IOE – FACULTY OF
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Classification and Stigma: Theorising the identity impact of dyslexia for students in UK higher education

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SIGNED DECLARATION

I, Charlotte H Hamilton Clark confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: Charlotte HH Clark

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the identity impact of dyslexia for students in UK higher education. It responds to gaps in the literature exploring the experiences of students with dyslexia and theorises the impacts of dyslexia's stigma and universities' dyslexia classification as defect and disability.

To explore these areas, in the project I interviewed five UK students with dyslexia and triangulated these findings with four university learning support tutors. The students noted dyslexia's heterogeneity, invisibility and situational nature contrasted with societal assumptions of specific negative traits and universities' standard support. Moreover, previously unidentified dyslexia impacted students' academic choices and self-esteem. Universities' classification of dyslexia as a disability, directed by UK law and evident in university policy, led to stigma as dyslexia was categorised as an individual problem needing remedial help.

In the analysis I apply critical perspectives from the related fields of education research, disability studies and identity work addressing social justice, health and disease. These ideas explore social classification, question societal assumptions about difference, highlight stigma and the implications of stigma management, and challenge the distribution of power between student and institution. This thesis theorises the impact on student identity of dyslexia's stigma by probing students' academic self-concept and stigma management through non-disclosure, hiding or rejecting dyslexia as an identity aspect and considers the consequences of identity deception, conflict and dependency on support.

The conclusions primarily contribute to dyslexia research in higher education, applying critical perspectives to develop theory and highlight priorities for the field. I also suggest implications for university policy and practice in dyslexia support provision, to lessen its stigma and encourage a wider appreciation of the benefits of cognitive diversity in UK higher education.

IMPACT STATEMENT

This qualitative project is a contribution to knowledge in dyslexia research but also draws from and has implications for the fields of disability studies and higher education research. The main benefits of the project are in academia: the thesis develops our understanding of the experience of UK students with dyslexia and theorises the relationship between the university approach to dyslexia, stigma and student identity. The study progresses on-going discussions between researchers engaged in work on dyslexia in adulthood and among students. It also offers ideas from critical perspectives in the related research areas of disability studies, education research and identity work in social justice, health and disease.

As an exploratory and early-stage project, it paves the way for future studies to further inform dyslexia research. It also advances our understanding of the potential to use email dialogue as a mode for interviewing students with dyslexia, alongside phone-based discussions.

The study findings suggest there is scope to improve university policy, pedagogy and support. The project highlights poor dyslexia accommodation in subject-based teaching, questions the consequences of binary dyslexia testing and suggests that support should be more accessible, flexible to suit individual profiles and boost student agency in their support. Universities have an opportunity to lessen the stigma of dyslexia and learning support among students by considering those with dyslexia when developing subject-based pedagogy; reducing the emphasis on segregated support; re-framing dyslexia policy to remove its association with deficit; and opening dialogue on disability between students and lecturers.

Following publication of the thesis, the main impact will be through disseminating the findings and conclusions in academic publishing and public engagement. I will target dyslexia researchers as the main audience for the research, as well as dyslexia specialists and university policy makers as the secondary audiences. This will be accomplished through papers written for peer-reviewed journals focusing on dyslexia research and higher education policy and pedagogy, also via conference and seminar speaking opportunities. There are specific occasions to address those who work in dyslexia support at universities (e.g. ADSHE at their annual conference) and to reach audiences in university policy and teaching practice development (e.g. higher education and disability support workshops and conferences).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge that this thesis would not have come to fruition without the support and guidance of several people.

Thesis supervisors: Professor Martin Oliver, the project's primary supervisor and Pro-Director for Academic Development at the UCL Institute of Education, was invaluable for the generous application of his knowledge and experience in the field of education. He challenged me to question the status quo, to debate ontology, truth and knowledge in relation to the study and to communicate clearly what I thought. Associate Professor Mina Vasalou, second supervisor for the project, was helpful for her astute and critical perspective, her experience in the dyslexia field as well as for epistemological and methodological debates. I am grateful to both supervisors for the editing comments. Thank you for persisting with the project as it developed and for having faith in my ability to complete it.

Past tutors and editors: I also appreciate those who have shaped my academic self-concept, love of learning and awareness of what there is still to understand. As William Cowper (1731-1800) says in A Winter Walk at Noon, "*Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; wisdom is humble that he knows no more*."

My family: Thank you for all the support and encouragement during this project and for continually demonstrating the intellectual potential and fun of cognitive diversity in a single family.

In a nod to the combined effort in getting this thesis off the ground, flying steadily and landed safely, I offer a quote from Aardman Animation's, Chicken Run (2000).
Rocky: You see, flying takes three things: Hard work, perseverance and …hard work.
Fowler: You said "hard work" twice.
Rocky: That's because it takes twice as much hard work as perseverance.

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SCOPE, TERMINOLOGY AND ACRONYMS USED IN THE PROJECT

UK scope

While dyslexia is identified in countries across the world, in multiple languages and writing systems, in this project I specifically address the perspectives and experiences of UK university students with dyslexia. Therefore, I will draw from UK sources for the statistics and legal framework, however I will set this in an international context, for example noting international dyslexia definitions and approaches, as context for the UK study.

Terminology

The project area of dyslexia in higher education uses specific terms and expressions. I have tried to be consistent in my use of relevant terms in the thesis, particularly where these may be ambiguous in meaning or used in different ways in other work. I will explain my use of them here.

University learning support tutor

A person employed by a university, whose work aims to help those students, registered at the university, who request additional support with their studies.

University lecturer

A person employed by a university who gives subject lectures and/or teaches seminars and assesses students' written work as part of a degree course.

Student

In the context of this thesis, a student is someone studying for a qualification at a university. This may be an undergraduate studying for a first degree, a graduate studying for a second or subsequent degree (for example a Masters) or a postgraduate pursuing further study research (for example a PhD).

Disability and impairment

This thesis follows the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of disability and impairment: "*The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) defines disability as an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Disability is the interaction between individuals with a health condition (e.g. cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression) and personal and environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports)*" WHO (2020).

'Student with dyslexia' and 'disabled student'

In this study I will use the term 'student identified with dyslexia,' shortened to 'student with dyslexia', following evidence for a preference for 'person with dyslexia' over 'dyslexic person' in identity constructions of dyslexia (Evans, 2014). In this thesis I will also use the term 'disabled student' rather than 'student with disabilities,' following the reasoning outlined in Seale (2017), as discussed below.

My use of the term 'student with dyslexia' could be seen as contrasting with the position of disability researchers such as Jane Seale (2017) who choose to use 'disabled student' over 'student with disabilities'. Seale suggests that the former allows for the societal construction of disability (disabled by barriers in society or the environment) whereas the latter implies the individual's condition leads to disability. To compare these two terms and phrases, dyslexia is the name we use for a specific range of cognitive differences (as I will discuss in the Literature Review 2.2.2.1). 'Disabled' has a subtly different use, it describes the impact of social or environmental barriers on an individual. Therefore, in this thesis I take the view that it is respectful to talk of a disabled individual, but who can be identified with a specific difference (e.g. dyslexia).

By using the term 'student with dyslexia' over 'dyslexic student' I recognise the situational nature of dyslexia, that an individual is a student first, so being identified with dyslexia is an aspect of their identity only in certain settings. Being a 'dyslexic individual' could imply a permanent and intrinsic aspect of their identity.

I appreciate there are those (e.g. Collinson, 2020) who reject the dyslexia label entirely and argue against the ‘person with dyslexia’ phrasing (discussed in more depth in Literature Review 2.2.2.2). These authors highlight the dominant Lexic discourse in society that reinforces the normative nature of societal literacy expectations. While these are useful philosophical perspectives aiming to challenge societal assumptions and language, the current thesis’ work explores situations where individuals are identified with dyslexia through testing and must acknowledge dyslexia as a distinct difference, to apply for support. While the future use of these terms may yet change, I would argue that in this thesis it is still appropriate to use the phrase ‘person with dyslexia.’

Disabled Student’s Allowance (DSA)

According to the UK government (no date) webpage ‘Help if you’re a student with a learning difficulty, health problem or disability’, the DSA is available to students in the UK “*to cover the study-related costs you have because of a mental health problem, long term illness or any other disability*.” Dyslexia is included within this.

In the academic year 2021-2022 for a full-time undergraduate student, for example, this funded up to £5,849 of specialist equipment during a course (e.g. laptop or software), £23,258 for a non-medical helper allowance per year (e.g. time with a support tutor), and up to £1,954 per year of general allowance (e.g. additional printing costs or library fees). Postgraduates can access up to £20,580 per year.

A student is assessed for their needs via assessment centres (e.g. at university learning support departments) and may receive up to these maximum amounts. Many universities rely on this funding to pay for the one-to-one support time offered to students and university learning support is therefore dependent on a student’s acceptance for the DSA.

Acronyms used in the thesis

ADHD Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

BDA British Dyslexia Association

BME Black Minority Ethnic

IDA International Dyslexia Association

WHO World Health Organisation

YCDC Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity

1. INTRODUCTION

Five hundred years ago, reading and writing was not essential to participate in society; dyslexia has only emerged in the past hundred years, alongside expectations of universal literacy. In the twenty-first century, the UK education system expects individuals to be able to read, spell and write fluently to access learning and links confident literacy with academic success.

1.1 Dyslexia research context in UK higher education

Dyslexia is associated with a cognitive difficulty in processing phonemes or sounds within words. As Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2003) explain, this affects not only early literacy, but also impacts the accuracy and fluency of spelling and written language throughout life. The proportion of those with dyslexia differs by country and language, depending on its definition and identification (Sprenger-Charolles and Siegel, 2013). For example, studies estimate dyslexia affects between 5-17% of US children (Shaywitz and Shaywitz, 2003) and in the UK the Rose (2009) report notes that one in 20 UK school children have dyslexia. Those with dyslexia develop personal coping strategies and hide their struggles, such that dyslexia is not always formally recognised. Those that progress to university continue to experience difficulties due to rising demands on their capacity to read, process and write large amounts of text-based information for their studies (Mortimore and Crozier, 2006).

While extensive research has been conducted into dyslexia in school-age children, fewer studies investigate the experience of dyslexia by university students, or question issues of dyslexia, identity and stigma at university. Traditionally, dyslexia research has focused on defining and testing dyslexia and evaluating methods for its support. However, Cameron (2016) called for studies into the experiences of students with dyslexia, setting individuals’ perceptions of dyslexia in a social context and considering the impact of this on the student. Other dyslexia researchers (e.g.

Burden, 2008 and extended by Prevett, Bell and Ralph, 2013) identified specific gaps in the literature relating dyslexia to identity and probing the consequences for self-esteem. They have called for research that addresses societal and institutional attitudes towards dyslexia; questions segregation and stigma in education through policy and pedagogy; and ultimately aims to increase the representation, achievement and retention of university students with dyslexia.

As dyslexia impacts an individual’s relationship with written language throughout life, university pedagogy and assessment requirements can disadvantage students with dyslexia. Those who struggle may request learning support, but at UK universities this is contingent on formal testing for dyslexia and support is offered under the banner of accommodation for a disability. In the thesis I highlight the traditional deficit-diagnosis-remediation approach to dyslexia that prevails among UK universities, where dyslexia is considered a neurological defect and remedial support aims to help students reach a normative level of academic achievement.

As a university researcher with personal experience of dyslexia, I recognise the stigma of associating dyslexia with features of otherness and defining it as a defect in an individual. This has the potential to undermine a student’s academic self-concept in the very setting in which they are trying to prove their worth. This leads to conflict between (i) a need to reveal dyslexia to access support or ask lecturers for help; and (ii) a desire to dissociate from a stigmatised identity aspect that is linked with societal assumptions of academic difficulty and low achievement.

In this project I contribute to the current body of dyslexia research by exploring these areas. I ask specifically about the experiences of students with dyslexia at UK universities, their views of universities’ approach to dyslexia, issues of dyslexia stigma and the management of dyslexia as an aspect of their identity. As a further research contribution, I will draw from critical perspectives outside of dyslexia research in education research, disability studies, and identity work in social justice, health and disease, to challenge current thinking and offer new ideas.

1.2 Personal perspective in relation to the study

In the thesis I apply critical perspectives (discussed in 1.6 below) to understand how individuals experience dyslexia, particularly the impact on student identity of institutional and societal attitudes towards dyslexia. As Kerschbaum (2014) argues, thinking critically involves questioning agency, norms and identities and this should be linked to self-disclosure of the researcher conducting such research.

As a mature student with a personal and family history of dyslexia, I am interested in the intersection between dyslexia, experience and identity. This reflects my own experiences of academic and professional work and acknowledges the support I give my three children in their education. I have not formally been identified with dyslexia; my journey of dyslexia discovery followed from its identification in my children. But I recognise many of its attributes: I have a different relationship with language that affects word retrieval when writing or speaking, I experience visual disturbance when reading long dense texts, I struggle to combine any two of reading, listening and writing and I've always found spelling difficult.

Despite these struggles, I have pursued a career that involved writing and academic studies. I completed my second Masters degree at the University of Edinburgh, after a first degree and Masters at the University of Oxford, in the natural and environmental sciences. Subsequently I moved into social science and from 2015 I have researched the current PhD thesis at the UCL Institute of Education. I therefore have experience of study at three UK universities, which, while I did not access additional support for dyslexia, added to my understanding of the limitations of university teaching for those with dyslexia and contributed to my own bank of strategies for coping with the difficulties I experience and attribute to dyslexia.

1.3 Research aim and questions

In the research project I aim to respond to gaps in the dyslexia literature, identified in the Introduction 1.1 above, that call for research theorising the impact of dyslexia on identity and self-esteem, exploring the experiences of students with dyslexia and setting these within the context of universities' approach to dyslexia. In the thesis I ask the research question: **What is the identity impact of dyslexia for students in UK higher education?** I will divide this main question into three sub-questions that address specific calls for work from dyslexia researchers:

1. **What is the student experience of dyslexia?** Responding to Cameron (2016) who identified a need for further research into the perceptions and experiences of adults with dyslexia, particularly those in higher education.
2. **How do universities approach dyslexia?** Responding to Prevett, Bell and Ralph (2013) who suggested further work on institutional approaches to dyslexia to rationalize the relationship with the individual and make sense of their educational choices.
3. **What is the impact of these on the identity of students with dyslexia?** Responding to Burden's (2008) call for research into the interactions between dyslexia and identity, which Prevett, Bell and Ralph (2013) further specified should address how the identity of those with dyslexia is impacted by societal approaches, as well as institutional policy and practices.

During the project I noted, through repeated literature searches, that researchers have still failed to address these important topics among UK students. To explore the research sub-questions, I will examine not only students' relationship with university support departments, but also probe their interactions with lecturers and student peers, as well as ask about their reflections on discovering dyslexia. When analysing the findings, I will suffuse the discussion with what we can learn from research in related areas (such as education research, disability studies and identity work), to expand our understanding and inform future dyslexia research.

1.4 Research approach

In the project, as a qualitative and exploratory study, I collected and examined the perspectives of a small number of UK students with dyslexia, triangulated with the views of support tutors at the same universities. The findings examine the student experience of dyslexia, question universities' dyslexia approach and examine its impact on student identity, focusing on dyslexia stigma and disclosure. The study contributes to dyslexia research by highlighting critical perspectives from the related fields of disability studies; social justice; and identity work in health and disease, exploring the identity impacts of stigma and stigma management.

1.5 Methodology

In this qualitative interview-based study I collected data through detailed semi-structured interviews by phone and email with five current or recent UK university students with dyslexia. I also conducted phone interviews with four learning support tutors at the same universities as the students, to triangulate the information and perspectives gathered in the student conversations. In one instance a support tutor was also interviewed as a recent post-graduate student, which gave insights into the areas of commonality and conflict between both perspectives in one individual. I recruited the students through the university learning support departments, via email and flyers posted on learning support noticeboards. Therefore, I acknowledge the limitation that the cohort only included students who had self-identified their dyslexia to the university and had an interest in learning support.

The conversations used open-ended questions to give participants the opportunity to express their views and to reflect on their experiences with dyslexia in higher education. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, pseudonymised then coded using NVivo to identify emerging themes from the discussions and to develop theory to explain these (as described in Strauss and Juliet, 1994).

1.6 Analysis

Although the project develops themes to draw meaning from the findings and develop theory, it tries not to reduce the individual voice. As Tom Shakespeare (2011) notes: "*How can you become a character when the world has already decided that you are a type?*" This project highlights the potential to see dyslexia as an aspect of cognitive diversity between individuals, not a defective type. It therefore seeks to expose where institutions have adopted philosophical approaches or labels that categorise individuals, for example based on individual defect.

In the analysis I take a critical stance, as advocated by Rexhepi & Torres (2011), to explore where societal assumptions or prejudice limits individuals' freedoms and confers stigma. I apply critical perspectives from disability studies, and identity work on social justice, health and disease to dissect the experiences of students with dyslexia in the context of universities' dyslexia classification, exploring the impact of stigma on student identity. I locate the work among critical studies that promote new ways of understanding, distinct from work that applies a critical lens to enact intervention or activism.

In analysing the findings, I aimed not to judge the actions of individuals (for example support tutors as agents of their institutions), but to see the plurality and complexity of situations, recognise the differences between individual perspective and institutional policy, highlight imbalances between individuals and institutional structures, and to frame questions concerning agency of the individual.

1.7 Overview of thesis chapters

In this introductory chapter I have set out the main issues that this thesis will address, considered my perspective as researcher, outlined the research aim, questions and approach, as well as presented the project methodology and analytical approach.

In chapters 2, 3 and 4 I review the literature that forms a foundation for the current project. Chapter 2 will focus on how dyslexia is defined and described, both as a phenomenon and as a concept in society. I address the two main conceptual approaches to dyslexia and highlight dyslexia’s legal status as it affects UK universities. Chapter 3 will examine existing research that relates to questions of dyslexia, identity and stigma. Then in chapter 4 I review research applying critical perspectives from outside dyslexia research, that I will draw from in the project. I reference critical approaches in education, disability studies and identity work on social justice, health and disease.

In the Methodology chapter 5, I discuss the ontological and epistemological basis of the research; give an overview of the research design including how participants were recruited and interviews conducted; outline the interview question areas and data handling process; highlight the analytical approach taken; and describe the steps taken in the project to ensure ethical considerations and risk were managed.

In chapter 6 I explore in detail the study’s findings, divided into the three research sub-questions of (i) the experiences of students with dyslexia; (ii) how universities approach dyslexia; and (iii) the impact of these on student identity. In Discussion chapter 7 I relate the findings back to existing literature, including references to previous dyslexia research as well as the critical perspectives in related areas.

Finally, in chapter 8 I present the conclusions. I first set the thesis in the context of gaps in the existing literature, next highlight the theoretical contributions the thesis makes to dyslexia research (given dyslexia researchers are the primary audience for the thesis). I also stress the practical implications of the work for policy and practice, for those who support students with dyslexia (the thesis’ secondary audience). I then reflect on the methodology, project limitations and opportunities for further work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

DEFINING AND DESCRIBING DYSLEXIA

The Literature Review forms a foundation for the Discussion, where I relate the Findings to existing research, showing where the project adds to, extends, or challenges current dyslexia research. The Literature Review is split into three chapters: Chapter 2 explores research into how individuals experience dyslexia and how researchers, society and institutions such as universities define and describe dyslexia. Then Chapter 3 reviews research specifically relating to dyslexia, identity and stigma. Lastly, Chapter 4 presents work from areas outside dyslexia research that I will draw from in the Discussion, applying critical perspectives from education, disability studies and identity work on social justice, health and disease.

The Literature Review preparation for the thesis initially focused on searches for research in education-specific journals (i.e. not medical journals) over the past two decades on dyslexia among children (for background) and among adults and students as relevant to the work of this project. The scope was widened in subsequent searches as the project progressed and themes developed from initial findings, to include related work to dyslexia on reading difficulties, learning disabilities, the experience of the disabled at university (in the context of identity work), as well as ideas from notable authors on identity, classification and social justice, as well as identity work in health and disease. I gave particular weight to studies that addressed the social context, institutional attitudes and where researchers drew conclusions on the identity impact on the individual.

In this Chapter 2 I will divide how we define and describe dyslexia into two parts: 2.1 relates to studies on dyslexia experienced as an individual phenomenon. First, I address the difficulties associated with dyslexia from childhood into adulthood, debate its proposed strengths and highlight evidence for dyslexia's variance. I then review dyslexia research among university students, focusing on the experience and prevalence of dyslexia and its mitigation. Section 2.2 explores dyslexia as a concept, examining literature on how society theorises and behaves towards those with dyslexia, describing its definition and legal status in the UK and highlighting published work on university policy and practices regarding dyslexia.

2.1 Dyslexia as a phenomenon for the individual

In this sub-section I will review the literature that addresses how dyslexia is experienced among children and adults, as a basis for exploring the student experiences of dyslexia, probing dyslexia's variance and possible strengths alongside the difficulty attributed to dyslexia.

2.1.1 Dyslexia is experienced as struggle

Dyslexia exists worldwide and has been researched across many languages and scripts (examples of international case studies are reviewed in Anderson and Meier-Hedde, 2011). Researchers such as Ziegler *et al* (2003) have investigated reading differences across different linguistic orthographies, finding that dyslexia's similarities across languages outstrip any differences, with a similar magnitude of difficulty and comparable incidences of dyslexia in the populations. However, for decades researchers (e.g. Lindgren, De Renzi and Richman 1985) have noted that the difficulties associated with dyslexia are more obvious in an alphabetic language rather than pictographic one such as Mandarin Chinese. Dyslexia is also more noticeable with opaque and linguistically complex languages such as English, over others of more transparent orthography, such as German or Italian, which have close correspondence between spelling and word sound.

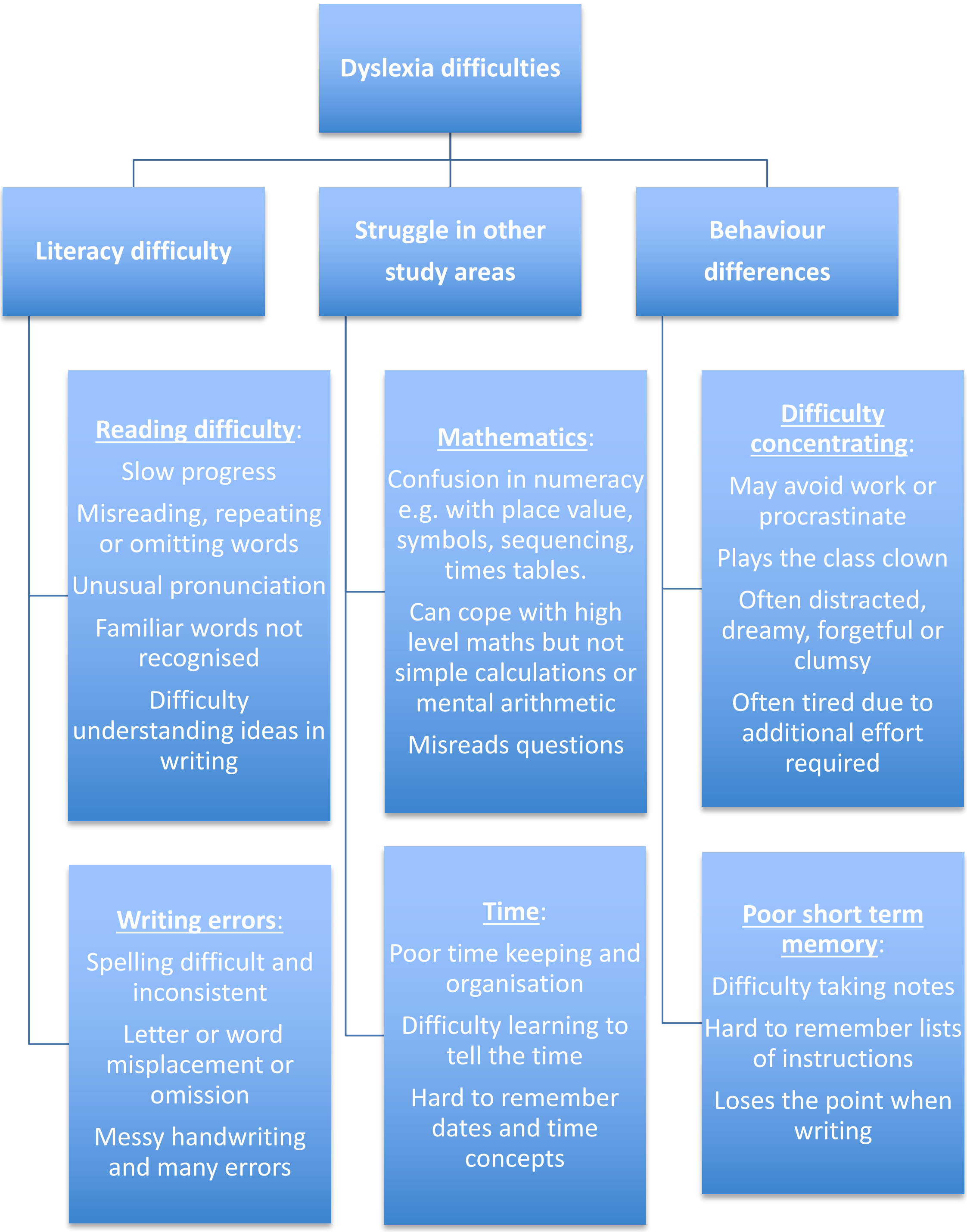
Researchers therefore propose that the complexity of the English language and its spelling leads to more conspicuous errors by those with dyslexia. As Seymour, Aro and Erskine (2003) suggest, this results in a general delay in reading development among English-speaking children compared with other European languages, which is exacerbated among those with dyslexia. It may also help to explain why, as Ziegler *et al* (2003) note, there is more published research into dyslexia from researchers in English-speaking countries. Below, I will highlight research into dyslexia's association with difficulty but also explore the possibility that strengths may co-occur, as a foundation to the first research sub-question on the experience of dyslexia.

2.1.1.1 Childhood dyslexia extends beyond literacy

Figure 1 overleaf illustrates the range of difficulties that are most often associated with dyslexia in children up to 18 years old, developed from information on the British Dyslexia Association 'About Dyslexia' web pages and the Rose (2009) definition and description of dyslexia.

In the Figure I have adapted and organised the difficulties associated with dyslexia into (i) literacy difficulties, (ii) difficulty in other areas of study, and (iii) those affecting behavior, with (ii) and (iii) addressed together in the discussion below. I will highlight research on the student experience of dyslexia, compared with that of children, in 2.1.2.1. Rather than present this as an all-inclusive list of dyslexia's manifestations, I recognize that there may be factors individuals associate with their dyslexia, which are not represented here. Further, individuals with dyslexia may not recognize all the traits discussed. I will expand on the heterogeneous nature of dyslexia in 2.1.1.4.

Figure 1: The difficulties most frequently associated with dyslexia in education



List of the difficulties associated with dyslexia, adapted from the British Dyslexia Association (no date).

(i) Literacy difficulties

The widely cited US dyslexia researchers Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2003, 2016) reviewed research into the underlying basis of dyslexia, concluding that there is a core difficulty at the most basic level of language reading and comprehension, with phonemic awareness. Similarly, in a review of forty years of research into the causes of dyslexia, Vellutino *et* al (2004), also from the US, concluded that the differences associated with dyslexia are due largely to defects in phonological processing, that prevent the usual bonds (of recognition and understanding) between spoken and written words when reading. Kim & Lombardino (2013) went further to identify difficulties within individual aspects of phonological processing: from phonemic awareness (identifying and blending sounds in words); to alphabetic mapping (accessing the phonological forms of letters and digits); phonological decoding; and working memory (storing and accessing phonological information to recall words).

The research suggests that a reader with dyslexia has trouble at the first stage of decoding a word on the page. The difficulty, being at a low-order cognitive level, is therefore largely independent of other higher order cognitive functions. Hence it is not correlated with intelligence or reasoning abilities; a common misconception associated with dyslexia. A stumbling block acknowledged by these studies is that dyslexia is not homogeneous in how it manifests between different individuals, a theme that is also important to this thesis.

(ii) Difficulties in other areas and (iii) affecting behaviour

Dyslexia is associated with other cognitive differences beyond difficulty decoding written language. These range from visual disturbance when reading, difficulties in mathematical calculations and with concepts of time, to short-term memory and organizational issues affecting behaviour. Snowling (2012) summarized these in children, noting that the subsidiary difficulties tend to overtake the core reading difficulty through secondary school and into adulthood. I will discuss in more depth how dyslexia manifests in adulthood in 2.1.1.2.

For the past two decades, researchers from neuroscience to psychology have noted that dyslexia is complex to define and evaluate. Some researchers (e.g. Siegel and Smythe, 2006) believe it is important to recognize there are many difficulties associated with dyslexia. In the current study, I agree with Vellutino *et al* (2004) who argued that narrowing the list of dyslexia's recognized manifestations to literacy difficulty alone reduces the scope for its identification and access to support, particularly later in life, when it manifests as a complex set of difficulties that can vary between individuals.

2.1.1.2 Dyslexia's impact broadens in adulthood

While many researchers (e.g. Tiu *et al*, 2004) have noted that dyslexia can be recognised from 7 years of age, it continues to persist into adulthood (Rutter, Kim-Cohen and Maughan, 2006). Research into dyslexia as a phenomenon in adulthood focuses on how dyslexia's impact changes after childhood. For example, Beacham, Szumko, and Alty (2003) found that adults with dyslexia reported difficulty with a wider range of tasks than at school, which were not just focused on reading and writing. These included difficulty remembering sequences of items; concentrating for long periods; recognizing or remembering written or spoken words; and navigating information in long-form text. This finding is echoed by the BDA, which states that difficulty with memory, organisation, timekeeping and multi-tasking is common among adults with dyslexia.

Exploring the difficulties associated with dyslexia outside literacy, MacDonald (2009) discusses how adults with dyslexia report a different relationship with spoken language, as well as the written word. He highlighted struggles to find the right spoken words; forgetting a specific word in speech; or pronouncing words incorrectly. However, he noted it is debateable to what extent these are due directly to dyslexia's impact, or whether there is an effect of dyslexia on general confidence and anxiety that impacts verbal speech. Other authors, such as Jacobs *et* al (2020) also identified verbal as well as written and organisational issues associated with dyslexia in adulthood, for example citing frustrations with word retrieval when put on the spot with academic lecturers.

In this thesis I am interested to explore further Macdonald's (2009) conclusion that dyslexia has broader impacts affecting adult life. He suggested that these range from difficulties filling out forms, to coping with the advanced literacy and memory requirements of work and study. While not the scope of the current thesis, there is room for further research in this area to explore the adult experience of dyslexia, for example, to appreciate the challenges in education and employment and to understand how adults develop and use compensatory coping strategies. The current project will add to our understanding of the experience of dyslexia specifically among students in UK higher education.

2.1.1.3 Putative dyslexia strengths are unproven

Twenty-five years ago, West (1997) argued that people with dyslexia might have skill sets that differ from their peers. Based on a greater prevalence of individuals with dyslexia in certain professions, West suggested an aptitude for visualisation and artistic skills; holistic and lateral thinking; and practical problem-solving skills. There is evidence (e.g. Wolff and Lundberg, 2002) of a higher incidence of dyslexia in engineering; design; art and architecture, than in the population. Some researchers attempted to link these findings, by conducting studies exploring the abilities of gifted individuals with dyslexia and proposing possible compensatory mechanisms for enhanced cognitive abilities in areas outside literacy (e.g. Gilger, Talavage and Olulade, 2013). However, the wide range of potential strengths has been difficult to link reliably to dyslexia, highlighting how it varies between individuals.
Several neuroscientists have also sought to identify strengths that accompany difficulties. Visual-spatial strengths are the most researched putative dyslexia strength, building on associations dating back to when dyslexia was first described (Morgan, 1896). More recently, von Karolyi *et al* (2003) tested whether students with dyslexia achieve higher scores in global visual-spatial tasks, finding partial support for the hypothesis. Authors argue that greater visual-spatial abilities in those

with dyslexia implies effective employment of higher-order cognitive processing. However, this might also be a by-product of an adaptation to aid phonological decoding (rather than a specific strength resulting from dyslexia itself).

Particularly relevant for the current thesis, Van Viersen *et* al (2015) investigated but found no evidence for compensatory strengths that counter difficulties in children with higher academic ability (i.e. in those who may progress to study at university). Van Viersen instead linked so-called borderline dyslexia cases with fewer environmental risk factors and less debilitating difficulties overall, however this does not eliminate the possibility that higher-ability children have developed stronger coping strategies that may mask the effects of dyslexia more efficiently than in lower-ability groups.

Further research is ongoing to explain the different abilities of those with dyslexia. However tempting it is to associate dyslexia with specific talent as well as difficulty (whether directly due to dyslexia or through individual's compensatory mechanisms) researchers debate how specific, consistent or demonstrable these strengths are. The proposed enhancements may help those with dyslexia to cope with teaching or assessment, or offer ability-based career guidance, but we are far from appreciating the mechanism. In the current project I recognize that it is important to explore students' compensatory strategies, history and awareness of dyslexia since school. This is something that has seldom been asked directly of students. It will also be interesting to ask the students and support tutors about their awareness of dyslexia strengths or individual approaches to coping with dyslexia.

2.1.1.4 Studies point to dyslexia's wide variance

It is useful to briefly review dyslexia's genetic and neurological basis to provide a foundation for understanding the influence of dyslexia variance on how different individuals experience it (linking to the first area of the research question). Researchers (e.g. Kerr, 1897) noticed dyslexia's heritability almost as soon as it was first identified as word-blindness from the 1870's. In the past few decades, statistical analyses of twins and familial studies as well as genetic mapping (discussed by Bates, 2006) support the idea that dyslexia is an inherited trait, however it is not inherited in a typically Mendelian fashion, ruling out the possibility that one gene is responsible, even within a single family. Interestingly, there is no identified linkage to the sex chromosomes and little genetic risk difference between the sexes (Bates *et al*, 2004), leading us to conclude there may be a referral bias, which could explain why more boys are identified with dyslexia than girls.

In a review of the behavioural and molecular genetics of reading, Bates (2006) argues that the many different profiles of dyslexia result from a complex network of differences in genetic interactions, which underlie our distinct abilities in language, reading, writing and mathematics. This could also explain the high degree of co-occurrence between a range of learning and behavioural differences (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADHD). Dyslexia is likely to involve many genes and the expression of dyslexia in an individual results from complex interactions between genes, the environment and an individual's neurological development (realised by Decker and Bender in 1988).

In addition to its genetic heterogeneity, dyslexia impacts cognitive function in varied ways (2.1.1). While brain imaging indicates specific activity patterns that are common to those with dyslexia (e.g. see Hancock, Gabrieli and Hoeft, 2016), the underlying neurological mechanisms of dyslexia are far from simple and proving elusive to unravel. Tamboer, Vorst and Oort, (2016) found that even the level of struggle with the most common aspect, spelling difficulty, does not correlate with the overall severity of dyslexia in an individual. As a result, the authors suggested that the co-incidence of traits associated with dyslexia tend towards a multiple cognitive model. Tamboer, Vorst and Oort (2016) even went as far as to suggest we leave the aetiological classification of dyslexia entirely and instead "*accept dyslexia as an alternative way of information processing that has evolved over thousands of years without being noticed*" (Tamboer, Vorst and Oort, 2016, p.482).

The idea that compensatory mechanisms (coping strategies) play a large part in the characteristics associated with dyslexia is supported by the work of researchers such as Deacon, Parrila and Kirby (2008). They showed individuals with dyslexia compensate for difficulties with phonological decoding when reading. For example, they adapted to use enhanced morphological processing (decoding of the smallest units of meaning in words), however this slows down the reading process, which might help explain one of the major aspects of dyslexia: slow reading.

In summary, as longstanding UK-based dyslexia researcher Margaret Snowling (2012) pointed out, dyslexia has neither clear boundaries, nor is there a single easily identified cause at the genetic level; and the differences associated with dyslexia stray from reading struggles into other areas of memory and visual ability. In this project, therefore, I suggest that dyslexia is best viewed as a heterogeneous difference with a complex genetic and neurological basis, which results from the manifestation of subtle differences in the brain's neural plasticity and cognitive adaptability. Many of the characteristics we observe result from how the brain hijacks higher-order linguistic and semantic processes to compensate for lower-order phonological difficulties. In the discussions with participants in the current project, it will be interesting to note variance in individuals' experience of dyslexia and identify overlaps with other cognitive differences or disorders.

2.1.2 University study presents particular challenges for dyslexia

Despite the repeated calls by researchers to address dyslexia at university, less attention has been devoted to this compared with studies among children. In this section I will review those few studies that have investigated dyslexia's complex meanings at university, how many students declare dyslexia and the coping strategies they use to aid their studies.

2.1.2.1 Dyslexia has complex associations at university

In a rare quantitative survey of 136 (all male) students with dyslexia in the UK, compared with a group of students who did not identify with dyslexia, Mortimore and Crozier (2006) investigated how students believed dyslexia impacted their university studies. The students with dyslexia highlighted challenges in notetaking, essay organisation and writing ideas down, also that these difficulties had evolved and changed since their school days. They noted greater struggles with concentration and self-organisation than the control group. More recently, the O'Byrne, Jagoe and Lawler (2019) study also found that students (of both sexes) with dyslexia felt they spent more time on study tasks and worked hard to develop multi-modal techniques, reflecting a move to access materials online. The difficulties and impacts raised by students with dyslexia may help to explain the earlier evidence from Richardson & Wydell (2003) that those with dyslexia achieve lower grades than their peers and are more likely to drop out, even if they had access to support.

Researchers have also asked students with dyslexia to keep diaries or join focus groups to understand further the impact of dyslexia in university settings, beyond literacy traits. For example, Cameron (2016) asked three students to keep a diary, in which they highlighted concerns with verbalizing their thoughts and feeling judged in seminars. They admitted to constant self-monitoring and feelings of not belonging in academic spaces. Cameron also ran a focus group with a group of 7 students at a university, to explore their construction of dyslexia as a moral issue. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, Cameron focused on the student narrative, which highlighted dyslexia as a relief or escape from worries of low intellectual ability. The students were careful with how they applied the dyslexia label and they saw dyslexia as a valuable concept invested with social meaning. Specifically, students believed the dyslexia label and the support received needed to be matched with hard work and clear intelligence, to gain moral worth.

Clearly there are multiple layers of complex meanings that students associate with dyslexia, woven together with their acceptance or rejection of social assumptions about dyslexia. These suggest that the challenges experienced by students with dyslexia are much broader than issues reading and writing. Indeed, the impact of dyslexia strays into judgments on competence, confidence and intelligence, which will be interesting to explore in the current study.

2.1.2.2 Fewer university students claim dyslexia than expected

The UK Equality Act 2010 requires universities to offer reasonable adjustments or accommodations for dyslexia (discussed above in 2.2.2.3). Yet data protection rules stipulate that it is up to students to declare their dyslexia to access support, either when applying or once at a university. Dyslexia is not evident by any physical characteristic, or by an obvious behavioural or ability difference in the lecture hall or seminar room, it is known as an invisible disability. So, whether students choose to declare dyslexia at university is difficult to probe and therefore under-researched.

Given that dyslexia is unrelated to intelligence, we should expect to see a similar prevalence of dyslexia among UK students to the 5% of school-aged children with dyslexia (Rose, 2009). While one in 20 undergraduate students declared a specific difficulty at UK universities (Advance HE 2018), this includes more difficulties than just dyslexia, indicating that the proportion of students who identify with dyslexia at university is lower than at school. This proportion further declines to around 3% of post-graduates who declare a specific difficulty, again not exclusively limited to dyslexia. The lower dyslexia prevalence than expected at university may be explained by two hypotheses discussed below, but further work is needed to explore their contribution, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

(a) **Students with dyslexia are under-represented:** Fewer students with dyslexia make it to university than expected which, given dyslexia is orthogonal to intelligence, poses questions of fair access for this group, that needs to be addressed at a government level by the UK Office for Students (Department of Education).

(b) **Students with dyslexia are under-identified:** Few studies measure this directly, however a US study by McGregor *et al* (2016) found that of the 5% of students who self-reported a learning disability in the study, only a third of these had declared or received accommodations for their difficulties at university. Under-identification of dyslexia at university may occur because students either are not aware of dyslexia (if it is previously unrecognised and takes time to identify at university), or they choose not to declare it if they are aware of it. It is unclear to what extent these reasons explain dyslexia's low apparent prevalence at university. I will briefly address the existing evidence for these explanations below.

(i) **Students are not aware of dyslexia pre-university**: Pollak (2005) highlighted that for many, dyslexia was not formally identified until after starting at university. Supporting this idea, the (UK) National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education (1999) claimed that as many as 43% of students with dyslexia are only identified as such after they start their university studies. Gilroy (2002) explains this scenario by highlighting that many teachers are only alerted to dyslexia when there is a significant difference between the student's written and oral abilities. At school dyslexia is often missed in individuals who go on to university, as they develop effective coping strategies (including putting in long hours studying) that mask underlying difficulties.

(ii) **Students' dyslexia is identified late at university**: Dyslexia researchers such as Farmer, Riddick, and Sterling (2002) and Henderson (2017) have highlighted that dyslexia recognition at university often does not occur until the second or third year of studies. Mortimore & Crozier (2006) suggested that this is because students may cope with the teaching-led first-year of study, but then struggle with research-led work from the second year. Nichols (2012) agreed that students only asked for dyslexia testing when they felt they were working much harder than their peers to achieve the same results or received unexpectedly low grades. This may only be noticeable after some time, leaving less time to apply for support.

(iii) **Students hesitate to declare dyslexia at university**: Stage and Milne (1996) found that some students with dyslexia are not keen to declare their difficulties through fear of discrimination by the university or their peers. Pollak (2005) developed this idea further, suggesting that students may reject a past association with dyslexia from school, viewing it as emotional baggage that they wished to jettison. Student decisions on whether to disclose dyslexia to the university will be addressed in greater detail in sub-section 3.4.1, in a discussion of dyslexia identity below.

The impact of later dyslexia identification has only been touched on briefly among schoolchildren and barely addressed in adults. For example, Shaywitz, Morris and Shaywitz (2008) found it was more difficult for children to bring their grades up to expected levels if dyslexia was identified in secondary rather than primary school. There is a gap in the literature, where research could contribute to our understanding of the implications of later dyslexia identification, particularly among students. The current project is an opportunity to explore when student participants' dyslexia was identified and probe the impact of later identification on identity.

There is likely a further body of students whose dyslexia is not recognised either at school or university. If they do not ask for help at university, they may never fully understand why they struggle. Instead, they rely on self-curated coping strategies and persistence. These students are hard to include in dyslexia research that recruits from among those whose dyslexia is recognised (this study among them).

In summary, dyslexia is not declared by as many students as would be expected from its prevalence in the population, which may be due to either under-representation or under-identification. Low levels of dyslexia recognition at school, late identification at university and student reticence over declaring dyslexia may contribute to under-identification. The extent to which these factors play a role is poorly understood. The current thesis seeks to add to our understanding of dyslexia under-identification by exploring its causes with students and support tutors.

2.1.2.3 Students extend their coping strategies to counter difficulties

University study places demands on students' ability to absorb large amounts of information through lectures, seminars and reading, as well as requiring organisation and study strategies in preparing and writing essay-based evidence of their learning. The Mortimore and Crozier (2006) study mentioned in 2.1.2.1 above explored the impact of these demands on UK students with dyslexia; they proposed that, even if an individual's dyslexia may have been slight in school, it could become a greater issue at university.

Some researchers suggest individuals with dyslexia employ higher-order cognitive skills to compensate for lower-order literacy difficulties (see 2.1.1.4). The risk with this strategy is that it slows strategic thinking and processing, particularly when reading. In support of this idea among adults at university, Pedersen *et al* (2016) found that students with dyslexia tend to focus on either reading accuracy or comprehension in reading tasks, not both, for example when reading aloud in seminars. As a result, students found they must repeat-read sections to themselves to first read the text correctly and then understand the information conveyed.

To compensate for these and other difficulties, Braten, Amundsen and Samuelstuen (2010) suggested that students with dyslexia use a range of study methods or coping strategies, which are intentional, effortful, and goal oriented. Andreassen, Jensen and Braten (2017) investigated these study methods further and found that students employ a variety of coping strategies. A review by Pino and Mortari (2014) of previous research on study methods used by students with dyslexia highlighted four main strategies, used to varying extents:
(i) Study skills to note and organize written information;
(ii) Aids to capturing information in lectures, including printed slides or recordings;
(iii) Help from peers or family in revising and learning information;
(iv) Metacognitive techniques such as choosing a quiet place to study and planning time schedules carefully.

This evidence suggests that students with dyslexia knit together a range of complementary study strategies. However, as Pollak (2012) points out, the emphasis is on the student adapting their environment, notation and techniques to satisfy the university's study and assessment requirements, rather than the other way round. Significantly, researchers have reported that some students' study strategies are not sufficient to overcome their difficulties, leading Andreassen, Jensen and Braten (2017) to suggest that this results in learned helplessness associated with dyslexia. They noted these individuals give up trying to battle against their struggles, instead they accept low achievement or failure as part of dyslexia.

In summary, students with dyslexia develop an array of personal adaptive coping strategies to circumvent the challenges they experience. There is a small but growing number of researchers (e.g. Andreassen, Jensen and Braten*,* 2017) who point to a wide variation in strategies. They argue we should try to understand how different students experience dyslexia and what strategies they employ. The topic will be an interesting area to probe in the current study.

2.2 Dyslexia as a concept in society

As Söder (1989) argued over thirty years ago, categorising an individual defines how that person perceives themselves and is perceived by others, it also highlights features associated with the category. This can foster sympathetic, altruistic, paternalistic, or resentful responses. Disability research (discussed in more depth in Chapter 4) has explored the impacts of such different approaches to disability, and the influence of how far we accept or challenge the construction of difference (discussed in Bolt, 2005). For example, our approach affects the language we use, from the labels applied (e.g. blind, deaf, dyslexic) to assigning a defect or problem to the individual (e.g. people with disabilities). Many disability researchers now counter the traditional approach of locating a defect within the individual and labelling them by their defect. Instead, they argue we should refer to individuals as disabled by an environment or social setting, which may confer disadvantage (discussed in Seale, 2017). These approaches will be discussed below in the context of dyslexia.

As Cameron & Billington (2015a) acknowledge, some researchers criticize making distinctions between conceptual approaches to dyslexia as difference. Detractors argue that discrepancies between the approaches are artificial or unhelpful in terms of building meaningful outcomes for those with dyslexia. However, for the current study, examining the conceptual approach to dyslexia in different contexts is useful to situate and rationalise dyslexia in social research. Further, recognizing different approaches can help us to explore dyslexia as an aspect of an individual's self-concept and examine the impact of how others conceptualize and treat those with dyslexia (which will be dealt with in the next chapter 3). Below, I will address how far researchers have investigated the societal, philosophical and practical consequences of the way we approach dyslexia. In 2.2.1 I look at the two main approaches to dyslexia; in 2.2.2 I consider dyslexia's legal position in the UK and its definition; in 2.2.3 I address the approach that universities take to dyslexia.

2.2.1 Attitudes divide into two approaches

Researchers such as Smyth (2005) point out that the philosophical approach and meanings that we associate with dyslexia have shifted over time, reflecting changes in the social context of disability and difference. Over thirty years ago Brisenden (1986) outlined that a medical model of difference is based on a clinical diagnosis of defects in the individual, as they differ from an idealized norm in ways to be described, identified, and if possible remediated. Oliver (1996a) and Priestley (1999), among others, set out objections to the medical model of impairment of the individual and described an alternative, social model of disability. As Swain and French (2000) explain, advocates of the social model challenge the medical model and argue we should situate differences socially, for example stressing that in an environment that is only designed for those who can walk, physical barriers disable a wheel-chair user. Therefore, the problem is redefined as one of the environment and expectations, which disable the individual. This removes the focus from impairment in the individual and instead turns the spotlight onto barriers, discrimination and prejudice within society (disability approaches are discussed in Chapter 4.2.1).

Echoing the debate between the medical and social models of disability, dyslexia researchers such as Cameron & Billington (2015a) highlighted similar discussions over whether to describe dyslexia with (i) the medical language of impairment that reflects a genetic and neurological basis; or (ii) through the lens of a socially-situated model, where dyslexia is a cognitive learning difference constructed due to an emphasis on universal literacy and emphasized through disadvantaging pedagogy in education. Differing epistemological concepts and varying understandings of the meanings or experiences of dyslexia have led to the different approaches, which is reflected in the language used to describe dyslexia. Neuroscientists investigating genetic linkages position dyslexia very differently from learning support teachers within schools trying to avoid stigmatizing children in the classroom. In this sub-section I will review research discussing these two approaches to dyslexia.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognized two approaches to disability in its International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2002), summarised in Figure 2 and discussed below. In this the medical view focuses on individual impairment in contrast to the social construction of disability.

Figure 2: The two conceptual models of disability, based on WHO guidelines.

Medical approach:

The disability is a defect, conferring negative traits

The issue is a problem for the individual, who may need external help to achieve normative status

Achievement comes from individual resilience and effort despite disadvantages

Social approach:

The individual is disabled by social or environmental causes

Disability arises from how naturally occurring differences between us manifest in our interactions with the social world

Any difficulty results from a mismatch between the individual’s abilities and the demands of the environment

Adapted from WHO (2002) Towards a Common Language for Functioning, Disability and Health ICF (p8).

2.2.1.1 The medical approach identifies defect in the individual

The medical model of disability stems from a positivist perspective, where a specific set of impairments are identified and described in an individual. The medical approach therefore positions dyslexia as a defect, situating the problem as a biologically described impairment located in the body of the individual concerned, which can be assessed using standardised tools to measure capabilities. Promoters of the medical approach to dyslexia highlight that this view is supported by evidence from three areas:

(i) It is inherited so is determined by underlying genetics: As outlined in 2.1.1.4, dyslexia’s heritability points to a genetic (albeit complex) basis;

(ii) It is language-universal so is present world-wide: Dyslexia exists in children in countries around the world and can be tested for, irrespective of the language that the child speaks or writes (Goswami *et al,* 2011);

(iii) It is linked to specific, observable functional brain differences: Research into structural and functional neurological differences (reviewed in 2.1.1.4) points to a reading mechanism in those with dyslexia that differs from those without dyslexia (outlined in Grigorenko, 2001), specifically in the areas of the brain that usually focus on phonological processing.

The medical background of many well-known dyslexia advocates and researchers (e.g. Shaywitz & Shaywitz) predisposes much dyslexia research towards a medical approach, using the language of illness to describe it, for example referring to diagnosis of a condition and intervention as treatment. These researchers hope to develop early-stage diagnostic techniques and build justification for pre-school intervention and support for children with dyslexia.

The scientific and medical community, including many who work in genetics and neuroscience, have contributed enormously to our understanding of cognitive differences, intellectual disabilities and disorders. For example, Parmenter (2001) describes how medical research has contributed drug-based treatments, available to mitigate the effects of syndromes such as ADHD, Tourettes, autism and Aspergers. Pharmaceutical companies are increasingly involved with support and advocacy for these conditions they help treat (for example in sponsoring awards for support groups). However, dyslexia, while it is situated alongside these other cognitive differences in education, has no medical treatment and less well-funded advocacy. Instead, trained support teachers offer practical reading and study skills remediation to help individuals with dyslexia adapt to mainstream learning.

I would argue that the medical approach and language used by the research community raises ethical issues. For example, the language we use can be associated with questioning the value and contributions to society of those with impairments, also with highlighting normality in contrast with defect. In support of this, Gillman (2004) discusses how the act of diagnosis within a medical framework situates dyslexia as a problem or defect of the individual and focuses on negative aspects of the difference, which could negatively impact the individual's identity. Other researchers (such as Harris, 1995 or Ho, 2004) also emphasise the medical approach's focus on individual defect, increasing the social perception of stigma and impairment. They caution that a medical approach can also position those with the difference as victims or passive participants in a process where experts decide on their future treatment and offer external aid.

In his critique of the medical labelling of dyslexia in education, Per Solvang (2007) suggests that at a societal level, the esteem we hold for medical descriptors often takes precedence over other approaches to interpret differences within education. Solvang developed ideas from Conrad & Schneider (1992) who proposed that the impacts of medical labelling divided between positives and negatives. Solvang suggests a medical approach has positive impacts leading to the recognition, identification and remediation of dyslexia as a medical condition. For example, the dyslexia label confers 'sick' status on the individual as it is considered a defect, which explains poor performance without assuming a lack of effort. It may even offer the chance of putative strengths or the opportunity to construct genius in the individual (see 2.1.1.3 above). For an institution such as a university, describing dyslexia as a defect and disability provides a moral and legal argument for protection and accommodations (see 2.2.2.3 below), it also allows institutions to treat the affected individuals differently (e.g. segregating them to offer support).

Solvang (2007) further highlights negative impacts of a medical approach to dyslexia, particularly for the individual. He argues the medical approach removes the social context to learning; positions the difference as a problem for the individual who must adapt; confirms a defective medical status (a deviant from a norm) where the individual needs treatment; confers stigma due to the shame of the defect; risks helplessness from reliance on external support; and ignores the marginal differences between us by labelling only two binary states (defective and normal).

In Figure 3 below I summarise the positive and negative aspects of the medical approach, developed from Conrad & Schneider's (1992) paper on disability and illness and Solvang's (2007) paper on dyslexia. For the current study, I have sorted these to highlight the positive and negative aspects of a medical approach to dyslexia from the perspective of the individual and the institution.

Figure 3: A critique of the medical approach to dyslexia

	Negative aspects	**Positive aspects**
For the individual	Defect is a problem of the individual. Defines two categories: normal and deviant. 'Sick' or impaired status confers stigma. Those with the defect attempt normalization. Risk of learned helplessness and dependency on support.	'Sick' status means they are physically different, not morally corrupt or lazy. Affords legal protection and argues for support. Can argue for associated compensatory strengths.
For the institution	Provides a moral and legal argument for the institution to provide remediation.	Explains difficulty as a defect, not an issue with the institution's teaching. Justifies pedagogy that segregates and treats those afflicted differently. Individuals must ask for help and the institution can decide how to help.

As can be seen from Figure 3, while there are both positive and negative implications of a medical approach for the individual, there are more positive aspects for the institution than negative. In the current project it will be interesting to ask about support tutors' perceptions of the medical model, where they see it applied and to explore the impact of a medical framing on student participants.

2.2.1.2 A social approach locates the issue externally

The social model of disability follows the conceptual framework of social constructivism, which recognises that knowledge is co-constructed by us through our interactions with the environment or society, rather than being objectively discoverable (discussed in Gallagher*,* Connor and Ferri *2014)*. This relates back to ideas of the enlightenment and Vico's view of education, since extended by theorists such as Cassirer, Piaget and Bateson (reviewed in Piaget, 1970; Peterson, 2012). The social constructivist interpretation considers that as we construct our knowledge of the world around us through the lens of our experiences and values, so our identity arises from these exchanges, rather than being intrinsic to us (Schwandt, 1994).

It is useful to refer to disability researchers' theorization of the social model of disability, as it has been debated more widely than in dyslexia research (I will refer in more depth to the framing of disability in Chapter 4.2.1.). From a social perspective, disability researchers (e.g. Slee, 1998; Barnes, 2000) argued that disability is a social construct that combines natural differences between individuals, with a cultural deficiency in how society approaches that difference. In 'Constructing Normalcy' Davis (2006) added that as society determines what is normal or impaired, it is also responsible for supporting those who differ from the norm. Further, as Dorfan (2017) explains, seeing disability as a socially constructed issue highlights that the stigma associated with disabilities leads to discrimination or exclusion. Disability research also explores the social and political context of constructing disability and has enabled those with disabilities to claim common identities and form communities to tackle barriers and prejudice.

Relating the social approach to disability in higher education, researchers (e.g. Seale, 2014a) redefine disability as a mismatch between the abilities or needs of the learner and the physical or teaching environment at university. So, disability is not a personal trait or defect of the individual, but an artefact of the relationship between individual and institution.

The social model therefore situates dyslexia as a result of the interaction between individuals' cognitive differences and the demands of reading and writing in education. Before literacy was expected of everyone, dyslexia did not exist as an issue. In this thesis, I join dyslexia researchers such as Riddick (2000), who argue that viewing dyslexia as a social issue helps to challenge assumptions around the importance of literacy and the presumed connection between academic achievement and success in society. Further, as Landerl *et al* (2009) highlighted, the social approach stresses the importance of external factors to dyslexia, which affect individuals differently.

The social approach also prioritises removing the barriers to learning, for example by adapting the policies and practices of education, rather than the sole emphasis being on requiring the individual to adapt or seek remediation (as with the medical model). Also, the social approach can help to challenge unhelpful attitudes in society that may lead to discrimination or stigma. For example, Ware (2001) suggests we challenge pedagogy that requires individuals with cognitive differences to undertake separate compensatory tuition that marks out the individual as different.

A key point to stress is that adjusting the learning environment to avoid disadvantage for those with dyslexia needn't be at the expense of others. Instead, accessibility in education is defined in terms of the learning environment for *all* learners, aiming for flexibility and the availability of alternatives (*IMS Global Learning Consortium, 2012)*. The current thesis offers an opportunity to explore these themes through the eyes of students and support tutors at UK universities.

2.2.1.3 Researchers continue to debate both models' validity

Debate persists between researchers over the role and relevance of the medical and social approaches to disability and difference. Some disability researchers, such as Frauenberger (2015), argued that defining a physical or cognitive difference purely in terms of language and culture (the social model), positions disability as ideology rather than accepting that disabled people experience barriers that lead to frustrations. However, if we look back to how Oliver (1996b, p43) explained the social model of disability, he said that it is useful to recognise disabling social barriers and argue for political action and changed practices. Oliver stressed that the social model can't explain everything, such as recognizing the interaction between impairment and experience. For example, it cannot resolve reading or face recognition for someone with visual impairment. Instead, as Gallagher, Connor and Ferri (2014) argued, the social model helps to advance our understanding of disability by explaining that it is socially constructed. The attributes of a disabled individual are inexorably linked to the setting, so we must recognize that we exert value judgments on our observations about an individual.

Some dyslexia researchers also criticise the social approach to dyslexia. For example, Shakespeare & Watson (2001) suggested that the social model of disability removes the existence of individual impairment, which can be an important aspect to acknowledge of an individual's identity. Therefore, they argue that individuals with dyslexia are stigmatised through poor literacy, without being able to claim a medically described reason. Shakespeare & Watson noted that approaching dyslexia solely from a social constructivist perspective could make dyslexia difficult to define or describe in education and diminishes the argument for offering support to those with dyslexia as a disadvantaged group in education. As Dewsbury *et al* (2004) also argue, it misses practical aspects of impairment, for example that assistive software can address difficulties with text reading or writing. Critics of the social approach have included assessors and learning support teachers as well as those developing tools to support accessibility.

Following criticisms of both the medical and social approaches, some dyslexia researchers hesitate to accept either approach to dyslexia (such as Macdonald, 2009 and Norwich, 2014). Instead, they seek to bridge between the social and medical models with compromise theories, building on the neurological foundation of dyslexia as an impairment but including aspects of a social approach to dyslexia. However, I would argue these hybrid models conflate the epistemological basis underlying the two main approaches.

I join Riddick (2001) in recognising the medical framing of dyslexia within institutions in legal and policy terms as a basis for remediation. This also underlies much medical research to understanding its heritability and neurological basis. Yet I also see the value in exposing the social context of dyslexia and the interactions between our education environments and the way that students study. Importantly, a social situating of dyslexia helps to consider cultural factors, understand the individual experience and avoid promoting ideas of normalcy and otherness.

As a result, in this thesis I join researchers such as Gabel & Peters (2004), who argue that agreeing on a single model of disability for all situations and perspectives may be unattainable. Instead, we need to be aware of the settings in which each approach is used (and by whom) and the consequences of each perspective. In the current project, instead of seeking one truth or arguing for one correct approach to dyslexia, I will consider both these main approaches to dyslexia as ways to explore the complex relationships between the material body, cultural experiences, socio-political frameworks, and theoretical discourses. The medical and social approaches will help to frame questions around power relationships, cultural context and personal meaning, to challenge disadvantage and discrimination in higher education.

2.2.2 Dyslexia definitions and UK legal status

In 2006, dyslexia researchers Siegel & Smythe wrote a strongly worded critique of a review by Rice and Brookes (2004) arguing that to provide a basis for open discussion, we need to consider dyslexia terminology, definitions and descriptions carefully. In the light of that rebuttal, below I will review the most common and relevant dyslexia definitions, looking both in the UK and internationally. I will also explore why it is important to use a label to recognize and identify those with dyslexia and I will examine dyslexia's legal protection, particularly under UK law.

2.2.2.1 Variance in dyslexia definitions points to fuzzy boundaries

A surprisingly wide range of current definitions of dyslexia exists, given that at least one in 20 people are thought to identify with dyslexia in the UK (Rose, 2009) and it has been studied for the best part of a century. These varying definitions are a reminder that there are different approaches to dyslexia that reflect nuances in our understanding of it. These can favour specific contributing factors; highlight conditions or context; enable a legal account to allow for entitlements; or provide a framework for philosophical debate.

Here I will examine three dyslexia definitions that are most heavily drawn upon in dyslexia research and contrast the nuances between them. I will look at definitions from the US-based International Dyslexia Association (IDA), the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) and the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (YCDC). I will use these three definitions as a basis for reflection on how dyslexia research and this project position dyslexia.

The IDA adopted its current dyslexia definition in 2002: "*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. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive* *abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge*." (IDA, no date)

This has led to dyslexia being widely understood as a neurological condition or defect characterized by difficulties with literacy and spelling. Researchers in neuroscience, for example Vellutino *et al* (2004), therefore define dyslexia as an obstruction, of neurological origin, in the recognition and processing of the sounds and structure of language through the written word.

The danger with the IDA definition, focused on neurological deficit, is that it could lead to an assumed association between dyslexia and low ability or poor academic performance in the classroom, despite effective teaching. As Collinson & Penketh (2010) point out, this can lead to those children with dyslexia being uniformly relegated to low ability groups at school, reinforcing a societally accepted link between the emphasis placed on early literacy and our perception of general academic ability at school. This association is not borne out by research findings that dyslexia is orthogonal to intelligence, or as Ferrer *et al* (2010) argue, dyslexia uncouples the link between IQ and reading ability throughout a child's schooling.

In contrast, the BDA uses the UK Secretary of State-commissioned report by Sir Jim Rose (2009) as a guide to define dyslexia succinctly as a reading difficulty: "*Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities…*" (BDA, no date)

This second definition therefore views dyslexia through its manifestations as difficulty with literacy, rather than following the IDA in declaring it a neurological disability. It also clearly distinguishes intellectual ability as distinct from dyslexia. The BDA definition relies on research that links dyslexia's literacy difficulties with deficits in phonological processing (see, for example, Wagner, Torgesen and Rashotte, 1994). However, both the IDA and BDA definitions of dyslexia position it as a defect of the individual.

The YCDC, headed by long-term dyslexia researchers Drs S. and B. Shaywitz, gives a simpler description of dyslexia as "*an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader… Dyslexia can't be "cured" – it is lifelong. But with the right supports, dyslexic individuals can become highly successful students and adults.*" (YCDC, no date) In the YCDC definition reading difficulties still form the basis of dyslexia, but the emphasis on learning difficulty (BDA) or disability (IDA) is gone. However, it still implies that dyslexia is a defect of the individual and implies they need support or remediation in order to achieve success.

If we look at how dyslexia researchers define dyslexia, most papers agree that it is (i) a life-long difference, particularly (but not only) affecting reading and spelling; (ii) independent of other higher order cognitive processes; and (iii) orthogonal to intelligence (see, for example Pumfrey, 2002 and Smythe, 2005). A few researchers take a purely socially situated view, for example Collinson & Penketh (2010) say that dyslexia is a "*failure to meet the demands of particular social expectations of literacy*" i.e. for a person of their intelligence. This very wide stance could open issues of measures of intelligence as well as of literacy, which may not easily consider language or cultural issues (such as ethnicity or social factors) or whether the individual had the teaching or opportunity to learn to read.

Most dyslexia research in the past decade takes a lead from Drs S. and B. Shaywitz, (see Shaywitz, Morris and Shaywitz, 2008), who express dyslexia as an unexpected difficulty in reading, where an individual has the motivation and exposure to read but nevertheless struggles. This project most closely aligns with this simplest definition of dyslexia, yet it is important to be aware of the alternative ways that dyslexia is defined, when describing, identifying or accommodating dyslexia.

2.2.2.2 Why dyslexia is useful as a term

As discussed above, the definitions, language and meanings we assign to dyslexia influence how we view it as researchers, institutions, teachers or students (explored further in Hughes *et al,* 2011). The names we use have a role in constructing social reality and conferring meanings (Stockholder, 1994). Some terms that were previously used to describe reading difficulty in the classroom have become derogatory and retired from use (e.g. handicapped, retarded, special needs). These are easy to dismiss today as out-dated terminology, however it is interesting to note that the dyslexia label has persisted for nearly a hundred years and still has currency.

In 'The Dyslexia Debate,' Elliott and Grigorenko (2014a) questioned the usefulness of the term dyslexia and its varying definitions; they asked whether it should be replaced by an alternative broader term, suggesting reading disability. Their argument centres on the dilution of the social meaning and relevance of the word dyslexia, as they claim it represents a meme with added social capital, i.e., parents and schools use the label to show that a child is not low intelligence but has a recognised reason for low reading ability. Elliott and Grigorenko support their view by pointing out that there is not yet a reliable and demonstrable single neurological basis for dyslexia. They questioned studies that claim to show specific genetic links, on the basis that these select from samples of children below a certain reading level cut-off. They also say that taking a pool of generally poor-readers and selecting a sample that shows higher potential in other cognitive areas to trace genetic links, is an artificial and not reliable classification of dyslexia. While their criticism of the sampling approach in some genetic studies may be valid, the difficulty with Elliott and Grigorenko's (2014a) argument is that society continues to find the term dyslexia, and the specific differences it represents, useful to define and describe. Their suggested term reading disability also is now considered distinct from dyslexia and is used where there is an impact on overall intelligence.

Other researcher-philosophers, such as Collinson (2020) argue against using the term dyslexia as it reinforces the dominant Lexic discourse in society that 'others' those with literacy difficulties and leads to discrimination. However, as a basis for the current study exploring the experiences of students identified with dyslexia, I agree with those dyslexia researchers (e.g. Glazzard, 2010 and Cameron, 2016) as well as support practitioners (e.g. Lithari, 2019) who argue the term dyslexia is useful. It is helpful for institutions, dyslexia researchers and those with dyslexia to name and describe dyslexia as a specific difference. We need an understanding of what dyslexia represents, to provide a foundation for dyslexia research, as well as guide policy and practice for those working to support individuals with dyslexia, even if we continue to debate how we identify and describe it. In recognising that there are disadvantages associated with dyslexia in certain settings, we can argue for adjustments and guard against discrimination or prejudice. Furthermore, criticism of the use of the term dyslexia adds fuel to the anti-dyslexia lobby in the press (e.g. Sample, 2005) and can lead to claims that dyslexia does not exist, or assertions that those who claim dyslexia are either dishonest or lazy, which is not the aim of healthy debate in dyslexia research.

There is another dimension to this debate. As Cameron & Billington (2015b) argue, the labels we use to construct realities and define ideologies sometimes change from their original meanings over time as social constructions develop. But a sudden conscious change in the term that we use to describe dyslexia would not change the social meaning attached to the phenomenon, due to the importance we place on high literacy and its association with intellectual ability. However, I do recognise, as Collinson (2020) highlights, that the term dyslexia is a label that identifies individuals as different from a socially accepted norm. It is the associated impacts of this label on an individual's identity that this project aims to explore.

2.2.2.3 The UK follows international law in defining dyslexia as a disability

Researchers such as Wendell (1996) and Davis (2010) highlight how Western societies see physical, mental and cognitive impairment as deviation from a normal state, warranting pity and support. In this sub-section I will review the evolution of dyslexia's legal status and labeling as a disability in UK and international law.

International bodies such as the UN have agreed conventions on human rights that describe and set standards for the treatment of individuals who may be at a disadvantage due to physical, mental, or cognitive differences, defined as disabilities. For example, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) states that members must "*ensure equal access to primary and secondary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning*." As Parmenter (2001) points out, pursuing global human rights sits comfortably alongside our ideas of individualism in Western cultures, but falters where cultures already emphasize the obligation of a group for the well-being or education of an individual: here mutual obligation may be a better idea. Therefore, the implementation of UN conventions on the rights of disabled individuals is left to individual nation states, so these standards are specified and applied as law at the local (country) level.

In the UK, over the past 75 years dyslexia has come under multiple legal frameworks and the terminology used to describe it has evolved too. The Education Act (1944) originally identified areas of handicap for those who were considered educationally subnormal and who were often sent to specialist institutions. Following the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978), the UK government removed the categories of handicap and instead proposed the term special educational needs (SEN), encouraging such children to be included in mainstream schools. The SEN label aimed to link descriptions of children "*suffering*" from impairments and the "*gap between a child's level of behaviour or achievement and what is required of him*" (Wedell, 2003, p.LF107). As Wedell describes, subsequent Education Acts (1981, 1993, 1996) refined a Code of Practice with guidance for education authorities and schools on SENs.

Dyslexia was first positioned as a disability in the UK under the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (discussed in Macdonald & Deacon, 2019), with an agenda to reduce discrimination in employment for adults by adopting a civil rights approach. Dyslexia's status as a disability was then updated in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), Disability Discrimination Act (2005) and then the Equality Act (2010), which extended legal entitlements to reasonable adjustments for those with dyslexia, in education settings as well as other areas.

Disability is defined in the 2010 Equality Act as one of the nine characteristics protected from discrimination: "*A person has a disability if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*" (Equality Act, 2010). Here, substantial is defined as more than trivial, i.e. taking much longer to complete daily tasks, and long-term means the effects are for more than a year. Dyslexia falls within one of the specified affected areas in the Act, described as: "*memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand*" (Equality Act, 2010). Therefore, within UK law, dyslexia is a disability in an educational environment.

Discrimination, according to the Equality Act 2010, occurs when "*someone is refused or not provided with a service, or provided with a service on poorer terms, or when a service provider fails to make a reasonable adjustment to the service*" (Equality Act, 2010). The Act states that adjustments or accommodations are required when an individual is at a disadvantage due to a disability. This has an impact on education provision in schools and other education institutions, legally requiring them to put in place accommodations to help those with dyslexia. However, reasonable adjustment as a term is problematic (as Macdonald & Deacon, 2019, highlight), as it is open to interpretation by educational institutions: is the adjustment of the situation or individual. Cameron *et al* (2019) outlined that university compliance with the Equality Act 2010 requires communication, an avoidance of blanket policies over individual decisions and a common-sense approach to promoting inclusive teaching.

Disability researchers such as Seale (2017) stress that locating disability within the person, as in the UK Equality Act above, places the legal conception of disability within the medical model (described in the section 2.2.1.1 above). As Bunbury (2019) recently pointed out, UK law positions disability as a problem of the individual and risks contributing to segregation and discrimination of disabled people, by perpetuating the idea that we should strive to reach an ideal. Instead, he suggests, the law should focus on the positive and transformative social model of disability and take note of the conceptual advances behind feminism, queer theory and racial equality discourses. This is hoped to lead to changes in social attitudes as well as our understanding of legal rights relating to disability.

UK law states that organisations (i.e. employers or education institutions) should also take reasonable steps to identify those who are disabled, such as asking on a university application form. This assumes the student is happy to declare the disability when applying to a university. In the case of dyslexia, the organisation can also request reasonable evidence (such as an Educational Psychologist's or Assessor's report) as proof of dyslexia identification. Nevertheless, the Data Protection Act (1998) overrules disability legislation asking for disclosure, so an individual can choose not to declare their disability to an organisation or can request that it be kept confidential. Thus, students in higher education may choose not to declare dyslexia and the university has no right to require it to be identified.

The issue for universities is identifying students who may be entitled to support. Understandably, universities prefer to minimise the number of students to whom they must offer costly support, limiting it to those who formally test for dyslexia and can claim the Disabled Student's Allowance to help pay for support. Drawing a clear line around dyslexia enables the institution to justify to whom they offer support; show they satisfy legal requirements; and enable funding of support services.

To put the UK's legal position in an international context, Solvang's (2007) analysis of Scandinavian education systems acknowledges the usefulness of a legal basis for dyslexia support programmes and attempts to monetise the impact of late dyslexia identification. Solvang noted there have been over 1,000 Norwegian legal cases where former pupils sued local education authorities for missing dyslexia. These cases based their argument on the premise that dyslexia identification was a valuable asset, not only to access support but also to explain difficulties at school, which could also raise students' self-esteem. This last aspect was even quoted in court, as a sense of "*safety and knowledge about the problems*" (Solvang, 2007, p.84, translated citation from court judgement) that faced pupils with dyslexia.

Disability researchers such as Michalko (2002) highlight that the term disability is therefore bound up with expectations of difficulty that the individual must suffer or overcome and, in the case of dyslexia, that a student needs specialist teaching or support to remediate for the defect. In this project I agree with Grue (2016) who points out in her review of the social meaning of disability, that while disability is a label that confers legal protection, it also comes with negative associations of bodily difference and social marginalisation that we should strive to understand.

It remains the case in the UK that many schools still use the language of SEN (following the Warnock report) when referring to dyslexia among children. In contrast, universities follow the legal definition of dyslexia as a disability in adults. This may be at least in part due to universities' need to identify dyslexia as a disability for students to access funding for support. This includes the government's Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) as well as internal university funding sources.

While it is useful to contextualise dyslexia in terms of its legal status and to consider institutions' obligations, we should be aware of the risk of taking a one-sided approach, where dyslexia is seen as a medical condition to be remediated. Some dyslexia researchers, such as Lewthwaite (2011), argue that we should consider dyslexia in the space between what is able and disabled. We can then ask questions of how dyslexia blurs the boundaries between disability and ability and explore individuals' views on dyslexia, seen as a disability. In the current project I am interested to probe student and tutor reactions to dyslexia classified as a disability at university and the implications of this for student identity.

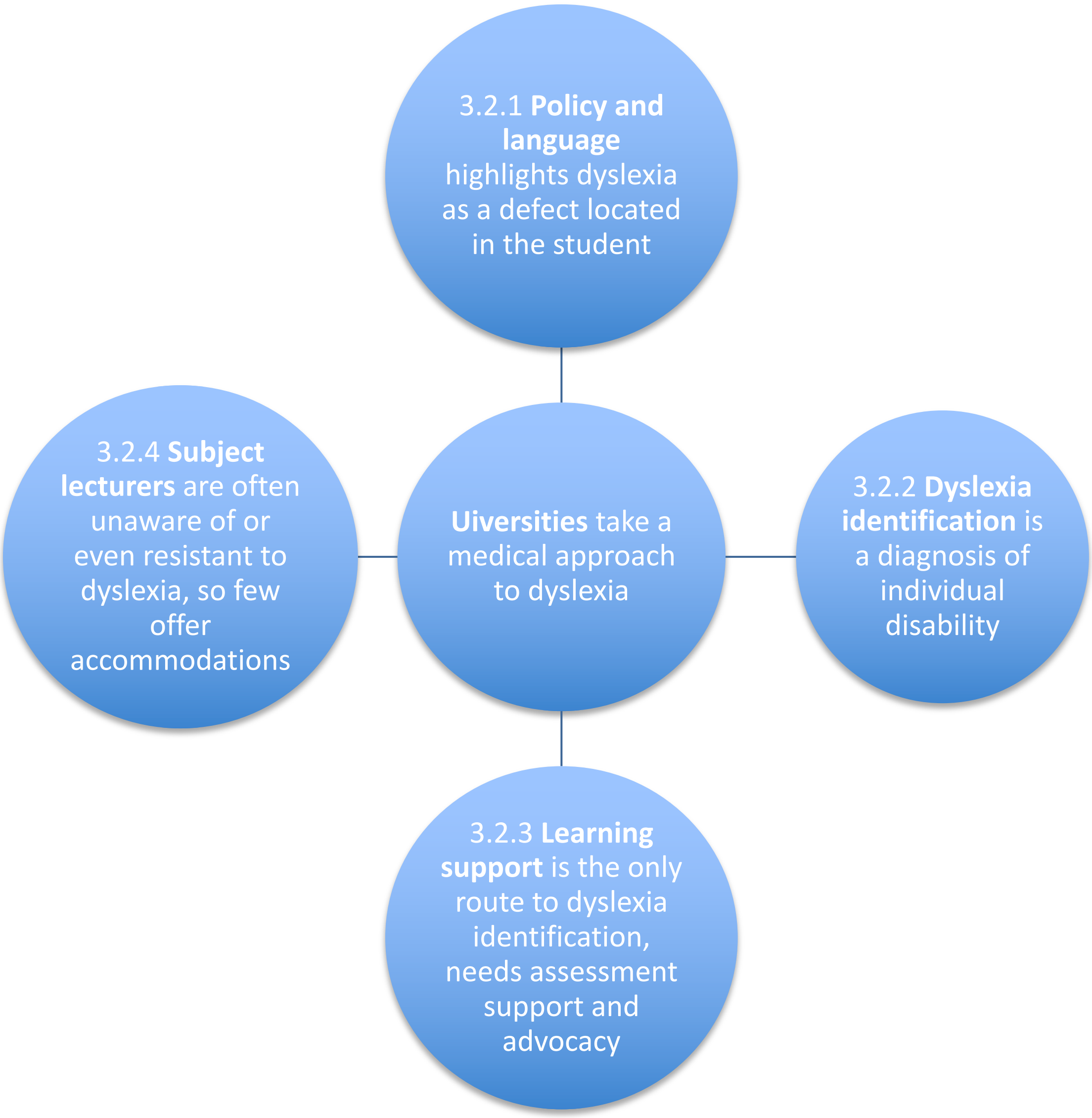
2.2.3 University policy focuses on dyslexia as a defect

This section will continue the theme of dyslexia as a concept, addressing existing literature relating to UK universities' policy and practices towards those with dyslexia, highlighting dyslexia identification as a diagnosis and learning support as the main route to remediation for dyslexia as a defect.

The UK Equality Act (2010), discussed in section 2.2.2.3, defines dyslexia as a debilitating defect deserving protection as a disability. While university lecturers, administrators or support tutors may individually construct dyslexia in different ways, university policy views dyslexia as a disability to satisfy legal obligations. However, this casts the students as other than normal and dyslexia as a condition to be remediated through university-provided support. It affects not only how an institution's staff must treat these students, but also impacts how they view a student with dyslexia, for example, Fawcett (2018) found that university personnel believe that students with dyslexia are limited in their studies.

Evidence of the medical approach to dyslexia at university (see Figure 4 below) was explored a decade ago, when Griffin & Pollak (2009) interviewed 27 students with dyslexia at the UK's De Montfort University, to explore their views of dyslexia. These they divided into two groups: (i) a neurodiversity view of dyslexia having a range of strengths and weaknesses; or (ii) those who saw dyslexia as a medical defect conferring disadvantage. While the first group was characterised by greater ambition and resilience, the latter group focused on dyslexia as disability and worried about qualifying for support. Group (ii) also adopted a medical language of suffering and symptoms and saw dyslexia only in terms of weakness. The current study is therefore an opportunity to explore the university approach to dyslexia further, as well as theorise its impact, through discussions with support tutors and students.

Figure 4: The literature points to universities' medical approach to dyslexia



2.2.3.1 Dyslexia identification at university is a diagnosis

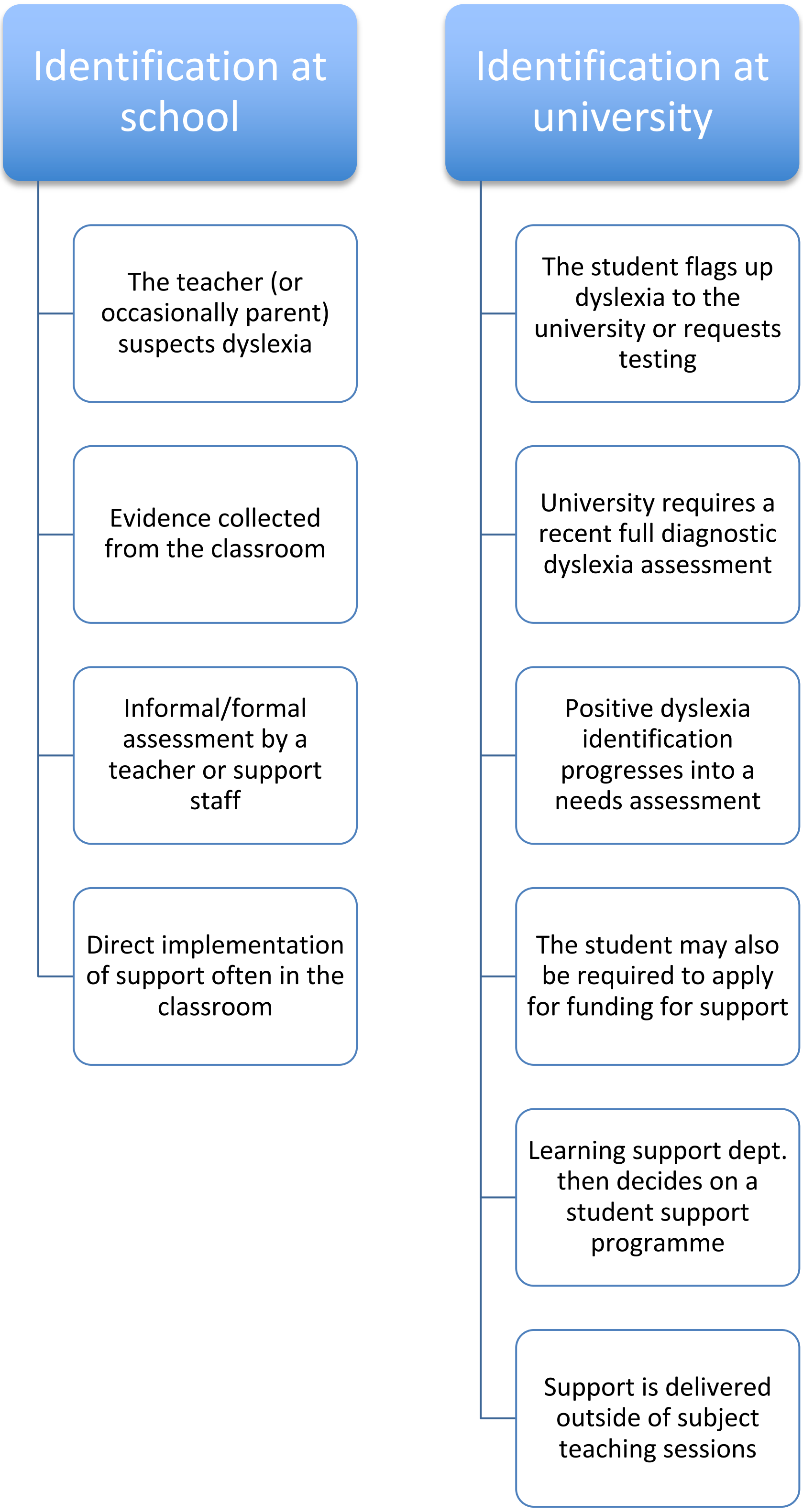
Dyslexia is a widely recognised phenomenon, associated with difficulties in education and affecting a significant proportion of the population. As a result, most researchers argue dyslexia is useful to define and identify, as it can explain struggle, as well as build solidarity between students, parents, teachers and researchers who seek to explain and assist with observed difficulties in education.

In the UK, dyslexia identification is complex and takes various forms, it may also be repeated at different stages of education to update an individual's difficulties or give greater depth to an earlier test. There are paper-based or online self-administered tests that give an indication of dyslexia. However, these are not considered fully accurate, nor do UK schools or universities accept them as confirmation of dyslexia. In schools, a specialist teacher or assessor may administer a dyslexia screening test, which can identify areas of difficulty as a basis for arranging support for a child, whether in class or with a specialist teacher. The assessment may be sourced by the school or privately by parents through organisations such as the BDA.

A formal dyslexia test, as a one-off examination of phonological recognition and processing, is an evaluation of only selected literacy traits to distinguish between different individuals' abilities. Dyslexia identification in school and university uses tests that rely on measuring a discrepancy between the individual's accuracy in reading and their expected ability given their age and IQ. This method relates back to a definition of dyslexia as a disconnect, or uncoupling, in the link between reading and intelligence (see 2.2.2.1). The method was supported by empirical evidence from Ferrer *et al* (2010), who developed statistical models using data from a longitudinal survey of US school children. They examined the dynamic linkage between cognitive IQ development and literacy, which usually guides an individual's progress with reading. Typically, reading links with IQ through a reciprocal, positive feedback loop, so reading and IQ influence each other in both directions. However, for those with dyslexia, Ferrer *et al* highlighted an uncoupling of these links, with virtually no association from reading to IQ and very little from IQ to reading. There was also increased disconnect over time, often leading to a widening gap in reading ability between those with dyslexia and typical readers. Researchers note that reading and IQ development is a complex area that is still under investigation.

Dyslexia assessment at university is outlined usefully in Pollak (2012). As a basis for the current project, I contrast dyslexia identification at school and university in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Dyslexia identification is more formal and segregated from teaching at university, compared with at school



Dyslexia identification at UK universities is referred to as a diagnosis, requiring confirmation through a written diagnostic assessment conducted by a Chartered Psychologist (known as an Educational Psychologist or Ed Psych). This was the main method of dyslexia testing at the UK universities where I spoke to students for this project. Specialist assessors applied a series of psychometric tests to students' verbal, spatial, reading and spelling abilities (both speed and accuracy), as well as their memory and processing speed. Typically, they identified a characteristic 'spikey' dyslexia profile, with ability drops in specific areas, particularly in speed and accuracy of reading and writing, phonological processing and short-term memory.

In their book 'Developmental Disorders of Language Learning and Cognition' Hulme and Snowling (2009) criticize the accuracy and reliability of dyslexia identification by observing the uncoupling of IQ and reading. They suggest there is variation in the consistency of adult dyslexia testing, particularly at university. As Ho (2004) argues, it is more of a subjective art than an objective science. Ryder and Norwich (2018) also recently criticised dyslexia identification, in a study of 118 UK assessors, highlighting how assessors preferred to interpret literacy difficulties in context, not in isolation. Therefore, Ryder and Norwich questioned the consistency, validity and reliability of these tests, particularly among adults. Ryder and Norwich noted assessors' reliance on observation and experience over actual psychometric test results.

Further, the boundaries used to determine dyslexia may vary between institutions, or assessors to ring-fence what is considered to constitute dyslexia. Even the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2021) under which the Chartered Educational Psychologists and Assessors operate, has declared that dyslexia is difficult to distinguish from other specific learning disorders, so diagnosis is neither precise nor fully supported by all education institutions. Ryder and Norwich also highlighted that the validity of the discrepancy model as a basis for testing has not yet been challenged in adult dyslexia in the same way as it has with children (e.g. in Warmington, Stothard and Snowling, 2013).

Existing research also debates the social benefits of dyslexia testing, focusing on children in schools, for example Ho (2004) declares that a positive test result absolves a parent from blame for a child's poor performance. Elliott and Grigorenko (2014a) argue in 'The Dyslexia Debate' that singling out children with aptitude in certain cognitive areas from among poor readers, gives a chosen few an excuse to be different and offers superior help with their reading. In contrast, other children continue to struggle with reading for less well explained reasons. Some researchers such as Rice and Brooks (2004) suggest that dyslexia is over-diagnosed, as there is too wide a set of characteristics associated with it and the flawed and subjective nature of testing often can't distinguish it from general reading difficulties.

Further, dyslexia identification offers advantages as it opens access to support for the student at school and university. Moreover, the individual gains an explanation for struggle and may avoid relegation to lower ability groups in school. As a specific example of the impact, Cameron (2021) examined the case of a student whose dyslexia identification and accommodations, gained at school, were removed by another assessor at university. Cameron highlights the student's dismay at the loss of dyslexia as explanation of difficulty, the removal of her support, subsequent academic struggles and grade drop, and feelings of powerlessness against a scientific judgement on the absence of dyslexia. As Cameron argues, there may be those who just fail to qualify for formal dyslexia identification but who undoubtedly would benefit from support. This raises questions of fairness in dyslexia identification, as a gateway to support, which will be interesting to explore in the current study.

Russell *et al* (2015) point out that dyslexia exists on a continuum with no specific cut-off point from 'normal' reading abilities (Rose, 2009) and additional support can help all poor readers, especially early in education, whether dyslexic or not (Vellutino *et al,* 2006). Therefore, a few researchers have started to question if we are right to create positive-negative dyslexia identification categories and to debate the impact this has on those who are (or are not) offered support. For example, researchers such as Reilly *et al* (2014) suggest removing exclusionary criteria altogether, opening support to all who might benefit from it.

To be clear at the outset, in the current project I will not focus on the validity or reliability of dyslexia testing at school or university. These are undoubtedly interesting questions to ask as the foundation of another study. Instead, this project will probe the student's experience of the test and explore dyslexia testing as a manifestation of the university approach to dyslexia. Therefore, in my discussions with students I will ask about their reactions to how, when and by whom dyslexia was confirmed and I will develop the findings to theorise the role and impact on student identity of dyslexia identification.

2.2.3.2 Learning support remediates for dyslexia

In the UK, dyslexia support in primary school emphasizes interventions to help with reading and spelling, to remediate the early difficulties with phonological processing (Rose, 2009). Over time, dyslexia support broadens to consider organization and study skills at senior school. At university, students identified with dyslexia can be offered a range of accommodations, which I will discuss below.

At the time of this study, UK students with dyslexia and other disabilities could apply for a Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA) from the UK government, intended to help pay for specialist equipment, non-medical support, additional travel and other costs. To apply for the DSA, a student must have their eligibility confirmed by the university (e.g. via a dyslexia test). Once dyslexia is identified, support staff conduct a needs assessment to determine how far they can offer support to the student. Support may include (i) a standard 25% extra time in exams and for assessed assignments; (ii) funding for technology equipment or software, such as a laptop, printer, or text reading software; or (iii) one-to-one support time, usually a standard one hour per week during term-time, i.e., 30 hours over a year. This is with a specialist learning support tutor to develop study skills and academic coping strategies. University support departments assess and advise on these accommodations.

Several researchers have criticised universities' support provision. For example, Watson (2002) argues that learning support requires students to seek help outside of subject teaching and does not foster a community for support. Further, Riddell and Weedon (2006) argued that higher education institutions struggle to provide suitable (i.e., tailored) accommodations for difficulties such as dyslexia. This criticism was supported more recently in a systematic review of research among disabled students, by Kutscher and Tuckwiller (2019), who found that students struggled with untailored support. The authors highlighted that dyslexia is not as clear-cut to define or easy to make adjustments for, when compared with physical disability or visual or aural impairments. Institutions must also balance resource allocation to identify and support students with dyslexia, alongside those with other disabilities and mental health issues. Further, as Fawcett (2018) discusses, there are putative revisions to UK policy that may segregate further those who are considered more severely affected students (classified as disabled) from those who are less affected (such as with learning differences). The implications of this for dyslexia are unclear.

Furthermore, the technology tools offered to students with dyslexia as part of the DSA may not be a simple panacea. Society often views technology as a compensation for disadvantage, for example to improve the life of disabled people. This is an example of the technology solutionism referred to by Carr (2010). The assumption that technology can negate disadvantage perpetuates an idea of disability as a feature of marginalised individuals who require support for impairment. Countering this assumption, those who are disabled point out that technologies may add difficulty, as individuals must adapt and learn to use them. An example relevant to dyslexia is the text-to-speech software sometimes offered to support students with dyslexia. A recent qualitative research project (Jacobs *et al,* 2020) among 14 UK students with dyslexia found they often did not use available additional technology to help with their studies. Asking why is important to develop our understanding of inclusive teaching, to test pedagogical changes and explore the experience of students with dyslexia.

Despite the criticisms of dyslexia support at university, researchers suggest that it can impact positively on the studies of students with dyslexia. For example, a US study by McGregor *et al* (2016) probed the challenges and satisfaction levels among students with learning difficulties, using the 2014 US Student Experience Survey. This showed that the 5% of students who self-reported a learning disability at university had lower satisfaction and experienced more obstacles with their study. While only a third of these received support from the university for their difficulties, those who did receive help found their studies less difficult than those who did not. Further work is needed to explore whether there are causal links between low satisfaction, study difficulties and no access to learning support, but this work suggests a role for some accommodations in supporting those with learning difficulties.

Difficulties arise with learning support as it can be difficult to orchestrate between siloed subject teaching departments and isolated learning support tutors (pointed out by Ling *et al,* 2007). Most worrying, MacCullagh, Bosanquet and Badock (2017) found a link between low suitability of support services to meet students' needs and poor student take-up of support services. There was even anecdotal evidence that some students drop out from support entirely, which will be interesting to explore in this thesis. In the current project I will ask about the challenges of university support from the perspectives of the support tutors as well as students with dyslexia.

2.2.3.3 Universities offer few in-subject accommodations

While the accommodations offered through university learning support departments may nominally meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, dyslexia support is not as effective as it could be. The UK government has requested that universities focus their efforts on anticipatory reasonable adjustments within teaching rather than remediation in one-to-one tutorials and with software (UK Dept for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Further, the Demos Project (2002), funded by the UK Higher Education Funding Council, issued guidelines suggesting that university lecturers should try to ensure teaching is accessible to students with dyslexia. These guidelines included providing lecture notes before lectures; structuring lectures with an overview and summary; giving hand-outs with summary notes; ensuring slides are clear, brief and well-spaced; and saying key names and dates out loud.

Authors such as Dobson (2019) suggest that in-subject support and mentoring has the potential to help those with dyslexia but is not often on offer at UK universities. In a study exploring students' learning practices and challenges, MacCullagh, Bosanquet and Badock (2017) found that dyslexia accommodation from lecturers was helpful for students but was seldom on offer. Mortimore (2013) suggested there is little incentive or training for lecturers to spot invisible difficulties, such as dyslexia, to offer help or refer students on to specialists. Lecturers' poor awareness of dyslexia or how to support through subject teaching was also highlighted by Ryder and Norwich (2019) in a survey of 164 UK lecturers at 12 universities. Specifically, the lecturers assumed generic learning support adjustments were sufficient and were reluctant to engage with individuals or consider issues of equity in education.

Researchers, however, have countered resistance to in-subject accommodation for dyslexia, pointing to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), created and developed by the US education research organisation CAST (no date). UDL stresses equal opportunity for all to learn, through teaching that is planned to be flexible and customisable, not requiring adaptation or accommodation for the few. While UDL has been promoted in the US for those with dyslexia in schools (see Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Boucher and Evans, 2018), again little research or debate has been raised on UDL and pedagogy change to address dyslexia in UK universities.

Inclusive teaching could arguably benefit all students, not just those with dyslexia. For example, a study looking at foreign language learning and dyslexia (Schneider and Crombie, 2003) found that university courses changed to benefit students with dyslexia were also of benefit to other students, as they assisted with reading, learning and organizing work. Therefore, lecturers were encouraged to record lectures, increase their understanding of dyslexia, offer more resources on academic writing and learning, and avoid unhelpful formatting (e.g. large amounts of data).

At UK universities there has also been much debate over lecture recording. Researchers such as Leadbeater *et al* (2013) found that a group of high users of recorded lectures (largely those with dyslexia or English as a second language) were very dependent on these recordings. Despite this, lecturers still had concerns. The lecturers argued that recordings diminished lecture attendance, led to surface rather than deep learning, and offered no significant impact on academic performance. Similarly, earlier research among lecturers by Riddell and Weedon (2006) showed that while students with dyslexia frequently requested lecture notes in advance (ideally electronically), the lecturers did not always respond to this positively. In the study, lecturers said they feared students would not come to lectures, or that they did not make notes, or they were protecting their intellectual rights over content. We await the outcomes of the move to online teaching and lectures during 2020-21 (after the period of data collection for the current project) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly on those with dyslexia.

Lecturer resistance to simple accommodations such as lecture recording leads us to ask more broadly about lecturer attitudes towards those with dyslexia at university. Cameron and Nunkoosing's (2012) study among university lecturers found that two out of 13 lecturers that they interviewed were deemed negative or resistant to students with dyslexia. These lecturers did not feel that they needed to support or accommodate students directly, were little informed about dyslexia and even doubted that it existed. These lecturers said that they assumed that support services adequately looked after the needs of students with dyslexia and that they shouldn't "*dabble as amateurs*" (Cameron and Nunkoosing, 2012, p.347) by adjusting their teaching or practices. Moreover, they expected students to come to them with issues, rather than asking students about dyslexia. In contrast, the 8 lecturers who had a positive stance towards dyslexia did not wait to be approached by students with dyslexia but would raise it with them directly.

In the 2012 study, Cameron and Nunkoosing highlighted that dyslexia awareness and interactions between lecturers and students with dyslexia contributed to lecturers' interest in dyslexia and related to positive attitudes towards its support. Conversely, it was those lecturers who did not interact with students with dyslexia who were more resistant and less open to discussions with students about dyslexia or accommodations. They were also less aware of which students identified with

dyslexia. The authors also suggested that it was unlikely that this more negative attitude would change. This relationship between lecturer awareness of dyslexia and sympathetic tendencies will be interesting to probe further in the current study.
In summary, while some universities encourage lecturers to be aware of dyslexia and its accommodation, the literature suggests that a proportion of lecturers resist it as a concept and feel it is not their job to support students. In this project I am interested to see if there is further evidence of lecturer resistance to dyslexia and what form it takes, as a preface to exploring the impact this has on the identity and self-esteem of students with dyslexia, which has yet to be explored in existing research.

Chapter 2 Concluding comments

In this chapter I outlined how dyslexia is described and defined in the literature, summarised in Figure 6. I started by reviewing studies that explore dyslexia as a phenomenon from the individual perspective, highlighting that while dyslexia is widely associated with literacy difficulty in early education, it can also impact later in a number of other ways, particularly as it often overlaps with other cognitive differences and varies in its expression, both between individuals and over time.

In the second half of the chapter, I looked at dyslexia as a concept and explained the importance of examining how dyslexia is defined and its legal status, which affects our language and behaviour towards those with dyslexia as well as dictating individual entitlements. In this project I note the focus on a medical approach to dyslexia to comply with UK law and institutional policy, yet I highlight the implications of situating dyslexia as a defect, which positions the individual as defective with impaired status, suggesting that they must attempt normalisation and rely on support. I contrast this with the social approach that defines dyslexia as a mismatch between an individual's abilities and the demands of the environment. Where dyslexia researchers argue for or against the polarised medical or social approaches as a correct or useful way forward, this study aims to contribute to our understanding by recognising where individuals or institutions take these approaches and asking about the implications of this for student identity.

Figure 6: Summary of Literature Review: Defining and describing dyslexia

Dyslexia background	**2.1 Dyslexia as a phenomenon for the individual**	**2.2 Dyslexia as a concept in society**
Sub-section	2.1.1 Dyslexia as struggle with literacy	2.2.1 Attitudes divide into two approaches
Themes explored	• Difficulties extend beyond early literacy into adulthood • Variance points to a complex genetic and cognitive basis	• The medical approach identifies defect in the individual • The social approach locates the issue externally
Sub-section	2.1.2 Dyslexia in higher education	2.2.2 Dyslexia definition and legal status
Themes explored	• Students extend coping strategies to meet challenges • Fewer students claim dyslexia than expected	• Variation in dyslexia definitions leads to fuzzy boundaries • UK law identifies dyslexia as a disability
Sub-section		2.2.3 How universities approach dyslexia
Themes explored		• Dyslexia identification as a diagnosis • Support as remediation • Lecturer resistance and low awareness

In the next chapter I will review literature that addresses dyslexia and identity.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: DYSLEXIA AND IDENTITY

This chapter will review existing research relating to dyslexia in the context of an individual’s identity, which I will draw on to respond to the main research question: **What is the identity impact of dyslexia for students in UK higher education?** The question is a response to dyslexia researchers such as Burden (2008) who called for research into the connections between self-esteem, academic self-concept and dyslexia, which he highlighted has been touched on in children but barely addressed in adults or students. In the years since Burden’s request, few studies have addressed identity work among adults with dyslexia, I will highlight these and the questions they raise below, in the context of wider work on identity and dyslexia.

As dyslexia in adults is positioned as a disability under UK law (see 2.2.2.3 above), I will also refer to work from disability studies, however I will examine critical approaches in disability studies in more detail in the next Chapter 4. Chapter 3 is divided into four sections, reviewing research addressing: identity construction (3.1;) dyslexia and self-esteem (3.2); dyslexia and stigma (3.3); and research on stigma management mostly outside of dyslexia research but relevant to this thesis (3.4).

3.1 Identity construction and the self

Many thinkers have studied identity over the centuries, the twentieth century was particularly fertile for theories of the self. Here I will summarise ideas that form the foundation of this thesis, from concepts of the self and identity theory, to multiple, social and group identity and the importance of the setting to understand identity.

3.1.1 Background on identity theories

First, I will briefly highlight the emergence of identity work, from the ideas of William James (1890) who drew a distinction between the self as subject (I, or knower) and as object of our understanding (me, or the known). He argued that this latter self is important to our understanding of us as beings and consists of aspects that are spiritual (how we think and feel), material (what we possess), social (in our interactions with others) and bodily (in our physical self). James said that we have pretentions in these aspects of our self-concept and that our self-esteem is a self-evaluation in terms of our success or failure in these aspects.

Identity theory developed particularly in the 1960s (e.g. Stryker, 1968) as a way to relate social interactions and identity. Theorists such as Giddens (1991) summarised these ideas in his book ‘Modernity and Self-Identity,’ suggesting that we construct our identity in relation to values and ideals as well as through our behavior and experience. It is continually created and revised as we interact with the world and we view our experiences through the lens of our genetics and disposition. The combination of beliefs and values, filtered through our character and outlook, develops our idea of the self and enables us to operate in a social environment by constructing our social identity.

This thesis follows the ideas developed more recently by Burke & Sets (2009), who positioned identity theory as work on how stable or fluid an identity is. This explores how our identity and the meanings associated with it can change over time or in different settings; and whether this is through our choices (e.g. getting married) or through identification of an aspect of the individual that changes their status in certain settings (e.g. identifying dyslexia). In the project I note that we filter external information through our identity, so our self-theory is instrumental in our interpretation of the social world that we inhabit (explored in Berzonsky, 2011).

3.1.2 Defining ideas of the self

As a basis for the discussion of identity and dyslexia later in this thesis, I will explain here the terms self-esteem, self-concept, self-worth and self-efficacy.

(i) Self-concept

Self-concept developed from the self-construct theories of psychology in the 1930's, including Freud's ideas of the conscious ego and mainly sub-conscious self, Mead's theories about the social self developed through interactions with others and Coopersmith's ideas of self-esteem as a constant aspect of the individual (Nash, 1976, discusses these theories). Some theorists focused on the self as an understanding of the individual by the individual, but others broadened to a social setting of the self.

This thesis also follows ideas from theorists such as Tajfel (1978) who consider that our self-concept gives us our identity through self-categorisation in particular settings. So, as we reflect on our self in different contexts, we form different definitions of the self, or self-concepts, e.g. in academic settings. This conceptualisation fits within the perceptual strand of identity theory (discussed in a review by Burke & Stryker, 2016) where our perception of an external identity affects our internal self-concept. This relates to further theory concerning the verification of identity and our emotional reactions to non-verification in different settings (Stets and Burke, 2005), which is relevant to discussions of undisclosed or unverified dyslexia identity in this thesis.

(ii) Self-esteem

If we think of identity as an abstract cognitive variable, self-esteem looks to the effect of our understanding of this on the individual i.e., the response to how we perceive ourselves. High self-esteem is related to a more positive outlook, better life satisfaction, and fewer feelings of hopelessness or depression. For example, Diener (1984) found high self-esteem to be the best predictor of overall satisfaction in the US, over demographic, social or other psychological factors. Conversely, Rosenberg (1995) linked low self-esteem to feelings of being unworthy, or inadequate, developing the Rosenberg self-esteem scale as a 10-point scale for measuring overall or global self-esteem. As Burke and Stryker (2016) highlight in their review, self-esteem assessments in various settings (influenced by identity verification and how well an individual felt they performed in a role) contributed to global self-esteem. However, rather than being a causal factor in social or psychological problems, authors such as Baumeister (1998) see self-esteem only as a symptom of such problems. It can be an aid to self-reflection for individuals in the face of adversity and has become a colloquial term in discussing identity and the self, so is particularly relevant to the current project.

(iii) Self-worth

As early as 1890, James gave a useful basis for the construction of self-worth in relation to self-esteem, saying that self-esteem rises and falls in relation to our success or failure in the aspects of our identity that we value, so these aspects make up our self-worth. More recently, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) discussed self-worth in different contexts, proposing that it can be assessed for an individual in different roles, for example relating to academic, athletic or family aspects of their identity. It is this conception of self-worth in different (e.g. academic) settings that is useful for the current study. Crocker and Wolfe further suggested that we explore the frailty of self-esteem and ideas of self-worth to explore social issues, which the current project will examine in the context of universities' approach to dyslexia and the impact on the identity of students with dyslexia.

(iv) Self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) introduced the idea of self-efficacy to social cognitive theory, as a measure of our control over our social environment. He suggested it is linked to being able to overcome difficulties and is dependent on self-confidence and a feeling of power over outcomes. Flynn and Chow (2017) argued that where we feel low self-efficacy this can affect our psychology, such as in phobias, depression and stress. Conversely, strong self-efficacy leads individuals to see difficult tasks as a challenge, they set tough goals, stick to these, and see failure as only temporary, believing they will develop the skills to achieve success. While this thesis is not intended as a psychological study of students with dyslexia, it is pertinent to explore ideas of self-efficacy to probe the intersection of dyslexia, identity, and ideas of agency and control, for example as a student receiving learning support.

3.1.3 Multiple identities and different settings

In a redevelopment of the single identity narrative discussed in 3.1.1 above, this thesis follows the ideas of theorists such as Burns and Bell (2011) who revised Foucault’s (1965) ideas of identity formation, to describe identity as a blended continuum of multiple identity aspects that develop during an individual’s lifespan. Therefore, individuals construct their identity as a constant reassessment of themselves in relation to others and external conditions or settings (self-concept).

As Burke and Stryker (2016) highlight, there are many questions to address if we accept that we possess multiple blended identities. For example, we can question the social and structural conditions that lead us to claim these identities; how we rationalise and prioritise them; how they operate independently of each other; and how much control we have over which identities we claim or disown. These questions are useful for research into self-concept in specific social settings, such as dyslexia in education, as they contribute to but are distinct from the individual’s global self-esteem. Therefore, while an individual may have a positive overall self-esteem, underlying this may be a negative self-concept in relation to academic self-worth in certain environments. Therefore, in the current project I will explore through the discussions with students their self-concept specifically in academic settings, as well as overall self-esteem.

The researchers Burke and Stets (2009) also explored scenarios where an individual claimed two identities that conflicted or had different standards, finding this caused distress for the individual. To mitigate for this, individuals avoided activating both conflicting identities at the same time, separating them in time or place. Again, this may have relevance for students with dyslexia, which are yet unexplored. Through the discussions with student participants, this project has an opportunity to ask about identity conflicts relating to dyslexia.

In summary, this thesis follows Burns and Bell's (2011) idea of multiple blended identities, founded on self-concepts assessed in different social settings e.g. academic environments. Therefore, a student, on identifying dyslexia, doesn't transition to a new single 'dyslexic' identity, dyslexia is already part of who they are (whether this had a formal label or not) through their experienced difficulties in education. However, the acknowledgement of dyslexia as an explanation for struggle may afford greater identity clarity and bring benefits (e.g. support). Yet it also can bring identity conflict through the negative associations of defect, disability and needing support. Students' acknowledgement of dyslexia and potential conflicting identity associations will be interesting to explore through the project's findings.

3.1.4 Group or social identity and verification

When conducting identity work among students it is relevant to ask questions of identity in relation to social groups, given the social upheavals of becoming a student and the importance of peer group context in social and study interactions. Group identity work examines judgments of comparison between different social groups, which give meaning and value to association with them. It also asks questions of self-identification for the individual, either within a group or without it.

Researchers such as Spears (2011) explored the idea of group identity via a social approach, where social identity is the meaning linked to association with a social group. This categorisation separates individuals from each other, which in turn can define their status in society or influence resource allocation. Spears suggests that by applying social identity theory and self-categorisation theory we can challenge the differences between social groups and help facilitate social change and mobility.

Grounded in social-cognitive theory, Chen, Boucher and Tapias (2006) developed the idea of relational identity, which involves knowledge of the self in relation to others. This perspective of the self can depend on the setting or be independent of context, and manifests through self-concept, motivation and other aspects of the self. In this study I am interested to ask the student participants their thoughts on dyslexia as a categorisation of the self, relating this to their status among peers and in terms of access to support.

More recently, Burke and Cerven (2019) combined ideas of multiple identities and group verification. They found that additional identities equated with positive emotion and greater self-esteem only if such identities were acknowledged and verified within a group. Conversely unverified identities led to negative emotion and lower self-esteem, irrespective of whether the identities were obligatory (such as being single/married) or voluntary identities claimed by the individual (such as membership of social groups).

These findings suggest that if students choose not to identify or disclose dyslexia at university, this could negatively impact self-esteem as an unverified identity. While unidentified dyslexia at university is outside the scope of this thesis to explore (all the student participants had identified dyslexia at least to the support department), it is an opportunity to explore with students the impacts of when they may choose not to disclose dyslexia, outside of learning support.

3.2 Dyslexia, self-concept and self-esteem

This thesis adds to our understanding of the impact of the dyslexia approach at university on the identity of students with dyslexia. To provide a basis for this, I will review existing research into self-concept, self-esteem and identity, first among children with dyslexia and then addressing students with dyslexia. Then I will examine work on associations between dyslexia, self-efficacy and helplessness in education, extending into ideas of resilience and locus of control.

3.2.1 Dyslexia and low self-esteem from childhood

In society, success is closely linked with literacy and academic ability. As a result, Kozulin (1998) proposed (in a book on the sociocultural approach to education) that society's culture and values, in emphasising early literacy, impact an individual's identity from childhood. More recently, Burden (2008) agreed that the difficulty reading and writing that is associated with dyslexia, creates barriers to success that start early in education and have the potential to affect an individual's self-esteem from a young age.

Some 30 years ago Chapman (1988) started exploring the impact of dyslexia on self-esteem, noting that it correlated with more negative feelings in children with dyslexia, compared with their peers without dyslexia. This has been examined in more detail in the decades since, for example Maugham and Hagell (1996) correlated increased rates of anxiety and depression with poor reading at school. Also, Hampton and Mason (2003) looked at learning disabilities (including dyslexia) and self-belief in US high school pupils, finding a link between a disability and feelings of low self-efficacy.

Humphrey and Mullins (2002), Zeleke (2004) and Burden (2008) have all reviewed others' research into self-concept and learning difficulties among children, specifically addressing dyslexia. For example, Humphrey & Mullins (2002) highlighted that the difficulties experienced by children with dyslexia negatively affects their education, largely through an impact on their self-esteem. At the simplest level, children with dyslexia make a strong association between being happy and being a good reader, so these children associate their difficulties reading with unhappiness. This underlines the importance placed on early fluency in reading and writing in our education system.

Some researchers (e.g. Palumbo, 2001 in a book on learning disorders in children) suggest that children develop self-narratives to express emotions and feelings of self-worth and to make sense of learning differences. This includes sense-making explanations of a difference, whether they accept or reject perceived external rationalisation of the difference. It also incorporates the individual’s worries and emotional reactions to the difference. For children with dyslexia, low self-esteem is characteristic of this self-narrative.

Further studies, reviewed by Burden (2008), have examined the impact of learning difficulties on a child’s social self-concept and whether there was a link to later psychiatric disorders. Burden found there was little conclusive and consistent evidence linking dyslexia with specific mental difficulties. However, he drew a distinction between self-concept, which for an individual with dyslexia may be low in an academic context, and global self-esteem, which may not be low if academic self-concept is not felt to be so important to global self-esteem.

Researchers have also explored how dyslexia relates to self-worth in children with dyslexia and the impact this has on self-concept. In a comparison of 28 studies, Zeleke (2004) found overall self-concept was not affected in any one specific way by dyslexia. However, Zeleke then distinguished between different aspects of self-concept and found that children with dyslexia had a consistently lower academic self-concept compared to their peers in several studies and this varied over time. Zeleke suggested that for those with dyslexia, academic self-concept was a link between achievement and self-esteem that also influenced academic potential.

Evidence from Palumbo (2001) and McNulty (2003) suggests the primary to secondary school transition is a key turning point for self-concept regarding dyslexia. For example, McNulty (2003) used narrative analysis to compare the life experiences of individuals with dyslexia and their self-esteem, noting there were opportunities in early adolescence to identify and support dyslexia, which led to later positive (or less negative) impacts on self-esteem. Further, while some pupils experienced teasing or bullying by their peers about their difficulties in the classroom (Glazzard, 2010), some teachers can make a positive contribution to the self-esteem of a child with dyslexia (Glazzard & Dale, 2015).

Glazzard (2010) also argued that children can see dyslexia identification as a positive, as it offers explanation for difficulty. However, the timing of dyslexia identification has an impact on how it was received. As Burden (2008) points out in his review, if a child is identified early with dyslexia and accepts this explanation, they can make sense of their perceived difficulties, lessening the measurable impact of the difficulty on their self-esteem later on. Conversely, those children whose dyslexia was identified later had lower motivation and less confidence in their academic potential at school (Palumbo, 2001, McNulty, 2003). It will be interesting in the current project to explore earlier unidentified dyslexia, among students with dyslexia at university, as an under-researched group in this context.

Addressing the impact of low self-esteem associated with dyslexia in children, Carroll *et al* (2005) in the UK and Terras, Thompson and Minnis (2009) in the US found a higher incidence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties among children with dyslexia. These authors further proposed that behavioural and psychological difficulties correlated with low academic self-esteem, resulting from dyslexia. They connected these findings with a link between dyslexia and the idea that an individual who internalises dyslexia difficulty will develop low self-esteem.

For decades, researchers have examined children’s rejection of the mantle of school education, relating this to identity, power and self-esteem. For example, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explored issues around dropping out from school and explained truancy as the way that individuals can reject aspects of formal education, rather than be thrown out. More recently, Armstrong (2003) and Collinson & Penketh (2010) explored the impact of learning spaces in education. For example, Collinson & Penketh (2010) interviewed an adult with dyslexia who recalled being removed to a separate area when at school. As a child he had disagreed with the school's assessment of his abilities as inferior; he disliked being separated from the main classroom and sent to learn in a space with those seen as less able. He therefore would play truant from lessons and school.

The rejection or fear of being separated from peers develops ideas around academic spatial markers. For example, Foucault's (1991) example of a stigmatising 'bench of ignorance' in schools and Armstrong's (2003) exploration of the impact of being taken to a separate space to learn. These spatial markers differentiate between those in a legitimised class and others who are separated for additional support, segregating them as outsiders. The separation clearly impacted how children identified themselves and how they felt about themselves in these environments, in some cases leading to the extreme of truancy from school. These questions of spatial separation are yet to be explored with university students with dyslexia, so the current study offers an opportunity to add to our understanding in this area.

Moving to research among adults, Madriaga (2007) explored the later effects of early negative school experiences, in a study among UK adults with dyslexia and found a correlation with low self-esteem. Madriaga's adults recognised a critical point when, without parental encouragement or school support for dyslexia, they had become demotivated in their studies. He concluded that the early school years were a crucial time at which a child either gave up or decided to persist with studies, even if with difficulty. Burden's (2008) review also pointed out that studies associated longstanding literacy difficulties from childhood with low self-esteem, higher anxiety, and a tendency to depression among young adults. Bell (2010) further found that negative experiences of dyslexia impacted adults in their life choices and self-image, particularly when changing educational settings or employment. More recently, Deacon, Macdonald and Donaghue (2020) interviewed

15 UK adults with dyslexia, who agreed that the difficulties experienced since childhood and the exclusionary practices of education and employment led to individual feelings of failure and low competency, which depressed self-esteem.

In one of few identity studies among UK students with dyslexia, Pollak (2005) suggested that dyslexia has a profound impact on the individual's sense of self, influenced by the label itself, the individual's view of dyslexia as well as their perception of society's view towards those with dyslexia. More recently, Kalka & Lockiewicz (2018) have attempted to evaluate happiness among Polish students with dyslexia, defined by pleasure, meaning and engagement as a path to success. This Polish study found a link between dyslexia and general lower life satisfaction. In a further psychology study looking at self-image among 115 UK students with dyslexia, Stoeber and Rountree (2021) used a questionnaire to connect image perfectionism with lower levels of adaptive coping, suggesting a link between how individuals present themselves, dyslexia's stigma and their ability to cope at university.

In summary, the literature agrees that dyslexia has a mainly negative impact on self-esteem from childhood, particularly if identified later rather than earlier. Dyslexia impacts children's academic self-concept, particularly if they were segregated from the rest of a class, with potentially catastrophic and long-lasting consequences for their education and identity. These findings emphasise the importance of asking about childhood experiences of dyslexia and their impact on later identity and self-esteem, exploring the experiences of university students with dyslexia.

3.2.2 Dyslexia links to low self-efficacy through learned helplessness and poor internal locus of control

Over forty years ago, Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) introduced the idea of learned helplessness to describe when an individual encountered difficulty, felt a sense of personal failure and consequently gave up on a task or had to ask for help. This led to the framing of self-efficacy (defined above in 3.1.2) as the individual's attitude towards difficulty and sense of control over the environment. Only in the past two decades have researchers started to explore the relationship between dyslexia and self-esteem, in terms of helplessness and self-efficacy. For example, Hampton & Mason (2003) and Margolis and McCabe (2003) examined self-efficacy among schoolchildren with dyslexia, both finding that children with dyslexia had lower self-efficacy in their work than children without dyslexia.

Investigating a link between self-concept, learned helplessness and locus of control, Humphrey (2002) and Humphrey and Mullins (2002) found that children with dyslexia attributed success or failure not to internal factors such as intelligence or commitment to the task, but to external factors, showing a poor internal locus of control over their studies. Only a handful of studies among children have explored the evidence to support this link between self-concept and locus of control, for example Burden (2008) reviewed Frederickson and Jacobs (2001) who looked at children with dyslexia and ideas of power and control. Frederickson and Jacobs found that a stronger internal locus of control corresponded with higher academic self-concept, compared with those who externalised control over academic success and failure. Burden (2008) called urgently for further studies to explore this complex relationship between dyslexia, locus of control and self-concept.

Since these early studies with children, Stagg, Eaton and Sjoblom (2018) used a questionnaire and interviews with UK students to explore self-efficacy, comparing those with and without dyslexia. They found that university students with dyslexia had lower self-efficacy than students without dyslexia, despite being on similar courses at university and controlling for other factors. They particularly noted the negative impact of previous low school achievement and repeated low grades on self-efficacy. Indeed, the students only reported any confidence in the area they had gone on to study. Further, students with dyslexia also reported low scores relating to their physiological state, indicating that they were uncomfortable in certain academic settings.

The most recent study by Cameron and Greenland (2021) uses journal-keeping by two BAME female students with dyslexia, studying at an elite university in white, male-dominated subject areas. These explored the students' views on belonging in academic spaces, which they set in the context of their difficulties and differences from the norm. One student in particular had internalised a sense of deficiency, combining external expectations of gender, race and ability.

These preliminary findings relating to self-efficacy are yet to be explored in detail with students with dyslexia. It will therefore be interesting in the current project to ask about students' feelings about dyslexia, their sense of power and control over their studies and support, and levels of discomfort in academic situations.

3.2.3 Resilience raises self-esteem by rejecting ideas of failure and seeing difference as externally constructed

In education research the term resilience is often used to refer to children's tendency to work hard and continue despite struggles. For example, Meltzer (2004) used resilience to relate academic performance and self-concept in children with learning disabilities. Wong (2003) introduced the idea of protective factors aiding resilience in education, such as the individual's attitudes, levels of support by parents and presence of inspirational teachers. Meltzer noted the scope for further work in this area, particularly involving learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Building on these earlier studies among children, Tanner (2009) examined the societal assumptions and education practices that reinforce ideas of failure among adults with dyslexia. While a few adults develop resilience to negative attitudes towards dyslexia, for many more there is a detrimental effect on their belief in their ability to succeed. Tanner called for more research into how dyslexia impacts adults' conceptions of themselves and how society maintains ideas of dyslexia as a barrier in educational settings. Developing this work, Collinson & Penketh (2010) explored resilience among six postgraduate students with dyslexia, using the term 'resistance through persistence' to describe how they fought continually to achieve academical success despite the difficulties experienced. The researchers noted the participants played along with academic 'rules of the game,' persisting with studies to achieve grades that proved they could succeed where previously they were made to feel a failure. These resilient students did not accept they were unable to study or learn within existing academic structures or without help. For example, one student had turned initial disparaging remarks about his academic ability into a determination to work hard and prove his teachers wrong.

In a further small qualitative study among Irish students, O'Byrne, Jagoe and Lawler (2019) found that students were aware of making additional efforts in their studies, framed as deep learning and resilience. These students also resisted dyslexia positioned as a negative characteristic or disorder, acknowledging and accepting it as part of their identity. Similarly, Lam (2016) found that a few students with dyslexia became better at taking control of their learning, accepting their differences in study environments and showing greater resilience to difficulty. Lam concluded that those students with dyslexia who were positive towards studies were also those who had overcome past struggles in school. In another study among Norwegian students, Andreassen, Jensen & Bråten (2017) investigated if self-directed study (i.e. with greater internal locus of control) might improve self-esteem in a small group of students with dyslexia. They found that self-regulated study fostered positive self-esteem, a link which was not evident in students without dyslexia.

The researchers above have called for further research into the connections between dyslexia, self-concept, self-efficacy, locus of control and resilience in education. They suggest there are complex relationships influenced by societal impacts as well as factors that are intrinsic to the individual. These ideas offer additional and supporting concepts for the current study, where there is an opportunity to explore ideas of resilience and persistence in education in the interviews with students. My discussion of these issues will be through exploring the experience of dyslexia and focusing on questions of identity relating to dyslexia and stigma, which I will address in the next sub-section.

3.3 Dyslexia as a stigmatized identity at university

Half a century ago, in his seminal book on stigma Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a discrediting mark on an individual's identity that society perpetuates to distinguish between those inside and outside social groups. Therefore, stigma acts to sort out the socially desirable or acceptable from the undesirable or discreditable in society. At the extreme, researchers have even explained stigma in terms of social Darwinism, for example Haghighat (2001) highlighted discrimination as promoting the fittest and demoting outcasts who were then less likely to reproduce. The stigma of illness, dangerous behaviour, physical impairment, or ideological threats (deviants) has led to the social rejection of criminals, those who may infect others (with viruses or ideas), or those whose genes are considered less fit for future generations. While we may attempt to break down the barriers and counter the ideas seeded by these social prejudices, stigma still persists in society and is an important aspect of identity work to study.

Goffman (1963) suggested that there are three categories of stigma: mental illness; physical impairment; and the stigma of group identity. The stigma of dyslexia is closest to mental disorder stigma, as it is innate to the individual but discovered later (so is not obvious from birth), it is situational (i.e. unobtrusive in most social settings and only a disadvantage for specific tasks) and is non-visible (i.e. individuals are at risk of discovery, so they are discreditable). Dyslexia is therefore associated with anticipated stigma, where individuals expect to be stigmatised if others find out about the difference. This can add to episodes of enacted stigma when they experience prejudice or discrimination.

Next, I will review the research that probes stigma in education, stigma as identity threat, the discovery of a stigmatised identity (e.g. through dyslexia identification) and the additional stigma of needing and accepting help, as a foundation to responding to the current project's third research question addressing the impact of universities' approach to dyslexia on student identity.

3.3.1 The stigma of dyslexia as undesirable traits in education

In this project I acknowledge the ideas of Crocker, Major and Steele (1998) who suggested we see stigma in terms of a devalued identity in certain situations, which, as Denhart (2008) highlighted, leads to the formation of stereotypes, misunderstanding and discrimination. The destructive power of stigma, therefore, comes from the shame attached to these devalued attributes and people's attempts to manage their visibility in society.

As outlined in 2.2.2.3 above, the handicap categories of the UK 1944 Education Act were removed, in part due to fears that these labels would become self-fulfilling prophecies, for example children labeled as disruptive or slow would think of themselves as such and so display those traits. Instead, the Warnock Report (1978) introduced the single categorisation of Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, consolidating learning difficulties under the banner of SEN soon led to the criticism that SEN still carried stigma through assumptions of inability or defect (Pumfrey 2007) and moreover was too vague to be helpful in terms of specifying the support a child needed. Further, as the SEN term encompassed many difficulties, it carried broad negative connotations that may not be associated with a single specific difficulty. Riddick (2000) therefore argued that grouping a range of learning differences under one umbrella term diminished our understanding of them as specific needs and led to dyslexia being missed in many children. In the past two decades the dyslexia label has increasingly been used to identify and explain a specific difficulty under the SEN banner in schools (Prevett, Bell and Ralph 2013), to reduce misunderstanding and enable more specific support. Without a recognised label, parents and pupils fear the difficulties associated with dyslexia will be only attributed to laziness, slowness, or lower ability.

However, dyslexia researchers agree that the term dyslexia still carries stigma. In an essay exploring the stigma of dyslexia, Denhart (2008) argues that society links dyslexia with undesirable negative attributes of intellectual inferiority. Supporting this, May and Stone (2010) found that individuals with dyslexia are stereotyped with fixed low intelligence, little academic ability and limited social skills. As Macdonald (2009) summarized, dyslexia's stigma arises through its association with negative traits in education (see Figure 1).

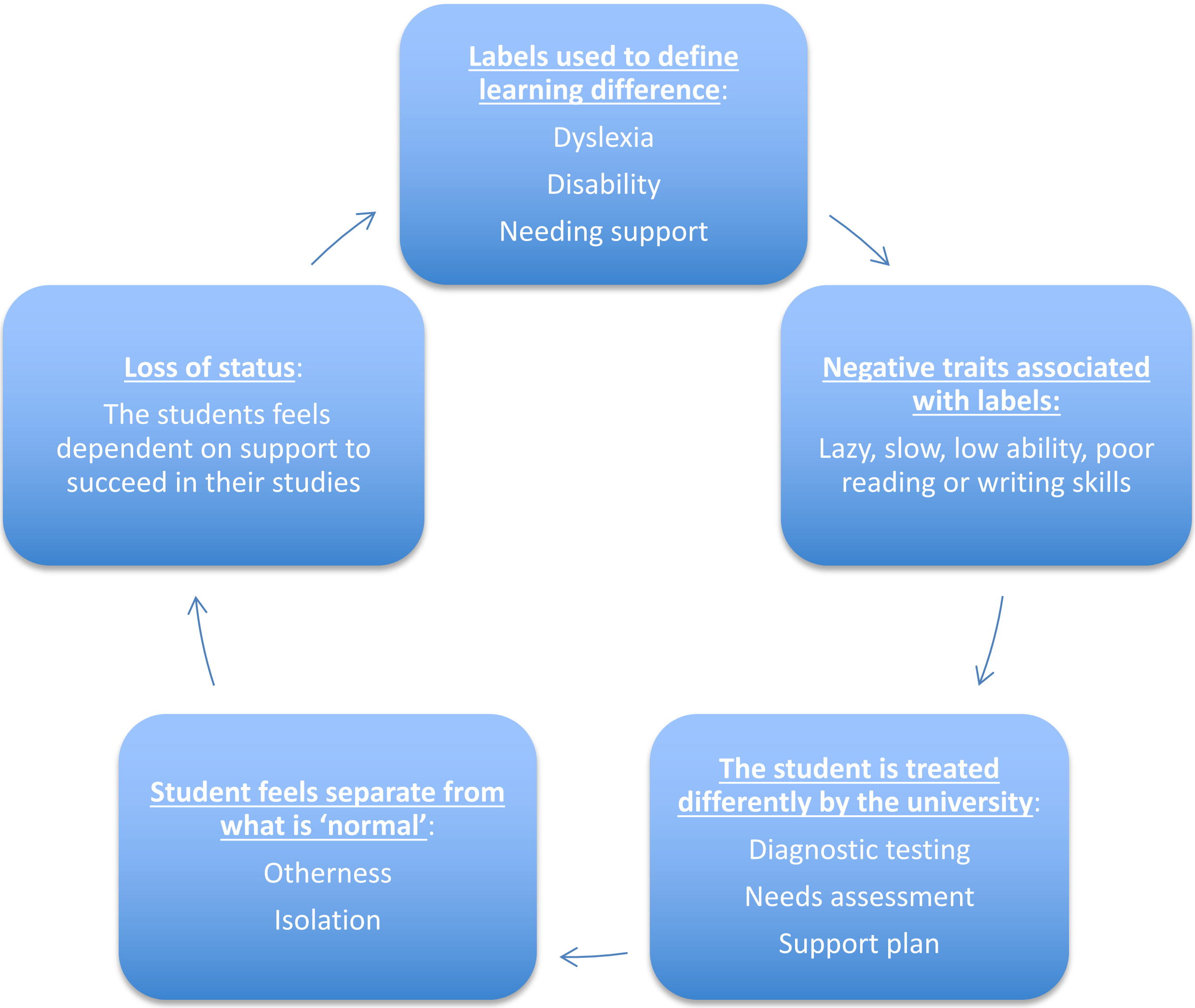
Researchers highlight that dyslexia's stigma is complex, for example, Lithari (2019) examined the self-perception of secondary school children with dyslexia in the UK, noting how this varied between individuals. Lithari identified some positive aspects to a dyslexia identity, such as explaining difficulty. Moreover, a few children had come to terms with their dyslexia, rising above its association with difficulty. Lithari's project highlighted complexity to be explored further, for example how self-perception changes in different stages of an individual's education. The current study offers an opportunity to explore students' views of dyslexia and stigma, reflecting on this over time through their education.

3.3.2 Dyslexia stigma as identity threat at university

Researchers such as Link & Phelan (2001) and Sartorius (2009) have explored stigma as a self-reinforcing cycle involving societal conceptions of labels and traits, leading to isolation and loss of status for the stigmatized individual. I have adapted these ideas in Figure 7 to apply to dyslexia at university where labels distinguish those with cognitive differences and imply negative traits, individuals are tested and offered remedial help, which highlights the difference and isolates the individual. This leads to a loss of status and feelings of dependency on help, which reinforces a reliance on labels to define and accommodate a difference such as dyslexia.

Figure 7: The cycle of stigma associated with dyslexia at university

Adapted from Link. B. & Phelan, J. (2001) ‘Components of Stigma’ and Sartorius (2009) ‘Cycle of Stigma’



Dyslexia’s identity impact arises via expectations of stigma and discrimination. For example, anticipation of stigma leads to stress responses and attempts to minimise the threat of stigma (discussed in the next section 3.4), which can impact self-esteem and mental health. Major and O’Brien (2005) suggested the impact of stigma on identity is mediated through three factors (listed below). I will develop these three factors as a framework to approach the findings relating to the stigma of dyslexia, explored in the Discussion chapter, section 7.3.

(i) **Collective representations of the stigma** i.e., how society views the stigmatised difference and how those with the difference view being part of a group with that stigma. This can be influenced by, for example, the controllability and visibility of the stigmatised attribute, or how well those with the attribute associate together.

(ii) **Situational cues** i.e., whether the stigmatised attribute may affect that individual only in certain situations, or only be declared with specific people. For example, dyslexia only presents difficulties in education and is disclosed to specialists, such as learning support tutors.

(iii) **Personal characteristics** i.e., individuals differ in how sensitised they are to stigma and their expectations of prejudice from others. This affects the impact of stigma on their self-esteem. Also, people vary in how far they identify with a stereotype and how they cope with difficulty, for example either boosting self-reliance or relying on external help.

Only recently have researchers (e.g. Deckoff-Jones and Duell, 2018) started to explore how students view peers with different disabilities (i.e. visible or invisible). They found peers were less understanding of accommodations for those with invisible differences, such as dyslexia, compared with obvious disabilities. The authors suggested this view created barriers to integration for those with invisible disabilities, led to further stigma and lowered the likelihood of academic success. Recent work such as Shaw and Anderson's (2018) work with 8 UK medical students with dyslexia highlighted their feelings of inadequacy among peers as well as bullying by other students, with little evidence of access to emotional support.

There is also early evidence that students with dyslexia do not wish to be associated with disability. The stigma of the disability label is highlighted in dyslexia research, for example Cameron & Billington (2015a,b) conducted research among a focus group of UK students with dyslexia. They found students tended to position themselves as self-reliant survivors who resisted the disabled label, they did not accept help or wish to acknowledge weakness. Disability in the context of dyslexia was constructed as a negative feeling that could be overcome with strength of character and hard work. A further study by Lister, Coughlan and Owen (2020) involving a survey of 723 UK disabled students found resistance to the disability label particularly among those with dyslexia and a preference for the phrase additional study needs. It will be interesting to ask in the current project about students' feelings towards the disabled label and the support tutors' views of this perspective.

The self-reliance referred to above among students with dyslexia impacts on students' acceptance of peer support. Researchers such as Nunan, George and McCausland (2000) have suggested that co-operative support and collective campaigning for change (e.g. in promoting disability awareness) is preferable to isolated students each working on their own individual strategies for support and inclusion. Yet Cameron & Billington (2015 a/b) argued that the rejection of the common bond of disability and difficulty lowered feelings of connection between students with dyslexia, reducing any inclinations to act together to co-support or collaborate. Emphasising this finding, research at a UK university by Loveland-Armour (2018) indicated that students with dyslexia haven't followed those that identify with other identity differences (e.g. race, gender or sexual preference) in trying to form cohesive communities for mutual support. While sharing insights between students may be helpful, it is difficult to achieve when learning support is individually arranged and is outside subject-based teaching. Instead, students with dyslexia compete from isolated positions of individual achievement.

In order to test the potential for cohesion around dyslexia as a common experience, research by Barden (2011, 2014a/b) investigated the supportive properties of the social network Facebook as an affinity space for learning among a small group of UK sixth form students with dyslexia. The affinity space is a concept originally explored by Gee (2004) in the field of new media and literacy, it is a place (real or virtual) for informal learning, where individuals are drawn together by a shared common interest. Barden's (2011) study found that when students with dyslexia were motivated, had clear goals and self-determination as well as the right resources, they participated in a shared interest group via a virtual affinity space (Facebook). However, there are few examples of this type of group cohesion being fostered among individuals with dyslexia in other settings and this finding may be an artefact of the specific conditions of Barden's study. Dyslexia is more often positioned as an individual affliction, exacerbated by its heterogeneous nature and the individual approach to remediation.

It is worth remembering that while society may attach stigma to an identity aspect, the individual with that aspect may not. Carolee Kamlager (2013) explored stigma in a thesis addressing identity among adults with intellectual disabilities. She noted that challenging stigmatised norms helped with positive identity formation in the face of stigma (developing ideas by Jahoda & Markova, 2004). So, the literature suggests dyslexia is an individual experience, which the current study will explore through students' conceptualisations of dyslexia identity and its associated stigma.

3.3.3 Conferring stigma through dyslexia identification

Stigma is often associated with a label assigned to an individual (e.g. dyslexia, or disability) that identifies an identity aspect loaded with social preconception. As noted in 3.3.1, dyslexia is associated with low ability in education. While some authors (e.g. Elliott & Place, 2004 and Gillies, 2005) claimed that dyslexia can confer a 'special not slow' label in school, this is countered by later studies where adults with dyslexia reflected that at school dyslexia was associated with slowness, laziness, low intelligence or not being 'bright' (Macdonald, 2009). Therefore, even if dyslexia offered an explanation for difficulty, the process of identifying dyslexia conferred stigma through societal assumptions of negative associations.

Moreover, students who are identified with dyslexia when they reach university may not have been previously aware of it, so may find the change in identity harder to accept. As Goffman (1963) noted, with late awareness the sudden transformation from normal to an individual with a stigmatised identity aspect is difficult to acknowledge psychologically. The discomfort of discovery comes not from a clash of identity from old to new, but from knowing what was once normal is no more.

Few dyslexia researchers have investigated how and why individuals accept or reject dyslexia identification beyond school. Among these, Armstrong & Humphrey (2009) constructed a model with a continuum between dyslexia acknowledgment and rejection, influenced by factors such as the individual's support network, educational development, emotional coping strategies and sense of self. While the authors suggested that an individual might move between rejection and acceptance, there has been little discussion of the tensions involved in dyslexia acceptance and what influences this. Therefore, the current project is an opportunity to ask students about dyslexia identification, stigma, their acceptance or rejection of dyslexia as an aspect of their identity, and whether this has changed over time.

3.3.4 The stigma of accepting learning support

Throughout education in the UK, learning support takes a compensatory approach to helping those with dyslexia to adapt to teaching pedagogy and assessment: it focuses on intervention for the individual. Children with dyslexia are taken out of classes for one-to-one help with reading and writing (discussed in Duff & Clarke, 2011) then at university students must go to separate learning support centres for additional tutoring or to qualify for additional time in exams (highlighted by Riddell and Weedon, 2006). Goffman's (1963) work on identity and stigma noted the humiliation of being segregated according to a stigmatised attribute, particularly for those newly identified with the attribute. More recently, Laisidou (2014) agreed that remedial measures in education single out the disadvantaged student, rather than help to include them. This adds the shame of needing additional help from outside mainstream teaching, compounding the stigma of dyslexia as negative traits.

In Cameron & Billington's (2015 a/b) UK study, students with dyslexia viewed those who accepted the disabled label as morally inferior, as they had turned for help to an external source. Similarly, accommodations were seen as a threat to the integrity of an individual and the value of a degree. Therefore, individuals who completed their academic course were seen to have succeeded and any who dropped out were blamed for an individual failure to work hard enough to succeed. In the current project I will ask, as Cameron & BIllington (2015) suggest, whether the added stigma of accepting learning support for dyslexia affects whether an individual accepts help.

Students with dyslexia may also fear that that their peers resent those receiving additional support, for example Field, Sarver and Shaw (2003) found that some students view the compensation offered to those with learning difficulties as unfair advantage. This additional worry about how lecturers and peers view those who seek help may increase students' discomfort with accepting support at university, which will be interesting to explore in the current study.

In summary, the literature suggests there may be complex interactions between the stigma of dyslexia as undesirable traits; the shame of the dyslexia and disabled labels; and the further humiliation of having to ask for help through a segregated learning support department, which the current project will explore from the perspective of UK students with dyslexia and their university support tutors.

3.4 Stigma management through identity concealment and selective disclosure

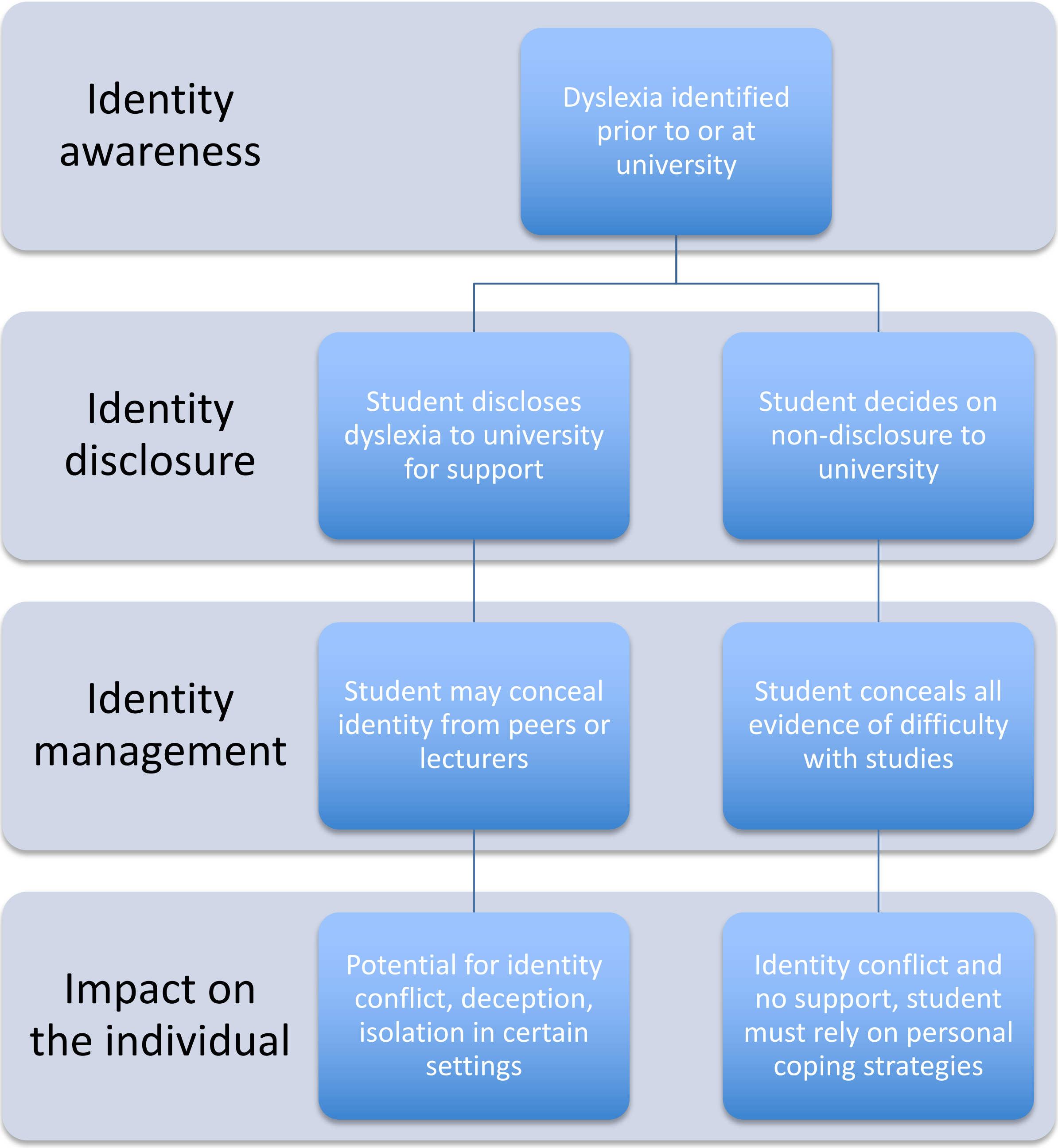
In order to avoid negative attitudes or behaviour (e.g. prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination) those with a stigmatized attribute attempt to manage the stigma through decisions on when, where, how and with whom they disclose the aspect of their identity. There is a range of stigma management strategies, as identity researcher Meisenbach (2010) highlighted, for example avoiding attribution with the identity, distancing the self from the stigmatized aspect, identity acceptance (possibly with humour), or defensiveness by criticizing those who stigmatise.

Figure 8 illustrates these stigma management options for students with dyslexia, highlighting the identity management decisions across different settings at university and the impact of these on the student. For example, they may either (i) not disclose dyslexia, avoiding association with negative traits or labels, but also rejecting opportunities for support; or (ii) disclose dyslexia to the university and then decide on the settings in which they will conceal the identity from lecturers and peers, distancing themselves from specific sources of stigma.

The extent to which students with dyslexia adopt these stigma management strategies is yet to be explored in the literature. The current project is therefore an opportunity to ask UK students about managing the stigma associated with dyslexia in a university environment where academic success is linked with speed, fluency and accuracy in reading and writing. In particular, I will discuss with participants when and with whom they disclose dyslexia and when they choose to conceal it.

To inform the current project, next I will review identity work and disability studies that probe stigma management decisions among students, as well as the few dyslexia studies that address this area. I will examine studies that consider questions of identity non-disclosure and concealment with the university in 3.4.1, then address work on disclosure decisions with lecturers and peers at university in 3.4.2, before exploring the influencing factors that affect student disclosure decisions in 3.4.3 and the impacts of identity concealment on the individual in 3.4.4.

Figure 8: Students' dyslexia identity management options at university



3.4.1 Non-disclosure of a stigmatised identity to a university

According to Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, those in a stigmatised category may attempt normification, i.e., pretend to be normal by hiding differences, or blemishes. They downplay the stigmatised identity aspect to avoid making themselves or others feel uncomfortable. More recently, identity researchers such as Miller & Major (2000) found that individuals change their behavior to alter others' perception of their identity and to avoid the attribution of flawed characteristics and stigma. However, in deciding whether to disclose or conceal a stigmatised identity aspect, an individual must weigh up between a desire to belong to a social group without fear of discrimination and a need to be honest about who and what they are.

Students dread distinguishing themselves as different, either in terms of their academic abilities or in needing help, particularly in a university setting where the prevailing ideology centres on individual academic success. For example, Morris and Turnbull (2006) found that student nurses with dyslexia preferred to be seen on an equal footing to their peers and not identified from the start as different. Particularly in the first year, researchers (e.g. Lahteenoja and Pirttila-Backman, 2005; Jacklin *et al*, 2007) have shown that students prioritise belonging to a social group over seeking help with their studies.

From disability research, in a study with disabled students at a UK university, Goode (2007) found they either avoid or procrastinate asking for support when applying or at the start of a new university course, as they felt ashamed to ask for help. In addition, Archer (2007) found that disabled students worried they may cost more to teach, which they felt would be a disincentive for a university to accept them. Exploring this further among students, a meta-analysis of 36 studies in 6 countries by Lindsay, Cagliostro and Carafa (2018) investigated the barriers and facilitators to disability disclosure at universities, finding stigma the overriding reason why students did not disclose a disability to the university, as well as fear of discrimination and doubts about accessing support.

In dyslexia research, in a survey of male students with and without dyslexia at 17 UK universities, Mortimore and Crozier (2006) found that those with dyslexia were not comfortable disclosing it at university. Exploring this further, Henderson (2017) found that students with dyslexia (at one UK university) were reluctant to disclose dyslexia as they worried about stigma. As Madriaga (2007, *et al*, 2013) highlighted, students must decide if the advantages of flagging up dyslexia (an otherwise invisible difference) for the possibility of support outweigh the negative impact of its association with negative traits (highlighted in 3.3.1 above). Students may also carry the emotional baggage of the stigma associated with learning support at school, explored by McNulty (2003). Further, as Richardson and Wydell (2003) highlighted, students with dyslexia worry about discrimination, for example that prejudice against dyslexia may prevent them from being accepted onto a course. The current study is an opportunity to extend and update these early studies on dyslexia disclosure, using in-depth student and tutor discussions across UK universities.

3.4.2 Concealment of differences from peers and lecturers

While students are not obliged to disclose dyslexia to lecturers, this may be a route to in-subject help, yet the literature suggests many students conceal dyslexia from lecturers (discussed in 3.2.4 above). Similarly, students could solicit solidarity and support from peers but may choose not to. In disability studies, researchers such as Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson (2005) found that disabled students fear being stigmatised among their peers, associating disability with victim status. As a result of this fear of stigma, Nario-Redmond, Noel and Fern (2013) found that disabled students try to appear normal by hiding, minimising or trying to negate their differences with peers. In a study examining disabled students' reluctance to disclose a disability, Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) pointed out that there was little benefit in disclosing a disability in social settings, in contrast with the gain in status when coming out as gay, for example.

More recently, dyslexia researchers such as Loveland-Amour (2018), who works with UK students with dyslexia, have started to explore student acceptance of the dyslexia identity at university. While Loveland-Amour's small group of students at a UK university recognized their dyslexia individually, they were not comfortable acknowledging dyslexia as part of their identity in the university context or as a label in a social setting. The inference was that hiding dyslexia may impact on the potential for peer-to-peer support with students' studies.

In one of the few dyslexia studies addressing student interactions with lecturers, Madriaga (2007) found students feared that dyslexia disclosure to an academic lecturer would imply they were intellectually less able. Fuller *et al* (2004) highlighted that while a few students mentioned dyslexia to lecturers, those that did met widely different reactions. As discussed in Chapter 3.2.4, Cameron & Nunkoosing's (2012) study found students specifically choose to hide dyslexia from their lecturers, fearing prejudice. Further, low awareness of dyslexia linked to a lower tendency to offer accommodations and increased prejudice towards dyslexia among lecturers.

In a personal account of dyslexia and her work at a university, Skinner (2011) presented the impacts of dyslexia on her life as a mother and lecturer, pointing to competing theories and discourses in interpreting dyslexia. Conscious of the dominant medicalised language of dyslexia in higher education (see section 3.2 above), which positions it as a defect and carries associated stigma, she referred to a tendency to hide, deny or not disclose dyslexia among lecturers and students. In a more recent paper, Hiscock and Leigh (2020) explored student attitudes to lecturer disclosure or reticence to disclose dyslexia. While they claimed to find increasing understanding of dyslexia, this was based on one lecturer's experiences at a single UK university.

In addition to exploring students' dyslexia disclosure with different audiences, in the current project I also recognize that disclosing or concealing dyslexia is an ongoing process of consideration throughout university, not a one-off decision (a perspective that is seldom studied in the previous literature). Therefore, this study will explore the identity negotiation by students with dyslexia in different settings, focusing on dyslexia concealment or disclosure decisions with different audiences and the resulting identity conflicts and impacts on self-esteem.

3.4.3 Factors influencing disclosure of a stigmatised identity

Identity researchers such as Ragins (2008) have shown that those who reconciled their identity through open disclosure removed the strain of ambiguity or conflict. In addition, those who received beneficial social support towards the identity aspect in one domain were more inclined to reveal the difference in all areas.

To be openly comfortable disclosing a potentially stigmatized identity attribute, Gamliel and Hazan (2006) suggested that individuals form narratives to reposition identity in relation to stigma. In further identity work looking at factors influencing decisions on when to disclose a stigmatised identity, Chaudoir and Fisher (2010) studied identity aspects such as sexual orientation. They identified a process stemming from antecedent goals, through to a disclosure event, to outcomes that feed back into future decisions on disclosure. Chaudoir and Fisher suggested those who disclosed due to positive goals (rather than the avoidance of negative ones) and who used more positive language were more likely to elicit a positive response from others and had a better experience of the disclosure, so were more likely to draw positive outcomes. Therefore, those who are open and positive about their identity show better adjustment to their social group and suffer fewer stressors.

In a recent meta-analysis addressing disability disclosure, Lindsay, Cagliostro and Carafa (2018) found universities' efforts to remove the stigma of disability and highlight support, promote self-advocacy and offer mentorship all helped to facilitate student disability disclosure. A few dyslexia researchers (e.g. Nalavany, Carawan and Sauber, 2015) have suggested that developing a strong sense of identity and highlighting individual strengths in relation to dyslexia can outweigh the desire to hide it. Ragins (2008) also suggested that family support helps to promote disclosure, by increasing self-acceptance and removing some of the burden of accepting an identity that comes with a cultural stereotype. In the current project I will explore with students and support tutors when and how negative constructions of dyslexia lead to identity concealment at university and conversely the potential for positive ones to lead to dyslexia disclosure.

3.4.4 The impact of hiding a stigmatised identity

While individuals with a stigmatized identity aspect may hide this to avoid discrimination and prejudice, identity research shows that this has negative emotional and identity impacts, as outlined below. In his seminal work on stigma, Goffman (1963) pointed out that hiding a stigmatised identity makes individuals more sensitised to the difference, through having to be aware of it to hide it. In addition, it increases sensitivity to social cues in trying to avoid awkward situations where the identity may become obvious. Identity concealment also results in identity conflict between the acknowledged and unacknowledged identities and due to the acts of deception necessary to conceal an aspect of identity. Identity researchers such as Pachankis (2007) argued that the act of concealment preys on an individual's consciousness, leading to suspiciousness of others and avoidance of stimuli related to the hidden stigma. This impacts on areas of social interaction and feelings of wellbeing, discussed by Orth *et al* (2009).

Ragins (2008) makes a useful distinction in her study, she suggests that disclosure choices across an individual's life domains leads to one of three identity states: (i) denial across all settings (total identity concealment); (ii) disconnect between different domains where the identity is revealed in some settings; or (iii) identity disclosure and integration across all domains (the ideal and least stressful situation). The undisclosed stigmatised identity of (i) and (ii) introduces elements of deceit and conflict, for example as a student actively hides dyslexia from peers or lecturers; there is the potential threat of discrediting the individual upon discovery of dyslexia. Further, those who maintain identity disconnect (ii) across their life domains suffer the greatest stress and ambiguity, combining fear of discovery as well as conflicts due to rejection of the identity in certain domains. The identity choices (i) and (ii) created inconsistencies in the verification of identity in different settings (discussed in Swann & Bosson, 2008). Further, Bosson, Weaver and Prewitt-Freilino (2012) suggested that revealing a stigmatised identity threatens the person's need to belong to a group. Conversely, concealing an identity leads to misclassification of the individual as non-stigmatised, which in turn contradicts the individual's true self-view. Therefore, individuals face the dilemma of being perceived falsely or with stigma. A study by Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) found that the worry associated with revealing a stigmatized identity aspect links to ill-health, as individuals internalise the stress of anticipated stigma. For example, worry about disclosing HIV status even impacted the immune responses of those with HIV (Strachan *et al*, 2007).

Further, identity concealment increases feelings of isolation as the individual is preoccupied with having to manage the identity (Smart and Wegner, 1999) and suffers greater cognitive load and stress (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010). Beals, Peplau & Gable (2009) agreed that identity concealment can lead to low mood and anxiety due to isolation. Expanding on this idea, Newheiser and Baretto (2014) found that hiding an identity aspect had negative consequences for the individual by reducing their sense of belonging to social groups and increasing fear of social rejection.

In dyslexia research there is little work among adults that addresses the impact of identity concealment to manage stigma. In a rare study among US students with dyslexia, based on a web survey, Nalavany, Carawan and Sauber (2015) referred to the complexity surrounding the concealment of dyslexia as a stigmatized identity and students' resulting fear of disclosure, leading to the potential for identity conflict and low self-esteem. There is ample scope to develop further work in this area, in the light of the research and theory outlined above on identity concealment and disclosure to manage stigma.

In the current project I will probe how the students felt about disclosing their dyslexia and with which audiences, the impact of peer or lecturer support, and if they hid their dyslexia at university and why. Furthermore, I will explore if there may be greater stress and a desire to hide the difference when it becomes obtrusive in a setting where few people would otherwise be aware of it. This suggestion has not been tested with students with dyslexia, so the current study is an opportunity to explore and theorise about the impacts of dyslexia concealment on student identity.

Chapter 3 Concluding comments

This chapter highlighted research relating to dyslexia, identity and stigma, as summarised in Figure 9. I reviewed the few studies that explore the impact of dyslexia on identity among adults, compared with a greater number of studies exploring dyslexia in children. The literature suggests individuals manage dyslexia as an aspect of their identity through decisions on disclosure and concealment, which this study will seek to explore further with students as well as support tutors.

Figure 9: Summary of Literature Review: Dyslexia and Identity

Section	Title	Themes explored
3.1	Identity construction and the self	• Identity theory and multiple identities • Social identity and verification
3.2	Dyslexia, self-concept and self-esteem	• Dyslexia and self-esteem through childhood • Dyslexia links to low self-efficacy through poor internal locus of control
3.3	Dyslexia as a stigmatized identity at university	• Dyslexia as undesirable traits • Dyslexia stigma as identity threat through its identification and support
3.4	Stigma management through identity concealment and selective disclosure	• Individuals manage stigma through decisions on identity disclosure and concealment

Yet we know little of when, why and with whom students may conceal or disclose dyslexia. While studies point to an impact of the resulting identity conflict and deceit on the self-esteem of those with dyslexia, there is a tantalising glimpse of increased resilience and dyslexia acknowledgement in a few.

In the next chapter of the literature review I will address literature that takes a critical perspective in areas outside dyslexia research, that this thesis will draw upon in responding to the research question.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW: APPLYING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM OUTSIDE DYSLEXIA RESEARCH

In the current project I ask questions of classification, segregation, power imbalances and identity relating to dyslexia among students. Saltman and Means (2015) argued that a critical approach is useful to challenge assumptions and the accepted modus operandi, to counter disadvantage and inspire creativity. It can help researchers to analyse the power structures between those that are disadvantaged and others that hold the key to lessening or remediating that disadvantage. However, to date, a critical approach has seldom been applied explicitly in the dyslexia literature to examine higher education from the perspective of those with learning differences. It is more typically applied to differences by race, gender, or socio-economic group.

To advance our understanding, develop theory and suggest implications for policy and practices, I will extend the Literature Review to include selected works that apply critical perspectives from outside dyslexia research. I will review relevant literature from the following research areas as a basis for the critical lens of the thesis discussion and to develop theory in dyslexia research (see Figure 10):

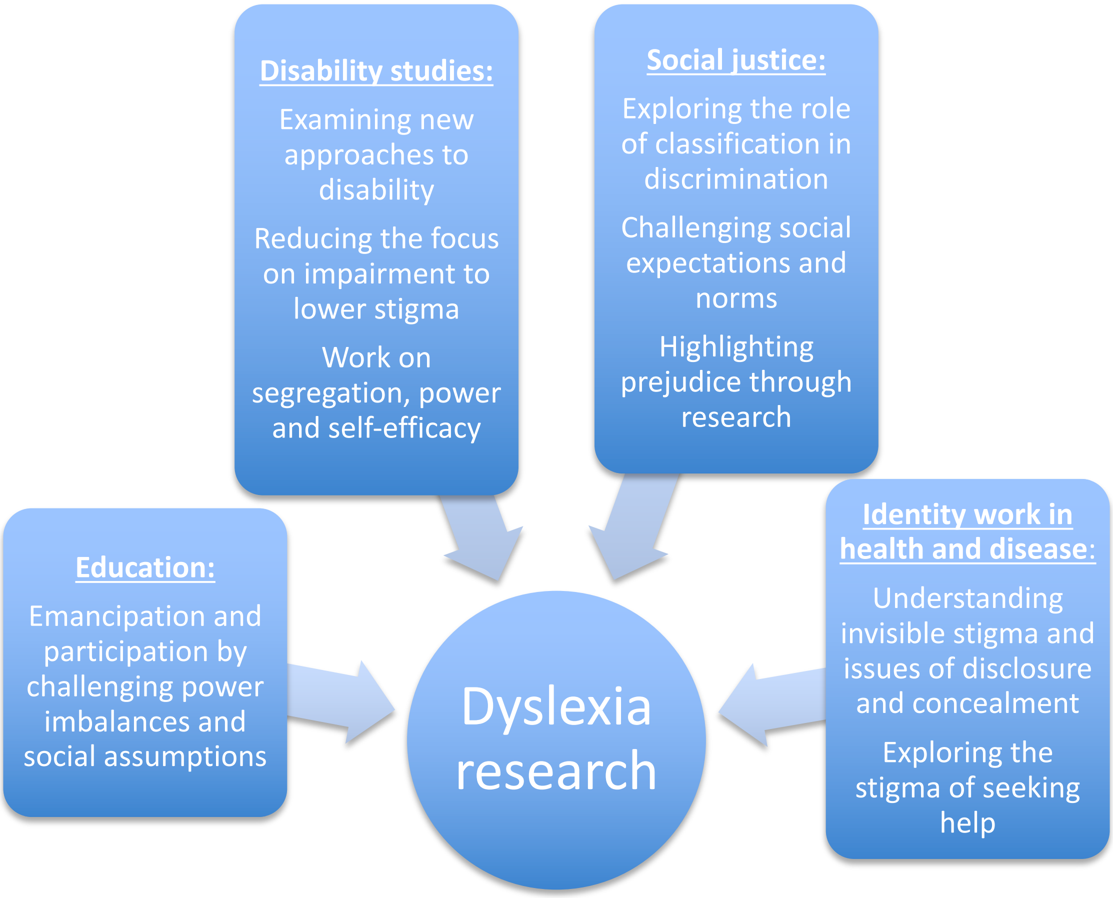
4.1: Critical perspectives in education and ideas of emancipation and participation.

4.2: Critical perspectives in disability studies that challenge negative social attitudes and the treatment of disabled individuals.

4.3: Critical perspectives in social justice to probe questions of equality and classification in relation to minority groups in society.

4.4: Critical perspectives in identity work on the impacts of invisible disease and mental health disorders, particularly relating to disclosure decisions.

Figure 10: Applying critical perspectives from outside dyslexia research



4.1 Critical perspectives in education: emancipation and participation

Education researchers have applied critical perspectives within research to ask questions about power and choices in a situation of disadvantage. As Mezirow (1981) argues, it is useful to examine teaching in education, challenge accepted norms and take a fresh look at practices. Here I will present an outline of the main ideas from this area that I will draw from in the project.

Freire (1968) developed some of the first articulations of a critical perspective in education to critique established norms in how institutions orchestrate their interactions with students. He sought to explain how this impacts students' socio-political and cultural lives. As Fraser (1985) explains, Critical Theory is rooted in ideas of freedom from authoritarian tendencies or inequality and encourages participants to take constructive action, seeing them as co-creators of knowledge and learning. Giroux's 2021 latest book 'Critical Pedagogy' explored Freire's ideas further, arguing for a consideration of power dynamics in pedagogy, to highlight institutional and societal authoritarianism and encourage the individual to think critically about teaching and learning and to seek social justice and freedom.

While it remains difficult to define a critical approach in one phrase , the current project will use the approach of Morrow and Brown who suggest a critical perspective "*is required to avoid identifying where we live here and now as somehow cast in stone by natural laws*" *(*Morrow and Brown, 1994 *p.11).* The critical lens in research is marked by its intention not to remain neutral but to question and change the world, it is linked with individual empowerment. It uses creative scepticism to examine accepted truths, in a quest to explore and challenge the social environment.

I will also follow the ideas of Foucault (1983) who argued we should examine social structures and institutions through a critical lens to satisfy our duties as citizens in calling out abuses of power. Further, he argued it is important to highlight the experiences and views of those who are stigmatised or marginalised, to include their voices in research and enhance their agency in their social environment. In Scotland's (2012) comparison of the scientific (positivist), interpretive and critical approaches to social research, he warns that by categorising research participants within a marginalized group, we impose a label that they may not all accept. Also, we don't consider differences in how they perceive their own identity. By applying a critical approach and listening to individual voice, in the project I will explore how students view dyslexia as an aspect of identity and ask about their acceptance or rejection of labels, group identities and the disclosure of dyslexia at university.

In a useful essay 're-imagining' the critical lens in educational research, Rexhepi and Torres (2011) suggest we have a duty to highlight power imbalances in our societal structures. This is particularly relevant in universities where those in academia and management develop policy and practices that affect students. A critical perspective is valuable to examine policy in education, providing a strong agenda that includes ethical concerns and ideas of social transformation. It rejects the positivist stance that research in education should be neutral and extricated from ethical concern, politics or subjectivity. It is notable for rejecting the evaluation of education by efficiency, effectiveness, or what works, which theorists such as Biesta (2007) have criticized as too restrictive. Instead, it involves humanistic, historical and socio-cultural dimensions, to form theory about social values and what ought to be.

Kathleen Tanner (2009) highlighted the exclusionary and oppressive ideologies present in education that leads to a "*conundrum of failure*" across society, affecting how adults with dyslexia perceive themselves. She called for further research into (i) how awareness of dyslexia impacts adult self-conceptions; and (ii) how societal attitudes maintain barriers and failure in adult education. This thesis will respond to these two questions, advancing our understanding by applying a critical approach to highlight the experience and perspectives of students with dyslexia and theorise the impact of universities' dyslexia approach on student identity and self-esteem.

4.2 Critical perspectives in disability studies: impact of approach and segregation

Disability studies describe and explore the perspectives and experiences of a group with a diverse range of physical and cognitive differences. While individuals may vary in how they are disabled and in what settings, Taylor (2011) claims it is relevant to study the disabled as a cohesive group, precisely because society categorises them by disability.

A critical approach explores disability as a social phenomenon, identifies oppression, relates disability to the recognition of individual rights and promotes the interests of the disabled (discussed in Rocco & Delgado, 2011). Critical disability research aims to empower those with impairments or differences and effecting social change. For example, Rocco (2005) applied critical disability theory to argue for self-determination of the disabled and to highlight ableism. As Kerschbaum (2014) points out, the critical lens questions agency, challenges normativity and probes the nature of disabled identities, moving away from fixed approaches to disability. Researchers such as Seale (2017) highlight that disability research itself is a political act that achieves academic activism to argue for changes in practices that disadvantage those with disabilities.

Below I will review the studies that I will draw on in the thesis to understand the impact of different approaches to disability, also focusing on critical disability studies in education settings and questions of segregation and inclusion.

4.2.1 Evolution of approaches to disability

For centuries disabled people have been marked out, labelled, associated with traits, and discriminated against. Even in recent decades, language is applied to disability reflecting medical ideas around treatment and alleviation.

The medical approach to disability is reflected in the language of ableism, which Bolt (2016) defines as a normative positivism: it derives from the assumption that there are socially accepted norms and those that differ from them are disabled. As a result, ableism is language or behaviour that discriminates based on ability. Ableism may promote feelings of sympathy for those who are disabled, but it also asserts the authority of those offering help and holds up the achievements of the able-bodied as the ideal to strive for (discussed in Rocco and Delgado, 2011). Ableism therefore imposes power relationships between the disabled who need support, those who provide it, and those who are nondisabled so are socially privileged.

Disability research has also highlighted disablism, where an adaptation to compensate for an impairment, in turn inconveniences the nondisabled. Bolt (2016) identified disablism with non-normative negativisms, for example, where a disabled individual felt awkward, or caused resentment among others, thereby affecting the emotional status of the disabled person. For example, offering additional notes, learning support or separate arrangements for examinations could further disadvantage an individual, as the treatment marks the student out as different. This could lead to stigma, affecting expectations or causing resentment among peers. The current study offers an opportunity to explore this among students with dyslexia.

Particularly pertinent for dyslexia is the concept of lexism, referring to attitudes that favour certain levels of literacy that society assumes translate into academic ability (Collinson, 2014). Lexism is linked to an ingrained elitism that associates the disabled as being less bright or less able to perform well academically than their non-disabled counterparts, even at university (Brink, 2009). However, this is not borne out in studies of the academic success of UK disabled students compared to their peers, investigated by Richardson (2009) and specifically for dyslexia in Richardson and Wydell (2003). In the current project I will highlight any prejudice against dyslexia, which might indicate societal assumptions of lower academic ability, or lexism.

As early as the 1980’s, influenced by the civil rights movement and a rising social consciousness of discrimination, Söder (1989) argued that applying a medical lens and language to define disability contrasted with other moral ideological interpretations. Social constructionism moved the focus onto questions of social meaning, values and beliefs by saying that disability is constructed by society's interpretation of differences between us. So, a social approach frames disability as an issue arising from a mismatch with society's expectations, it is an issue of context (Madriaga, 2007). As Gallagher, Connor & Ferri (2014) state, physical disability exists because we value physical ability, just as dyslexia exists since we value literacy. Those who support the social model, such as Rocco & Delgado (2011) argue that a social approach to disability positions it alongside other minority issues, rather than rooting it in individual defect.

Although there is widespread support among disability researchers for the social approach to disability, there is also debate over its merits. Critics (e.g. Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011) say that framing disability as purely a form of oppression denies the individual the experience of difficulty due to biological differences and removes arguments for support. Further, they argue that the social model has a flawed and idealistic view of inclusion, saying it criticizes support in education for segregating individuals, putting inclusion above effectiveness in teaching. This will be interesting to explore in the current project, for example, whether university support tutors fear that the social model of dyslexia does not acknowledge the differences that lead to difficulty, so an individual may be denied support.

In the thesis, I join researchers such as Riddick (2000) who see the debate between the medical and social approaches to disability as evidence that they both have a role in understanding perspectives, to develop theory and enable us to highlight unhelpful attitudes in society. In a rebuttal of Anastasiou and Kauffman's (2010) critique of the social model of disability, Gallagher, Connor & Ferri (2014) argued that the debate should not be seen as a quest to determine one truth in how disability is experienced or how it should be theorised. Instead, the approaches shed light on different aspects of our understanding of disability. In the Discussion chapter 7, I will include these ideas from disability studies, relating them to the Findings and considering their impact on how we think about dyslexia.

4.2.2 Critical disability research in higher education

Critical disability research (as Pena, Stapleton and Schaffer, 2016 discusses) enables us to remove the focus from individual deficit, highlight where legal requirements affect the power relationship between individuals and institutions, criticise the social structures that disable individuals and listen to the opinions of those with disabilities to inform decisions.

Disability researchers such as Bolt (2016) assert that for decades educators have absorbed the medical approach to disability and inadvertently promoted ableism. For example, Madriaga *et* al (2013) found that disabled students entering university still face assumptions based on disability as deviance from a physical, mental or intellectual norm and therefore suffer from low self-esteem, a feeling of otherness, or a reluctance to come forward for help. Positioning a difference as an individual rather than institutional issue is also reflected in the language of reasonable accommodations required of institutions by UK disability law.

Much social research has addressed questions of power, since Foucault's seminal work of 1983 where he emphasized that power is complex, relational and changes in different circumstances. More recently, researchers in the field of disability studies such as Aston, Breau and MacLoed (2014) have used Foucault's ideas to question power relationships, particularly where individuals seek help from institutions. The authors argue that power is less an external, static, binary construct, but emanates from individuals and is renegotiated through their daily actions and rationalizing of their interactions with others. This concept of power as constructed by relationships between students and universities is the most useful to the current project.

In an example of work concerning power relationships, Karen Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) interviewed disabled students in the UK and found they felt dissociated from control over their disability assessment and decisions on training and support. The students told her they were mere passive recipients of disability services from departments that made decisions on their behalf and did not encourage their involvement in setting or auditing the success of the services. Moreover, when students were consulted, they cited barriers to their participation in developing support services. These included the timings of consultations, the validity of their involvement, defined power relationships, and disability stigma (a fear of drawing attention to the disability). Further, these disabled students refrained from complaining when they were unhappy with university support services due to fears of an impact on future support, or that it may be withdrawn. There was evidence of an unbalanced power relationship between the support department and its disabled student users. For example, professionals were viewed as superior in judgement and students felt encouraged to accept whatever support was offered without question. In her essay on critical disability studies, Liasidou (2014) agreed that discriminatory practices are endemic to higher education.

To further highlight the power of university administrators and support, Cox (2017) recently wrote an ethnographic study of disability and the perspective of UK university administrators, highlighting how staff had bureaucratic power to classify disability and assign remediation. As Cox noted, this has implications not only for training, for example, how to support students without diminishing their agency or impacting their identity, but also to increase awareness of the complex political landscape and language associated with the disability experience at university. As yet, little research examines the identity and confidence of students with dyslexia regarding support, therefore this project is an opportunity to ask how they feel as receivers of support and whether they feel actively involved in support decisions.

This project joins those researchers who argue that to address disadvantage in education, research must centre on the student experience and identity impacts to transform policy and practice (e.g. Barnes, 2007; Gibson, 2012, Liasidou, 2014).

4.2.3 Critical disability studies and inclusion

Inclusion emerged as a useful concept in disability studies at the turn of the last millennium, reflecting a focus on equality, social exclusion and recognising the discrimination that may be rooted in individuals' differing identities (see Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson, 2005). Social justice implies assuring the fair distribution of social goods, including education; of the cultural acceptance of individuals' differences; and of social inclusion, assuring equality for groups or individuals who may previously have been disadvantaged.

Disability researchers such as Gabel and Peters (2004) debated the changing role of the social model of disability in the context of inclusion, advocating for resistance as a social movement that uses identity politics to advocate for change. For example, Young (2000) had described how groups used solidarity around a common issue to counter stereotypes based on impairment or affliction and remove inequalities. Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) further developed the idea of disability as an issue to argue for political change, highlighting the importance of disabled individuals taking an active stance to decide on their wants or rights rather than externally assessed needs. This was enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006), which states that disabled individuals have the right to recognition and participation within society and to request support.

Defining disability as an individual problem leads to segregation of individuals by their differences. Segregation then gives rise to arguments for inclusion to counter the effects of exclusion, which may be asserted as a moral obligation or a legal requirement. Yet the efforts to include those who are excluded may objectify disability, highlighting those who are other than normal, which is a form of ableism. This can lead to individuals' reluctance to declare disability or rejection of support, which Kendall (2018) suggested results from a fear of segregation and stigma. This is an important area that has been little researched among students with dyslexia, but the current project will explore. To date we know little of when or why students declare dyslexia to lecturers, peers, or support departments at university.

Bolt (2016) argued for a non-normative, positive approach to disability that acknowledges its affirming contribution to understanding and perspective. Therefore, to be truly inclusive we should appreciate the positive aspects of difference. For example, Brueggemann (2002) suggested that impairment (e.g. deafness) has the potential to provide insight within teaching, rather than being a disadvantage. The focus should be on enabling a positive implication rather than just remediating for deficit. This has led to the concept of Disability Gain, introduced by Garland-Thomson (2013), positioning individual difference as opportunity not difficulty within education.

In the past few years, developing the idea of disability as a positive in society, Ostiguy (2018) introduced the idea of Deep Ecology to disability studies among students. Ostiguy argued that the attitudinal barriers and medical approach to disability in higher education are perpetuated by a neoliberal approach to policy in higher education, which values individuals by their economic contribution to society. Thus, those who are disabled must strive to overcome their impairments to participate and belong in society. Instead, Ostiguy suggests that we apply ideas from Deep Ecology, which contends that there is intrinsic value in all of us, including those who are disabled, regardless of our ultimate direct economic contribution to society. This builds on three principles - originally applied to reshape our conception of all living things, but here Ostiguy applied them to the diversity of humanity. These principles are that (i) we all have intrinsic value; (ii) diversity has value itself; and (iii) we have no right to diminish the diversity that exists.

Ostiguy (2018) suggests this approach is useful as a guide to developing higher education services that are inclusive not discriminatory and which recognise and preserve the diverse identities and challenges experienced by the disabled. It also suggests we pursue studies (such as the current project) that develop critical research questions; consider the perspective of those with disabilities; and open new avenues to develop inclusion in higher education policy and practice. While existing disability work has touched on social justice and inclusion in education, little research addresses dyslexia specifically in this light.

In their review, Gallagher, Connor & Ferri (2014) summarise the core questions for disability studies in education. They contend that inclusion is as much a moral as a pedagogical aim and propose a manifesto that asks: "*what disability is; what disabled people need, want and deserve; and the responsibility of education and educators in relation to such matters*" (Gallagher, Connor & Ferri, 2014, p.1137). The authors proposed (i) the experiences of the disabled are crucial to include in research; (ii) our ideas of what is normal or impaired are socially constructed; (iii) remediation needs to involve all students, not just those that are disabled; and (iv) cross-disciplinary research is important to bring new ideas and methods for study. The current dyslexia research project follows this disability studies manifesto for education, as it explores students' experiences, questions conceptions of impairment, examines how remediation is offered and managed and applies perspectives from outside dyslexia research.

We can apply ideas from critical disability studies to dyslexia research, for example to explore dyslexia as stereotyped traits, or framing it in terms of distinctions segregated by type. A critical approach is also useful to question the intentions and impact of university accommodations. We can ask whether they level the playing field, or absolve institutions for providing an uneven playing field, or merely assuage the concerns of society by showing that concession has been made. In the project I will apply these ideas to critique attitudes to difference, highlight prejudice and challenge segregating practices.

4.3 Critical perspectives in social justice: impact of classification

Social commentators, such as Nikolas Rose (2007), have challenged the view that we can divide humans into ethnic groups. Rose suggests (p.158) that while genetic research can find genome-based differences between us that correlate with some population or ethnic groups, these are best seen as genetic markers rather than used to separate groups by race or ethnicity. Indeed, socio-cultural and environmental factors make a greater contribution to who we are than genes alone, even if both can be associated with categories of race. This makes it hard to distinguish between the two. As Marks (2002) highlights in his book on our genetic similarity to apes, in-group genetic differences among humans are greater than between-group ones. Despite these biological realities, Foucault (2002) pointed out that ideas of a genetic basis for race have led to the emergence of the idea of biopower, where stereotyping and racism is incorporated into the mechanics of state power. Foucault highlighted that the strength of one group is asserted as another is diminished by restricting rights or power. Central to this is classification of differences between us.

The way that we think about classification centres on relational ideas: we group people according to social comparisons of who they are or in communities of practice, for example as students of a subject at a particular college of education. In their book 'Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences,' Bowker & Star (1999) highlight that classification touches on sensitive ethical and political values, yet is often managed by local administration or individual institutions (such as universities) as if it were a neutral and technical matter (e.g. dyslexia identification).

The danger with classification is that we go too far, hiding behind categorisation as a veil for discrimination, while oppressive regimes use it for their own ends. For example, as Bowker & Star (1999) emphasize, social classification was taken to extremes through Apartheid in South Africa, where individuals were categorized according to four racial categories, enabling institutions to enact a complex system of restrictive laws, rules, zones and practices, differentiated along racial lines.

To counter the discrimination that can accompany classification, we must identify the groups that are disadvantaged and explain the nature and cause of that disadvantage. For example, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002) puts forward this argument in a criticism of colour-blind racism. He asserts that subtlety and ambiguity disguise a new form of racism, which is present despite claims that overt racist language and discrimination based on skin colour have disappeared from society. For example, he says society still (i) maintains segregation in where people live; (ii) explains the inferior standing of minorities in terms of culture or economics; and (iii) only applies liberal ideas to racial issues in the abstract sense. Bonilla-Silva argues that avoiding addressing racial issues directly and maintaining a smoke screen of colour-blindness is nonsense. This highlights the importance of being aware of our approach to the differences between us and the imposition of social categorisation and its impact on individuals. These arguments relate to the current project's research question, exploring the identity impacts of universities’ dyslexia categorisation and highlighting these to address their effects.

It becomes even harder to cling to binary classifications when we consider those on the boundaries of a category, such as individuals with non-binary sexual identities, or the racial categories discussed above. For example, Valocci (2005) highlighted the dangers of binary distinctions (e.g. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) and of the assumption that these are enshrined as natural phenomena. Moreover, Valocci asserted that the binary classification of gender and sexuality wields power, particularly over those who do not align to one or other of the categories. Instead, queer theory emphasises the socio-cultural context of such classification and contrasts it with the complex, changing and blurred nature of categories of gender and sexuality. So, seeking to understand edge cases and non-binaries is important to recognise the individual nature of the social differences between us.

For disability too, it can be difficult to fit people into traditional disabled and non-disabled categories, as discussed in Cox (2017). Instead, we apply best-fit compromises and assign classification by drawing arbitrary lines to distinguish between us. These compromises have drawbacks: we have to accept fuzziness in our logic, we draw artificial divisions between groups and we drive a wedge between individuals who may not wish to be distinguished from their peers. Our society reinforces these divisions through our preference to organise individuals by attributes linked with recognisable traits. For example, dyslexia identification (discussed in 2.2.3.1), associated with specific difficulties in education, determines whether individuals can access accommodations and support.

In the current project I suggest it is important to explore ideas of classification and examine the approach and policies enacted by the institutions who classify (universities), to understand the impact on those who are classified (students with dyslexia). As Davis (1995) pointed out over two decades ago in his book ‘Enforcing Normalcy’, while we may highlight and denounce bias or discrimination based on race, gender, ethnic background, social class, or financial means, we often ignore the fact that education and our information systems are founded on expected ‘normal’ levels of cognitive and physical ability. In the 27 years since, this has hardly changed.

In this project I will follow researchers such as Gibson (2012) who argue that by seeking to understand disadvantage and learning from individual experiences, we can transform policy and practice. The current study therefore is a chance to examine these questions for students with dyslexia, by exploring their experiences of dyslexia as a minority categorisation and the impact of this on student self-concept.

4.4 Critical perspectives in identity work in health and disease: invisible stigma and disclosure

Invisible differences, such as dyslexia, that are associated with stigma (reviewed in 3.3) make the individual discreditable through discovery (discussed by Goffman, 1963, reviewed in 3.2). As Pachankis (2007) argued, concealment of a hidden identity acts as protection in intolerant situations, to protect against shame, rejection or discrimination (see 3.4.3 above). Other invisible differences include social factors such as religious difference or sexual preference, as well as illnesses such as cancer and HIV/AIDS, mental disorders, drug abuse and addictions. While we may not often situate dyslexia alongside these other phenomena, it is relevant to consider research on these areas to inform our understanding of the impact of concealing dyslexia, as a hidden, discreditable identity.

Much research has addressed questions of identity and disclosure relating to the stigma of hidden health issues and disease, for example, cancers, HIV and mental disorders. Particularly relevant to dyslexia stigma is an understanding of cancer, as a complex and heterogeneous identity. In a review of cancer as stigma and identity threat, Knapp, Marziliano and Moyer (2014) used Major & O'Brien's (2005) framework (reviewed in 3.3.2) to understand the dynamics between stigma, identity and self-esteem. Once cancer is diagnosed, Knapp, Marziliano and Moyer highlighted that stigma was linked to identity threat, as the patient internalised and rationalised cancer's meanings in relation to the self. Therefore, the focus was not on cancer as stigma, but on the factors that resulted from the diagnosis, i.e. stereotype threat.

In a further study of cancer and identity, Jones, Parker-Raley and Barczyk (2011) examined identity conflict and paradox among 12 adolescent cancer patients. They used qualitative interviews to highlight the risks and process of identity change when they transitioned from being a patient to a cancer survivor. Similarly, in the Knapp, Marziliano and Moyer (2014) review, they found that cancer patients had stages of acceptance of a diagnosis, from an initial period of shock followed by resignation to ‘get on with it’. Stigmatised identity acceptance over time is an important question which I will address in the current study’s interviews with students.

Another area relevant to dyslexia as an invisible stigmatised identity is work on mental health disorders. Mental health researchers have explored whether external intervention can help to diminish the stigma of a mental health disorder. For example, Ilic *et al* (2014) conducted research among those with mental disorders and found that strategies that put the responsibility for illness and stigma on the individual were counter-productive and did not encourage adaptation to accept mental illness. Conversely, a model that empowered individuals and positioned them as active participants and constructors in their own social worlds led to positive outcomes. The current project is an opportunity to consider how these findings from identity work on health and disease may also be relevant in dyslexia research. For example, by exploring the impact of universities positioning dyslexia as a defect of the individual and a problem for students to solve.

Mental health research also contributes three strategies to tackle the prejudice leading to stigma of mental disorders: education, contact and protest, discussed below, these were developed by Roe, Lysaker and Yanos (2014). These three ideas offer examples of how to counter or diminish stigma, relevant to other invisible stigmatised identities, such as dyslexia.

(i) **Education**: Facts can change our beliefs about the value others have in society or the perception of a stigmatised attribute, so this is an important factor in overcoming stigma. For example, mental illness was seen as an affliction of the individual, a disorder, which had the effect of medicalising it as a chronic condition. This reduced the idea of possible recovery and added stigma, affecting life chances such as employment. Now we can use evidence-based information to counter misinformation, challenge stereotypes and lessen the stigma associated with mental health challenges.

(ii) **Contact**: Work by Corrigan (2006) showed that contact with individuals with the stigmatised attribute was the most effective way to change perceptions, breaking stereotypes and bridging the ‘them and us’ gap. This need not be passively orchestrated by third parties, but actively endorsed by those that are stigmatised, by sharing their life stories and highlighting the challenges that they see in the attribute.

(iii) **Protest**: A faster and more forceful strategy to counter stigma is to raise awareness of the attribute through protest or a media campaign. This is often used in the face of discrimination or insults based on prejudice. The protest should make clear both the moral message of what is or is not acceptable and that there are consequences of perpetuating prejudice. This can be by raising awareness of the impact on the stigmatised, or a threat to boycott services associated with the sources of discrimination.

In addition to the stigma of mental health disorders, there is the added stigma of seeking help (discussed in Corrigan, 2014). This leads individuals to manage stigma by concealing or denying the attribute or the fact they access help, in settings where they felt vulnerable. For example, in a web survey addressing mental health stigma and disclosure among UK clinical psychologists, Tay, Alcock and Scior (2018) found clinicians avoided disclosing mental health issues in work situations, fearing the shame of the disorder and of being seen to need help. To address the stigma of seeking help, anti-stigma programmes have tried to reposition support for mental health. For example, Corrigan (2014) cites Australia’s ‘beyondblue’ campaign to raise awareness of depression and position it as treatable.

There are also initiatives by clinical practitioners in mental health to tackle stigma. For example, Corrigan, Rusch and Scior (2018) and Scior *et al* (2020) wrote about anti-stigma initiatives such as the Honest, Open, Proud group programme, delivered to psychiatry patients in several countries (e.g. US, Australia, several European countries and the UK) and the Conceal or Reveal programme, targeted to help individuals decide on disclosure in work settings. These were still undergoing trials with different patient groups, but early evidence suggested the benefit of support in a disclosure decision, irrespective of whether the individual does conceal or reveal. The authors noted that awareness and understanding played a large part in lowering the stress associated with an invisible stigmatized identity and such studies provide useful information to support and encourage disclosure. The current study is an opportunity to ask students and support tutors about dyslexia disclosure decisions, in particular addressing disclosure with lecturers as well as students' peers.

Chapter 4 concluding comments

To challenge existing thinking and bring new insights to dyslexia research, in this project I draw from four additional research areas that apply critical perspectives: education; disability studies; social justice; and identity work on health and disease (see Figure 11). Throughout the Discussion, I will reference disability research and critical perspectives in education to challenge socially accepted prejudices and assumptions at university and explore the impact of dyslexia as a disability on the self-concept of students.

In the analysis of universities' classification of dyslexia as a social difference (Discussion 7.2) I will draw from social justice work to highlight students with dyslexia as a minority and disadvantaged group, to find ways to increase their participation and advocacy at university. Further, in Discussion 7.3 I will incorporate identity work on mental disorders and disease, as stigmatised identities, to interpret the findings from the student discussions, exploring where these perspectives could develop our understanding of dyslexia, identity and stigma at university.

Figure 11: Summary of Literature Review: Critical perspectives from outside dyslexia research

Research area	Education	Disability studies	Social Justice	Identity work in health and disease
Sub-section	4.1 Critical perspectives in education: emancipation and participation	4.2 Critical perspectives in disability studies: impact of approach and segregation	4.3 Critical perspectives in social justice work: the impact of classification	4.4 Critical perspectives in identity work in health and disease: invisible stigma and disclosure
Themes explored in relation to dyslexia	• Challenging norms and assumptions to avoid prejudice • Highlighting power imbalances between individual and institution	• Evolution of the approach towards disability • Power imbalances with institutions • Increasing emphasis on inclusion	• Classification as social grouping and its role in discrimination • Political and social impacts of categorisation • Difficulties with binary classification and fuzzy boundaries	• Non-visible stigmatised identities e.g. cancer • Dislosure-concealment decisions e.g. mental health disorders • Strategies for tackling stigma

5. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will present the methodological approach, starting with the ontological and epistemological basis and the research approach taken in the project (5.1). Next, I will give an overview of the research design (5.2), then detail the participant recruitment process (5.3) discussion modes offered for the interviews (5.4) and how participant pseudonyms were used to protect individual's privacy (5.5). Last, I will address the development of interview questions (5.6) and how data was handled (5.7), before outlining the analytical approach (5.8) and how the project managed risk and ethical considerations (5.9).

5.1 Ontology, epistemology and research approach

To provide a foundation for the project, I will introduce the conceptual approach I take to dyslexia and disability in the project. I will also outline the approach I take to truth and knowledge in the context of the research and how I intend to develop knowledge and theory through the thesis.

Dyslexia research and disability studies have been deeply influenced over the past few decades by a debate between the medical approach, focusing on individual impairment, and a developing social situating of disability (see Oliver, 1996a and others, discussed in the Literature Review 2.2.1.3). In the social approach, individuals are disabled by barriers that may be physical (e.g. stairs for the wheelchair-user), or they may arise through the pedagogy and practices of educational institutions. The current project questions the approach of UK university policy and practice towards dyslexia and seeks to understand the impact of this on student identity.

In this thesis I apply a critical approach. In his book, Roy Bhaskar (1975) developed ideas of critical naturalism and transcendental realism into critical realism, to know what is (ontology) and how we come to know this reality (epistemology). Alongside other post-modern approaches to social research (e.g. interpretivism), it shares a rejection of positivist concepts of a single neutral reality that we can determine scientifically. Instead, it suggests that human beings are complex social beings and our understanding of society is informed more by culture and language than by the pursuit of external truths.

Frauenberger (2015) developed these ideas, arguing that critical realism differs from other post-modern ideas that suggest reality is purely a social construct. Instead, critical realism accepts that reality exists independently of our perception of it (ontology), but states that the way we understand the social world is through the lens of our many cultural descriptions of it (epistemology). In this thesis I accept that we build a negotiated understanding of the social world by exploring multiple perceptions of reality, that may be culturally or individually determined.

Whereas Frauenberger (2015) applied critical realism for research into assistive technology for physically disabled individuals, the current thesis applies it to examine dyslexia in higher education. I agree with Frauenberger that through critical realism we can explore the multiplicity of individual experiences and perspectives, while also acknowledging the role of practical interventions to remove barriers and improve the quality of life for an individual. As Frauenberger concluded, while intransitive things such as disabling barriers do exist, we understand these things through our own socially constructed perspective, which is fallible and transient. Therefore, I acknowledge that there may be many different perceptions of dyslexia, for example an individual’s view of it; attitudes prevalent in society; the legal treatment of the difference; or implied approaches that are conveyed through support systems or institutional policy and practices. These are all important perspectives to explore when examining dyslexia approach in higher education.

The current project applies critical perspectives (discussed in Literature Review Chapter 4) as an approach through which to analyse and discuss the findings. A critical approach seeks to challenge, compared with interpretivism which seeks to understand and positivism which seeks to generalise. It is focused on critique and emancipation, looking at issues of power, justice and fairness in social structures, highlighting how things ought to be and is particularly important when developing theory about social differences, as in the current project.

5.2 Research design overview

Turning to the research purpose and how the research was conducted, the project was exploratory in nature, aiming to advance theory and inform our understanding. The project responds to calls for further research on the societal rules and beliefs that impact on our identity and affect our experiences of education, as well as our sense of general well-being, from researchers such as Prevett, Bell & Ralph (2013).

By applying Vygotsky's ideas on how thoughts and language are linked in our culture, we can make sense of our social interactions through research that explores individuals' experiences and probes their identity in relation to these (discussed in Kozulin *et al*, 2003). The thesis aims to examine the choices, decisions and beliefs that individuals associate with a phenomenon such as dyslexia, then relate these to societal or institutional-level attitudes, such as universities' approach to dyslexia.

Therefore, the project collected in-depth qualitative interview-based data from information-rich discussions with a limited number of UK university students (over 18 years old) with dyslexia. These discussions used semi-structured interview scripts and were conducted via email or phone, at the student's choice, discussed in 5.4 below. An outline of participant profiles is given in section 5.5 and I also triangulated and extended the data collected through phone interviews with a support tutor or Head of learning support from the same UK universities as the students.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project and low number of studies in this area, I designed each interview to explore broad question areas (discussed in 5.6 below) and used data from each successive interview to build themes and theory. These developing themes helped to inform and develop the questions asked in subsequent interviews, whether with the same student, e.g. in a phone interview following an email exchange, or with a subsequent student. Therefore, the interviews evolved throughout the process as each interview was completed. The student interviews also informed the learning support tutor interviews, which explored in detail the emerging themes from the student interview at that university. These not only triangulated the student view but gave insight into the university position through the perspective of learning support, as agents of university policy and practices, as well as highlighting the individual perspectives of the support tutors.

In the interviews I gathered information discursively through language and meaning. I brought to the discussion my own experiences and perceptions of dyslexia and of study at several UK institutions (discussed further in the Introduction 1.2 and Conclusions 8.4.4). I viewed my own experiences of dyslexia as beneficial in the project, helping me to appreciate the students' perspectives, and facilitating the understanding of social phenomena, as discussed by Rosaldo (1993). While Rosaldo emphasises that we have multiple identities and one of these positions me as a researcher, I do not draw from this that I have one unmoveable perspective when conducting work, that is based on my past experiences, training and present values. Rather, that I balance a perspective as researcher, that does not know the interview participant or their circumstances and views until they acquaint me with them, with an awareness of my inherent subjectivity as co-participant in a discussion.

The research design of this thesis uses thematic analysis, described by Braun & Clarke (2006) in the psychological field, who highlight its flexibility and accessibility as an approach to analysing qualitative data to find patterns or themes. I applied theoretical saturation and comparison, as described by Corbin & Strauss (2008), reasoning and deliberating over the relationships between themes that arose in the conversations. I used open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to guide the process of navigating and sorting the data into individual topics, grouping into sub-categories and then building over-arching themes. The coding process therefore produced a hierarchy of categorised data, which is discussed further in sub-section 5.8 and Figure 15, ranging from specific school memories and contemporary experiences at university, to participants' rationalised thoughts and self-concepts. I used the organised and categorised data as a basis to structure the findings and develop theory for the Discussion.

As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, thematic analysis is best used with a clear method and awareness of any assumptions made. As a qualitative interview study, I adopted a framework (also used by Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) in a comparison of other approaches), which specifies the following for the project methodology:

(i) **Philosophy**: Develops theory relating to social interactions and processes from concepts grounded in narrative data.
(ii) **Goal**: Asks questions in the research about the experiences of students in the context of a specific aspect (dyslexia) and probes the relationships with social processes and identity.
(iii) **Selection criteria**: Selects for interview students who experienced dyslexia and those who support them at university (i.e. students and support tutors);
(iv) **Method of data collection**: Probes for detail in semi-structured interviews, as the participants describe their experiences and views.
(v) **Analysis**: Examines thematic concepts from the data to develop an explanatory framework and relates this to literature.
(vi) **Target audience**: Aims to reach dyslexia researchers as the primary audience for the research and practitioners as the secondary audience.
(vii) **Product of research**: Generates theory on the identity impacts of dyslexia by relating participants' experiences to the social context of universities' dyslexia approach.

I further note that the thematic analysis of the data and research discussion generated in the current study are constructions themselves; they are a version of reality that can be debated in the context of other perspectives and approaches. For example, there are many different research approaches to identity work and this project, applying a critical approach to thematic analysis of qualitative interview data, is only one way to examine stigmatised, hidden or disabled identity aspects at UK universities.

In the project, I developed theory as it related to the concepts and themes that arose, rather than generating a higher-level theory to be tested. Therefore, the research approach was inductive not deductive. It may be that the current study's research findings and theory could apply elsewhere, but a researcher would need to consider their relevance and transferability to a new context. I have endeavoured to provide information on the participants, methods and settings to aid decisions on the transferability of the project findings and to assist in understanding its credibility and rigour. The limitations of the methodology and its rigour are discussed in greater depth in the Conclusions 8.4.

5.3 Participant recruitment rationale

As the study is exploratory in its purpose, I adapted and developed the participant recruitment method as the project progressed. The student recruitment process, which involved advertising for participants via dyslexia support sources, was designed to ensure that the students recruited for the study were identified with dyslexia. However, participation was self-selecting and voluntary and dyslexia was self-declared. I recognise that students with dyslexia are a varied group of individuals with wide-ranging views of higher education. As Rocco & Delgado (2011) suggest, this diversity may reflect their experiences of the cultural response to dyslexia and the responses of the different institutions where they study. The research therefore sought to gather views from as wide a spectrum of students as possible (discussed later in section 5.5) to collect a variety of experiences and views.

Early in the project, I established contact with The Helen Arkell Centre, a dyslexia-specific training and support centre based in Farnham, UK, that offers support to children, students and parents outside of the school or university environment. The centre agreed to distribute information on the project and my contact details, in their monthly update to their email distribution list, reaching past and present students with dyslexia and their families across the UK. The Centre also posted an information leaflet on its support noticeboard and in teaching rooms. Interestingly, there was no response from this method of contacting potential student participants via a support source outside of universities.

Subsequently, I also contacted several UK university learning support centres to ask for help recruiting student participants, focusing on those institutions near to me in Southern England, in case participants requested in-person interviews. Some universities declined, citing data protection limitations on contacting students for potential research projects. In total I contacted and followed up 12 university learning support departments over a year, from 2016-2017. I received positive responses from 6 institutions in this period and sent these learning support departments a student recruitment flyer, describing the project with my email contact details. One Head of learning support agreed to send this flyer to students with dyslexia via email and another five departments posted it on a learning support notice board. In 2016-2017 I recruited 5 students (current and recent) with dyslexia from 4 UK universities to participate in the project. The student profiles are discussed in 5.5 below.

As the project progressed and the themes emerged, it became clear that it would be helpful to triangulate the experiences and views from students with the perspectives of those at the interface between the university and those that identify with dyslexia. As I was in contact with university learning support departments to orchestrate the project's recruitment of students with dyslexia, I made the decision to also request an interview with a lead learning support tutor at four institutions where I had recruited student participants. The support tutor interviews were a valuable opportunity to explore further the attitudes towards dyslexia identification, its classification and accommodation at UK universities.

The study relied on student self-reporting of dyslexia, rather than asking for independent or official documentary evidence of dyslexia, affording the students the power to define and acknowledge their own cognitive differences. However, the nature of the recruitment process, via university learning support departments, meant that the participants had been identified with dyslexia, confirmed by a third party (most often the university).

In the recruitment process I did not offer any incentives to participate, to avoid the possibility that the data collected could have been affected by participants applying erroneously to participate or adjusting their answers to access a reward. However, following the interviews, all participants were offered a summary report of the findings that their data will have contributed to. At no time was an individual student's specific case discussed with a learning support tutor and anonymity was protected throughout.

5.4 Project participation mode: email and phone discussions

Once I received an email expression of interest from a student, I sent details of the project with a consent form for the student to complete [see **Appendix I**]. Then I offered the potential participant the opportunity to join me in a discussion, via an email exchange or verbally, either through a telephone conversation or in-person meeting. I suggested ideally a combination of both email and verbal modes, at their convenience and using the mode of their choosing, however I aimed for students to participate via the mode(s) on which they were most comfortable.

I made the decision to include email as a choice of interview mode, reflecting email's prevalence and widespread use by students. While it is a written mode of communication and some may think it counter-intuitive for a study attempting to attract participants with dyslexia, I would argue that those with dyslexia may embrace the asynchronous and reflective format of email-based discussion, particularly where there is no pressure on grammar or spelling. Moreover, to progress to university, the students would have to be comfortable to an extent with written communication.

In these judgements, I also considered previous work where email interviews have been used and deliberated, for example Kitto and Barnett (2007) apply an analysis of online and email communication for interviews. The authors found email dialogue offered efficiency of researcher time, easy analysis of sequential responses, reduction in errors of transcription, no time constraints of an individual verbal interview, and the possibility of a more considered participant response. The authors argued that email interview data is a rich source of rational and reasonable responses, even if the number of words may be less than in a verbal interview.

As an asynchronous exchange, email dialogue allows participants to structure, write and check their responses in their own time, as well as to keep a record of their previous responses in the email history (this was described in a project by Leach, 2012). Further, the email format lets students easily end a dialogue, for example if work pressures build or they have had enough: the participant may simply cease responding and I would not pursue further communication.

In the email dialogue I aimed to let participants jointly direct the conversation with me, to draw out a fresh understanding of the student's experiences for researcher and participant. In this way I responded to statements they made in a previous response, often asking for further detail or clarification, as well as asking the questions that I asked all students. As a collaborative venture, the email dialogue enabled me as researcher to be a participant in a discussion alongside the student interviewee, co-constructing and interpreting knowledge through dialogue (discussed in James & Busher, 2009). As this is a relatively novel way to conduct a participant interview, particularly in dyslexia research, I attach a pseudonymised example email dialogue in **Appendix III**.

I made the decision not to correct the spelling or use of language in the email written responses or in the quotes used from them in the thesis, other than to adjust an expletive. These were the written language that the participants chose to use when responding in an email dialogue, so they are reproduced in quotes in the Findings chapter as they were sent to me. When reading these through, I took the view that it was reasonable to include variations from dictionary spelling or general language use that does not affect the message or inhibit readers from understanding what the participant was saying. Indeed, it conveys the natural language use of the interview participant.

Three of the student participants agreed to a telephone interview following an email dialogue (see Figure 12 below for a tally of interviews by mode), which I used to probe specific areas in more detail and to check that I had fully understood the responses given in the email exchange. It also gave each student an opportunity to expand on verbally or add to the topics that were covered via email. I aimed to gain further insights and nuances from the semi-structured phone interviews that may not have been accessed via email dialogue. I sought the participants' permission to audio-record the verbal interviews as well as making notes myself, to help me to accurately transcribe the interviews. I recognised that in the immediacy of a verbal exchange, ideas can be probed before intended meaning is lost; tones of voice are used to offer empathy or encourage expansion on a theme; or prompts used to maintain the flow of conversation, all of which are harder to replicate via an email exchange over several days or weeks.

Figure 12: Interview tally and breakdown by of mode of interview

Interview tally	Student	Learning Support tutor
Completed	5 interviews	4 interviews

Interview breakdown by mode	Student	Learning Support tutor
Email only	2	0
Phone only	1	4
Phone and email	2	0

I recognise that offering a choice of interview mode enabled me to test whether both email and verbal interviews were attractive to students and useful to the researcher when conducting research among students with dyslexia. Therefore, the email and verbal discussions provided the project with insights and data from two different interview modes and enabled me to compare the two (discussed in the Conclusions 8.4.3).

5.5 Participant pseudonyms and profiles

Early in the project I confirmed that participant privacy was paramount, due to sensitivities concerning dyslexia, as well as to preserve the integrity of the research study. I recognized that if the study enabled identification of a student or tutor while still at the institution, it could affect how they may be viewed or treated by the learning support department, student peers, lecturers, or those in university policy development. I appreciated how candid the participants were with me and did not wish to compromise their trust in myself as researcher, or in the project. However, to be able to link comments made by a single individual, I substituted a pseudonym for the name of each student or tutor and removed the names of institutions.

I took participant pseudonyms from a Wikipedia list of British suffragists from the early 1900's, with the centenary of the suffrage movement in mind. I chose this as an example of employing critical approaches to question social injustice and confront existing power structures, albeit a hundred years ago and on the topic of gender equality. I maintained the declared gender status of participants' pseudonyms. As in Figure 13 below, student names start with 'S' and learning support tutors with 'L'.

Figure 13: Participant pseudonyms used in the project

Students		Learning Support Tutors
Sarah-Louisa	=	**Sarah-Louisa**
Selina		**Laurence**
Sophia		**Lilian**
Stewart		**Lucy**
Sylvia		

In the table, the individual with the hyphenated name Sarah-Louisa represents a participant who was both a recent student and support tutor. Sarah-Louisa was working as a learning support tutor at the time of interview. I first contacted her through her support role at a UK university, when I approached the learning support department regarding student recruitment for the project. She volunteered that she had also been identified with dyslexia and had completed a graduate qualification within the past year. I asked if she would feel comfortable having discussions with me from the perspective of both student and tutor. We agreed that the two perspectives could be dealt with via two separate discussions via the two interview modes, as a student via email and as a learning support tutor by phone. To put her comments in context as from the view of both student and tutor, I identified this participant as Sarah-Louisa throughout the quotes.

I recruited students who were currently registered at a UK university or who had recently completed their study course (within the year before the interview). As the student discussions approached a new area of exploratory enquiry, I hoped to include different student profiles among the participants, for example to include graduate students and undergraduates; those whose dyslexia was identified at school and those at university; those studying different subjects; and to include students of different genders. This was successfully borne out in the students recruited to the project, who were prepared to have a discussion with me. As the project was not aiming to test specific differences between individual characteristics, e.g. between male and female students, I decided in this project that it was not important to seek an equal balance between specific student profiles, for example it was sufficient that male and female genders were both represented.

As I will discuss further in Reflections on the Methodology (Conclusions 8.4.1), with 8 individual participants the project claims only to have collected a sample of views from what is undoubtedly a wider range of experiences across all UK students with dyslexia or support tutors. However, large amounts of data were collected from the participant discussions which provided many valuable insights through thematic analysis. For example, a phone interview of over 3 hours led to a transcript of approaching 9,000 words and even an email dialogue over 2 weeks produced 2,500 words. Therefore, I do not claim that the findings are representative of the whole population of students with dyslexia at UK universities, or of learning support tutors.

However, as I will discuss in the Conclusions (Project Limitations 8.5), as a qualitative project it aims to be credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable, according to Shenton's (2004) criteria.

Below is a summary and table (Figure 14) of the student participants, respecting anonymity, where the student names have been replaced with letters a to e (dictated by the order in which I conducted the interviews).

Selina (a):

- Undergraduate in third year of a first Honours degree.
- Dyslexia identified at university after a lecturer suggested testing for dyslexia.
- Project participation by email and phone.

Sophia (b):

- Undergraduate in third year of an Honours degree.
- Dyslexia suspected through primary school, identified at secondary school.
- Project participation by email.

Sylvia (c):

- Mature student on a 1-year course after a foundation degree.
- Dyslexia identified by a lecturer on a previous course 10 years ago.
- Had dropped out of school at age 13 with no formal qualifications.
- Project participation by phone.

Sarah-Louisa (d):

- Mature student recently finished a postgraduate qualification.
- Dyslexia identified by a lecturer on a previous university course 10 years ago.
- Currently working within dyslexia support at a university.
- Project participation by email (as a student) and phone (as a support tutor).

<u>Stewart (e):</u>

- Graduate student in the second year of a Masters course, working full-time to support part-time studies.
- Dyslexia identified at age 6 and received learning support through school.
- Project participation by email and phone.

Figure 14: Outline student profiles

	Student:	**a**	**b**	**c**	**d**	**e**
Student status	Undergraduate	✓	✓			
	Graduate student			✓		✓
Degree stage	Post-graduate				✓	
	Current student	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Recently finished studies				✓	
Dyslexia identified	At primary school					✓
	At secondary school		✓			
	At university	✓		✓	✓	
Project participation	By email	✓	✓		✓	✓
	By phone	✓		✓	✓	✓

5.6 Interview questions

In the semi-structured discussions by phone and email with student and support tutor participants, I aimed to cover a series of prepared topic areas. These explored students' educational situation and background; experiences of dyslexia; coping strategies and support; and explored student self-concept relating to dyslexia and accessing support at university.

I will outline the student and support tutor question areas briefly here and highlight how they evolved, **Appendix II** gives a more comprehensive list of questions for student participants that I was able to pick from in the email dialogue or phone semi-structured interview. As mentioned above, due to the adaptive nature of the study I modified the specific questions in each case to the participant's responses. **Appendix III** also offers a transcript of an email dialogue with a student, conducted over several days. A comparison of this with **Appendix II** gives insight into how the discussion and question development progressed in these dialogues.

5.6.1 Student question areas

My discussions with student participants covered the following topics, although some areas were covered in more detail than others depending on the participant's responses. Also, as mentioned in 5.2 above, the specific questions varied as I developed the themes and theory from each successive interview. I indicate below where this changed the direction of the questioning as the project progressed.

- Students' current subject, university, status (undergraduate/graduate) and progress through the course.
- Students' experiences of dyslexia at university, what they associated with dyslexia, the challenges and any advantages.

    - **As the interviews evolved, I adapted this question to ask about their school experiences of dyslexia: early interviews revealed this to be a formative time in terms of dyslexia and academic self-concept.**
- How and when dyslexia was identified, whether they had been re-tested at university and their views on the process of identifying dyslexia and qualifying for support as a student;
    - **I adapted this to also ask about whether and when they were aware of dyslexia at school and the consequences of this on their studies.**
- The study skills that students had learnt plus other tools and technology offered by the university that they used;
    - **Since technology tools did not feature as a major help or issue, I adapted this area to focus on students' own coping strategies for dyslexia and how they developed study skills and the role of university learning support in this.**
- How students felt others (family, peers) viewed dyslexia, the reactions to dyslexia they had experienced and the support they received from them;
    - **I found that the views of lecturers towards dyslexia was a key issue for some students and so in subsequent interviews I also asked about students' experiences of lecturer reactions to dyslexia.**
- Students' views of university learning support, how their relationship with this department had developed, what services they accessed, how integrated this was with subject teaching and how their support was funded;
    - **As interviews progressed, students highlighted issues around the labelling of dyslexia support as disability support, so I adapted questions to ask the students and support tutors about this.**
- If discovering dyslexia and accessing learning support had affected their view of themselves;
    - **As the interviews progressed, I asked in more depth about students' sense of self in relation to dyslexia, if they felt dyslexia defined who they are, did they feel different from other students and in what way and how their view of themselves has changed since school.**

5.6.2 Support tutor question areas

To complement and triangulate the student interviews, the discussions with support tutors covered the following topics, also responding to issues that the student at that university had highlighted to me. These topic areas also adapted throughout the process, as I developed further specific questions as indicated below.

- The name, function and services offered by the learning support department.
- The tutor’s view of the university’s approach to dyslexia and services offered;
    - **As the interviews evolved, I had more detailed discussions on the medical and social approaches to dyslexia and tutors’ view of these.**
- The university process for student dyslexia identification and needs assessment for support and their views on this;
    - **Questions developed to ask about the proportion of students who were previously or newly aware of dyslexia and to ask in detail about the dyslexia assessment process.**
- The tutor’s views on the specific support services offered to those with dyslexia, the most popular and effective services and the role of technology.
- What tutors felt the university could improve in support and teaching.
- The tutor’s views on how dyslexia impacts student identity and self-worth;
    - **As with the student interviews, I adapted this to probe the impact of the disability and support labels at university on student identity.**

5.7 Data handling and storage

I took the following precautions to protect the data collected in the project interviews. I conducted the email exchanges via a UCL password-protected email account, accessed by a password-protected desktop computer, which I also used to transcribe and access the phone interviews. Once an email exchange had terminated with that participant, the email dialogue was immediately pseudonymised and transferred to a password protected secure folder in my UCL student research log. The email exchange was then deleted from my email folders.

The phone interviews were conducted on a PIN-protected iPhone, which I used to audio-record the data. Once a phone conversation had come to its natural end, I transcribed and pseudonymised the interview data, then saved it securely in a UCL student research log. Lastly, the data was deleted from the iPhone and computer.

To conduct the analysis, the pseudonymised data from each interview was transcribed into a password protected NVivo account for coding. I coded the first sets of data from the email dialogues and verbal interviews initially using descriptive terms, summarising the subject discussed or point being made. These initial descriptive codes were then used to inform subsequent interviews, to shape the question areas and refine the tone or phrasing of questions or prompts. Once all interview data was collected, I re-read the transcripts to start drawing out a hierarchy of themes that revolved around descriptive terms, to code in NVivo as nodes (see below in 5.8).

In accordance with UCL research requirements, the email and phone interview data and NVivo coded transcripts were stored only in electronic format on the UCL student research log (not printed) and will be kept for 10 years from publication of the thesis, then deleted.

5.8 Analytical approach

In this study I listened to and explored the experiences and views of students with dyslexia as well as learning support tutors, to identify the issues, context, and conflicts associated with dyslexia and student identity in higher education. As outlined in 5.2 above, I applied thematic analysis to evaluate the information collected via the email and telephone interviews, to identify issues and common patterns across the data, refining these into categories (Boyatzis, 1998). The study organised these patterns into themes (or nodes coded in NVivo) that describe the phenomena examined (discussed in Braun & Clarke, 2006), employing these themes to build theory grounded in the stories and experiences of the student participants.

Each subsequent transcript in the interview process was a new experience in the research process, cumulatively adding detail to existing themes, forging new themes, expanding the theme hierarchy and adding new categories of summary themes. I therefore progressively edited and added to the themes as the interviews were completed over a 6-month period. This bottom-up inductive approach to theme development aimed to capture the commonality and differences between the experiences and views of participants, which is explored in the Discussion, for example where I compare comments from students and learning support tutors.

Through the project, I developed the following summary themes (outlined in Figure 15). I also coded participant comments in NVivo reflecting descriptive themes, such as whether the comment was a past reflection, current experience, rationalised thought, or theory, which influenced how I treated the comment in the Findings. In a further level of coding, I cross-referenced these themes with coded nodes for the language used, such as metaphors or sentence structures, to convey additional meaning, also to label the comments from students and tutors.

Figure 15: Subject coding nodes used for students and tutors

Student themes	Learning support tutor themes
Dyslexia at school and in family	Role of student support
Dyslexia identification process	Identifying students with dyslexia
Coping strategies	Developing coping strategies with students
Dyslexia and university support	Dyslexia support and accommodations
Dyslexia and lecturers	Lecturer attitudes to dyslexia
Dyslexia and peers	Dyslexia and student peers
Dyslexia and self-concept	Dyslexia and identity
Personal views of dyslexia	University approach to dyslexia
Disclosing dyslexia	Future directions for support

When interpreting the interview data, I took a critical approach (discussed in Literature Review 4.1 and above in 5.1), considering questions of power and social justice in relation to the emerging themes, specifically to question the intersection of the institutional approach to dyslexia (through language, policy and practices) and the experience, identity and self-esteem of students with dyslexia.

While I drew common themes from the conversations with the participants, I also recognised that they each had very individual experiences that influenced their self-conception and how they rationalized their dyslexia identity. I saw my role as researcher to highlight their choices and dilemmas and to pick out overarching themes to respond to the research questions. Throughout this project I have sought to uncover variation in experience and character associated with dyslexia, rather than identify or highlight a type.

In the Discussion Chapter 7 I relate the findings and analysis to the literature, highlighting gaps to show how this study adds to or challenges our understanding of dyslexia, its classification and issues of dyslexia identity and stigma at university.

5.9 Ethics and managing risk

The project was subject to UCL's Institute of Education ethical guidelines (2015-2016) and was reviewed by the UCL Research Ethics Committee, receiving ethical approval in January 2016. The research was designed to comply with the (then current) British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), specifically regarding informed consent, the right to withdraw, non-use of incentives, privacy and data storage (discussed in 5.7 above).

Through the research design process, I reflected on the ethical considerations and potential risks of the project to participants. I committed to communicate clearly with participants, particularly in obtaining informed consent for the interviews. The project information sent to participants via email included a statement of informed consent (see **Appendix I**). I provided information on who I was at the UCL Institute of Education; the project's aims and methods; what to expect; broad question area; and a privacy statement. I also highlighted that the participants could withdraw, decline to answer any question, or refuse consent for their data to be used at any time. I balanced providing the information required to satisfy ethical guidelines, with making the text accessible and easily readable by the participants. I kept the language and structure clear, for example, I included the headings 'Who will be in the project?', 'What will it involve?', 'Why is this research important?', 'Who will know if you take part?' as in **Appendix I**. I appreciated that it was important not to put off participants, to ensure they clearly understood the research aims, had considered the risks and were happy with what participation involved.

I also included a statement on data protection in the information form, detailing how the information would be stored and used and under which data protection rules (the Data Protection Act 1998, i.e., before the GDPR rules came into effect). Participant names were pseudonymised (see 5.5 above) and contact details were preserved under password protection to send participants a summary of findings.

In the project design, I recognised a risk that choosing to offer email interview as a mode of participation may deter some students who prefer not to correspond via a written format. However, I aimed to mitigate this risk (and avoid excluding these students) by also offering phone or in-person interviews on the project consent form. This enabled one student (Sylvia) to opt out of the offered email dialogue in preference for a telephone interview. I did not pressure students to choose one format over another, or to interact with me via both modes rather than one.

In addition, I acknowledge the potential off-putting nature of large sections of close-written text in an email dialogue, when sent to an individual with dyslexia, so I avoided this as far as possible when conducting the email interviews. I favoured short open statements or questions to prompt responses, these were well spaced out, and I used simple text colour to separate sections.

In the thesis I also recognised a potential risk of offence through the language used to address participants or describe dyslexia, which may highlight students with dyslexia as defective, or sub-normal. I mitigated for this by avoiding referring to dyslexia as a defect in the interviews, instead letting the participants narrate their own and the university's construction of dyslexia. Further, in the thematic analysis and discussion, I was conscious of and reflected on the language participants used relating to dyslexia, using a critical lens to explore societal and institutional approaches to dyslexia through language as well as policies.

Chapter 5 Concluding comments

In the Methodology chapter I have located the thesis in terms of ontology and epistemology, reflected on the research design, ethical considerations and risk, analytical approach and how the data was collected and protected. As an early-stage, exploratory project, it applies thematic analysis to semi-structured interview data, collected from email and phone discussions with students with dyslexia and support tutors, from four UK universities.

In the study I recognised the importance of situating dyslexia within a social context to explore the individual experience of dyslexia, as well as situating it as a specific phenomenon afforded legal protection to explore the institutional approach. The question areas reflected this, asking about the student experience of dyslexia as well as probing institutional policy and process relating to dyslexia at university and the impact on student self-concept and esteem.

Next, in Chapter 6 I will present the Findings relating to the research question.

6. FINDINGS

In this chapter I will present the Findings that relate to the research question, organised by the three research sub-questions, as below.

6.1 The student experience of dyslexia. In this first section I will present students' views of the impact of dyslexia on their time at school and university and how they have adjusted to study. I will also address themes arising on the timing, process, and impact of dyslexia identification.

6.2 How universities approach dyslexia. In the second section I examine comments from the students and tutors relating to universities' approach to identifying and accommodating students with dyslexia, also on the learning support that is available to students and subject lecturer attitudes towards students with dyslexia.

6.3 Dyslexia, identity and stigma at university. In the last section of Findings, I will explore the impact of dyslexia and the university approach to dyslexia on student identity, the relationship between dyslexia, learning support and student self-concept and students' feelings about dyslexia identity disclosure.

Throughout this chapter I use participants' words to add depth to the findings, explain their thoughts and give examples to support the themes that I draw out from the discussions. Alongside the students' words, I have included comments from the learning support tutors as a counterbalance. I will highlight where these two accounts support each other and where they differ, either adding additional context and meaning or sometimes contrasting with the students' experiences.

The tutors' comments were particularly rich regarding student reactions to dyslexia identification and support at the university, underpinned by their work with hundreds of students with dyslexia at the universities. Their perspective is, however, as an employee of the university and may therefore reflect bias due to the university's approach to dyslexia and constraints of providing learning support. It is therefore interesting to note where the learning support viewpoint differs from the individual stories of those students to whom I spoke in this study. In particular, the recent student who was working as a learning support tutor at the time of interview gave valuable insights from both perspectives, highlighting conflict arising from the two different viewpoints.

Through this chapter I will explore specific topic themes that emerged in the data analysis, which are summarised in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16: Mapping the research questions and Findings sections onto the themes to explore in Chapter 6

Research question	What is the student experience of dyslexia?	How do universities approach dyslexia?	What is the impact of this approach on student identity?
Findings section	6.1 The student experience of dyslexia	6.2 How universities approach dyslexia	6.3 Dyslexia, identity and stigma at university
Themes to explore	• Unrecognised dyslexia • Dyslexia experienced as negative traits • Coping strategies • Dyslexia identification	• Tutor and student perspectives on the university's approach • Student reactions to the university's approach • Dyslexia as disability • Interactions with learning support and lecturers	• Accepting dyslexia seen as traits • Accepting learning support • Impact of dyslexia on self-concept • Managing dyslexia as part of student identity

6.1 The student experience of dyslexia

In this section addressing the first research sub-question, I will present students' accounts of their experiences as an individual with dyslexia. From the discussions with both students and support tutors, I will first draw out comments on students' awareness of and impacts of literacy struggles since the school classroom (6.1.1). Then I will highlight comments on the impact of dyslexia at university and how students have adjusted to study in higher education, as well as the timing and process of dyslexia identification (6.1.2).

6.1.1 Unrecognised difficulty constrained students' formal education

To explore students' experiences of dyslexia, I asked about the differences they associated with dyslexia, their awareness of these through school and how it had affected university studies. Central to this was the fact that for most students in this project, dyslexia was not recognized in school. For some it was not identified until the student embarked on a graduate degree. These students therefore did not have an explanation for struggles in the school classroom or undergraduate lecture hall, which begs questions around the impact of unrecognised dyslexia at university, which I will explore in the Discussion chapter 7.1.3.

6.1.1.1 Students' dyslexia was often unrecognised at school

The student participants said that from an early stage in their education they were aware they had greater difficulties with literacy than their peers in the classroom. The students mentioned specific issues with reading and writing, which echoes research into the basis of dyslexia as an uncoupling of cognition (or IQ development) from reading in a child (see Ferrer *et al,* 2010, Literature Review 2.2.2.1).

When I asked the students at what stage dyslexia had been identified, Stewart was the only student whose dyslexia was recognised early, in primary school. As a result of early dyslexia identification Stewart had access to support from his parents and in the classroom, particularly at secondary school, which he felt helped him to gradually build confidence in his abilities and help with his studies: “In year 11 i would say that I came out of my shell a lot and managed to get decent GCSEs” **Stewart (email).**

All the other students that I spoke to said that schoolteachers had failed to recognise dyslexia, for most it was only identified after they had left school. The learning support tutors agreed that a significant proportion of undergraduate and graduate students’ dyslexia is only identified while studying at university. At some universities, most students with dyslexia are not conscious of it before they arrive, but request dyslexia testing following a long-standing awareness of a fundamental difference in the way that they learned and performed at school. As Lilian described: “About 75%-80% of our students [*with dyslexia*] don’t know and come through our screening process by self-referral. Inevitably they approach this process by saying ‘I always knew there was something wrong with me’” **Lilian (phone).**

In one alternative scenario, Sophia’s parents requested a dyslexia test when she moved to senior school at age 11, following years of struggle in the primary classroom: “Throughout school I always fell through the system as I wasn't ddyslexi enough… My parents were told that I was a bit slow but I was never assessed” **Sophia (email).** Sophia excused her primary teachers for not recognising dyslexia by reasoning that her dyslexia couldn’t have been obvious in the classroom or in her work. However, as a result her academic abilities were misinterpreted and she struggled with literacy in her early education.

The tutors explained to me why dyslexia is often unrecognised at school, saying there were several reasons why this occurred. Firstly, for mature and graduate students, dyslexia was just not identified at school 20 years ago, where it would be picked up today (discussed in Literature Review 3.3.3), as until relatively recently it was seen as a middle-class affectation or an excuse for laziness in school. Also, many new undergraduates arriving at age 18 may not have had the opportunity to identify dyslexia at school, unless it was seriously debilitating to the individual's progress. The early evidence of this study suggests it takes an exceptional teacher (or parent) to recognise dyslexia in a school-age child with the potential to go on to university.

6.1.1.2 Unrecognised dyslexia affected behaviour, participation and confidence

As a result of unrecognised dyslexia, a substantial number of potential university candidates don't have an explanation for their struggles in the classroom or receive support for dyslexia when at school. From early in their education, the lack of a reason or support for their literacy struggles has led students to develop distraction or avoidance tactics to evade difficult situations or classes, either becoming disruptive in class or dropping out of lessons.

Stewart associated his early school days with behaviour issues that he felt resulted from his struggles with literacy. He said that he "could never concentrate, was very easily distracted, hated reading and writing and was generally quite disruptive" **Stewart (email).** His difficulties culminated in the ultimate humiliation of having to repeat a year at primary school. "I was held back a year and put into my brother's year... It was very embarassing" **Stewart (email).**

Stewart was not alone in being aware that a frustration with literacy difficulties led to unruly behaviour to mask struggles in class. Other students also said that their conduct at school was affected due to difficulties in the classroom. For example, Sylvia noted that while her teachers recognised her potential to absorb verbal information at school, she was unable to show her learning in writing: "Somehow I was in the top set, but I never produced any written work" **Sylvia (phone)**. She also avoided situations where she was compelled to confront her literacy difficulties in the classroom: "When I was a kid I didn't understand what was going on so I would just avoid reading entirely" **Sylvia (phone)**. Avoiding reading turned into avoiding lessons, then avoiding school. Unfortunately, her parents' efforts to correct her had the opposite effect: "My Dad would take me in and sit me down and tell me off in front of everyone, which didn't help. Of course, as soon as he went, at some point I'd just slip out and that's it, I wouldn't come back" **Sylvia (phone).**

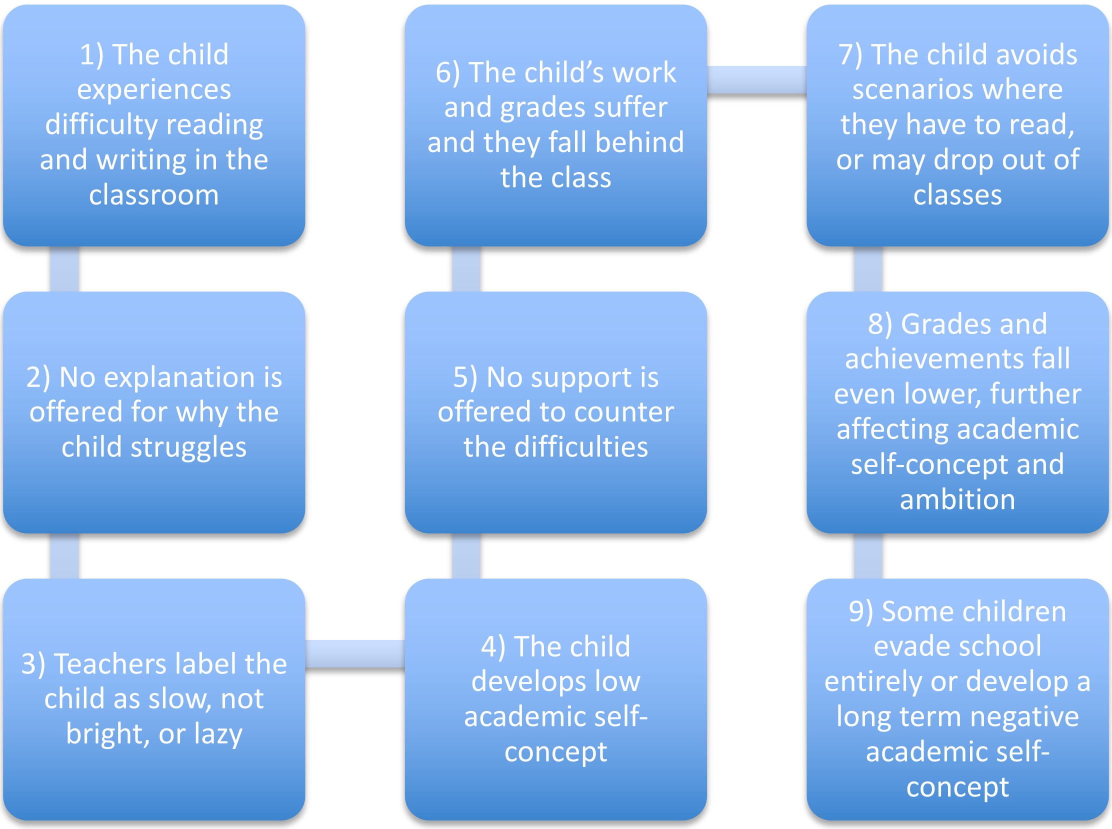
At school Sylvia had no rational explanation for her difficulty so received no support or positive encouragement either from school or home, her avoidance tactics eventually built up into self-imposed exclusion as she dropped out of school entirely at age 13. "So, I became a truant and didn't go to school… through my secondary school life I probably went to school for a maximum of 5 months" **Sylvia (phone)**. Sylvia's difficulties in the classroom therefore had a serious impact on her education as unrecognised dyslexia inhibited her participation at school. Moreover, Sylvia felt that her schoolteachers blamed the truancy solely on a negative behaviour trait. "No one ever asked me why. It was just 'she's a truant'… It was never considered that the reason I didn't go to school was to do with learning" **Sylvia (phone).** Therefore, her schoolteachers had entirely missed the opportunity to help her overcome her underlying difficulties reading and writing.

In addition to behavioural impacts such as distraction tactics or class avoidance, unrecognised dyslexia at school lowered the students' perception of their academic abilities. They felt that these were masked at school by the difficulties associated with dyslexia. Sylvia summarized the students' view that "the key emotion I felt as a kid was embarrassment and shame" **Sylvia (phone).** The students said their academic confidence suffered at school, as they had neither explanation nor support for their struggles. Selina, for example, contrasted her difficult and dispiriting school experience with her time at university, once dyslexia was identified and she was aware of the reason for her differences in class: "At school and college I didn't know of my dyslexia so I felt very down on my academic ability. University has given me the confidence to know that I can do what everyone else can" **Selina (email).**

The learning support tutors agreed that when dyslexia is unrecognised in the classroom, it not only impacted how students viewed themselves academically at school, but also affected future life choices, including whether to apply to university. Lilian summed up the consequences for students: "Often times our students have not had the opportunities to even entertain ideas or questions about their learning. They are pushed through lower and middle ability groups in their schooling and are not perceived as university material a lot of the time” **Lilian (phone)**.

The experiences of student participants with unrecognised dyslexia through school are summarised below in Figure 17.

Figure 17: Unrecognised dyslexia and a lack of support affects academic participation and self-confidence



The support tutors agreed that being consigned to low ability classes from where they were not expected to progress to university, lowered the self-confidence of students with dyslexia. Therefore, when they arrived at university “they have absorbed that questioning, self-doubt, that sense of ‘Do I even really deserve to be here?’” **Lilian (phone).** The subsequent identification of dyslexia at university provided an explanation for students’ lower than expected grades through school and countered worries about intelligence and academic abilities: “I think that’s where dyslexia can be a really liberating explanation” **Lilian (phone).**

This study provides evidence that schoolchildren with dyslexia struggle particularly where it is not recognised and they do not have either explanation or support for their difficulties. These findings extend studies such as Pollak (2005), discussed in the Literature Review 3.1.3, which highlighted that for many students with dyslexia, it was not formally identified until university. While there is little existing literature on the impact of late identification, the current study suggests that students learn to hide or mask their difficulties in front of a school class or teacher. As they lack an explanation for difficulty, their academic confidence suffers (discussed in greater depth in section 6.3) and they may avoid classes or school entirely. What was encouraging was that, despite the setbacks in their education, those individuals that I spoke to have overcome considerable barriers, from no qualifications to low self-belief, to progress to study at university.

6.1.1.3 University students only flagged dyslexia when it was a serious challenge

When dyslexia is missed at school by teachers or parents, university students with dyslexia often have had to seek dyslexia identification by themselves. As discussed in the Literature Review 3.2.2, students must be formally tested and dyslexia confirmed for them to access support at university.

Students are most likely to ask for help when they are already enrolled at a university, rather than requesting testing before the course starts. Selina, for example, requested a dyslexia test only after she had started her university course. "I was 20 and I'd never really thought about it before" **Selina (phone).** She said she felt awkward asking to be tested at what she thought was such a late stage, "So to go to student services and say 'I think I'm dyslexic. Do you mind if … we test that' Ha! I did feel a bit silly" **Selina (phone).** However, confirmation of dyslexia made her realise that she could have asked for a test much earlier: "I got tested and it came back … 'Yeah you are dyslexic.' And I was, like, Oh! I probably should have done this a few years earlier" **Selina (phone).**

The support tutors pointed out that students who asked for help for dyslexia while at university, only did so when they felt significantly challenged by an increase in the demands of their studies. As Sarah-Louisa said, this can be well into a first or subsequent degree: "We do have a lot [*of students with dyslexia*] that feel that they always had difficulties but that when they are challenged, particularly in post-graduate courses, at that point they think, right ok, I really am going to need the support now" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** As a case in point, Sarah-Louisa's own dyslexia wasn't identified until after she had left school and completed a first degree, when she noticed herself struggling with the workload on her Masters course: "As it [*the written workload*] got higher and higher, I went, hang on a minute, something's not quite right here**" Sarah-Louisa (phone).** She was fortunate that her suspicions about dyslexia were backed up by a lecturer's observations at the time, prompting her to pursue dyslexia identification: "I was a late diagnosis (26) while studying for a MA at [*university*]. My tutor… noticed the clear discrepancies between my verbal and written representations" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).**

The latest dyslexia identification was Sylvia's, who was not formally identified with dyslexia until she returned to education as an adult in her thirties, having left school at 13. She struggled through most of her first degree before a lecturer finally suggested testing for dyslexia. "In terms of official diagnosis, in order to obtain support, I was two and a half years into this foundation degree and I hadn't submitted one assignment…" **Sylvia (phone).** Dyslexia so perfectly explained her difficulties with her studies, Sylvia was surprised that none of her previous teachers had recognised it.

The fact that students wait until they are significantly challenged by dyslexia before they ask for help may also reflect the demographic cohort of current students (particularly mature students), whose dyslexia was not often identified at school, unless it was a significant barrier to learning. It may also reflect either a lack of dyslexia awareness in their earlier education or a fear of prejudice if the student requests dyslexia testing and it is identified. The study findings add further evidence to earlier studies that suggested some students shy away from declaring dyslexia or requesting its identification, as they feared prejudice or discrimination (e.g. Stage and Milne, 1996, Literature Review 3.1.3).

Sub-section 6.1.1 Concluding comments

The participant discussions revealed that students were aware of struggles with literacy from an early stage, but often dyslexia was identified only later. Teachers relegated them to lower-ability groups and the students resigned themselves to lower grades and ambitions than they had hoped for. Even before they reached university or dyslexia was formally identified, the students were keenly aware of specific frustrations and difficulties that they later associated with dyslexia. The students cited unrecognised dyslexia at school as a contributing factor to classroom disruption, poor participation in lessons, or even dropping out of school, negatively impacting their education.

This project adds further detail to existing work (Literature Review 3.1.3) that found students often don't acknowledge or ask for help for dyslexia until they are well into a university course. My discussions with students and tutors support this finding, suggesting that students delay asking for help at university until they feel significantly challenged by their studies. Furthermore, students must then navigate the time-consuming and complex process to identify dyslexia, recognise needs and qualify for funding for support, alongside their studies, in addition to making sense of what a dyslexia identification means for them as a student at university.

6.1.2 Students associated dyslexia with obstacles to their study

The project probed the student experience of dyslexia at university, asking students what they associated with dyslexia and how they met its challenges. I also explored the process and rationalisation of moving from unexplained difficulty at school through to an understanding of dyslexia in a university context.

6.1.2.1 Dyslexia hampered students from achieving their potential

When I asked students about the experience of dyslexia at university, they cited a wide range of negative associations, for example slow reading speed and poor comprehension when reading, low writing accuracy and poor short-term memory. The students' comments add depth to existing research on how dyslexia impacts university study (Literature Review 3.1.2), moreover, the project underlines how individuals vary from each other in how they experienced dyslexia.

In discussion with Sylvia, she elaborated on her struggles taking in information when reading: "It's… not recognizing that I'm reading the same passage in the book... I can read it word for word, but whether I take meaning from it is another thing" **Sylvia (phone).** This echoes research by Pedersen *et al* (2016) (Literature Review 3.1.4) showing that students with dyslexia can focus on either reading accuracy or comprehension but find it difficult to do both at the same time.

Stewart explained his problems listening and writing in lectures in terms of poor short-term memory, leading to difficulty multi-tasking and remembering auditory information: "I do zone out… I try to write down things, but when you're trying to write down and listen, you forget what they've just said. The short-term memory is quite a big thing" **Stewart (phone).** Stewart also noted his difficulty in lectures was compounded by a physical barrier of right-handed writing pads on lecture room chairs, which were unsuitable for him as a left-handed student.

The difficulties highlighted by students affected them in various ways, impacting their ability to (i) progress through long reading lists of extensive close-written texts; (ii) hold and recall information in discussions with lecturers and peers; and (iii) multi-task in lectures when writing notes, looking at visual text on slides, as well as listening to auditory information from lecturers.

These issues culminated in a frustration with their written work at university. Student participants struggled to communicate what they wished to say through the written word and to present this at a standard that they felt they could hand in to their subject lecturers. Sylvia described how "I was writing loads and loads and not having anything that was in order for me to submit… it's not being able to make sense of information and apply it" **Sylvia (phone).** Students felt that whilst they had proven their intellectual potential by having won a place at university, they then struggled to structure and write their thoughts to submit evidence of their learning. As a result, students felt held back from demonstrating what they were intellectually capable of, due to the focus on written assignments and examinations to assess progress in learning. Sylvia explained how this made her feel: "The most challenging part of being a student for me was I couldn't deliver an assignment; I couldn't get to a standard to get me a mark… My mind is so active, it's the frustration of knowing I am so much more than I can do" **Sylvia (phone).**

Sarah-Louisa, as a recent mature student and current support tutor, felt universities' continuing reliance on written work disadvantages those students who find it difficult to structure and write long essays. "Our current way of measuring 'success' seems to be floored [*sic*.] and is too narrow and writes people off without focusing on other qualities" **Sarah-Louisa (email).** Instead, she proposed that increased oral assessment would help to remove some of the barriers to study, for those with dyslexia, by lessening the burden of written assessment. She said: "I'd like to see more Viva's, presentations and group work; skills which most people use in work every day. I have not once as an employee written an essay" **Sarah-Louisa (email).**

When I asked specifically about positives associated with dyslexia at university, students struggled to come up with any examples, underlining the overwhelmingly negative associations of dyslexia. Only one student (Selina) had heard about and agreed with an advantage, not directly affecting academic work: she said dyslexia gave her a spatial awareness and she found it easy to learn to drive. While anecdotal, this may be interesting to probe as part of on-going studies into possible dyslexia strengths (Literature Review 2.1.1.3).

Similarly, the learning support tutors dismissed any generalised positives linked with dyslexia. As Laurence explained, students with dyslexia have such varied ability profiles, that their learned coping strategies are more likely to explain any perceived associations between dyslexia and creativity or intellectual advantage, as a response to barriers they encounter in education. This links to evidence (outlined in the Literature Review 2.1.1.3), that the positives sometimes associated with dyslexia may be learned adaptations and not innate. To date, there is little consistent evidence for specific, testable advantages or cognitive strengths associated with dyslexia, that could compensate to a degree for the difficulties experienced.

In summary, students reported different ways that dyslexia held them back from producing work that demonstrated their potential at university. This included struggles with reading comprehension, writing accuracy, and short-term memory, leading to difficulty in lectures, preparing written assignments and in exams.

6.1.2.2 Students developed their own strategies to cope with difficulties studying

In the current study the student participants said they had to develop an array of techniques to help them to concentrate, organize themselves, capture and memorize information, and to deliver work for their studies. The students said that they developed these personal coping strategies themselves, often over several years, based on self-awareness and using experimentation as well as adapting methods they saw other students using.

The students I spoke to said they felt they needed to work harder than other students on organisation, planning and time management. For example, they needed to allow additional time for reading and they requested printed slides before lectures. Several of the participants also said they preferred to work somewhere quiet to avoid distractions and they consciously had to focus their attention when working. As Stewart described: “I just help myself really, I sit at the front [*in lectures*], close to the screen so I can see… not use my phone” **Stewart (phone).**

The student participants used many different study techniques, which varied between individuals. What worked for one student with dyslexia did not necessarily help another. Participants mentioned colour-highlighting, repeat-writing notes, mind mapping and charts to organize and learn information for exams. These techniques underpinned students’ studies at university and continued to develop as they navigated their university courses. Selina, for example, expressed frustration with the ongoing process of experimenting to find techniques that were effective for her studies, she still struggled in her third undergraduate year to revise and remember information for exams.

Students had to be inventive in their techniques for assimilating, recording and demonstrating their learning. As an example of proactivity among students with dyslexia, Sarah-Louisa said that she had noticed some students used technology to be self-supporting in their studies. “With software: there is all this assistive free apps on phones, there’s loads of ways the dyslexic student can mitigate some of the effects of dyslexia” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** Sylvia also recognised her own resourcefulness, that after she had dropped out of school, she had developed strategies for learning outside of formal teaching. “It did take me away from a learning environment in terms of school. However, it didn’t stop me from learning, but maybe it took me to learn how to cope as a kid who wasn’t in school” **Sylvia (phone).** That she later found ways to re-enter education without school qualifications is perhaps a measure of the success of her personal coping strategies.

6.1.2.3 Dyslexia identification at university was time consuming and expensive

As discussed in the Literature Review 3.1.3 and 3.2.2, UK universities request evidence of, or administer, a formal dyslexia test before offering support. This differs from the situation at many schools, where evidence collected by teachers in the classroom is often sufficient to identify dyslexia and award support, or there may be an informal assessment by a support teacher. The university learning support tutors in this study agreed that students wishing to access any form of support for dyslexia needed recent and detailed written diagnostic evidence of dyslexia (i.e. a formal dyslexia assessment carried out by a trained Educational Psychologist).

In my discussions with support tutors, I asked why students were required to take a full diagnostic test, even if dyslexia had been previously identified. The tutors said this was because of variation in testing and support for dyslexia at schools. Universities required support tutors to seek additional current evidence through a full dyslexia test and a new needs assessment. For example, Lucy said some students arriving at university had evidence of access arrangements (such as use of a computer) from school but not a specific issue identified. “What would you do if you were an exam officer, or adviser in higher education and a student came with access arrangements from their school that says so-and-so writes illegibly, so should be given the use of a computer, but has no identified learning disability. Do you test them again, do you take their word for it, or send them away and say practice your handwriting? It’s a very difficult issue” **Lucy (phone).** The tutors noted the sensitivity of requiring detailed evidence of specific learning differences such as dyslexia, in order to offer support, particularly where this had already been provided previously without testing or where dyslexia was not identified at school.

The support tutors added that few students arrived with a full diagnostic assessment from school: “Probably about 7% arrive with an SpLD assessment… Usually that would be a school assessment, or a full diagnostic assessment from when they were younger. Very few have a post-16 full assessment” **Laurence (phone).** However, the tutors agreed that mostly this was not deemed recent or detailed enough for the university's purposes. "But they can't just walk in here … and us put loads of entitlements in place for them" **Laurence (phone).**

The dyslexia test and needs assessment takes time for the students to complete and costs money for the universities to offer, which not all universities will fund. I discovered that some universities will only contribute if the test is positive for dyslexia (this was Stewart's experience), so the risk is on the student in requesting a test. Where the university will not pay, the cost is passed directly on to the student.

Those support tutors from universities that paid for the test on behalf of students, worried that this was taken advantage of: "We do get students well into their 20's or 30's, who realise that [*university*] offers a free diagnostic assessment service, clearly advertised, which is unusual. So, there is a bit of an element of, it's free now, so I will access it" **Lucy (phone)**. Also, the tutors felt that some students did not value the test or its results if these were free, for example there were issues with student non-attendance when tests were booked. Therefore, those universities that charged students for the test reasoned that they provided a valued service for the student with actionable results from the test. "We do charge deliberately, so they value it… We put students through a really rigorous process. …they have the recommendations from it … for life" **Laurence (phone)**.

From the student perspective, it can be hard to pay for a dyslexia test. Sylvia received a demand to pay for a new dyslexia test even though dyslexia had been recognised by a college during her previous degree 10 years earlier. She highlighted her frustrations with the difficulties in finding money to pay for another dyslexia test, despite being on financial support at the university: "They said I… had to get another assessment. I would have to pay… I'm this age, I've got children… There are things I have not got, as I can't afford them to provide for the kids. It is that hard to get the assessment... Why should I pay again to be humiliated?" **Sylvia (phone).**

The tutors realised that some students found the dyslexia identification process a burden, compounding the difficulties of adapting to new study methods or adding to the stresses of going back into studies (for mature students). For example, Lilian described how “we have students in their 40’s or 50’s for career changes who have come back to university. Then on top of that decision to think, now I have to discover if dyslexia is a factor and how to make sense of that” **Lilian (phone).**

Following positive dyslexia identification, universities encourage students to apply for UK government Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) funding, which could pay for one-to-one support tutoring and technology equipment (e.g. laptops, printers, software). However, the DSA application process required a needs assessment with further paperwork, which some students found difficult to complete in time to access support to help their studies, particularly on shorter graduate courses. For example, Sylvia found that to test for dyslexia, then apply for the DSA, took such a long time that her financial award for additional equipment and one-to-one support only came through towards the end of her one-year course. “I applied for the DSA before the course started, but I didn’t actually get the go-ahead authorized money until March… The course was due to finish in May. If there is something recognized for me to have to support me… if I don’t have that until months into the course, it’s going to have an impact” **Sylvia (phone).** Moreover, Sylvia’s university was unable to provide support until the DSA approval had cleared. “I wasn’t given any interim dyslexia support…. to prop me up while I’m waiting” **Sylvia (phone).**

The support tutors at universities that relied on DSA funding for support agreed with the students’ frustration. They also resented the paperwork and time involved, especially if it delayed the student’s access to support. They were sympathetic to the students’ irritation with the numerous forms, tests and procedures required to qualify and be assessed for the DSA. “Our services are entirely funded by DSA, so we are dependent on [*dyslexia*] being confirmed. It is a disadvantage as sometimes students are delayed, just because of the volume of people going through” **Lilian (phone).** Only one of the universities in this study had access to central university funding for support services that could bypass DSA funding applications and offer immediate support, such as one-to-one tutorials, when students were formally identified with dyslexia at the university. They noted that this ensured support was also available to international students who would not be eligible for UK DSA funding and would otherwise not have been able to access support.

Lilian also noted that universities were powerless to help those students that did not identify with dyslexia, even if they had similar struggles: “The other side is that there are students who go through the process and find it’s not dyslexia, there is not really an explanation for why they are struggling” **Lilian (phone).** This emphasised the importance of the dyslexia test to award support to those who achieved dyslexia identification and the fact that there were students who might benefit from support but currently could not be offered it: “So… of course they will not be accessing our service… as an institution we have some work to do” **Lilian (phone).**

This study highlighted the frustration among students and support tutors at the lengthy process, cost and paperwork required to prove a student’s dyslexia at university and to apply for funding for support. There are clearly standardisation issues for dyslexia identification between school and university in the UK, as well as an urgent need to speed up applications for funding and needs assessment, particularly on one-year courses, as in Sylvia’s case. The barriers to accessing support hint at the potential for students to be put off: the current project only spoke to participants who accessed learning support so had completed the process, it would also be useful to know how many don’t qualify or complete the process, so are denied access to an explanation for struggle or a source of support.

Sub-section 6.1.2 Concluding comments

The current study’s discussions with students highlighted that they associate dyslexia with struggle and difficulty, which continued in higher education. The students said that dyslexia inhibited them from delivering work at a standard that would show evidence of their academic ability. The early literacy difficulties experienced at school had translated into varied issues with university study. For example, students with dyslexia struggled with (i) multi-tasking in lectures, involving simultaneous auditory and visual processing while writing notes; (ii) reading for both accuracy and comprehension; (iii) organising and articulating their thoughts in complex written assignments; and (iv) revising for exams. Moreover, the process to identify dyslexia at university was time-consuming, complex and often costly for the student, leading to frustrations for students and tutors. Further, the support was sometimes awarded late in a student’s university tenure so was of limited benefit.

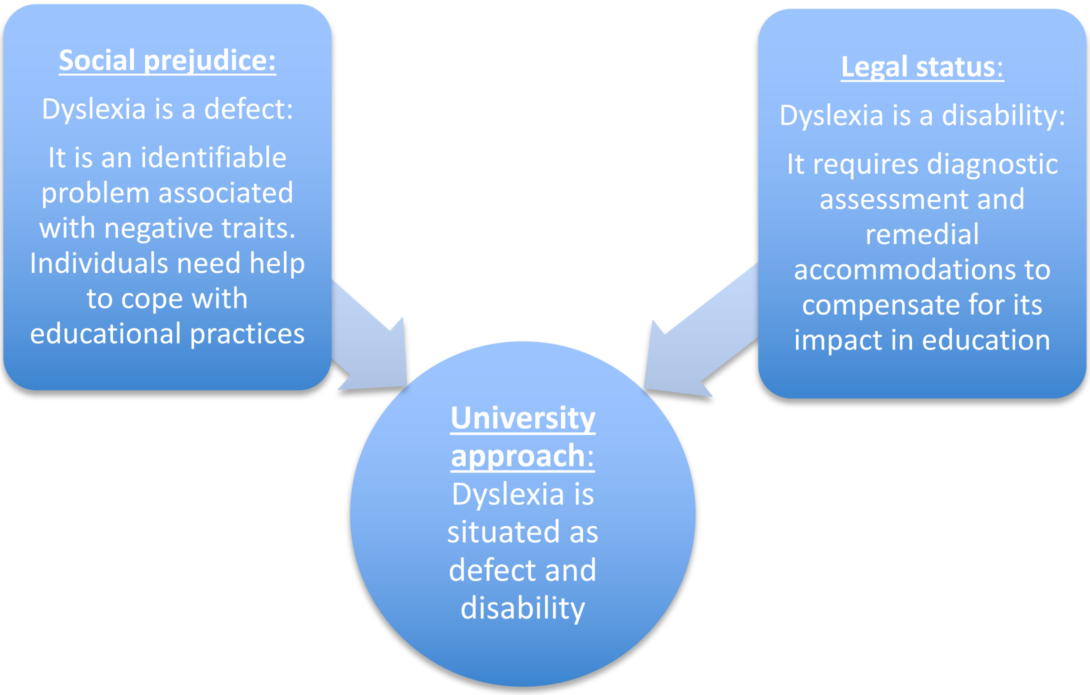
6.2 Universities' approach to dyslexia

This thesis aims to explore the approach towards dyslexia at UK universities, by probing how university policy conceptualised dyslexia, as well as the attitude and language used towards students with dyslexia by learning support and subject lecturers. In this section, I will assess participants' views of the university approach to dyslexia (6.2.1), examine the accommodations offered in the context of this approach (6.2.2) and explore subject lecturer responses (6.2.3) to dyslexia.

6.2.1 University policy focused on defect and disability

As discussed in the Literature Review 2.2.1.1, negative assumptions prevail in society about dyslexia, accompanied by a medicalised language portraying it as a condition inhibiting an individual's ability to read, write and learn in our education system (see Burden's 2008 review). Further, UK legal guidelines define adult dyslexia as a disability (Literature Review 2.2.2.3), requiring remedial accommodations. In the interviews with support tutors, it became clear that universities also approach dyslexia as a defect of the individual and a disability that merits remediation. This was evident through the language, policy and practices of dyslexia support (see Figure 18). In the discussions with tutors and students I explored the reasons behind this portrayal of dyslexia within the medical model of disability and the acceptance or rejection of this view by students and support tutors as individuals, which I will discuss below.

Figure 18: The university approach to dyslexia is built on social prejudice and legal obligation



6.2.1.1 Universities viewed dyslexia through a medical lens

Through the current project, I became aware of a predominantly medical approach to dyslexia in university policy, with a focus on diagnosis and remediation of an individual defect. This positions dyslexia as a problem for the individual, students with dyslexia are other than normal, so they need specialist help to reach a normative level in their studies.

The learning support tutors were conscious of this medical view of dyslexia. For example, Laurence acknowledged that his university approached dyslexia alongside other differences that were diagnosed and remediated by specific accommodations. "I think we are still in the medical model, so dyslexic students have entitlements based on their dyslexia, as with other disabled students" **Laurence (phone).** Further, Lilian defended her universities' medical approach saying that she did not feel other approaches helped with dyslexia, as they dismissed evidence of specific, describable differences between students and made it difficult to have discussions based on individual need: “it can homogenise the needs, or the perception of needs of students with dyslexia” **Lilian (phone).**

The support tutors I spoke to were largely in favour of defining dyslexia as a disability. Tutors were quick to indicate the advantages to the university of labelling dyslexia as a disability, for example Lucy pointed out that the disability label attracts attention, legal status and funding: “If we want to attract resources to that student, both DSA and institutional resources… you identify someone under a defined disability under the Equality Act” **Lucy (phone)**.

The association between dyslexia and disability was made explicit in the name of the support department in several cases. Most of the learning support tutors who responded to this project were associated with a disability support department or were part of broader disability assistance. One support department had even recently changed their name from Learning Support to Disability Support. At this university, the support tutor justified positioning dyslexia support under a disability label as they were asked to deal with a wide brief and disability was the broadest name to encompass all the issues they try to help with, from physical and mental impairments to accommodating maternity and breastfeeding at university. These differences in student profiles were viewed by learning support in terms of having to identify needs, arrange assessments, and prescribe and administer accommodations, so they merited the disability label. It would be interesting in another study to investigate the impact on pregnant students, or those with children, of having to be labelled disabled to ask for help.

One university recognised that students may not agree with the disability label, as the support tutor said they had conducted research on student preferences and found they were not comfortable with it. However, the support department had not eliminated the association, but added dyslexia in a new title ‘Disability and Dyslexia’ as they felt that the department preferred it, regardless of student preferences. The learning support department felt they had achieved separation between dyslexia and disability, yet it was clear the department dealt with students under both labels together. It is not known whether, following this name change, the students appreciated the separation in the new name or felt that this confirmed the association between dyslexia and disability.

Only one tutor pointed out that their dyslexia support department was unusual in being separate from disability support, highlighting that was not the case in most universities. She recognised that having to accept undesirable social connotations of disability was an additional step for students, on top of the negative assumptions relating to dyslexia. As Lilian suggested that, following dyslexia identification: “Then to immediately be told, well that’s a disability, is just too much to process for most students” **Lilian (phone).**

6.2.1.2 Students accepted dyslexia as defect but rejected the disability label

When student participants described dyslexia, they situated it as a flaw that inhibited the individual from achieving their academic potential, echoing the university approach to dyslexia as defect. For example, Sarah-Louisa recalled: “After the diagnosis, I felt I had some kind of defect which has held me back” **Sarah-Louisa (phone)**. As a result of seeing dyslexia as a defect, the students drew a distinction between themselves and other students who were not identified with dyslexia, but were ‘normal’: “I wish I could just read and write etc like a normal person” **Stewart (email).** Further, the students saw dyslexia as an abnormality requiring remediation, to participate in education effectively alongside other students. As Sylvia said: “It shows some dysfunction… that something doesn’t add up. Maybe some intervention needs to happen” **Sylvia (phone).** The tutors agreed that students saw dyslexia as a confirmation of abnormality, echoing the university’s medical approach to dyslexia. “Inevitably they approach this process by saying ‘I always knew there was something wrong with me’” **Lilian (phone).**

However, the student participants had deep reservations about using the term disabled in association with dyslexia. “I see myself as dyslexic not disabled. I think there is a big difference” **Stewart (email).** Stewart, who was aware of his dyslexia since school, associated it with a different way of learning rather than disability. “I’ve always called it learning difficulty… you don’t learn the same way as everyone else. I wouldn’t say you are impaired” **Stewart (email).** This distinction perhaps reflects the approach of UK primary and secondary schools to dyslexia as a learning difference or difficulty, rather than the university approach to dyslexia in adults as disability.

The other students that I spoke to, who learned of their dyslexia while at university, were also uncomfortable associating dyslexia with disability, but had to accept the link to access learning support. As Selina described: “The label "disabled" has been used although I do think it sounds harsh” **Selina (email).** Even though, as she explained, she felt unwilling to accept the negative social connotations of disability, Selina justified her acceptance of it as dyslexia could be disabling at university. “It is something that disables me to learn in the way that others do so although at first it sounds quite bad it is in fact correct” **Selina (email).**

The students were aware that their negative perceptions of the term disability linked to wider social prejudices, including their families’ attitudes towards disabilities. For example, Sylvia had felt unable to use the term disabled with her family. “For a long time, I couldn’t even say that [*disabled*] in front of Dad. Even now he would be furious for me to be disabled, or for me to associate myself with anything to do with that” **Sylvia (phone)**. She reasoned that while family members could accept the dyslexia label, her Dad specifically resisted the classification of dyslexia as disability. “He’s more dyslexic than I am. He doesn’t mind the word dyslexia, it’s because the abilities are part of it.” **Sylvia (phone)**. Sylvia therefore experienced resistance from within her family, they accepted dyslexia yet would not link it to disability.

When I asked further about her own feelings toward dyslexia as disability, Sylvia said that she associated disability with specific physical impairments, not with dyslexia. “Dyslexia as a word is fine. The disability part of it feels weird…In terms of growing up, disabled was used in terms of… physical disability, whether it means deaf, or blind or not being able to walk” **Sylvia (phone).** Sylvia saw physical disability as distinct from invisible non-physical differences such as dyslexia, she felt dyslexia was associated with positives as well as negatives, different abilities rather than disability and she described dyslexia as "not so much about something you are not able to do" **Sylvia (phone).**

On further reflection about the meanings of disability, Sylvia argued that dyslexia, which students associate with specific difficulties in education, should not be classified alongside other physical impairments that are disabling outside education. Sylvia drew a distinction between (i) learning in an environment where she does not feel disabled, and (ii) when she has to produce written work she did feel disabled by dyslexia. "I do feel [*disabled*] in regards to written work, but not in terms of my learning…I learn" **Sylvia (phone)**. She reasoned that the terms disabled or learning disability were not appropriate for dyslexia, as she did not feel an impact in all situations, even within education. Some of the tutors also took this view, that students only felt the impact of dyslexia felt in certain situations, so labelling a student as disabled, a label associated with permanent affliction, did not take the situational aspect of dyslexia into account. As Lucy said: "[*dyslexia*] isn't a disability that affects everything you do, it affects very specific aspects of your life and in other aspects there may be areas where there's no impact at all... You may have other strengths" **Lucy (phone).**

The tutor (and recent student) Sarah-Louisa admitted a contradiction in her approach to dyslexia as disability. She did not accept the disability label as a student, yet it was one that she applied professionally to the students that she supported. "I personally don't consider myself disabled… I feel it's a little bit fraudulent to consider myself that when I have dyslexia" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** When she was a student, she felt that her dyslexia did not measure up to her definition of disability, so claiming a disabled identity would feel false. She admitted that this dissociation from the disability label was rooted in a past view of disability, which may be now out-dated. "It's not quite the same way as traditionally I've been brought up seeing disability as… I know it is very much more broadly thought of [*now*]. It's not something I apply to myself" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** As a result of rejecting the disabled classification when she had been at university as a student Sarah-Louisa did not apply for funding for support under the disabled label. “I didn’t access other services such as applying for DSA as I prefer to think of myself as learning in a different way rather than disabled” **Sarah-Louisa (email).**

Therefore Sarah-Louisa admitted inconsistency in her approach. Her traditional personal view of disability, which she would not apply to her own dyslexia as a student, contrasted with her professional and more modern approach to dyslexia and disability as a support tutor at university. This highlights conflict arising from her roles as a past student identifying with dyslexia, as well as working as a support tutor at a university where she is required to advocate for the students she supports and also to promote the university’s approach to dyslexia (labelling it as a disability).

Sub-section 6.2.1 Concluding comments

At a fundamental level, students had accepted the universities’ classification of dyslexia as a defect, i.e. associated dyslexia with a set of negative traits, affecting their academic performance. However, this acceptance was in marked contrast to students’ rejection of the disability label. The participants dissociated dyslexia from other more obvious physical impairments and pointed out that dyslexia was invisible and situational, it only conferred negative traits in certain (educational) settings. Interestingly, this study emphasises a contrast between support tutors, who firmly asserted that the disability label was helpful to afford legal status and funding; and students and their families, who did not feel comfortable with an association with disability. This conflict was highlighted in Sarah-Louisa, who as a student with dyslexia rejected the label for herself yet applied it to the students she now supported as a tutor.

6.2.2 Learning support remediated difficulties through standard accommodations

As highlighted above, universities must offer accommodations for dyslexia (defined as a disability under the Equality Act 2010, Literature Review 2.2.2.3), which support tutors orchestrate through learning (or disability) support departments. The tutors oversee dyslexia identification, assess needs, administer remediation and advocate for students with dyslexia at the university.

The student participants and tutors noted learning support's primary role was to develop students' study techniques, to mitigate for the difficulties associated with dyslexia with university teaching and assessment. The support tutors used language that portrayed dyslexia as an obstacle to students' studies, it was a hindrance that they needed to overcome. "When I show students [*results of a dyslexia test*] and we talk about their profile, the spiky profile, they find that really interesting. If that's the barrier, the block, how do you get around that?" **Laurence (phone).** Support tutors therefore positioned learning support as the conduit for students to unlock their potential, by adapting the student to university teaching (not the other way round).

This project recruited students via learning support departments, so they had all registered with or accessed the department during their studies. However, the types of learning support they found useful varied between students, reflecting the individual nature of dyslexia. I will discuss the two main areas of support for dyslexia: additional time in exams and technology aids that act as a quick fix to mitigate for the difficulties associated with dyslexia in 6.2.2.1; and one-to-one time with support tutors developing study skills in 6.2.2.2.

6.2.2.1 Technology and extra time were quick fix adjustments

Students can use DSA funding for computer equipment or software to help with their studies. For example, Selina said she had used part of her DSA allowance to pay for a scanner and printer plus text-to-speech software. The universities encouraged students to use technology, as a hoped-for quick fix. The learning support tutors claimed that such equipment was useful to the students, even adapting the evidence from dyslexia tests to allow for this accommodation. “We had a case recently where the Ed Psych report didn’t say they were allowed to use a PC but on reviewing the evidence… it was clear that the particular student was struggling with spelling, structure and processing speed. So we just interpret that to say… a PC would have been awarded” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).**

However, new computer hardware and software programmes were not always awarded to students and not all students were positive that technology support would be helpful. As Stewart said: “I was not allowed new equipment despite my current laptop being so slow now. There is another student on my course with it [*dyslexia*] but she has used all the technology whereas I don't feel comfortable using it. She was introduced to it earlier so could adapt” **Stewart (email).**

Stewart also highlighted that students with dyslexia must invest time and effort to adapt to using unfamiliar technologies as part of their studies, which may be difficult at a late stage in their education. The learning support tutors conceded that students sometimes found dyslexia-specific software difficult to use, for example the text-to-speech program Dragon did not adapt well to regional pronunciations. “From my experience students don’t tend to make best use of technology. They typically will use planning software once they are taught how to plan successfully… Many students just completely discount Dragon as it takes time to train it. We are in the Midlands and it struggles with accents” **Lilian (phone).**

Instead of using specifically designed software packages to record and convert speech to text on a PC, Lucy noted that many students, not just those with dyslexia, now use recording features on their smart devices to capture lecture information, then file-share to distribute the information. “I think students are a lot more tech savvy… they all have recorders on their smartphones now. There’s lots more file sharing and things students know how to do” **Lucy (phone).** These adaptations and strategies were not taught as part of learning support, but tutors saw these as a form of coping strategy that students developed themselves.

Another of the awards that universities may make to those identified with dyslexia is a standard 25% additional time for exams or assignments. The learning support tutors acknowledged that additional time was a relatively easy accommodation for the university to make to fulfil their legal responsibilities towards a student with dyslexia. "I think the provision of extra time and examination arrangement is currently the way that institutions have a nod to fulfil their obligations from the Equality Act. It is relatively easy to do" **Lucy (phone).** The implied danger was that universities could argue they had satisfied their obligations regarding dyslexia support with just technology and additional time awarded, so need not offer further support. "So, for the institution… it's kind of means they don't have to start thinking too much about inclusive teaching and learning methods" **Lucy (phone).**

The support tutors conceded that for some students, additional time was the main accommodation that they sought, not all students pursued one-to-one time with a tutor. However, some students clearly found the additional time awarded just increased the opportunity to procrastinate without helping to complete work. As Sylvia said: "Giving me extensions was helpful, but it gave me more rope, it didn't take the noose, in terms of not having the support" **Sylvia (phone).**

Clearly universities' provisions of additional time for work and technology aids are not universally appreciated. For some students these form the core of their support, for others these are a poor substitute for the more personal support that they crave.

6.2.2.2 Time with tutors offered longer term support

All the student participants that I spoke to had been offered one-to-one time (usually an hour a week during term-time, up to 30 hours a year) with a learning support tutor. The learning support tutors (perhaps unsurprisingly as it concerned the bulk of their work) were quick to stress the importance of this role in supporting studies. “The comments and feedback that we get back, is that ‘I would happily give away all of my equipment and software as long as I can still have my support…’” **Lilian (phone).** As Lucy explained, “One-to-one support in study skills is really valuable and the research does seem to show that students that access one-to-one support allocations do get more 2:1s than those who don’t who also have the disability” **Lucy (phone).** However, this highlights a correlation between tutor-led support and grades rather than a proven causality in a particular direction: it may be higher grade students who choose tutor support.

The tutors justified weekly support tutorials by saying that, while the quick fixes of time and technology might fulfill universities’ legal obligations, weekly one-to-one sessions with a tutor enabled the students to digest gradually what dyslexia meant for them, to build up a relationship of trust and develop their coping strategies. The tutors also argued that some students with dyslexia found it hard to identify or articulate their thoughts during subject teaching sessions with lecturers. “The problem is that students… think ‘I don’t even know where to start with what I don’t understand’” **Lilian (phone).** So, part of the learning support tutor’s role was to tease this out during support sessions: “We do construct questions with the student, so that when they go to tutorials they have the core bank of questions to start the conversation… with the lecturers” **Lilian (phone).**

The support tutors’ emphasis on the value of one-to-one support to develop study skills contrasted with some students’ observations expressed in section 6.1.2.2. The participants felt that they had developed their own coping strategies through school and university and saw this as an ongoing personal journey. The students argued that they used highly individual strategies, Stewart had even rejected the standard techniques that his support tutor had tried to teach him, in favour of his own methods: “[They] talked about highlighters to help learn, I couldn’t stand it. They always wanted me to do spider diagrams, which I just couldn’t do” **Stewart (phone).**

This discrepancy between how tutors and students viewed tutor-led support may partly arise though a difference in what is understood by the strategies involved.

Students recognized they needed an array of individual techniques to help with personal organisation; concentration; group-discussion; reading; and memory, which they built up themselves over many years. They adjusted where they studied, how they approached lectures or wrote, and how they made and learnt notes for assessments. In contrast, the tutors referred to a standard array of techniques that students with dyslexia typically found helpful for their studies. They focused in one-to-one time on building generic reading and writing skills to assimilate information and deliver written work. As Lucy mentioned: “So many students come to university, whether undergraduate or even having done an undergraduate degree, and it’s really pretty abysmal, their academic reading and writing skills” **Lucy (phone).**

Some students, however, felt that one-to-one time with learning support was wasted on general study skills, they complained that support was not personalised and therefore not suited to their own profile. “That’s why the support systems fall down sometimes, because they try to support you and treat everyone with dyslexia in the same way, but it doesn’t work like that” **Selina (phone).** The tutors conceded that the general study skills (useful to any student) could be taught in a subject-appropriate way by academic departments to all students, not just those with dyslexia. “So what I would like to see is a more inclusive approach to teaching those skills to all students” **Lucy (phone).**

The tutors also worried that some students were caught in a dependency on learning support, which they attributed to the university’s medical approach to dyslexia and culture of universities treating students with dyslexia as needing third party support. “Because of the medical approach and one-to-one support, there is a bit of a dependency” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** Laurence agreed that dyslexia support within a medical model encouraged students’ dependency on that support. He implied that a student’s reliance on learning support at university was ultimately a negative if it held that student back from understanding their dyslexia as an individual and to become self-reliant beyond university. “There is still an issue with the DSA culture and medical model, that there is an entitlement-led approach in students. ‘I need to have this and this,’ and not fully exploring how they live with their learning difference, and how they master it” **Laurence (phone).**

Laurence summarised that, when it worked well, one-to-one time with a support tutor can help students with dyslexia to develop skills and enhance their self-awareness, aspects of university study that could not easily be taught at a group level. “There is something really interesting in the dyslexic profile being so different for each person and the impact of that… it doesn’t matter how teaching and learning is, our experts here say a dyslexic student will still need some 1-1… but it is hellishly expensive” **Laurence (phone).**

Sub-section 6.2.2 Concluding comments

The project found that learning support focused on adjusting the students’ study rather than the university’s teaching, involving significant time investment by the student to learn how to use new technology tools and attend one-to-one support. The discrepancy between the tutors’ and students’ views on the value of one-to-one support was interesting to note. While tutors understandably wish to justify their role and defend the time and money invested in working one-to-one with students, the students’ experience clearly varied in how personalised and effective this time was in supporting their studies.

6.2.3 Negative lecturer reactions to dyslexia increased barriers to study

Nearly all the students highlighted examples of unconstructive reactions to dyslexia by subject lecturers at university, in some cases there were clear examples of prejudice against dyslexia. Students either had experienced resistance to dyslexia accommodations in teaching or marking, or lecturers who were outspoken in their criticism of dyslexia in the lecture or class environment. These two areas are discussed in the sections below. While these did not represent most lecturers' responses to student participants, their negative nature and lecturers' social position meant that students attached greater weight to these unhelpful lecturer attitudes, outweighing any neutral or positive reactions from other sources.

6.2.3.1 Some lecturers resisted dyslexia accommodations

Despite developing personal coping strategies and accessing university learning support to adjust to study at university, the students in this project said that they still feared that lecturers would mark down their work due to spelling mistakes and grammatical inaccuracies, or for poorly articulated work. Students worried that their written work did not meet the university's expectations for standard of work, some fretted that they were not able to show they were clever enough to deserve their place at the university. As Selina noted: "I can come away feeling really terrible and really judged, and not… bright enough" **Selina (phone).**

The learning support tutors told me there was wide variation in how well lecturers understood dyslexia, its accommodations through learning support, or what would be helpful to different students with dyslexia. "Actually, there's still lots of misunderstanding [*among lecturers*] about the needs of dyslexic students and their entitlements. Things like note taking, notes in advance, delivery of materials, assessment, the way we assess… and the fact that dyslexic students are very different, the diversity within the body of dyslexic students" **Laurence (phone).**

A couple of tutors mentioned that they had tried to raise awareness and understanding of dyslexia among subject lecturers to counter negative attitudes and prejudice, but that this was on a voluntary attendance basis and met with mixed success. "In terms of knowledge about dyslexia… I do subject area awareness sessions for lecturers. It depends if they are open to that information… Lecturers are trying to understand the needs but they are not specialists and their time involved in developing that is quite limited" **Lilian (phone).** The support tutors concluded that a lack of training, poor time commitment and resistant mindsets meant that lecturer attitudes towards dyslexia often left much to be desired.

Sylvia told me of specific instances when her university course lecturers had focused on spelling and grammatical errors, "I couldn't believe that… the person who was marking my work in adult education would give me back my piece of work with that kind of commentary and correcting all my spelling mistakes" **Sylvia (phone).** She felt that marking these mistakes in red pen brought back painful memories of her difficulties being highlighted at school. As a result, students said they worried about submitting written work, fearing being marked down on mistakes they attributed to dyslexia. "I get so nervous when I have to upload a piece of work. I think God, what if they read this and think 'What have they written here?'" **Selina (phone).**

Two of the student participants mentioned a red-dot system at their university whereby they can choose to flag that the piece of work should not be marked for spelling and grammar. However, the students who used red dots on their work felt that lecturers often did not take this into account: "You know the little red dot system - they would disregard it… And I'd go to them… I'm not saying I want a higher grade or want special treatment; I just want you to take me into consideration" **Selina (phone).** These students felt that lecturers who ignored the red-dot system would never change their views, seeing it as part of a general resistance to accommodations for dyslexia. "And then they were, 'No, not really'. I can't change how people feel about it" **Selina (phone).**

The support tutors confirmed that flagging work by students with dyslexia was not popular among lecturers, so in some cases was being withdrawn. Lucy noted that her university was reviewing overall marking guidance as lecturers were confused by how to mark a script from a student with dyslexia. Interestingly, she advocated removing marking guidelines, justifying this by saying that most students also did not wish to use it: "We don't have sympathetic marking, that's a policy decision taken in general. Most students that we talk to understand that, they actually think it's a good thing. They don't necessarily want to have errors ignored, just because they are dyslexic" **Lucy (phone).**

The support tutor view above contrasts with the views of Selina and Sylvia, who said that marking with a focus on spelling and grammar affected their confidence in their written work. There may be more nuances than are explored here, such as the extent to which each marker focuses on the spelling errors compared with the structure and content of the work, which will vary by individual lecturer. Further, the tutor Lucy may be motivated to highlight student comments in favour of the department's policy change away from sympathetic marking, over other students who were resistant to it. It is worth noting that universities' move away from flagging up work by students with dyslexia does not consider the possibility that there may be students who do wish to lessen the focus on spelling and grammar. Institutions have taken a universal decision, ignoring any students' different views.

By removing systems that offer students with dyslexia the choice whether to flag up their work to lecturers, universities also (i) disconnect one of the ways to make lecturers aware of students' dyslexia; and (ii) eliminate encouragement for lecturers to make accommodations in their teaching and marking of work. Instead, the universities considered that accommodations were made for dyslexia in other ways, for example through additional time for assignments. "No, we don't flag scripts to markers anymore. It was deemed that if you already have the extra time and in particular use a PC... So spelling, punctuation and grammar is already taken care of" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** However, these are quick fix adjustments that are easy for the university to award and don't necessarily help the student longer term. The university is not accommodating students through its subject teaching, so the onus is on students to adjust to study at university, not the other way round.

All the student participants said that they sought help with capturing information that was presented in lectures. They mentioned that the breadth of topics and number of slides used in lectures was difficult to note, organise and remember from the lecture itself, so lecture video recording was helpful to revisit the topic online at a later stage. Selina stressed the value of online lecture content for all students: "Even if you were not a dyslexic student, there is so much to remember. It would be really helpful if you could just go back and re-watch them" **Selina (phone).** The learning support tutors agreed with the students that lecture video capture would make a difference to all student learning, but particularly for those with dyslexia.

While three of the four universities offered lecture recording during the study's data collection in 2016-2017, lecturer participation was optional and was the exception rather than the rule. The students in this study were frustrated that while the universities issued guidelines suggesting that recordings be made available to students, few lecturers followed these. "I did ask why some did and some didn't [*record lectures*]. She said she couldn't disclose the reasons… but it was just down to personal discretion really" **Selina (phone).**

Support tutors agreed that lecturers had resisted recording their lectures for students to watch later, telling me that the lecturers argued there were barriers ranging from academic copyright to legal liability. "Lecturers are resistant to [*lecture capture*] because there are questions of who can access it, how will it be used or stored, if students raise a complaint will it be evidence against the lecturer, there are lots of academic freedoms that are called into question by using it" **Lilian (phone).** However, Lilian also pointed out that it was a relatively simple way for the university to fulfill its obligations to make learning more available, though it may reduce the pressure to explore other pedagogical changes towards inclusivity. "It will be an easy way to say we are making things accessible… we don't have to make any other changes because we have done this" **Lilian (phone).**

Lucy said that at her university, a new policy meant that lecturers would be assumed to give consent to lecture recording and would have to opt out, rather than opt in, as previously. “There’s just been a revision of the academic manual… lecturers have to think about it [*lecture recording*] and have a reason not to use it” **Lucy (phone).** Further, the learning support department was encouraged to enforce the change. “We have been told to look out for, from students, if departments are opting out. That’s a little bit of pressure, encouraging lecturers to change the ways they approach things” **Lucy (phone).**

Therefore, while universities may issue dyslexia support guidelines for lecturers, for example on marking and lecture recording, lecturer adherence to the recommendations varies widely. Gradually these lecturer guidelines were being withdrawn in favour of quick fix adjustments for students with dyslexia, such as additional time in exams, computer software, and lecture recording. As a result, students with dyslexia felt frustrated at universities’ slow progress towards providing and enforcing promised lecturer accommodations.

6.2.3.2 Students resented lecturers’ outright dyslexia denial

Two students (Selina and Sylvia) mentioned specific instances when they had come across lecturers who had been openly negative regarding dyslexia. Dyslexia denial by lecturers undermines the legitimacy of dyslexia and confirms the stigma of the negative traits associated with it.

One of Selina’s lecturers had denied dyslexia existed altogether, which so affected Selina that it prompted her to file a complaint about the comment. Sylvia also said that she felt a lecturer was in denial about dyslexia: “I know some people do not think I am dyslexic. Some people think I’m making it up and trying to get extra time because I’m lazy. That does bother me” **Sylvia (phone).** In these instances, the shock of such disheartening comments was deepened by the fact that the student knew that their dyslexia had been declared to the lecturer. The lecturer was withdrawing the validity of dyslexia as an explanation of difficulty, negating the time, effort and money that students had invested in obtaining dyslexia identification.

Dyslexia denial also deepens the stigma attached to dyslexia in that environment, which may be picked up on by the student and their peers. When Selina complained to the university over the lecturer's dyslexia denial, she justified her protest by saying that the lecturer's respected position would influence other students present and enhance the stigma of dyslexia. "Lecturers have an element of power… people take what they say really seriously. So, if a really credited lecturer is standing there in front of a group of people, saying 'I don't think dyslexia's real'… That doesn't help the prejudice against it" **Selina (phone).** Following her complaint, the university offered Selina a verbal apology delivered by a third party, which Selina found insincere but felt she had to accept it as the end of the matter.

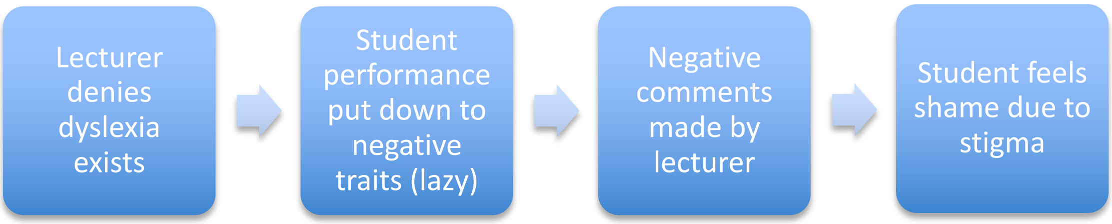
In Selina's and Sylvia's cases, dyslexia denial, whether overtly stated or implied, had led to derogatory comments either directly to the student or to the class in front of the student. These comments highlighted negative traits and increased the shame associated with dyslexia. For example, one lecturer "…called it 'reading retardation'" **Selina (email).** Meanwhile, Sylvia said that the lecturer in her case had made broad negative comments to the class that reinforced her own worries about her academic abilities. "What started to happen was really degrading comments being made in the classroom that were not specific to me but felt like they were specific to me" **Sylvia (phone).** In Sylvia's case the comments diminished her confidence and inhibited her learning in that environment. "So I absorbed that… comments like 'I'm really worried by this class, the level of work is atrocious, you'll be lucky if even half of you leave with a 3rd.' I mean seriously who says that in this day and age? What that does is press all my insecurity buttons" **Sylvia (phone).**

While Selina took her complaint to the head of the subject department, other students confided in the learning support tutor. The tutors acknowledged that part of their role was to advocate for students with dyslexia as well as support them. The learning support tutors said they were aware of negative attitudes towards students with dyslexia among some lecturers. “We do have a subject area where we have a couple of lecturers who are, what can I say, they are dyslexia deniers” **Lilian (phone).** Lilian pointed out that if lecturers denied dyslexia existed, it was difficult to convince the lecturer to participate in a programme of support for the student. “That becomes problematic to communicate with lecturers if they don’t think dyslexia exists. That’s where we have to try to make inroads for students.” **Lilian (phone)** Therefore dyslexia denial by lecturers was a barrier that both learning support tutors and students struggled with.

Students told me of these instances of dyslexia denial unprompted, underlining that, while this may refer to a minority of lecturers, it has a disproportionate effect on the student. The impact of these negative comments far outweighed any neutral or even positive attitudes towards dyslexia among lecturers. The learning support tutors agreed that dyslexia denial had a deep impact on students, it significantly lowered self-confidence, often outweighing the benefits of learning support. “It only takes one negative thing to override all the positive things we say to them, that’s what unfortunately tends to stick in people’s heads” **Lucy (phone).**

In summary, in the students’ view lecturers reluctantly offered only modest concessions for dyslexia in their teaching. While lecturers could be informed about students with dyslexia, with the student’s consent, the participants had experienced both general criticism and dyslexia denial. Workshops on dyslexia run by learning support for lecturers are optional and interest in these appeared low, they just added to the pressures on lecturers’ time. The support tutors agreed with the students’ view that dyslexia denial had a disproportionately damaging impact, undermining dyslexia’s legitimacy in an academic setting. It challenged dyslexia’s validity as an explanation for struggle and deepened the misunderstanding and stigma associated with dyslexia (see Figure 19). The tutors admitted there is much work to be done to improve the understanding of dyslexia among lecturers and to reduce prejudice against it.

Figure 19: Lecturer dyslexia denial undermines dyslexia’s legitimacy and increases stigma



Sub-section 6.2.3 Concluding comments

Students with dyslexia define it as situational and preferred not to view it as a defect or disability, yet they must accept these labels to access learning support at university. The universities believed they satisfied their legal obligations towards those with dyslexia, defining it as a disability and offering accommodations, but they preferred quick fix accommodations that were easy to put in place, such as exam time concessions and technology tools for students to use as aids. The support time with tutors was outside the subject teaching structure and location, demanding time from students to learn to adapt to university study, rather than the other way round. Some subject lecturers’ poor understanding or awareness of students with dyslexia led to prejudice and increased the stigma of dyslexia. This was particularly the case where lecturers were resistant to dyslexia accommodations or denied that it existed.

6.3 Student dyslexia, identity and stigma

First, I will briefly recap what I mean by the terms self-esteem (often used interchangeably with self-worth), self-concept and self-efficacy (discussed in the Literature Review 3.1). More than a century ago, James (1890) suggested self-esteem relates to our assessment of success or failure in those aspects of ourselves that we hold in high value. We build our global self-esteem from self-categorisation in many different settings, for example relating to academic performance, these evaluations form our self-concepts (discussed in Giddens, 1991). Tajfel (1978) suggested that our beliefs, values, behaviour and experiences shape our self-concept, enabling us to situate ourselves in a social context. Self-efficacy is our evaluation of our ability to complete activities to achieve results, it is therefore a measure of our control over and impact on our environment. Researchers (e.g. Flynn and Chow, 2017) link low self-efficacy to stress, depression and a feeling of helplessness, whereas high self-efficacy relates to resilience and persistence.

In this Findings section 6.3, I will explore student identity and self-esteem relating to dyslexia, identity and stigma. In the email and phone discussions I asked students about the influence of dyslexia and support on how they felt about themselves and with whom they were open about dyslexia at university. Alongside the students' comments on dyslexia, identity and disclosure, I include the support tutors' views on how students rationalised dyslexia as part of their identity and the impact of accepting learning support. One of the most arresting themes to arise was whether, when and with whom students acknowledged dyslexia as an aspect of their identity.

6.3.1 Students associated dyslexia with low self-esteem

This thesis highlights the experience of dyslexia as on-going struggle in higher education (Findings 6.1) and its classification by universities as defect and disability (Findings 6.2). The literature foreshadows possible implications of these findings on student identity and self-esteem. In the Literature Review (3.2.2) I referenced work investigating the effect of dyslexia's association with defect and negative traits on student identity, for example Stagg, Eaton and Sjoblom (2018) found lower self-efficacy in students with dyslexia, when compared with students without dyslexia. Further research (3.3.1), mainly among children, has looked at dyslexia as an identity associated with stigma in education, for example Lithari (2019) explored how children reacted in different ways to dyslexia's stigma at various stages of their school education.

The findings from the participant discussions, highlighted below, further our understanding of the effect of dyslexia identification at university on students' self-esteem (6.3.1.1); its societal association with specific negative traits and the impact of this on student self-concept in academic settings (6.3.1.2); and the further impact of accepting remediation through learning support (6.3.1.3).

6.3.1.1 Participants wrestled with dyslexia's meanings

When asked "did they identify themselves as a student or as a student with dyslexia" student participants said dyslexia was an integral part of their identity. Selina, for example, reasoned that seeing dyslexia as part of the self was helpful for her to explain the difference in her approach to studies: "it makes it easier for me to remember that when I don't understand something as other students do, that's okay and there is a reason for that" **Selina (email).** Stewart, who had been identified with dyslexia at 6 years old, seemed the most comfortable with dyslexia as an aspect of his identity, perhaps as he had sufficient time to become used to the idea of dyslexia and its meanings. He said: "Dyslexia definitely defines who I am" **Stewart (email).**

Each of the students I spoke to had been through a progression of different emotional and rational reactions to dyslexia in the months, and sometimes years, following its identification. This process of making sense of dyslexia coloured their view of themselves, their work and their academic potential, and therefore touched on many of the areas that I discussed with participants. Here I will set out how the student participants described their reactions to dyslexia, comparing this with support tutors' comments on how students responded to dyslexia identification.

Most of the students initially felt relief immediately following dyslexia identification. The students said that, at a basic level, dyslexia identification took them from unexplained struggle to a justification of their difficulties in education settings. The tutors agreed that no student rejected dyslexia identification outright, students accepted it as an explanation of difference. "I can't remember an incident with anyone being resistant to the fact that they are dyslexic" **Laurence (phone).**

For students whose dyslexia was not identified until university, frustration quickly followed relief when they realised that they had therefore struggled through school without dyslexia being identified. The students understood that late dyslexia identification had affected their performance (and often their participation) at school, as well as their perception of their academic abilities. As Selina described: "To an extent I was relieved when I found out, but I was also quite angry... Because I'd gone through my whole educational life knowing something wasn't quite right… Never really knew why. So, I grew up thinking I'm not as bright as everyone, and that's not been the case" **Selina (phone).** The support tutors agreed that initial acceptance of dyslexia identification often turned to anger, mainly directed towards the fact that it had not been recognised earlier. "People do get upset though, it's normal to be upset as they haven't been diagnosed previously, rather than with the diagnosis itself" **Laurence (phone)**.

However, students then started to think through the implications of dyslexia identification and consciously decided to take a more positive view of the discovery, despite initial anger and disappointment. Selina, for example, said: "So I tried to flip it on its head and thought, well, I've just started a new uni course, and now I know, so I can get the support I need" **Selina (phone).** The tutors supported this finding, they said that once a student had accepted dyslexia identification, they saw access to support as a positive, particularly if they had not had access to support previously. As Laurence put it: "Some mature students feel almost getting the diagnosis was the best thing to happen to them, they get lots of support that other people who are struggling academically but that aren't dyslexic don't get" **Laurence (phone).**

However, the students and tutors both highlighted that accepting a dyslexia identity meant an admission of continued struggle in education. Dyslexia identification was seen by students as confirmation of a defined difference in how the student's mind worked and support was seen as remediating for, not removing that difference. For example, Sarah-Louisa contrasted her mind-set pre- and post- discovering dyslexia. Prior to dyslexia identification, she pointed to her acceptance of lower grades than she had hoped for, despite her hard work. "I assumed I wasn't as bright as I thought, and others wanted me to be, and I made peace with that" **Sarah-Louisa (email).**

Following identification of dyslexia, Sarah-Louisa's academic self-confidence suffered further. "After the diagnosis, I felt I had some kind of defect which has held me back rather than sub-par intelligence" **Sarah-Louisa (email).** As a result, she changed her study plans away from graduate studies, she "switched suddenly to go into teaching as I felt I would not be capable of completing a PhD" **Sarah-Louisa (email).** She said that she felt she had discovered a personal flaw that was a barrier to her academic success. The tutors agreed that some students saw dyslexia identification as a confirmation of an insurmountable obstacle in education, which would limit their academic potential. "Their perceptions of dyslexia are tied in with societal expectations of dyslexia, so you can't read or spell, should definitely not be a teacher and you should probably not go to university" **Lilian (phone).**

It was only on later reflection that Sarah-Louisa said she realised that she had felt constrained by the traits that she (and society) associated with dyslexia: "In hindsight I allowed the diagnosis to limit me, I stopped believing hard work would get me where I wanted to go." **Sarah-Louisa (email).** Continuing the sense-making process, Sarah-Louisa eventually overcame the psychological barrier that she associated with dyslexia as a student. She recognised that connecting dyslexia with a set of traits had affected her self-esteem and she determined to explore her academic potential and continue in further education. "I'm fairly sure that's why I went to [*second university*] to prove to myself I am more than a set of traits” **Sarah-Louisa (email).**

The other support tutors also recognised that students eventually reconciled themselves to a long-term positive view of their academic potential. Lilian summarised that: “I would say a majority of our students, once they have the space and time for self-reflection [*following a dyslexia test*], ...then their expectations inevitably rise…” **Lilian (phone).** She noted that after taking time to digest the many implications of dyslexia identification, a few students used it as a catalyst spurring them to work towards higher grades that would reflect their intellectual abilities. “So, some students, who were getting a high 2:2 or even a 2:1, start thinking ‘I should definitely be getting a 1st’… It is a positive and pressure” **Lilian (phone).**

Sarah-Louisa said that some students became intensely self-reliant in their approach to work, following dyslexia identification. “Some students really take ownership of [*dyslexia*]… They…get the understanding of their learning style and they work with it” **Sarah-Louisa (phone)**. Laurence agreed that a positive mind-set benefitted students with dyslexia, he also referred to students taking ownership of their personal profile and style of learning, focusing on strengths, rather than the stigma and negative traits. “I was struck by one guy, owning your dyslexia comes from him… when they embrace it saying: ‘This is the way that I learn and I work, these are my particular strengths’ I think they find it quite empowering” **Laurence (phone).**

In an interesting aside, Sarah-Louisa concluded that her personal journey to dyslexia identification and coming to terms with what this meant for her, had impacted positively on her response as a support tutor to students with dyslexia. She felt she was better able to empathise with the students she saw, and recognised the challenging, complex and sometimes traumatic aspects of discovering dyslexia while at university. This informed her approach to student support when identifying dyslexia. “One of the things that has come out of this [*personal discovery of dyslexia*] is professionally, when issuing a diagnostic report, we invite the student in to explain how this will affect their learning, suggest strategies, and offer counselling" **Sarah-Louisa (phone).**

Therefore, the student responses to dyslexia were complex, developed over time, and changed between positive and negative perspectives, as they made sense of dyslexia and what it meant for their studies. Students' initial emotive reactions of relief and anger gave way to more reasoned views. Some were negative, restricted by societal prejudices towards traits associated with dyslexia but, in a few instances, these were positive, for example a spur to work harder to achieve the student's ambitions regardless of the perceived academic barriers. The tutors' views supported and extended students' accounts of reactions to dyslexia identification. Support tutors tried to see dyslexia in a positive light, saying that its identification enabled students to access support at university. Yet the tutors acknowledged that many students still struggled to come to terms with dyslexia.

6.3.1.2 Dyslexia's negative associations affected students' academic self-concept

Late dyslexia identification (highlighted in Findings 6.1.1) impacts students in multiple ways, not only delaying access to support, but also denying the student an explanation for struggle in the classroom and feeding doubts about academic ability and intelligence. The learning support tutors told me that when dyslexia was unrecognised at school, it impacted how students viewed their abilities and affected their future life choices.

It was clear from the interviews that student's academic self-concept was affected by dyslexia. I found a clear association between dyslexia, low academic achievement and low self-esteem. For example, Sarah Louisa only acknowledged her academic achievements in retrospect: "I rarely performed as well as I would have liked as a student and therefore assumed I wasn't a good student yet looking back everyone else wanted my notes. I suppose I'm not a bad student as I have 5 postgraduate qualifications" **Sarah-Louisa (email).** She found academic success hard to achieve, even when she knew she was bright and invested hard work. Her frustration at the low return on her efforts led to a low academic self-concept: “I stopped believing hard work would get me where I wanted to go” **Sarah-Louisa (email).** This had impacted not only her ambitions and career selection, but also left psychological issues that she was still dealing with. “I am currently going to therapy to deal with my low self-value and the subsequent life choices I've made as a result” **Sarah-Louisa (email).**

Sylvia similarly felt her confidence slide at university when she spent time and effort producing written work, for it to be returned with negative comments and a mark below what was needed for the course. “The worst part was taking the time in investing in myself, to be knocked back… reminding me you still can’t do it” **Sylvia (phone)**. This upset her, feeding worries that her study efforts were not sufficient and increasing her reluctance to submit work for marking in the future. “I felt really anxious about submitting anything again, and I didn’t. For me, it really pressed all those emotional buttons... Distressing” **Sylvia (phone).** Sylvia’s frustrations with written work led to a low self-concept in academic settings and impacted her overall self-esteem. It is worth noting that Sylvia had not completed her course and attributed this to a mix of factors, centred on a dependency on support and the delays and difficulty in accessing it.

Stewart also said that dyslexia, coupled with his left-handedness, had impacted his self-esteem, as he had felt held back by the differences. “Being it [*dyslexic*] and left handed certainly makes you feel like the black sheep… I used to have a very low self esteem from it [*dyslexia*] and I still do sometimes” **Stewart (email).** Further, Stewart pointed out that even his peers at university used the dyslexia label as a negative and derogatory stereotype. “What does annoy me is when people make a spelling mistake and then just say 'oh it's because I'm dyslexic' despite not even being it. Paints a bad picture” **Stewart (email).** Stewart’s annoyance was directed at those who falsely claimed dyslexia to excuse a stereotypical trait associated with it. He felt it reinforced the negative associations without understanding the complexity behind the label. This is an example of Stewart contesting dyslexia stereotyped as traits, yet also disputing its boundaries, as he excludes students that just make occasional spelling mistakes, over those who identify with a wider concept of dyslexia.

Stewart put his later academic success down to a strong work ethic and continued persistence with his studies, demonstrating high self-efficacy. "Dyslexia certainly affects my studies but I am at an age where I know I need to put the work in… I worked extra hard because I didn't want to look stupid so I got serious about my studies and aspirations" **Stewart (email).** So, while Stewart associated his dyslexia with the potential to look stupid in an educational context (recalling that he had been kept down an academic year in primary school) he felt he had moved beyond the limiting negative associations of dyslexia, investing in hard work to achieve his ambitions. It was evident to me that Stewart's long awareness of dyslexia and resilient attitude to difficulties overcame any negative feelings of helplessness or low self-efficacy, he instead took control of his studies through hard work.

6.3.1.3 Accepting learning support marked students out as less able

This study recruited students via learning support departments, therefore they all had applied for and received learning support during their time at university, whether funding for technology, additional time in exams, or one-to-one time with a tutor. To probe the impact of accessing learning support, I asked the students how they felt as someone who accessed support at university. I also counterbalanced the student participants' comments with support tutor views on students' responses to learning support. I found the students had complex feelings associated with learning support, dominated by the view that accessing support labelled them as less able. This extends earlier work on the stigma of accepting support, discussed in 3.3.4.

For example, Sylvia focused on the social stigma of support, she mentioned feeling ashamed of dyslexia as she had to ask for support, where her peers without dyslexia did not. Further, she felt humiliation at the lack of privacy when accessing support, she had to go to the support centre which, as a separate physical space, which flagged to her peers that she was someone in need of help and would lead to assumptions made by others about why. “Even going to the space where you get extra support... It’s like going to a sexual health clinic. Now they know I’m dyslexic” **Sylvia (phone).**

Sylvia expanded on the reasons behind her aversion to being identified as someone who needed support, she worried that it affected the academic expectations of her subject lecturers as well as those of other students, which potentially impacted on their treatment of her and expectations of her studies. “We hear of low expectations of teachers and how this affects the learning experience of the child... We think of it in terms of kids in school. But, what about in adult learning environment too… Singling out one who is smart or one who is not, affects how they are treated by the teacher and their future” **Sylvia (phone).** Therefore, Sylvia resented the otherness that support conferred, in her mind it confirmed in her peers’ and lecturers’ eyes that her academic potential was less than other students’.

Selina also associated learning support with embarrassment in front of others, anticipating assumptions of lower ability: “As a student who received additional support, at first I felt embarrassed and less capable” **Selina (email).** Yet she eventually put this association to one side, deciding that others wouldn’t dwell as much as she did on this aspect of her identity. “After a while I learned to accept it's just who I am and I actually cared more about it than anyone else.” **Selina (email).**

Only Sophia thought of support in a positive light as she didn’t feel alone on her courses in accessing learning support: “It is great having extra support as there is many of us who are dyslexic in my course I don't feel singled out and it is more recognised at uni” **Sophia (email).** Therefore, for Sophia the fact that she knew she was one of several with dyslexia and not the only one, mitigated for the stigma of accepting dyslexia and accessing support. Sophia had connected with a group who identified with dyslexia. While previously as individuals they were outsiders compared with other students without dyslexia, they now formed their own group of insiders, bonded through dyslexia and support. However, the fact she mentioned that she could have felt ‘singled out’ implies that she was aware of the potential to feel isolated and stigmatised.

The support tutors agreed that students keenly felt the stigma of accepting help, but argued that, from the tutors’ perspective, it was comparatively less than the stigma associated with other physical or mental impairments that the university also supported: “[dyslexia] is not as stigmatised as anxiety or mental health” **Laurence (phone).** It was interesting that support tutors distinguished between dyslexia and other visible and invisible impairments that fall under the disability banner for support at university. For the students with dyslexia, accepting learning support under a disability banner conferred stigma, which impacted how they felt about themselves, however that measured up against other disabilities.

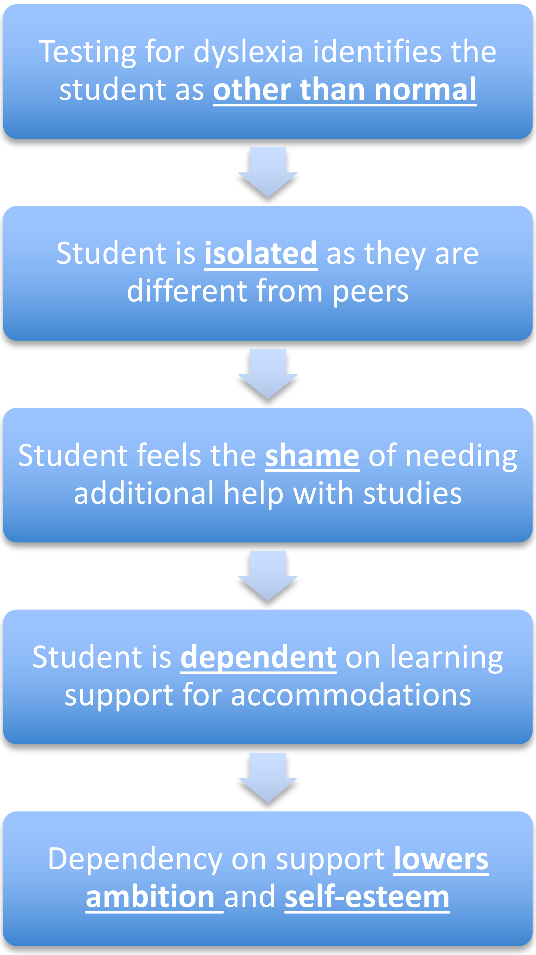
Sarah-Louisa revealed that she had been uncomfortable with the stigma of learning support as a student with dyslexia, she said: “it wasn’t an identifier I found positive” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** She explained how accessing learning support undermined her confidence in her ability to complete studies at a sufficient level to progress (her self-efficacy). This admission, that when she was a student learning support carried stigma, contrasts with Sarah-Louisa’s later professional position as a tutor within a learning support department. She admitted the paradox between her stances as student and tutor: “Perhaps I’m of the general group who sees needing support as a weakness, which is ironic given my line of work” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).** She implied that society generally viewed dyslexia as a flaw and that learning support carried the stigma of disability and otherness. Moreover, Sarah-Louisa’s professional role required students to accept the stigmatised identity aspects that she had rejected as a student. Sarah-Louisa pointed out the dissonance between seeing her own dyslexia as a personal flaw and her professional approach to try to focus on the positive aspects of students’ dyslexia. “I don’t think about my students in this way at all, it’s all about enabling and making the best of your skills and playing to your strengths. A little dichotomy there” **Sarah-Louisa (phone).**

The tutors' voices therefore distinguished learning support for dyslexia from the stigma of disability, yet the nuances in this distinction were lost on students who had to accept the disability label to ask for help. Moreover, students had to access support in physically distinct spaces, set aside for learning support. They keenly felt the stigma of applying for and accepting support at university.

Sub-section 6.3.1 Concluding comments

Through the project discussions, I found that students believed that despite their hard work and abilities, they would not achieve the academic success that would have been possible were they not affected by dyslexia. Further, students saw accepting help through learning support as a negative, particularly as it lowered their sense of personal academic achievement. Also, learning support came with stigma attached to accepting help outside of subject teaching and to the disability label. Moreover, they were isolated from other students in accessing support from a department segregated from subject-teaching. These factors contributed in some students to feelings of dependency on support and led to low self-efficacy in academic settings, summarised in Figure 20 below.

Figure 20: Summary of the impact of universities' medical approach to dyslexia on student identity



6.3.2 Students avoided stigma by concealing dyslexia and learning support

The students in the current study recognised that dyslexia carried stigma, often based on misconstructions or an over-simplified view of it. Selina recounted: "People think it's very cut and dried: You can't read, or letters appear backwards, or we can't read unless it's on coloured paper" **Selina (phone).** The support tutors told me that in an ideal world there would be no need to disclose dyslexia to a university for support, as inclusive teaching methods would remove the barriers to study. Currently, students can choose whether to reveal dyslexia to their peers or lecturers. The question I asked student participants was when, to whom, and why do they choose to disclose or hide dyslexia as an aspect of their identity.

6.3.2.1 Participants hid dyslexia and support from student peers

Most of the students that I spoke to said they chose not to disclose dyslexia to other students at the university, as they anticipated prejudice or misunderstanding. Their reluctance was rooted in a complex web of fears, from a reluctance to admit the need for support, to worry about looking foolish in front of others in class, to anxiety about being judged as undeserving of support, or to losing the respect of their peers. The students went to some lengths not to disclose dyslexia, for example Selina chose not to use her usual car-share on days when she went to learning support, instead she drove herself so she did not have to divulge where she was going. "I didn't say why so I just said I didn't need the lift" **Selina (email).** Selina's fear was rooted in not wanting to admit to others that she accessed support and having to explain why.

Sylvia's fear was of judgment. She reasoned that her peers, if they were aware of her support for dyslexia, would judge her as undeserving of that support given that she came across as an able student in lessons. "The bit I find hardest is the level to which people can weigh up and understand how I come across doesn't match the support I need, so they don't believe me" **Sylvia (phone)**. Sylvia's non-disclosure was rooted in not wanting to admit that she accessed support, which she felt would contradict her image as academically strong in class: "There is a part… of me that tries to act more in control of things than I am, I don't want to disappoint them and I don't have time to explain…So I'd walk away from conversations, as I didn't want anyone to know." **Sylvia (phone)** Sylvia kept dyslexia and learning support hidden as she felt it would alter her peers view of her academic abilities and she did not want to confront misconceptions or prejudice about dyslexia.

As well as avoiding telling other students about dyslexia directly, the students sidestepped situations that might betray their dyslexia in front of their peers. Stewart's low confidence in his ability to read out loud, led him to avoid reading classes when completing his first undergraduate degree. "I would say 'I'm not well, I'm not going.' I went to all the lectures though as you don't have to read aloud there” **Stewart (email).** His fear was founded on feeling less fluent in literacy in front of his peers, something he had experienced in his primary school.

Only when studying for his graduate degree did Stewart feel comfortable enough to disclose dyslexia among his peers “It doesn’t really bother me as much as before. As I get to know people, then it’s fine that they know” **Stewart (email).** He reasoned that he knew he was not the only one in his year with dyslexia and was encouraged that another student with dyslexia was more open and positive about it. Support tutors agreed that it helped when students knew they were not alone with dyslexia on a course. This again highlights that when students feel included in a wider group of students with dyslexia, it counters the stigma and isolation associated with being a solitary student with dyslexia.

Selina was the only student who had taken a few close friends into her confidence and accepted their help with notes in lectures. She attributed this to realising that these peers had a better understanding of dyslexia from a psychology course that covered the topic, she therefore felt that they would be less likely be prejudiced towards dyslexia and feel she was undeserving of support. “When it comes to the students, they are understanding me now. I don’t feel judged. Because I feel, ‘you are learning what this means for me’” **Selina (phone).** Selina’s relaxed approach to acknowledging dyslexia to her well-informed peers contrasts starkly with Sylvia’s reticence and worry about being judged as unworthy of her additional support.

Students were therefore cautious about revealing dyslexia among peers and the learning support tutors empathised with their reticence. The tutors acknowledged that students only declared dyslexia when necessary to access support. “I would say the vast majority would hide it…they would declare it to us [*learning support*] as they know they will get entitlements for it” **Laurence (phone).** I was interested to learn if this restraint was echoed in students’ interactions with their lecturers.

6.3.2.2 Students won’t tell lecturers but want them to be aware of dyslexia

The student participants had several subject lecturers on their courses, both in formal lectures, but also in smaller class and seminar settings. These lecturers were responsible for the subject teaching and set and marked work by the students, either in preparation for exams or as coursework for the degree. Most of the students that I spoke to had not mentioned dyslexia to these subject lecturers at all. Stewart voiced the students’ fear underlying this decision, saying that he associated telling lecturers with asking for preferential marking or other concessions, which he was not comfortable doing. “I don't think my teachers or lecturers are aware. I haven't told them… I don’t tell people to get special treatment” **Stewart (email).**

The learning support tutors agreed that students did not disclose dyslexia openly to lecturers. They noted that while students were reluctant to tell lecturers directly, hiding dyslexia from lecturers conflicted with students’ desire for dyslexia to be considered when lecturers were teaching or marking their work. As Lilian explained: “I find this fascinating as they [*students*] found it helpful to have them [*lecturers*] perceive challenges during the learning” **Lilian (phone)**. The support tutors acknowledged that students would struggle to articulate to lecturers what they found difficult or to ask for help with their work. Lilian said that students: “do not know how to break down the challenges with the lecturers… they would not initiate the conversations” **Lilian (phone)**.

The support tutors mentioned that, at some universities, the lecturers could be made aware of dyslexia indirectly with the student’s consent, on a notification system from learning support. In the support tutors’ view, notification of a student’s dyslexia had the potential to be a “passport to discussions with departments” **Lucy (phone).** However, the support tutors acknowledged that, where the notification system was offered, the students used it to avoid discussing dyslexia with lecturers. Students assumed instead that the lecturers would be sufficiently informed about dyslexia to adapt their teaching and marking without having to discuss it with the student, sometimes leading to disappointment (for example with Sylvia) when lecturers were not understanding and focused on the very things she found difficult. This led to further barriers to discussions between students and lecturers on dyslexia and its accommodation at university.

These findings question the legitimacy of universities promoting an impersonal, uniform classification of dyslexia, identified to lecturers as a list of students alongside a one-word descriptor of an impairment. At university, students with dyslexia have individual needs assessments, yet the nuances of how best to accommodate a student may be lost in an indirect, impersonal automated notification system. There is apparently very little discussion between lecturers and students about what dyslexia means for that individual and any possible impacts on their work. This limits opportunities for lecturer support and in-subject accommodation, driving students to segregated support as their sole source of help.

6.3.2.3 Students disengaged from one-to-one support in favour of self-reliance

The standard award for one-to-one support at university consists of up to 30 one-hour sessions per year (highlighted in 6.2.2). While the tutors felt that some one-to-one support benefitted students with dyslexia, the tutor and student participants felt the full allocation wasn't necessary for all students, only for a minority. Universities left it up to the student to decide if their support was beneficial and whether to continue through their course. Tutors worried that those who continued with support were developing a dependency on it. However, a few students decided that they no longer needed this level of tutor support and stepped away from it. I was interested in the reasons why these students dissociated from support.

Three student participants in the current study disengaged from support during their studies: Sarah-Louisa, Stewart and Selina. Sarah-Louisa preferred to develop her own coping strategies, over the non-specific skills she covered in one-to-one time with a support tutor, she said that one-to-one support was often too generic to be useful at an individual level: "Overall I wasn't keen on having support I found it patronising and not especially tailored to my needs" **Sarah-Louisa** (email).

Stewart, who had accepted learning support throughout his school education, found university support repeated what he had already been taught, moreover he found it difficult to fit support tutorials into his schedule and these were not available at a geographically convenient location. "As I'm studying part time and working as well full time… The practicalities. It really got in the way" **Stewart (email).** He therefore declined to continue with one-to-one support after his first degree. When I asked Stewart if he would have liked to continue with learning support if it were more practical, he concluded that he did not miss time with a university learning support tutor, he had developed his own coping strategies and so did not regret his decision to dissociate from support.

Selina also disengaged from learning support in her final undergraduate year as she felt she no longer benefitted from time with the tutor. "I no longer go to them in my final year as I felt it wasn't making any difference to my coping skills or learning" **Selina (email).** Selina went into detail, reasoning that the support wasn't subject-specific enough to be helpful later in the degree course, and the tutor's manner was sometimes patronizing. Further, the funding for support came out of the DSA allowance, which could be spent on other forms of support, such as technology (e.g. a laptop and printer).

When I asked Selina further about the dissociation from learning support, she made it clear that her decision was part of a choice not to let the fact she took learning support influence her view of herself, saying that it had adversely affected her self-confidence. Selina recognised that after declining further one-to-one support, she had felt release, she stopped expecting herself to make mistakes that would need correcting with a support tutor before the work was suitable to submit for marking. Instead, her work was entirely her own, increasing her self-efficacy. "When I stepped back from it, I almost felt relieved, because I didn't have to run my work by anyone… I felt this is good enough. I didn't have to feel I was doing something wrong" **Selina (email).** Selina concluded that accepting help from learning support had a negative impact on her confidence. "I think actually she [*learning support tutor*] may have even hindered me. And that's gone now" **Selina (email).** By dissociating from learning support, she no longer put herself in the physical and emotional environment of support tutorials that emphasized her dyslexia. Instead, she distanced herself from the source of the stigma, which had the result of raising her self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Further, after declining learning support tutorials, Selina noticed that her grades did not suffer, and she felt proud that this was now down to her efforts alone. “So it’s been ‘Yes I can do this, I’m just as capable as everybody else in this room.’ It might take me longer to do something or come out in a different way in the way I explain it to you. But it’s going to get done, and it’s going to be a good piece of work” **Selina (email).** The dissociation from one-to-one support therefore impacted positively on her self-concept through her self-efficacy: her work was now entirely her own.

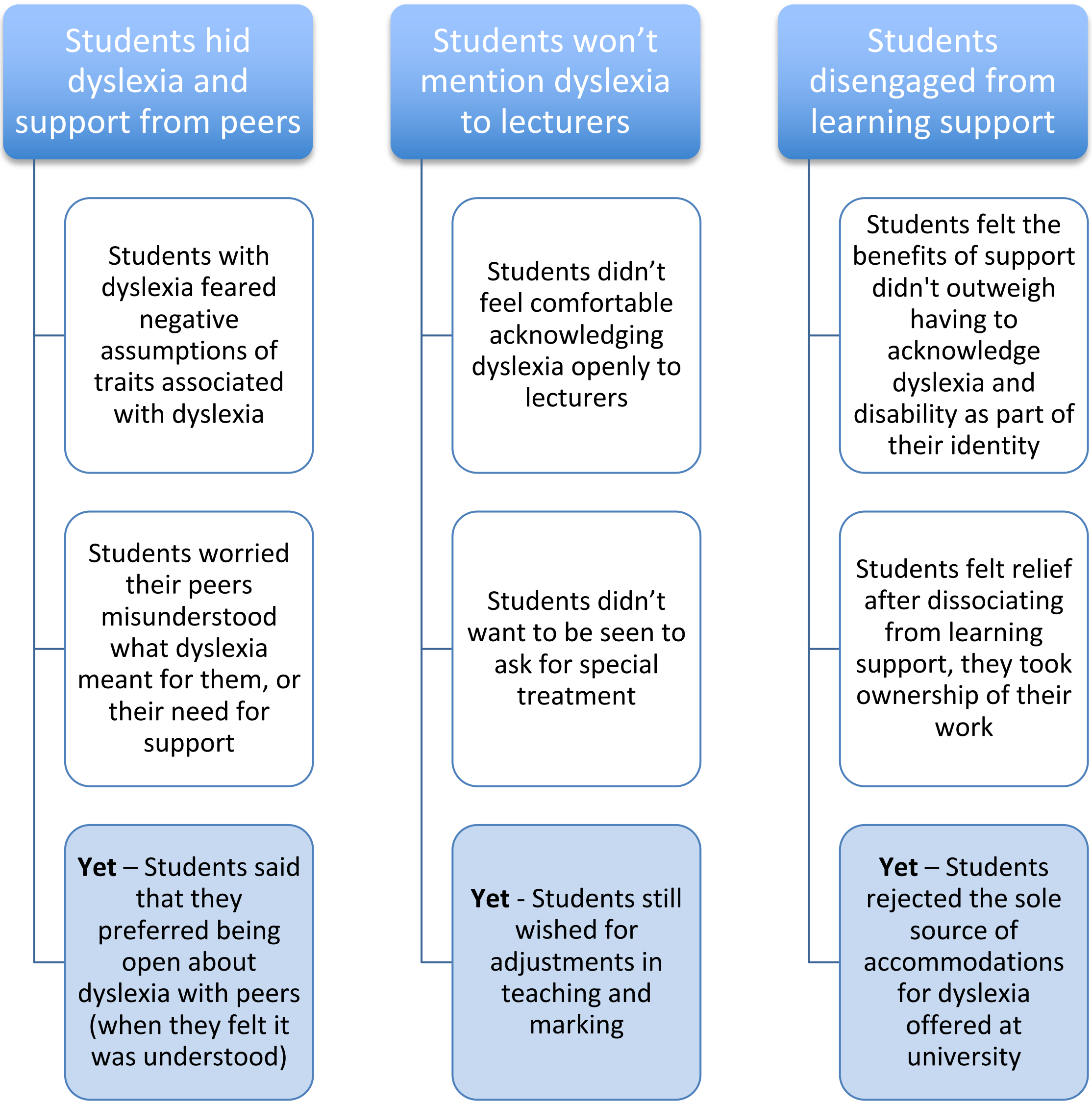
Sub-section 6.3.2 Concluding comments

In the Literature Review (3.4) I referred to research exploring the factors that influence disclosure decisions and concealment of a stigmatized identity. This has seldom been addressed among students with dyslexia, so the thesis findings add to our understanding in this area. In the project, I discovered that students mostly hid dyslexia from their peers, fearing prejudice. They avoided situations where dyslexia could become obvious, jeopardising their studies by avoiding classes, or making life more inconvenient by refusing a lift share. Only one student was open about dyslexia when she was confident her peers understood it well.

Students wanted dyslexia to be considered by lecturers when marking or teaching, yet they resisted raising it directly, instead relying on indirect notifications. Student participants therefore missed opportunities to discuss difficulties in a subject-context, they also don’t help lecturers to better understand dyslexia.

Further, students realised that the stigma of accepting learning support lowered their self-efficacy, leading some to disengage from support tutorials to achieve academic results on their own. These complex conflicts between acknowledging dyslexia to peers, lecturers or learning support to access help, and students' preferences to conceal it in the face of misunderstanding and stigma, are summarised in Figure 21.

Figure 21: Student dyslexia concealment decisions inhibited opportunities for informal peer help, lecturer understanding and ongoing learning support



Students hid dyslexia and support from peers

- Students with dyslexia feared negative assumptions of traits associated with dyslexia
- Students worried their peers misunderstood what dyslexia meant for them, or their need for support
- **Yet** – Students said that they preferred being open about dyslexia with peers (when they felt it was understood)

Students won't mention dyslexia to lecturers

- Students didn't feel comfortable acknowledging dyslexia openly to lecturers
- Students didn't want to be seen to ask for special treatment
- **Yet** - Students still wished for adjustments in teaching and marking

Students disengaged from learning support

- Students felt the benefits of support didn't outweigh having to acknowledge dyslexia and disability as part of their identity
- Students felt relief after dissociating from learning support, they took ownership of their work
- **Yet** – Students rejected the sole source of accommodations for dyslexia offered at university

Chapter 6 Findings Concluding Comments

This chapter presented the findings relating to the three areas of the research question, developing themes that I will relate to the literature in the chapter 7.

(i) **Findings 6.1:** Students experienced dyslexia as struggle through school and into university study, yet they saw dyslexia as a heterogeneous phenomenon, more than a set of negative traits. Dyslexia, frequently unrecognised throughout their school education, was only flagged to institutions when it was a major barrier to study and in some cases had led to behaviour difficulties and truancy earlier in their studies. Dyslexia therefore affected students' participation in education and was positioned as an obstacle which students largely developed their own coping strategies to deal with.

(ii) **Findings 6.2:** Universities' approach to dyslexia, viewed through its policies and practices, classifies dyslexia as defect and disability, which attaches stigma. Accessing learning support and lecturers' unsympathetic reactions to dyslexia added further to students' shame. Students rejected the disability label, arguing that dyslexia is invisible and situational. Further, students who accessed one-to-one support criticised it as not personalised, yet those denied it felt dependent on help to progress with their studies.

(iii) **Findings 6.3:** Students resented dyslexia's association with defect, disability and needing support. They also feared misunderstanding and prejudice among lecturers and peers who students felt saw only dyslexia's negative traits. Students linked dyslexia's stigma to low academic self-concept through poor self-efficacy. They attempted to lessen dyslexia's stigma by hiding it from lecturers and peers and they only acknowledged it to gain access to accommodations through learning support departments. Some later disengaged from learning support to reclaim self-reliance in their studies.

7. DISCUSSION

In the Discussion chapter I will interpret the study's findings in the light of previous literature and point to where this work supports, extends, or challenges existing findings and theory. To frame the discussion, I will again use the research question's three sub-questions as a basis for the sub-sections, echoing the structure of the Literature Review and Findings chapters. As a starting point, the themes arising from the Findings chapter are mapped onto the Discussion sections in Figure 22 below.

Figure 22: Mapping the Research Questions and Findings themes onto the Discussion sections

Research questions	**What is the student experience of dyslexia?**	**How do universities approach dyslexia?**	**What is the impact of this approach on student identity?**
Findings chapter sections	6.1 The student experience of dyslexia	6.2 Universities' approach to dyslexia	6.3 Student dyslexia, identity and stigma
Themes emerging from Findings chapter	• Students associate dyslexia with obstacles to study • Students feel they are more than a set of stereotypical traits • Unrecognised dyslexia constrains education from school through to university	• Universities' approach classifies dyslexia as a defect and disability, leading to stigma • Learning support controls access to standardized remediation • Negative lecturer reactions and segregated support increase study barriers	• Students hide their dyslexia and the fact they access learning support from lecturers and peers • Dyslexia's stigma leads to low academic self-concept, affecting self-esteem at university • Some students rejected support in favour of building self-reliance
Discussion chapter sections	7.1 Students experience dyslexia as a barrier	7.2 Universities' dyslexia classification as categorisation of social difference	7.3 Universities' dyslexia approach undermines student self-esteem

As discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter 4), research that takes a critical approach can highlight how individuals experience disadvantage, argue for inclusion based on learning from these experiences and amplify the voice of those who are disadvantaged, to transform policy and practices (Gibson, 2012). To date, critical perspectives have seldom been applied in dyslexia literature, it is more typically applied to disability, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. The current project applied a critical epistemological approach to the research and analysis (discussed in Methodology, 5.1), to highlight disadvantage, challenge misconceptions and argue for change where there is the potential for prejudice or discrimination.

Disability researchers such as Gallagher, Connor and Ferri (2014) (Literature Review 4.2) have proposed that cross-disciplinary research is important to bring new ideas and methods for study. In this vein, throughout the Discussion I will draw on theory from the different research areas highlighted in Literature Review chapter 4 to shed light on questions of classification, segregation, inclusion, power imbalances, stigma and identity management raised in this project. This foray into related research is not intended to be exhaustive, but to indicate the potential for dyslexia research to develop through understanding other areas.

In each of the sub-sections below (7.1-3) I will explore the themes arising from the findings in responding to the 3 research sub-questions, identify the ideological issues at stake, then apply thinking from research in other areas to suggest ways forward. At the end of each section, I will add concluding comments and a summary table of themes and issues arising in the sub-section, also highlighting possible pathways to resolve the issues identified.

7.1 Students experience dyslexia as a barrier

Since much dyslexia research is written by or for university-based support tutors and policy makers, projects among university students often take a practical approach to dyslexia, aiming to describe the specific difficulties experienced, develop and evaluate study skills and improve existing institutional support structures (for example, Mortimore and Crozier, 2006, outlined in the Literature Review 3.1.2). While these are laudable aims, Pena, Stapleton and Schaffer (2016) noted that there is little research or theory on the individual student experience of disability. Going further, Cameron (2016) specifically pointed to a deficit in research interpreting the experience of dyslexia among students and probing the interaction of this with the social environment and what this means for the student.

The first area of the research question addressing the student experience of dyslexia is therefore an opportunity to explore the main themes that arose from the student interviews, before I set this in the context of the social environment (university and societal approach) and theorise about the impact on the student in the second and third areas of the research question. In this section I will examine the following themes from the Findings:

(i) Students' reactions to the meanings associated with dyslexia (7.1.1);
(ii) Their views of dyslexia accommodations at university (7.1.2); and
(iii) How a history of unidentified dyslexia affects them (7.1.3).

7.1.1 Students reject dyslexia stereotyped as negative traits

The simplest dyslexia definition used by researchers and dyslexia support bodies is as an unexpected difficulty with literacy, usually evident from an early age (dyslexia definitions are explored in the Literature Review 2.2.2.1). Beyond this basic definition, dyslexia is associated with specific difficulties affecting reading and writing throughout an individual's life (Literature review 2.1.1). These difficulties are detailed in the Literature Review Figure 1 and lead to dyslexia's characterisation as:

(i) An inherited cognitive deficit that is a barrier to success in education;
(ii) A neurological difference associated with early literacy problems, specifically slowness reading and writing and involving other higher-order cognitive issues, such as difficulties with short-term memory and concentration;
(iii) A life-long condition that can only be remediated to reach normative academic achievement, not eradicated.

Therefore, society perceives dyslexia as an obstacle to acquiring knowledge through academic study. Dyslexia researchers such as Collinson and Penketh (2010) and Denhart (2008) have argued that society links the negative traits associated with dyslexia, particularly the slowness reading and difficulties writing, with low academic ability. This arises from a perceived link between intellectual ability and early literacy: society believes that a child's early ability in reading and writing is a measure of intellect. However, this is not the case with dyslexia where the difficulties decoding words when learning to read are not indicative of the individual's higher order cognitive abilities (Literature Review 2.1.1.4).

In higher education beyond secondary school, the teaching and assessment methods further challenge students with dyslexia (discussed in Literature Review 2.1.2) and universities measure academic achievement primarily through written exams. As a result, we expect students to develop coping strategies to deal with the demands of advanced reading and writing skills (reviewed in 2.1.2.3). The students I spoke to in this study identified these as challenges in their experience of dyslexia (Findings 6.1.2.1), which they said held them back in their studies.

Researchers such as Mortimore and Crozier (2006) have investigated how dyslexia presents specific challenges at university, for example with note taking, reading long texts and writing essays (Literature review 2.1.2.1). The current project adds further detail to existing studies. The specific challenges mentioned to me by the students ranged from Sylvia's difficulties reading and her dread of submitting written work, to Stewart's frustrations trying to listen, think and write simultaneously in lectures (Findings 6.1.2.1). They believed dyslexia inhibited their studies at university in many ways, which they countered through a combination of their own personal coping strategies (Findings 6.1.2.2) as well as by accessing university accommodations (Findings 6.2.2). The students I spoke to highlighted that dyslexia manifested at university in ways that were much broader than their literacy struggles at school (Findings 6.1.1). These changes in how dyslexia affected individuals throughout their education questions the validity of standard dyslexia definitions, mentioned above, that are focused on an early difficulty learning to read, particularly when students may only be identified with dyslexia later in their education (Findings 6.1.1).

It is understandable to wish to find compensatory abilities or strengths to counter dyslexia's negative associations in education. Dyslexia researchers (e.g. Morgan, 1898) have associated putative visual strengths with dyslexia since it was first described. Possible dyslexia strengths, for example involving visual-spatial or creative skills, have been explored through cognitive tests in studies bridging between neuroscience and dyslexia, by researchers such as von Karolyi *et al* (2003) (discussed in Literature Review 2.1.1.3). However, there is little consistent evidence for specific detectable strengths that accompany dyslexia, particularly any that would help in educational settings. The lack of reliable or repeatable evidence for dyslexia strengths may reflect the heterogeneity of dyslexia (discussed in the following sub-section) rather than the absence of strengths, but this has been difficult to show in studies. Few have asked students directly if they link any positives with dyslexia.

From my conversations with students and support tutors, they did not associate any specific strengths with dyslexia. Even when directly asked about positives, the participants instead portrayed dyslexia as difficulty in higher education (Findings 6.1.2.1). This may reflect a focus on large amounts of reading and written work as part of university study, with little emphasis (at least among the students I spoke to) on the visual-spatial or creative skills that may underlie some dyslexia strengths, as discussed above. Further work is therefore needed to explore possible dyslexia strengths, particularly those that may impact positively in education. This will no doubt be difficult due to the complexity of interactions between dyslexia's cognitive differences and the coping strategies individuals develop to overcome these.

In the current project I venture beyond describing students' experiences of dyslexia, as I also explore the contrast between their own and others' interpretations of dyslexia. For example, the student participants challenged the societal view (as they saw it) of dyslexia only as a set of negative traits affecting reading and writing, saying they didn't want to be stereotyped (Findings 6.1.2). To the students, the traits represented generalised assumptions about dyslexia as deficiency and defect (such as difficulty spelling, writing, or losing your place reading).

While the students recognised specific difficulties that they identified with their own individual experience of dyslexia, they didn't feel their profile fitted a generalised type, nor did they wish to feel that others defined them in academic settings by something that held them back. For example, Sylvia feared that by acknowledging her dyslexia openly, she would only be viewed by lecturers and peers at university in terms of negative traits. She worried these traits would be used to explain any struggle (whether attributable to dyslexia or not) and shadow any academic success. The fact that student participants disagreed with societal and institutional perceptions of dyslexia but felt powerless to change them, raises questions about who is in control of dyslexia's meanings at university.

The students also told me that their academic choices were impacted by others' views of dyslexia as a set of traits. For example, Sarah-Louisa recognised that she had accepted external negative assumptions about dyslexia and this had held her back from believing that she could achieve her ambitions. She said that eventually she had realised that she was "more than a set of traits" (Findings 6.3.1.1). This was echoed by Sylvia, who spoke of "knowing I am so much more than I can do" (Findings 6.1.2.1), as she felt dyslexia made it difficult to produce written evidence of her abilities. The students recognised they had been pigeonholed by negative societal assumptions of dyslexia, but they rejected these associations in a process of self-understanding in relation to dyslexia.

These themes of (i) rejecting stereotyped traits associated with impairment and (ii) not wishing to be defined by them, links the findings of the current study to disability studies, in particular the ideas of Critical Disability Theory (Literature Review 4.2.2). For example, Rocco (2005) and Pena, Stapleton and Schaffer (2016) addressed the impact on individuals of disability portrayed as a defect. They applied a critical lens to highlight where legislation dominated how institutions treat the disabled and critiqued the structures that form negative ideas of disability as a social phenomenon. There are clear parallels with dyslexia's position as a disability at university, with its assumed negative associations that impact how students see themselves as well as how others see them. Rocco (2005) and Pena, Stapleton and Schaffer's (2016) counterargument was to remove the focus from grouping people into defect groups, dissect socially accepted terms that describe disability and disassociate the individual from assumed negative traits. The findings of the current project suggest that these changes will be critical to removing the negative associations of dyslexia at university to avoiding stereotyping.

Therefore, the current study contributes to our understanding of students' experience of dyslexia, finding that they reject the societal focus on dyslexia as negative traits affecting reading and writing. This may be founded on a desire to avoid stereotyped assumptions about their academic abilities because of dyslexia. To counter negative stereotyping, Critical Disability Theory suggests we reduce the current focus on the distinctions between us, such as whom society defines as normal or impaired. I will discuss this further in section 7.2, where I debate the act, rationale and impact of universities' dyslexia classification as defect and disability. Further research to explore these ideas (suggested in Conclusions 8.6.1) will be important to lessen dyslexia's stereotyping and the impact of this on students.

7.1.2 Dyslexia heterogeneity contrasts with standardised support

In contrast to the widely accepted view of dyslexia as a specific set of negative traits affecting reading and writing, neurological research has contributed to our awareness and understanding of the variation between individual dyslexia profiles. A decade ago, Snowling (2012) highlighted that dyslexia has a complex neurological and genetic basis, so has neither clear boundaries nor a single cause (discussed in Literature Review 2.1.1.4). Some researchers (e.g. Tamboer, Vorst and Oort, 2016) have concluded that we should characterise dyslexia as part of a multiplicity of cognitive differences, where it is hard to separate attributes that are etiological from those factors arising from individuals' coping strategies (or cognitive adaptations).

As a result of this complexity and variation between individuals with dyslexia, for decades researchers have debated dyslexia's characterisation, incidence and remediation (outlined in Pumfrey, 2002). This has led to difficulties standardising dyslexia's definition (Literature Review 2.2.2.1), developing reliable and consistent testing (Literature Review 3.2.2), or offering fair accommodations for dyslexia between individuals and across institutions (Literature Review 3.2.3). All this variance exists in a single country and language, let alone attempting harmonisation across national and linguistic boundaries.

While studies such as Cameron (2016) and O'Byrne, Jagoe and Lawler (2019) (reviewed in the Literature Review 2.1.1.4) explored dyslexia's variance in a handful of students, little research has looked at heterogeneity across larger groups of students or addressed the implications of dyslexia variance for support. Instead, researchers generalised how dyslexia manifests in adults, collating group data on its difficulties and coping strategies and assuming that these are universally valid (e.g. Beacham, Szumko and Alty, 2003). This contrasts with emerging studies among primary school children (e.g. Rose, 2009), which probe the individual's dyslexia profile as a key aspect of educational support.

The current project highlights and explores the implications of dyslexia's heterogeneity in even a small group of students. As noted in Findings 6.1.2, the students I spoke to described a range of difficulties that they faced, they had developed differing personal coping strategies, and furthermore they expressed varying enthusiasm for the standard types of support that universities offered. The students even differed in what they valued from tutor-led support, from those who chose to use the time to check their work, to others who sought personalised study-skills training (Findings 6.2.2).

The variance in how students experience dyslexia and their different support preferences sits awkwardly with the standard accommodation model that university support tutors offer, consisting of money for technology, study skills learning support and 25% extra exam time (discussed in Findings 6.2.2). According to the students I spoke to, they felt pigeonholed by standard dyslexia accommodations, even one-to-one tutor support was too generic and not meaningfully tailored to their profiles (Findings 6.2.2.2). The current project suggests that university accommodations suit only some, not all, students with dyslexia reflecting the heterogeneity in how they experience dyslexia and have adapted to study.

In a review highlighting the importance of awareness of how disabled students experience accommodations, Kutscher and Tuckwiller (2019) found that the best support was when tailored to the individual (Literature Review 3.2.3). Further work by MacCullagh, Bosanquet and Badock (2017) concluded that low take-up or even rejection of student disability support was due in large part to poor suitability of the services to an individual’s profile. The current project extends these disability researchers’ work into the dyslexia field, finding that some students with dyslexia drop out from support, questioning its appropriateness (Findings 6.3.2.3). We may excuse universities’ standardised support to some extent as they are constrained by funding and must balance economics with ideal best practice. The time needed to individually tailor one-to-one support may not be scalable for the 5% of students with dyslexia. Yet we should still seek alternative solutions to improve student support, discussed in Conclusions 8.3.2, for example broadening online study skills training to all students and enabling individual support for specific difficulties.

In summary, the students I spoke to highlighted the opportunity and need to improve university dyslexia support, to increase its relevance and appeal. The related field of critical disability studies frames questions to explore further, for example probing the impact of generic accommodations on students with dyslexia, both on the student experience and their persistence with studies or support. Future dyslexia research could also explore possibilities for tailored accommodation through inclusive subject teaching, investigate the potential for flexibility in the writing and assessment demands of university courses, as well as examine options to exploit technology to deliver personalised support for students, without substantial increases in support tutor time input (I will raise this in Conclusions 8.6.1).

7.1.3 Late dyslexia identification affects academic performance and potential

Dyslexia identification is often missed or delayed in those who go on to university, previous research suggests that this is due to a combination of poor awareness of dyslexia at school and students' reluctance to admit dyslexia when at university (discussed in Literature Review 2.1.2.2). For example, Henderson (2017) found dyslexia identification was often after the first year of university study, as students requested it only when they really struggled. In contrast, early dyslexia identification is important for academic persistence: research with children has shown that those whose dyslexia was identified later had lower academic motivation (e.g. Palumbo, 2001 and McNulty, 2003, discussed in Literature Review 3.2.1).

This study explores delayed dyslexia identification from the student's perspective, looking at the later impact of struggles at school (Findings 6.1.1) and the absence of an explanation for this struggle on self-esteem (Findings 6.3.1). In the current study, only one out of five students' dyslexia was recognised in primary education. We can divide the others between two main scenarios, where dyslexia was either missed or masked at school.

(i) **Dyslexia was missed altogether.** Researchers such as Gilroy (2002) suggest that many schoolteachers do not recognise dyslexia in the classroom, or the difficulties of those who go on to university may not be a significant enough barrier at school, perhaps due to effective coping strategies (discussed in Literature Review 2.1.2.2). For example, in the current study Sophia excused her school for not recognising her dyslexia, saying it was not obvious. She believed that she needed to flag up her dyslexia to a school to access support, even if she was not aware of it formally herself. Sarah-Louisa similarly had to rely on her own coping strategies throughout her education, she only requested support later as the challenges grew during graduate studies.

(ii) **Dyslexia was masked and attention diverted to other issues**. In the case of both Sylvia and Stewart, they developed attention-diverting behavioural changes in school to hide their literacy difficulties. While Stewart's dyslexia was then recognised, Sylvia's school focused on the symptom (her disruptive behaviour) rather than the cause (dyslexia). Sylvia was punished by her school and family for her class disruption, meanwhile the reason for her literacy difficulties was unrecognised.

Some previous dyslexia studies (e.g. Henderson, 2017) have asked whether and why dyslexia identification is late among university students, but few researchers to date have explored the impact of late identification on students at university. Most (3 of 5) of the students in the current study were without formal dyslexia recognition or support until they were well into a first or second degree at university. This was borne out by comments from the support tutors that dyslexia was only identified at university for many of their students who accessed support. In the discussions with students, I explored how they had felt as students with unidentified dyslexia. They reported that further to their struggles through school, at university they had faced additional negative reactions to the difficulties associated with dyslexia, as they remained unexplained and unsupported (Findings 6.2.3).

Research among children with dyslexia underlines how important early recognition is for developing support and coping strategies, for example Shaywitz, Morris and Shaywitz (2008) point out how much harder it is to raise grades up to expected levels if dyslexia is recognised in secondary rather than primary school (Literature Review 2.1.2.2). In addition, from the evidence of this project, not only did students associate unrecognised dyslexia with poor academic performance at school, but it also led to disruption and truancy, critically impacting an individual's academic potential for years ahead. In the current study, for example, Sylvia's school focused on her troublesome behaviour and labelled her as naughty. From Sylvia's perspective, her poor literacy, tendency towards disruption and low self-esteem led her to absent herself from classes entirely, she felt unable to participate as her peers did. This speaks to the much earlier work by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) who explored truancy as individuals removing themselves from education rather than waiting to be thrown out (Literature Review 3.2.1).

The current project also highlights the longer-term impact of unexplained difficulty associated with dyslexia through school into university. The students in the current study believed late identification led to low confidence and poorer academic performance at university (Findings 6.1.1.2) and in some cases was a disincentive to continue with studies (e.g. Sarah-Louisa, Findings 6.3.1.1). Even when dyslexia was finally identified, the findings suggest that years of struggle without explanation have a debilitating effect on a student's belief in their academic ability and commitment (Findings 6.3.1.2). The impact of late dyslexia identification on student academic self-concept and self-esteem will be explored in Discussion section 7.3.1.

In summary, the study findings suggest that early dyslexia identification is crucial to avoid later impacts on academic achievement and self-esteem. As will be discussed in Conclusions 8.6.1, there is scope for further research into the impact of unrecognised dyslexia at school on later academic potential, which could address university admission success and students' persistence with education, as well as grades achieved and self-esteem.

Sub-section 7.1 Concluding comments

The first research sub-question explores students’ experience of dyslexia at university, summarised in Figure 23 below. In the study, students felt university policy and societal assumptions stereotyped dyslexia, emphasising its negative traits and offering accommodations that meet only a standard dyslexic type. As a result, students with dyslexia felt university support was too generic. Dyslexia research and support could learn from disability studies, where researchers argue to lessen the emphasis on defect, avoid typecasting people by negative traits and explore the student experience to inform learning support. In addition, this study connects late dyslexia identification with poor academic achievement and low self-confidence, pointing to the importance of early dyslexia awareness and support.

Figure 23: The discussion themes responding to the first research sub-question

Research question	**What is the student experience of dyslexia?**		
Discussion section	7.1 Students experience dyslexia as a barrier		
Sub-section and themes	7.1.1 Students reject dyslexia stereotyped as negative traits	7.1.2 Dyslexia heterogeneity contrasts with standardised support	7.1.3 Late dyslexia identification affects academic performance and potential
Issues	Students felt held back by negative societal assumptions about dyslexia	Students highlighted mismatch between dyslexia variance and university support	Dyslexia missed or masked at school, leads to lower motivation and confidence
Other relevant research areas	A critical approach removes the focus from defect and argues against segregating individuals by traits	Disability research criticises generalised support, arguing disability is an individual experience	Education research highlights disruption and truancy as distraction from difficulty
Pathway forward	Encouraging acceptance of differences and policy treating students as individuals, not as a type	Seeking to understand the individual profile and personalise support	Promoting early identification in schools and appropriately supporting those who are identified later

7.2 Universities' dyslexia classification as categorisation of social difference

Much existing research among students with dyslexia accepts it as a detrimental condition, seeking to identify difficulties and devise effective remediation. This thesis agrees with Prevett, Bell and Ralph (2013) (discussed in the introduction to Literature Review 2.2.3), who suggested that it is important to go beyond these studies and relate experience-based research to societal and institutional attitudes to dyslexia, to make sense of individuals' choices through their educational journey. Therefore the second research sub-question's enquiry asks about universities' dyslexia approach and the impact of this on the relationship with the student, as a preface to theorising in 7.3 about the interaction between student experience and university approach, specifically the impact on student identity and self-esteem.

As discussed in the Literature Review 4.3, we use classification to reduce the chaos in the social world around us. It is often social institutions, such as universities, that form and sustain classification systems, linking categorisation to the organizational role of these institutions and reflecting their political and social origins. Classification is therefore a social justice issue, as it influences decisions on labelling and entitlements. Dyslexia categorisation confers meanings through how we describe and define it and how we behave towards those with dyslexia.

In this section I will follow a critical approach (discussed in Literature Review 4.1) to:

(i) Question the act and accuracy of dyslexia classification (7.2.1);
(ii) Challenge the rationale behind the medical approach to dyslexia, which underpins universities' classification of dyslexia (7.2.2);
(iii) Highlight the power imbalances between the student and university that result from dyslexia classification within a medical approach (7.2.3).

7.2.1 Act of classification: Dyslexia identification as a binary diagnosis contradicts dyslexia heterogeneity

Söder (1989) highlighted thirty years ago that categorisation labels a person and highlights aspects of their identity in relation to the category, affecting our attitudes towards them as well as the language we use about them (Literature Review 2.2). Only a few researchers (e.g. Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014a,b) have questioned classifying dyslexia as a specific category, distinct from slow reading. Instead, this thesis joins most dyslexia researchers who agree that dyslexia is a useful term to describe a set of cognitive differences that can lead to disadvantage in education (Literature Review 2.2.2.2). Researchers (e.g. Taylor 2011) argue that it is useful to study those who are united by an accepted social category, but I would add that this is as long as we also seek to understand the impacts of that categorisation on the individual and are aware of variance in its definition (see Literature Review 2.2.2.1).

Universities need dyslexia identification to pinpoint those students to whom they are legally obliged to offer help (Literature Review 2.2.2.3). The students and tutors in the current project agreed that it is useful to acknowledge dyslexia at university (Findings 6.2.1.2). Crucially, it affords an explanation of difficulty for the individual and argues for support. The students felt that aspects of additional support in combination with their personal coping strategies were valuable and had impacted positively on their studies, affecting their degree and future options (Findings 6.2.2).

However, the students I spoke to also found the method, language and meanings of dyslexia classification problematic. From a practical perspective, they complained to me of the burden of having to spend time and money on tests and form filling to meet the criteria to access support (Findings 6.1.2.3). For example, Sylvia felt she had wasted much of her one-year course filling in forms for support that was not offered in time for her to benefit from it. This issue has seldom been addressed in the dyslexia literature yet simplifying processes and speeding decisions is in the interests of both universities and students, to reduce the time and effort spent.

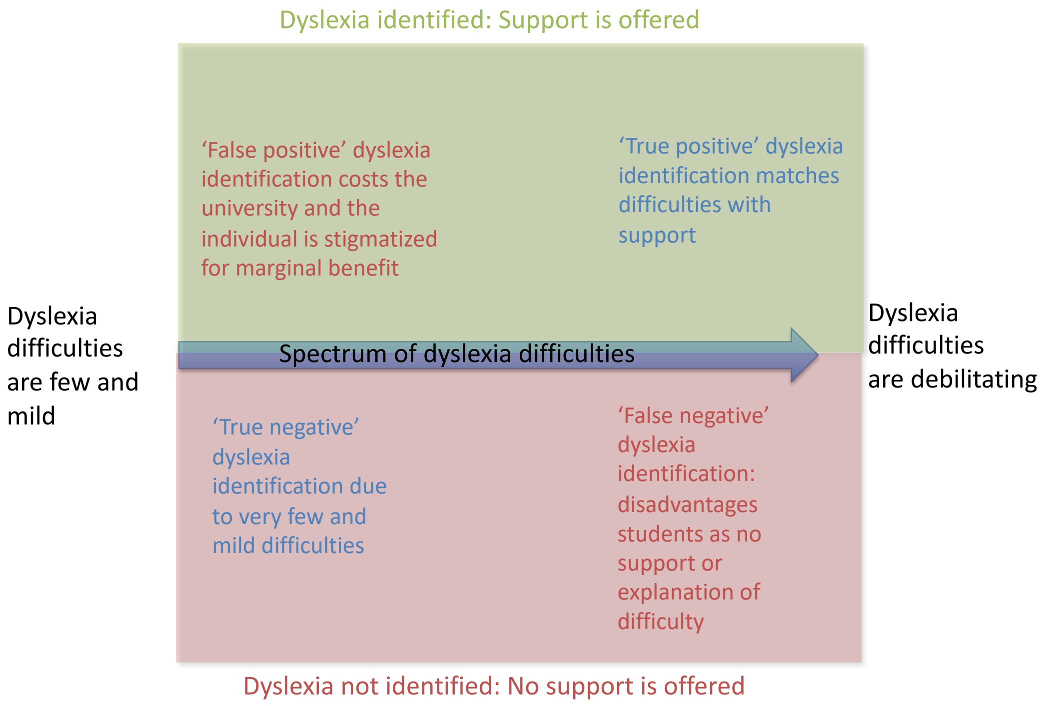
Beyond the practicalities of dyslexia identification, students also highlighted the implications of a dyslexia classification at university, pointing out its association with defect, disability and academic struggle in an environment where they are evaluated by their academic achievement (Findings 6.2.1). As a basis for exploring the impact of dyslexia classification on identity in section 8.3, here I will critique the act of binary classification itself, drawing from work addressing questions of individual or group difference and social justice.

Researchers who investigate social justice issues, such as Bowker and Star (1999), criticise social classification as it applies a set of binary decisions to test for attributes that classify an individual in a category. In practice, social classification is often blurred or difficult to determine: our social world exists with innumerable indistinct differences between individuals that do not fit easily into categories. Bowker and Star's (1999) criticism of 'Classification and its consequences' focused on the use of social and visual clues for racial classification under Apartheid in South Africa, which ignored the evidence that humans are a species of heterogeneous hybrids and are not pure types (Literature Review 4.3). The authors' critical approach highlighted the consequences of classification for the individual, affecting not only their status in society but their identity. I will apply a similar critical lens in examining the binary classification of dyslexia at university.

Building on the idea that dyslexia is heterogeneous (discussed above in Literature Review 2.1.1.4 and Discussion 7.1.2), difficulties arise when we admit that it encompasses a wide range of characteristics that are not all recognized in all individuals with dyslexia. Also, dyslexia can overlap and interact with other cognitive differences (for example ADHD in Sylvia's case in the current study), which are not explored or controlled for in a dyslexia test. Further, students with dyslexia develop sophisticated personal coping strategies (Findings 6.1.2.2), which may diminish the extent to which dyslexia's differences are testable. Universities' binary dyslexia categorisation belies its fuzzy boundaries, as the evidence points to dyslexia experienced as a spectrum of cognitive diversity and adaptation.

As a result of universities' binary dyslexia classification, students who exhibit very similar characteristics may fall just inside or outside of the dyslexia boundary. Figure 24 below highlights the disconnect between dyslexia as a spectrum of difference (a continuum from left to right) and the binary dyslexia classification imposed by university testing (green for a positive result for dyslexia or red for negative, determining access to support). From the students' perspective, those who exhibit some difficulties but miss the classification of dyslexia ('False negatives') are disadvantaged by not being able to access support. Moreover, an explanation for study difficulties is denied them. Conversely, a 'False positive' classification, where the difficulties are mild, labels the student with a defective condition and costs the university time and money to support them where this is only marginally helpful.

Figure 24: Binary dyslexia testing at university contrasts with dyslexia heterogeneity



Therefore, by offering learning support only to those who fall within the dyslexia categorisation, universities, as Lilian admitted (Findings 6.1.2.2), are powerless to help those who would also benefit from additional support, but who do not (at the point they were tested) meet the criteria for dyslexia classification.

We can also challenge the execution of dyslexia classification through dyslexia testing at UK universities. For example, Ryder and Norwich (2018) suggest, from interviews with dyslexia assessors, that recognizing dyslexia in adults requires more than identifying literacy difficulties in a test. They suggest that assessors had to apply their own judgment and saw difficulties in context and in relative terms, rather than in isolation (discussed in the Literature Review 2.2.3.2). As a result, variation in assessor experience led to differences in the interpretation of dyslexia assessment. Further, they had difficulty assessing those with higher IQs on a purely discrepancy basis at university. The validity of adult dyslexia tests has not had the same critical attention as testing for dyslexia among children. As Ryder and Norwich (2018) found, only a third of dyslexia assessors believed that an individual is either dyslexic or not, renouncing binary dyslexia classification and undermining the relevance of the test that they must administer. Further questions are raised in a recent paper by Cameron (2021), who highlighted the case of a UK student whose dyslexia identity, awarded at school, was revoked at university leaving her bereft of support and explanation for her difficulty, moreover she felt powerless against the scientific binary judgement of the dyslexia test.

For a few years, some researchers such as Reilly *et al* (2014) have suggested repositioning dyslexia testing, removing the emphasis on inclusion or exclusion from support. For example, to address some of the criticisms above, the test could be repositioned as a heuristic tool to direct support tutorials (Russell *et al*, 2015) and inform the student of where they may benefit best from support. While some support tutors in this study said they used dyslexia testing in this way, the students I spoke to said this was not widespread (Findings 6.1.2.3). Currently the main role of the dyslexia test is to categorise for the university those who, under UK law, must be awarded support. There is clearly room to increase the use of testing as analysis, with less emphasis on it as a classification tool.

In summary, UK universities categorise students requesting support for dyslexia, by imposing binary dyslexia classification over fuzzy boundaries and using test methodology of questionable validity. This leads to the potential for social injustice due to the support privileges that dyslexia identification affords and academic implications for those denied support as they were outside the dyslexia boundary. Moreover, there are identity implications for the student, through the identification of a stigmatized attribute, as will be discussed in 7.3.

It is difficult to see how universities can remove the potential for injustice highlighted above, without major changes in teaching and a broadening of access to support. The implications of the current project for university dyslexia support are discussed in Conclusions 8.3, however, the support tutors I spoke to hinted that fully inclusive pedagogy could help remove the need for dyslexia classification as a gateway to separate support. Initial steps such as lecture recording is underway (accelerated due to the increase in remote studying in the Covid-19 pandemic). Offering elective online study support for all students may further help to reduce the need to classify those mildly impacted by dyslexia, who may otherwise miss out on support. Clearly there is scope for further research in this area, as well as leadership from universities, as it involves significant ideological as well as practical changes.

7.2.2 Rationale of classification: Universities' medical model of disability contrasts with students' and tutors' own views

In addition to examining the act of classification, the current project explores how students with dyslexia and support tutors perceive their university's approach to dyslexia, through its policies, practices and the language used to describe it (Findings 6.2.1). It then compares and theorises the university's institutional approach with that of the students and tutors as individuals, setting this in the context of research into conceptions of dyslexia and disability (Literature Review 2.2.3).

7.2.2.1 University policy positions dyslexia as individual impairment within a medical model of disability

This project extends Cameron and Billington's (2015a,b) earlier exploration of dyslexia as a label with socially constructed meanings (discussed in the Literature Review 3.3.2). Evidence from the dyslexia literature (Literature Review 2.2.3) and this study (Findings 6.2) suggests that UK university policy largely takes a medical approach to dyslexia. Universities identify dyslexia through diagnostic testing for specific traits and prescribe remedial help outside of subject teaching. The students and tutors I spoke to echoed the medical language that universities used to describe dyslexia, accepting the terminology of diagnosis and remediation (Findings 6.2.1.2). The language conformed to negative expectations of dyslexia, describing dyslexia as a defect needing intervention, that there was something wrong with the student.

There are complex meanings associated with a medical approach to dyslexia, which have been discussed by a few researchers such as Solvang (2007) (Literature Review 2.2.1.1). It can have positive as well as negative attributes when explaining difficulty, for example describing the individual as physically (or neurologically) different, not morally corrupt or lazy. It can also afford legal or sick status, allowing for those who are affected to be treated differently and arguing for resources to support them. The support tutors in this study said there is an important gain from a medical classification of dyslexia (Findings 6.2.1) (i) for the institution, legally it obliges the university to offer accommodations and it also attracts funding for support; and (ii) for the individual, it can confer special status, enabling them to access support as well as explaining difficulty by identifying a specific cognitive difference.

There is therefore a transactional dimension to dyslexia classification within a medical model, that it confers certain legal and moral obligations on the institution and guides student expectations of how they will be treated. In Norway, legal cases have even started to try to monetise the impact on pupils' education and self-esteem of not receiving a medical diagnosis of dyslexia (described in Solvang, 2007, Literature Review 2.2.2.3). Echoing the arguments of disability researchers, such as

Shakespeare and Watson (2001), the support tutors I spoke to worried that situating dyslexia solely within a social model removed a clear definition of individual impairment, diminishing the argument for support for those within a disadvantaged group in education (Findings 6.2.1.1).

In the Literature Review (4.1) I outlined how critical research perspectives aim to change our acceptance of the way things are, by challenging approaches and assumptions and highlighting power imbalances, prompted by the cause of social justice. It queries why we accept certain norms or choices in society, probes situations of disadvantage and encourages participants to take action, both in creating knowledge (research) and constructing change (practices). It also moves away from purely assessing effectiveness in education, towards prioritizing ethical and socio-cultural concerns (reviewed by Rexhepi and Torres, 2011).

Seen through the lens of a critical approach, the medical view of dyslexia is an example of a positivist approach where disorders and impairments are intrinsic to the individual (Literature Review 2.2.3.1). As illustrated in Figure 3, it confirms a medical status (the individual is sick and depends on support) and removes social context (that might emphasise disabling barriers, rather than individual defect). Further, it divides us into categories of normal and other (confirming ideas of deviance) and so confers stigma upon the individual (examined in Discussion 7.3). Therefore, dyslexia disadvantages a student, placing them in a category of other: they are defective, requiring remediation to reach a normative level of achievement.

Disability researchers have also applied critical perspectives to question whether students see disability as an opportunity for mutual support. Disability researcher Nick Watson (2002) pointed out that universities take an individual approach to supporting disabled students (Literature review 2.2.3.2). This reduces the chances of students identifying with a specific group, to coalesce around a shared experience and identify common issues to debate and campaign over. Recent research at a UK university (by Loveland-Armour, 2018) supported this finding for dyslexia: few students with dyslexia came together in communities as they did for other social minorities, either for mutual support or to enact change (discussed in Literature Review 3.3.2). The current project supports this finding: the students I spoke to did not come across other students with dyslexia through their interactions with learning support. As a result, any concerns the students had were raised individually rather than through collective support, such as on lecturer resistance or hostility to dyslexia (Findings 6.2.3.2). More research is needed to understand the impact on an individual of identifying within a disability group, specifically the effect on student identity. Existing disability studies suggests it can be helpful (e.g. Seale, 2017), but only where it affords students agency and activism by amplifying a collective voice.

7.2.2.2 Students and tutors navigate between social and medical dyslexia approaches at university

Two decades ago, Riddick (2001) suggested that while the medical model had been useful to guide dyslexia interventions in schools, the rise of the social model of disability was crucial to highlight cultural factors in dyslexia’s manifestation in adults (Literature Review 2.2.1.2). As described above, the medical model identifies a defect in the individual, giving rise to the potential for stigma and discrimination. In contrast, advocates of the social approach position impairment as a mismatch between the individual and the expectations of society (Seale, 2014a). Therefore, socially situating dyslexia states that there is a social cause - unhelpful pedagogy - to the difficulties experienced and highlights that there are social impacts of diagnosing and remediating it as a defect.

In the current project, the students - and in several instances the support tutors - situated dyslexia within a social model in their personal accounts of dyslexia. For example, they highlighted that it was an interaction with a setting or environment that disadvantaged an individual, i.e., dyslexia arose from the demands of education. For example, the student Sylvia and tutor Lucy both highlighted that dyslexia only affected students in specific situations, not universally, to distinguish dyslexia from other disabilities (Findings 6.2.1.2). The students even identified specific teaching practices, that they said led to disadvantage, for example Stewart found it difficult trying to listen, read and note in-person lectures simultaneously and all students highlighted to me the specific demands of written essays (Findings 6.1.2).

Dyslexia research has not examined how an individual can navigate between both medical and social models in different settings. Instead, researchers typically take a stance supporting one model and argue against using the other (e.g. Collinson and Penketh, 2010). My discussions with students showed elements of both the medical and social models of disability. For example, the student participants wrestled with accepting the disability label and receiving learning support, as these highlighted dyslexia as defect (Findings 6.3.2) and led to social stigma (Findings 6.3.1). Yet they had still adopted the university's language of diagnosis and defect, that situated dyslexia within a medical model. Similarly, the support tutors also showed complexity in their rationalisation of dyslexia, with dissonance between (i) a personal social situating of dyslexia as a cognitive difference and (ii) the medical approach they upheld on behalf of university policy.

Disability researchers and those in dyslexia research continue to debate the usefulness and implications of both medical and social models (Literature Review 2.2.1.3), suggesting there is an opportunity to develop how we conceptualise and apply these approaches to dyslexia. Some disability researchers (e.g. Dorfman, 2017) argue that we need aspects of the social, cultural and political in our conception of disability identity, in order to empower individuals, allow for a common identity, identify prejudice, and see positives in difference rather than negative traits (Literature Review 4.2). This speaks to many of the issues raised in the current study, including questions of stereotyping, identity, power and stigma. While this is a laudable aim, we should beware of overlooking issues of epistemology: simply cherry-picking the most useful aspects of the medical and socially situated approaches to disability and fitting these into a new approach to dyslexia raises questions of consistency between two very different conceptions of disability and difference. As a result, in disability studies, researchers such as Gabel and Peters (2004) suggest that finding one unifying model for disability is unrealistic.

Returning to ontology, epistemology and dyslexia approach in the current project (discussed in Methodology 5.1), this thesis follows the ideas of Frauenberger (2015) who described critical realism as the pursuit of an objective reality, perceived through the lens of our many cultural or individual experiences and interactions. The evidence in the current project suggests that the students and tutors must navigate between the social and medical models to rationalise dyslexia in different settings. This thesis therefore argues it is useful to acknowledge and explore these existing approaches, rather than trying to resolve one correct way to approach dyslexia. The danger in arguing the case for solely a social or medical model is that we lose sight of the way that individuals navigate between these two approaches in different settings and the implications of this, particularly for those with dyslexia. We should appreciate there are multiple possible realities that can co-exist and that individuals navigate between these depending on their perspective and setting.

In summary, the current project suggests there is complexity in how individuals rationalise dyslexia. Clearly the experience of dyslexia at university is more nuanced for students and support tutors than has been previously explored in the literature. Students and tutors must identify dyslexia within the medical model to qualify for and offer support at university. Yet, students and tutors also see dyslexia as socially constructed: they highlight its situational nature, the influence of teaching pedagogy on the experience of dyslexia, and distinguish its implications in different settings, for example with lectures or peers.

7.2.3 Impact of classification: A medical approach impacts the power negotiation between student and institution

The critical perspective in education (Literature Review 4.1) questions power imbalances between student and institution and is useful to explore the impact of universities' dyslexia classification within a medical model of defect and disability. Power is an important issue to explore at university, not only in the transfer of knowledge, but also as students rely on institutions to confer disability status and award resources to assist them in their studies. Michel Foucault's (1983) work on power called for a critique of the social practices and structures that abuse power or objectivize us as subjects, through dividing practices that separate us from others, e.g. sick and healthy. Foucault's ideas have been applied in disability studies more than in dyslexia research, where researchers view power as a non-static, non-binary negotiation between the individual and institution (e.g. Aston, Breau and MacLeod, 2014, discussed in Literature Review 4.2.2).

The current project applies Foucault's ideas to explore power as a complex and dynamic three-way negotiation at university between: (i) students with dyslexia, who have power to only disclose dyslexia, or reject support (Findings 6.3.2.3); (ii) their subject lecturers, as holders of knowledge as power and with the ability to offer accommodating concessions, such as lecture recording and consideration in marking (Findings 6.2.3.1); and (iii) support tutors who have the power to decide on dyslexia status and to offer accommodations from within segregated support departments (Findings 6.2.2). In the following two sub-sections I will address these power negotiations between students, lecturers and support tutors.

7.2.3.1 A focus on segregated support over inclusive teaching locates the problem in the student with dyslexia

The university approach to dyslexia locates dyslexia as a problem for the student to overcome (Findings 6.2.1.1), therefore the student must adjust to university teaching not the other way round. In the current study, both students and support tutors criticised subject teaching practices that disadvantaged those with dyslexia. Sarah-Louisa, for example, pointed out that the difficulties associated with dyslexia arose largely due to the university's focus on delivering information via verbal lectures and the preference for written assessment (Findings 6.1.2.1). She highlighted that university pedagogy was unfair towards those with dyslexia and she believed that it created a need for students to seek segregated support, suggesting that subject-based teaching and assessment methods could be more inclusive.

In previous research, students have expressed appreciation where subject lecturers made provisions for dyslexia (e.g. MacCullagh, Bosanquet and Badock, 2017, discussed in Literature Review 2.2.3.3). The current study supports and extends this finding with specific examples of lecturer accommodations that students wished for. The students I spoke to mentioned two areas of subject-based accommodation for dyslexia that they would appreciate but found hard to access: marking sympathetically and allowing lecture recording, which I will discuss below.

The students said they valued lecturers taking dyslexia into consideration when marking work, but this practice varied widely between lecturers (Findings 6.2.3.1). Furthermore, two students (Sylvia and Selina) said they felt their confidence and marks suffered when lecturers were unaware of or disregarded dyslexia. Interestingly, the support tutors were less keen to continue dyslexia marking policies, citing other students with dyslexia who had said they didn't want to be marked differently from their peers (Findings 6.2.3.1). However, this raises questions of whether the support tutors had collected a range of student views on this topic, as the comments conveniently support the university's policy to remove marking guidelines. Further work is needed to establish whether marking guidelines make a difference to students with dyslexia and how they are viewed by students and best applied, before universities entirely scrap these.

The students also mentioned lecture recording, which some said was helpful when revising, also to sidestep difficulties with note taking during in-person lectures

(Findings 6.2.3.1). While this may not suit all students due to time constraints to re-listen to lectures or their own preferences for study, the option may be important for some. However, students and tutors noted lecturers were reluctant to record lectures. This supports previous research where lecturers cited concerns that it would diminish lecture attendance, encourage surface learning rather than deep understanding and not increase academic performance (Riddell and Weedon, 2006 and Leadbeater *et al*, 2013, discussed in Literature Review 2.2.3.3).

The current study highlights that universities enable lecturers to maintain control over the extent of any accommodations they offer (such as marking or lecture recording). There is no obligation to consider those with dyslexia through teaching content and delivery, as support is formally delivered through segregated departments. So, while the students told me they favoured subject-based accommodations for dyslexia, their only option was to seek segregated learning support, that they felt was geared towards generalised study skills.

Disability researchers such as Liasidou (2014) question whether it is fair to segregate students for support in higher education, arguing that this leads to underrepresentation of student voice and high drop-out from studies (Literature Review 3.3.4). Indeed, in line with international recognition of disability rights, researchers argue that universities have a duty to change teaching and assessment to increase subject-based inclusion for disabled students, including dyslexia.

This thesis recognises that it is difficult to justify changing entrenched teaching and examining pedagogy to benefit a minority of students, such as those with dyslexia. Studies such as by Schneider and Crombie (2003) (Literature Review 2.2.3.3) are useful for insights into pedagogical change that embraces inclusivity, particularly where carefully thought through changes benefit all students. For example, Dobson (2019) argues that subject-based mentoring would help students with dyslexia as well as the wider student body, but this is seldom offered at UK universities.

There is clearly work to be done to explore how education institutions can develop inclusive teaching and assessment practices to avoid disadvantaging students with dyslexia and to diminish the need for segregated support, without an unfair focus on a small proportion of students. Steps such as lecture recording that benefit all students offer one way forward. While there are several hurdles (legal, practical and ideological) to overcome in encouraging lecture recording, one support tutor's example of an opt-out rather than opt-in policy points to some universities acknowledging the important role of making lecture content uniformly available asynchronously and online. No doubt the rush to move university teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic will accelerate this process across universities.

7.2.3.2 Defining dyslexia as a disability diminishes student agency in support

To satisfy equality law, UK universities must recognise dyslexia as a disability and offer accommodations (Literature Review 2.2.2.3). By situating dyslexia as disability, universities require students with dyslexia to acknowledge a specific difference from their peers, linked to ideas of individual impairment. The implications of this on stigma and student identity I will address in section 8.3 below, here I will address how this impacts the power balance between student and institution, affecting student agency in their support and their feelings of self-efficacy in their studies (defined in 3.1.2).

In his 1963 book on stigma, Goffman proposed that specialists who identify and assist the disabled, exert power as they have control over defining and helping those with the difference. Few studies have addressed directly the power dynamic between university learning support and students with dyslexia, yet questions of power are explored in the field of disability studies, where researchers (e.g. Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012, Literature Review 4.2.2) have addressed the impact of low student agency in support decisions. Beauchamp-Pryor described disabled students as passive recipients of support, highlighting that the university decides who merits support and acts as gatekeeper and deliverer of that support. There is little student involvement in support decisions and feedback is seldom invited or possible. As a result, disabled students felt inhibited from raising issues with those who supported them, for fear that any help they did receive would be withdrawn. These criticisms pointed to a systemic lack of student input into support decisions at university.

The current project highlights this view from disability studies and contributes new evidence that UK students with dyslexia have low agency in their support. Support tutors have control over uncovering dyslexia as an aspect of a student's identity, assessing need and prescribing remediation. The tutors also manage key aspects of the student's relationship with the university for support funding (Findings 6.1.2.3). Support tutors additionally mediated students' grievances regarding their study and support, such as complaints about lecturer resistance to dyslexia. In this respect, the students saw the support tutor as a potential advocate for their cause, yet the tutor must arbitrate between the university and student. There was conflict in this role, evident as two of the students I spoke to (Selina and Sylvia) expressed dissatisfaction and helplessness with the outcome of disputes mediated by the support department (Findings 6.2.3.2).

As a contributing factor to self-esteem, self-efficacy is an indication of control over our environment and the impact of this on identity (Bandura, 1977). Existing studies (discussed in the Literature Review 3.2.1) have examined the associations between dyslexia and low self-efficacy or learned helplessness in US and UK schoolchildren (e.g. Humphrey, 2002; Hampton and Mason, 2003; and Margolis and McCabe, 2003). Specifically, Humphrey and Mullins (2002) found that children with dyslexia associated academic success or failure with external rather than internal factors (e.g. access to and quality of learning support) over which they had little input, rather than attributing their achievements to their own efforts and ability.

Few dyslexia researchers address questions of self-efficacy among students, compared with those who work with children. The current project's findings add context to the work of Stagg, Eaton and Sjoblom (2018) who used an academic self-efficacy scale together with interviews to show that undergraduate students with dyslexia scored lower than their peers in four out of five self-efficacy measures. In a specific example of a student acting to boost self-efficacy from the current study, Selina told me that she had disengaged from support to increase feelings of control over her studies (Findings 6.3.2.3). It was only by dissociating from learning support that Selina felt her academic success would represent her own efforts without help. As a result, she felt relief and it built confidence in her abilities.

To address low self-efficacy among disabled students, disability researchers suggest we should enable individuals to make decisions on what they want, rather than being assessed for needs, which contrasts with standardised university dyslexia testing and needs assessment. Disability activism has turned to a language of rights, not needs, emphasising an ideal active stance of the disabled individual, which is reflected in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) (Literature Review, 4.2.3). Universities therefore tread a delicate path between (i) satisfying local legislation (from the evidence of this project in the UK this currently situates dyslexia as a disability and frames it within the medical model) and (ii) observing internationally enshrined rights that stem from ideas of social justice and the social model of disability.

Recognising the rights of the disabled individual within a social model will precipitate changes in UK law (discussed recently in Bunbury, 2019) as well as bring policy implications for universities. Disability researchers prioritise boosting the agency of disabled students by involving them in support decisions. For example, Liasidou (2014) argues for a new approach to support for disabilities in higher education, to remove discriminatory practices and enable student agency in decisions.

Early studies on student input into support strategies for dyslexia agree that increasing a student's involvement in study support choices increases feelings of control and confidence in their abilities (e.g. Andreassen, Jensen and Bråten, 2017, Literature Review 3.2.3). Only a few disability researchers, such as Seale *et al* (2015) have trialled methods to amplify disabled students' voices at university and afford greater agency in their support, positioning such research as a political act. Clearly there is scope for further work with students with dyslexia as well as with disabled students more widely, explored further in the Conclusions chapter.

Sub-section 7.2 Concluding comments

By questioning the act, rationale and impacts of universities' dyslexia classification within a medical model, this study highlights (i) dissonance between dyslexia identification and its heterogeneity; (ii) conflict between the institutional and individual conceptual framework of dyslexia; and (iii) imbalance in the power negotiation regarding support between the student and university. Figure 25 below summarises the key issues emerging from the second research sub-question, alongside signposts to the studies I referred to from other research areas, as well as suggestions arising from the current project for a pathway forward.

Figure 25: The discussion themes responding to the second research sub-question

Research questions	**How do universities approach dyslexia?**		
Discussion sections	7.2 Universities' dyslexia classification as categorisation of social difference		
Sub-section and themes	7.2.1 Act of classification: Dyslexia identification as a binary diagnosis contradicts dyslexia heterogeneity	7.2.2 Rationale of classification: Universities' medical model of disability contrasts with students' and tutors' own views	7.2.3 Impact of classification: A medical approach impacts the power negotiation between student and institution
Issues	Dyslexia's fuzzy boundaries contrasts with its binary identification, moreover classification carries stigma	Students and tutors must navigate between universities' medical approach and their own social situating of dyslexia	Universities locate the problem in the student, but they have little say in support decisions or delivery
Other relevant research areas	Social justice exposes categories that have political consequences affecting status and privileges	Critical Theory encourages action to change practices that disadvantage and to increase understanding	Disability studies examines power negotiations between individuals and institutions
Pathway forward	Removing the need to categorise dyslexia and positioning testing as heuristics not diagnosis	Recognising complexity in dyslexia approaches and exploring it as a group experience	Increasing student agency in support and questioning the role of segregated support over inclusion through teaching

7.3 Universities' dyslexia approach undermines student self-esteem

In this section I will address the third research sub-question: investigating the impact on student identity and self-esteem of the interaction between the student experience of dyslexia and the social context of the university approach to dyslexia. At the end of Burden's 2008 review exploring the associations between dyslexia and feelings of low self-worth (discussed in the Literature Review 3.2.3), he called for further research into the interactions between dyslexia and identity. Similarly, Prevett, Bell and Ralph (2013, p.4) noted "…*we look to more: Research in identity in relation to people with dyslexia and how this is influenced by educational and other institutional culture and practices."* However, compared with emerging research on dyslexia and identity among school-age children (e.g. Lithari, 2019 in Literature Review 3.3.1), few projects have explored or theorised this area among adults. The current study aims to address this gap, focusing on UK university students.

In this project I develop ideas on stigma that were first proposed by Goffman (1963) (Literature Review 3.3). As a society, stigma helps us to deal with the information we process on the people we meet. We anticipate attributes through generalisations and we group individuals according to these. In a study of the psychology of social stigma, Major and O'Brien (2005) (Literature Review 3.3.2) noted that stigma affects our identity as individuals through our anticipation of discrimination and stereotyping because of such generalisations. Developing these ideas, Major and O'Brien distilled theories of stigma as identity threat into three factors: the social or collective representations of stigma attached to an aspect; how sensitised the individual was towards the issue; and the situational cues of different settings (Literature Review .2).

In this third section of the Discussion I will explore the impact of the university approach to dyslexia on student identity through the lens of Major and O'Brien's (2005) three factors influencing identity threat, in the following sub-sections:

(i) The social stigma of dyslexia at university (7.3.1);
(ii) Students’ processing of the meanings associated with dyslexia and their sensitivity to dyslexia as identity threat (7.3.2); and
(iii) How students used dyslexia’s situational nature to manage the stigma of dyslexia at university (7.3.3).

Following this, in sub-section 7.3.4 I will theorise how the study’s findings build our understanding of the impacts of universities’ approach to dyslexia on student identity through the lens of self-esteem. I will refer to previous dyslexia research as well as work on stigma and self-esteem in related fields, before I address how we can reduce the stigma of dyslexia, drawing from disability studies. The structure and themes of this section 7.3 are outlined in Figure 26 on the next page.

As a foundation to section 7.3, the following definitions inform the identity discussions below (Literature Review 3.1.2): **self-concept** as the construction of our identity through self-categorisation in a particular setting (Tajfel, 1978); **self-esteem** as an evaluation of the effect on the individual of how they understand themselves and **self-worth** as the outcomes that contribute to a rising or falling self-esteem (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001); and **self-efficacy** as a measure of our ability to structure and complete an activity to achieve results, i.e. our control over our environment (Bandura, 1977). This thesis follows the ideas of Burns and Bell (2011), who suggested we see our identity as a blend of multiple self-concepts in different settings, which are constantly reassessed in relation to our social environment (discussed in Literature Review 3.1.3).

Table 26: Outlining Discussion section 7.3 themes and related findings

Discussion section	Title and themes	Related Findings section
7.3.1	**Dyslexia confers three types of stigma at university.** I will explore how the societal expectations of dyslexia as a defect, its labelling at university as a disability and the segregation of support, all confer stigma on those with dyslexia at university	6.2.1.1-2, 6.3.1.3
7.3.2	**Students need time to process dyslexia as part of their identity.** I will highlight how students rationalised dyslexia as an aspect of their identity and explore the impact of the timing of dyslexia identification	6.3.1.1, 6.1.1.2
7.3.3	**Students use dyslexia's invisibility and renounceability to manage stigma in different settings.** I will address how students manage dyslexia's stigma as an aspect of their identity, through decisions on dyslexia disclosure and acceptance or rejection of learning support	6.3.2.1-3
7.3.4	**Dyslexia stigma and its management impact student identity.** I will reflect on the relationships between dyslexia and academic self-concept and theorise the effect of concealing dyslexia on identity authenticity	6.3.1.1-2 6.3.2

7.3.1 Dyslexia confers three types of stigma at university

In the Literature Review (3.2.1) I outlined how Kozulin (1998, *et al* 2003) argued that societal values and cultural influences impact our identity, for example the high value we place on literacy and academic achievement has a counter point in the low status in education of those who struggle. Authors such as Rice and Brooks (2004) have pointed out that dyslexia as a label carries stigma. The evidence of the current project suggests that there are multiple aspects to the stigma associated with dyslexia, which I will explore in the sub-sections below, relating these to Goffman's (1963) categories of stigma associated with mental illness, physical impairment and the stigma of group identity (described in Literature Review 3.3).

7.3.1.1 Dyslexia's stigma is rooted in societal normative expectations

In the Literature Review (3.3.1) I pointed out that dyslexia is associated with societal expectations of low ability throughout school, even when it is identified and supported (Macdonald, 2009). This association overshadows efforts by some parents or teachers to re-cast dyslexia as special not slow (Elliott and Place, 2004 and Gillies, 2005). There are few studies in the literature that explore dyslexia and stigma in adults, beyond a broad discussion of dyslexia as a set of negative traits in education (see Literature Review 3.3.2). Only Pollak (2005) and Cameron and Billington (2015a/b) have started to explore students' views on the meanings and stigma associated with dyslexia at university. For example, Cameron (2016) highlighted that students with dyslexia felt they did not belong in academic spaces and used constant self-monitoring to minimize evidence of their dyslexia from others around them. Recent identity research in disability studies has only started to probe the impact of others' reactions to a disability, for example, Deckoff-Jones and Duell (2018) found that students with invisible disabilities (such as dyslexia) inspired less understanding or empathy among their peers than those with more obvious physical impairments.

The current project provides further evidence and adds to our understanding of the stigma of dyslexia among students: The students told me they associated dyslexia identification at university with accepting a stigmatised identity (Findings 6.3.1.1). As discussed in section 7.1.1 above, the students I spoke to felt stereotyped by negative traits in education (as academic weakness or laziness) and that others did not fully understand what they found difficult and why, or how difficulty could be avoided.

The current study also offers examples of the impact of prejudice against dyslexia, which affected the behaviour and studies of students with dyslexia. Three of the students I spoke to (Stewart, Sylvia and Selina) discussed negative reactions from university lecturers or peers to dyslexia (Findings 6.2.3). As a result of this, they felt shame about dyslexia, that in Stewart's case led to his avoiding classes, highlighting a reluctance to admit his dyslexia in settings where it would become obvious.

However, the students I spoke to also highlighted the situational nature and invisibility of dyslexia. So, while they may have had to accept the stigma associated with dyslexia in their interactions with the university and support tutors, they had an opportunity not to disclose it to peers or lecturers. The current project suggests that students hide dyslexia to avoid the expected negative reactions to dyslexia from lecturers and peers. I will explore the implications of non-disclosure further in section 7.3.3 below.

The findings from the current study therefore highlight the innate, situational and invisible nature of dyslexia's stigma. These match Goffman's (1963) first category of mental disorder stigma, that is (i) intrinsic to the individual's profile (i.e. dyslexia stems from a cognitive difference that is innate to the student); (ii) unobtrusive in most settings and only a disadvantage for specific tasks (i.e. the difficulties associated with dyslexia only manifest under certain demands of university teaching); and (iii) non-visible, therefore can be missed or hidden by the individuals. Therefore, those with dyslexia are at risk of discovery: they are discreditable due to the anticipated stigma if others around them find out about the difference.

7.3.1.2 Students with dyslexia reject the additional stigma of disability

From UK universities’ perspective, dyslexia is legally positioned as a disability. However, existing research among students with dyslexia has only briefly examined their feelings towards the disability label. For example, Cameron and Billington (2015 a/b) found students with dyslexia were reluctant to admit weakness or accept help, as these factors were associated with disability (Literature Review 3.3.2). Further, the students in Cameron and Billington’s study constructed dyslexia as something they had to overcome with strength of character and hard work. They felt that those who accepted a disability label to access support were morally inferior and students who dropped out of courses were viewed as academic failures. The current study probes the identity implications of applying the disability label to dyslexia.

The students I spoke to did not feel comfortable accepting the disability label, which they associated with obvious or physical impairment (Findings 6.2.1.2). This additional stigma inhibited students’ willingness to ask for or continue to accept support (Findings 6.3.2.3). The students drew a clear distinction between their conceptions of dyslexia and disability: they did not define dyslexia as a disability. Only on further reflection did the students admit to me that they did indeed feel disabled in certain situations (recognising a social situating of disability).

Even the support tutors, whose perspective has not been previously probed in this respect, acknowledged that a disability label was difficult for students with dyslexia to accept at university. Sarah-Louisa, who had recently been a student and was a support tutor at the time of interview, would not associate dyslexia with disability for herself, although she admitted this led to a dichotomy, as she had to apply the disability label to those students with dyslexia that she supported in her work.

Therefore, students were reluctant to take on the additional stigma associated with physical disability, further to the stigma already associated with dyslexia discussed in 7.3.1.1 above (that of mental disorder stigma). The current study highlights conflict between (i) students’ personal rejection of the additional stigma of the disability label and (ii) the fact they must accept dyslexia defined as a disability to accept university support. The findings suggest we question the usefulness of overtly labelling dyslexia as a disability at university. This strengthens Riddick's (2000) call for greater input into labelling decisions by those who are labelled, echoed by researchers across disability studies.

7.3.1.3 Segregated learning support adds further stigma

Further stigma is associated with seeking help, which links to the third of Goffman's stigma types, that of association with a stigmatised group. The current study's findings extend the work of Cameron and Billington (2015 a/b) on students' negative views towards seeking help with studies (Literature Review 3.3.4). In the current study the participants viewed having to ask for support with their studies as academic weakness (Findings 6.3.1.3), which risked undermining their position as an academically able student at university.

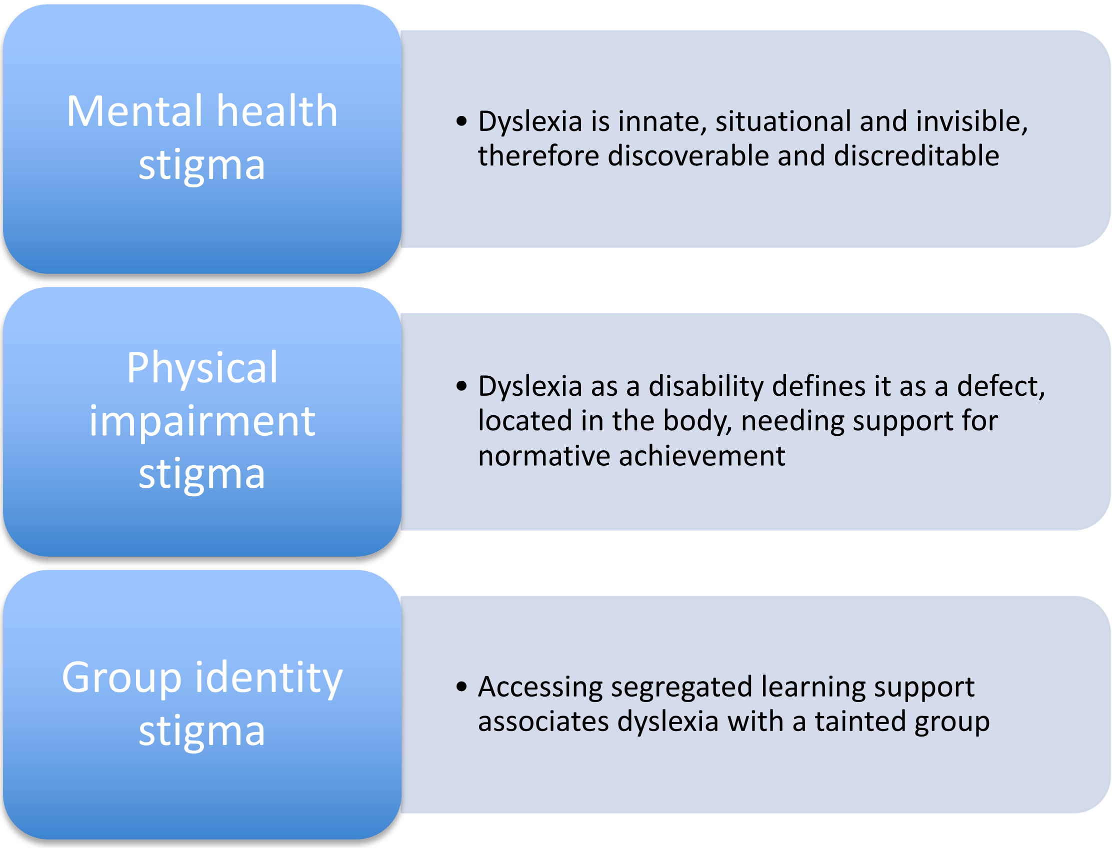
The students and tutors in this study also highlighted that learning support is segregated from subject-based teaching. This creates two issues: Firstly, on a practical level the students in the current study begrudged the extra time and effort required to attend one-to-one learning support tutorials, that were often in locations at a distance from subject teaching. This was an issue particularly for those who studied part-time due to work or other commitments (e.g. Stewart). Secondly, students were separated from their peers spatially for a part of their academic studies. Previous research has found that students resented being made to feel different from their peers (e.g. Morris and Turnbull, 2006) and separated spatially from them at school (e.g. Armstrong, 2003 and Collinson and Penketh, 2010, discussed in Literature Review 3.2.1).

The current study highlights the impact of this segregation at university: students felt shame in being associated with a tainted identity when they had to go to a separated support centre, which, as Sylvia said, was like going to a sexual health clinic. Thus, segregated learning support at university is associated with Goffman's third type of stigma: that of tainted group identity stigma, in a way that other forms of support (e.g. IT and library support, or even family and peer support) are not. The additional stigma of segregated learning support, highlighted by the current study, suggests we question its rationale. However, there are also issues with suggesting that additional support be delivered without segregation, e.g. expecting lecturers to support those with dyslexia within classes, which could further highlight dyslexia in front of lecturers and peers as well as add to the demands made of lecturers.

Critical perspectives in education (Literature Review 4.1) argue for an inclusive approach to support involving students, lecturers and tutors, even if administered through an external learning support department. There is clearly scope to develop the framing and delivery of university learning support, as well as improve its relevance, appeal and to include student voice. Reframing learning support as student-led and repositioning students as co-constructors rather than receivers of support could encourage students to understand their profile, reflect on their support wants, review support decisions with tutors and help to build students' metacognitive skills and self-awareness. It could also involve greater awareness and participation from lecturers. Applying participatory research methods, discussed in Seale (2009), may help address these issues of participation and empowerment.

In summary, the current study argues that in identifying dyslexia, applying for disability status to access support and accepting segregated support at university, dyslexia at university confers all three of Goffman's (1963) categories of stigma, associated with mental illness, physical impairment and the stigma of group identity (see Figure 27). Further, the current study provides evidence for previously unexplored complexities in the interactions between students, support tutors, lecturers and peers, that affect students' perceptions of dyslexia as a stigmatised identity, as well as their attempts to disguise it.

Figure 27: Dyslexia stigma relates to all three of Goffman's stigma types



Mental health stigma

- Dyslexia is innate, situational and invisible, therefore discoverable and discreditable

Physical impairment stigma

- Dyslexia as a disability defines it as a defect, located in the body, needing support for normative achievement

Group identity stigma

- Accessing segregated learning support associates dyslexia with a tainted group

In the next sub-section 7.3.2 I will address the second of Major and O'Brien's (2005) factors for identity threat, exploring how students rationalise dyslexia as an aspect of their identity and their sensitivity to the stigma of dyslexia.

7.3.2 Students need time to process dyslexia as part of their identity

Most dyslexia researchers have assumed that individuals have a static view of dyslexia in relation to their identity, or they have only asked about individuals' views at one point in time. For example, Pollak (2005) divided student reactions to dyslexia into simple positive or negative categories (Literature Review 2.2.3.1). Among the few who have considered a more fluid model of dyslexia acceptance, Armstrong and Humphrey (2009) proposed a variable model of resistance to dyslexia versus acknowledgment (Literature Review 3.3.3), suggesting that both internal emotions and external factors such as familial support impact an individual’s acceptance of a dyslexia identity. Lithari (2019) (Literature Review 3.3.1) developed this idea, suggested there is complexity in how UK secondary school children learn about and accept dyslexia. Lithari theorised that while dyslexia carried stigma, it could be a positive experience as it explained difficulty; furthermore, some individuals later repaired their identity, when the impacts of dyslexia were not so keenly felt. It is this dynamic model of weighing up the meanings and impacts of dyslexia in relation to identity that I explore in the thesis, through a discussion of dyslexia rationalisation.

The current study extends and develops the idea that individuals change how they rationalise dyslexia as an aspect of their identity over time. In 7.3.2.1 I will explore how the students’ acceptance of dyslexia as an aspect of their identity had changed throughout their education; then I will examine the relationship between student acceptance of dyslexia and their sensitivity to dyslexia’s stigma in 7.3.2.2; lastly, I will address the impact of late identification on student acceptance of dyslexia in 7.3.2.3.

7.3.2.1 The students rationalised dyslexia in stages

In my discussions with students, I discovered that each had been through a complex sense-making process following dyslexia identification, particularly those whose dyslexia was identified later at school or at university (Findings 6.3.1.1). The project highlights students’ subjective experience in this process of rationalisation: my interviews suggest that each student may take a unique path through various emotional and rational staging points in acknowledging a dyslexia identity and not all the students I spoke to were at the same stage in this process. From the student and tutor discussions in this project, I suggest that students with dyslexia progress through at least four phases of dyslexia rationalization following its identification, which I explain below.

(i) Initial relief at an explanation for difficulty

In research mainly among children with dyslexia, (Literature Review 3.2.1), researchers such as Glazzard (2010) found a rise in self-esteem following dyslexia identification, suggesting it excuses previous disappointing performance and offers the hope of change. The current thesis extends this work. Of the students I spoke to, those whose dyslexia was only recognised recently at university said they initially felt relief that they at last had an explanation for the difficulties experienced at school and they were glad to access support (Findings 6.3.1.1). These students had lived for years with the ambiguity of not understanding why they struggled in school, particularly as they knew they were able in terms of verbal intellectual ability (for example, Sylvia’s comments in 6.1.1). They had developed personal coping strategies and tried to hide their difficulties (6.1.2.2), yet they had not embarked on the process of rationalising dyslexia as part of their identity until starting university. Therefore, when dyslexia was identified, their identity changed from one of ambiguity (no classification but self-recognised difficulty); to clarity (dyslexia as explanation of difficulty), giving rise to relief.

(ii) Anger that dyslexia was not previously recognised

Following dyslexia identification, some of the students I spoke to (e.g. Selina) said they had felt angry that they had not previously had access to an explanation for their difficulty, particularly that it had come so late in their academic journey. Both students and support tutors associated late dyslexia identification with elements of student frustration and anger (Findings 6.1.1) suggesting this may be widespread. To date, anger is seldom mentioned in dyslexia research, highlighting the opportunity to take emotion and its context into account. Moreover, this could help to inform future work exploring resentment in students’ rationalisation of dyslexia, for example questioning of the usefulness or destructiveness of an individual’s anger and its role in the complex process of accepting dyslexia as an aspect of identity.

(iii) Internalising difficulty and externalising locus of control over studies

While researchers such as Humphrey (2002) discussed in Literature Review 3.2.2 have explored learned helplessness in children and poor internal locus of control associated with dyslexia, research has seldom touched on this among university students. The students I spoke to dwelled on dyslexia as an individual defect that they could not change in themselves (Findings 6.3.1.1). They had internalised the conceptions of dyslexia as a barrier to their studies and to achieving academic success (Findings 6.3.1.2). In addition, the current study highlighted how universities' classification of dyslexia within the medical model, segregation of support and labelling of dyslexia as a disability led to changes in the power negotiation between institution and student and decreased student agency in their support and studies (Discussion 7.2.3). This thesis therefore suggests that this combination of factors lowered students' self-efficacy over their studies, by externalising the locus of control over their support at university.

For example, at least two of the students I spoke with highlighted the twin factors of internal difficulty due to dyslexia and external locus of control of support, they cited feelings of helplessness, frustration and reliance on support (for example Sylvia's comments, in Findings 6.3.1.3). This impacted on their participation in studies, for example, Sarah-Louisa even gave up further university studies at one point because of low confidence in her own academic abilities.

(iv) Internalising locus of control over studies over time

In the Literature Review 3.2.3 I discussed research that suggests individuals can form positive narratives to reposition a stigmatised identity over time, such as internalising the locus of control over the source of stigma. While dyslexia research has seldom addressed questions of locus of control among students, this idea is explored in work with children on how a strong internal locus of control over school studies builds self-efficacy. For example, Frederickson and Jacobs (2001) found that children with dyslexia developed a better academic self-concept if they had a strong internal locus of control in their work (Literature Review 3.2.2), i.e. they felt they were the main agents of their own academic success. In the following two decades little research has investigated this link among adults, so the current study is a new contribution to research in this area.

In the current study the tutors Laurence and Sarah-Louisa described how some students took 'ownership' of dyslexia (Findings 6.3.1.1), indicating that some students developed a strong internal locus of control in relation to dyslexia and their studies. The tutors said these students were self-reliant and so less dependent on external support; they developed independent coping strategies and framed dyslexia in terms of individual strengths.

The only student whom I spoke to who had developed a clear positive approach to dyslexia was Stewart. He implied he had come to terms with his dyslexia and did not feel the need to hide or be ashamed of it, as the other students in the study did. Stewart was notable for having been aware of his dyslexia from a young age and having rationalised dyslexia as an aspect of his identity gradually during his education. The current study suggests that the passage of time may have contributed to his view that dyslexia was no longer an identity threat through its association with stigma. In contrast, the other students I spoke to, whose dyslexia was only identified at university, were still processing the meanings associated with dyslexia at university and were more sensitive to the stigma of dyslexia. Further work is needed to explore this further.

There are interesting parallels between the current study's findings, that students rationalise dyslexia over time and in stages, and work on identity in health and disease (Literature Review 4.4), looking at individuals' emotional and rational reactions to acknowledgement of a new identity aspect. For example, cancer patients, following diagnosis, often have an initial period of shock followed by a phase of sense making and later a resignation to get on with life (Knapp, Marziliano and Moyer 2014). The current study adds to our understanding of how students with dyslexia may consider dyslexia's meanings, move between negative and positive framings and rationalise the implications for their identity, both over time and in different settings. Dyslexia researchers have an opportunity to explore further the idea of a trajectory of dyslexia rationalisation and to understand how student dyslexia acceptance is influenced, discussed in Conclusions 8.6.

7.3.2.2 Dyslexia acceptance involves individual resilience and persistence

The current study's findings suggest that accepting an identity associated with stigma involves complex interactions between emotional coping strategies and ideas of the self. The few studies that have explored this area among adults (Collinson and Penketh, 2010) and students (O'Byrne, Jagoe and Lawler, 2019) found that some individuals with dyslexia were more likely to frame their academic journey in terms of personal persistence and resilience to difficulty (Literature Review 3.2.3). These individuals attributed academic achievement to their own hard work, rather than to the support they received.

The current study explores how resilience in education contributes to dyslexia rationalisation and acceptance. In the study, both Sarah-Louisa and Stewart said that as part of the process of accepting dyslexia, they had determined to make the most of their studies and investment in developing their coping strategies (Findings 6.3.1.1). They decided not to let the difficulties associated with dyslexia defeat them, to shake off any associations with low academic ability and work additionally hard to prove they could achieve the grades they felt they deserved. For example, Sarah-Louisa overcame low academic confidence and pursued post-graduate education.

An existing study addressing persistence in education by students with dyslexia identified resistance from inside academic structures (Collinson and Penketh, 2010, Literature Review 3.2.3). The current project's example of Sarah-Louisa's and Stewart's resilience, described above, supports this finding. They pursued their studies at school and university until they succeeded where previously they were made to feel a failure; they proved perceived societal assumptions of low academic ability wrong.

Therefore, the current study highlights a complex and fluid interaction between students' commitment to hard work, self-confidence, and resilience in education, aided by a strong internal locus of control over studies. The study's findings explore the relationship between an individual's positive approach to studies, their view of their academic abilities and overall self-esteem. The relationships between these factors deserve further attention in the context of dyslexia (this will be addressed in more detail in Conclusions 8.6).

7.3.2.3 Late dyslexia identification delays dyslexia acceptance

In the Literature Review (3.2.1) discussing dyslexia and low self-esteem I noted dyslexia researchers (e.g. Palumbo, 2001 and McNulty, 2003) who had suggested unrecognised dyslexia in school impacts academic performance and self-esteem beyond the classroom, into adulthood. In his review of dyslexia research, Burden (2008) argued that early dyslexia identification offers the opportunity for a child to make sense of their difficulties in a gradual way as part of their educational journey, which later dyslexia identification does not. Since then, few researchers have addressed this point, so the current study contributes to research into the impact of the timing of dyslexia identification on student identity.

In Discussion section 7.1.3 above, I explored the effect of unrecognised dyslexia on students' academic progress pre-university and on classroom behaviour. The students whose dyslexia was identified later at university also told me that unrecognised dyslexia from school contributed to on-going low self-esteem as a student, even when they were later aware of dyslexia and were accessing support (Findings 6.1.1.2). The current study therefore supports and extends Burden's (2008) work, highlighting that even once dyslexia is identified, an individual needs time to understand its associated meanings, accept dyslexia as part of their identity and build academic self-confidence.

Late dyslexia identification may be particularly difficult to accept as it is a late identity change, as Goffman (1963, p.157) explains: "*The painfulness, then, of sudden stigmatization can come not from the individual's confusion about his identity, but from his knowing too well what he has become,*" the individual is aware that they no longer are normal in that aspect. Therefore, students such as Sylvia had lived for years with the ambiguity of not having an explanation for their difficulties in school

(Findings 6.1.1). Yet when these students reached university and dyslexia was identified, it was paradoxical, being both productive (offering explanation and support) as well as counter-productive (bringing stigma). This is an important finding from the study, highlighting conflict and tension in students’ rationalisation of the meanings associated with dyslexia as an aspect of their identity.

The current study highlights the importance of early dyslexia identification at school, building on the findings of the Rose (2009) report; and suggests implications at university, for example a role for psychological support to accompany late dyslexia identification (discussed in Conclusions 8.3.2). Even those whose dyslexia does not hamper them enough to merit formal support at school could benefit from being aware of dyslexia as early as possible, as it would help to explain any difficulties that may develop later and increase awareness of future support options (whether developing self-supporting coping strategies or using additional support).

In summary, most students in the current study were still processing dyslexia’s meanings and implications at university, exacerbated by late dyslexia identification. Future work could explore the impact of early and late identification on the transition to university, or study persistence (discussed in Conclusions 8.6.1).

7.3.3 Students use dyslexia's invisibility and renounceability to manage stigma in different settings

In this sub-section I will address the third of Major and O'Brien's (2005) stigma factors: stigma as identity threat. I will highlight dyslexia's individual, situational and invisible nature and explore how the current study's findings add to our understanding of dyslexia as a hidden identity, by examining how students manage dyslexia disclosure across different settings with peers (7.3.3.1), lecturers (7.3.3.2) and support (7.3.3.3). In the project, students discussed choosing whether to disclose dyslexia, with whom and in what environments, which echoes the findings of research into other hidden, non-disclosed, or renounceable identities. Therefore, I will draw from identity work on disability and other invisible stigmatised identities such as illness and mental health to inform the discussion (Literature Review 4.4).

7.3.3.1 Dyslexia as an individual defect inhibits collaborative peer support

There is a prevailing sentiment in educational settings that promotes academic success through individual effort, building competition between students instead of fostering an environment of collaboration. For example, Cameron and Billington, (2015 a/b, Literature Review 3.3.2) found that students with dyslexia position themselves as self-reliant individuals, not acknowledging their dyslexia to avoid assumptions of academic weakness in front of peers. The current study contributed further evidence for this view: the students and support tutors that I spoke to noted that students with dyslexia rarely supported each other or formed groups based on dyslexia. Instead, the individual nature of dyslexia meant that students focused on their own specific support strategies (Findings 6.1.2.2) and concealed their dyslexia from student peers (6.3.2.1). For example, Selina noted that it took time to admit her dyslexia to peers and ask for their help.

A further impact of the individual approach to dyslexia at university is that it also offers little opportunity for students with dyslexia to highlight issues as a group.

Researchers such as Spears (2011, discussed in Literature Review 3.1.4) argued that minority groups that share mutual support are more likely to raise a combined voice and challenge prejudice or bring about social change. For example, disability studies have found that collective peer support is more effective in addressing stigma and identity than isolated students following individual support strategies (Nunan, George and McCausland 2000, discussed in Literature Review 3.3.2).

Students with dyslexia have not followed the lead of other minority student groups that form cohesive communities based on a difference such as race, gender, physical disability or sexual orientation. Recent exploratory research has just started to ask how prepared students with dyslexia might be to associate with each other to share support and debate common social issues (e.g. Loveland-Amour, 2018). Cameron (2016) among others suggests that a safe space (real or online) for students with dyslexia would enable them to share experiences and discuss how to press for changes in practices and support. As Barden (2011, 2014a/b) found when exploring the opportunity to create an affinity space online for students with dyslexia, group association can occur when there is motivation, a clear goal, resources and some self-determination (Literature Review 3.3.2).

From the current project, only one support tutor mentioned in passing a group association based on dyslexia as a common bond. This was a trial, run by learning support, to initiate group social contact between former and current students with dyslexia, aiming to help dispel negative myths and boost career opportunities. While it was too early to claim success, the support department implied this was an area to explore further. By introducing alumni as examples of academic achievement and career success, the university support department aimed to build the academic self-concept of students with dyslexia.

Therefore, the current study's results highlight that students conceal dyslexia from their peers, exploiting its invisible and situational nature. However, this diminishes the possibility of peer support or group affiliation around dyslexia as a common issue. Instead, the individual approach to support at university isolates individuals and removes the potential for effecting social change through group activism.

7.3.3.2 Students fear lecturers’ prejudice and dyslexia denial

In a study from a decade ago, Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012) found that attitudes towards dyslexia among university lecturers varied widely, some even questioned if dyslexia existed (Literature Review 3.2.4). The authors found a correlation between dyslexia awareness and a sense of responsibility to identify and support students with dyslexia through their studies. The current study extends and updates this previous research, as it explores student experiences of lecturer reactions to dyslexia and discussed how prepared they were to make lecturers aware of dyslexia.

The students that I spoke to were not comfortable flagging dyslexia to lecturers directly as they didn’t want to be seen as asking for special treatment (e.g. Stewart and Selina, Findings 6.3.2.2). They worried that disclosing dyslexia would focus attention on their difficulties, risk inviting unhelpful attitudes to dyslexia and highlight a difference from their peers. However, they acknowledged a dilemma as they felt that concealing dyslexia could risk lower marks in their studies if lecturers were not aware of their difficulties. This situation highlights dissonance between students’ desire for lecturer understanding and their own reticence in making them aware of dyslexia. While some universities had systems that could electronically flag up a student with dyslexia (e.g. on class lists), the support tutors agreed that this was not as effective an approach as the student having a direct conversation with a lecturer. Furthermore, few lecturers have specific training on dyslexia and support tutors noted that voluntary dyslexia workshops they had run for lecturers were not well attended (Findings 6.2.3.2).

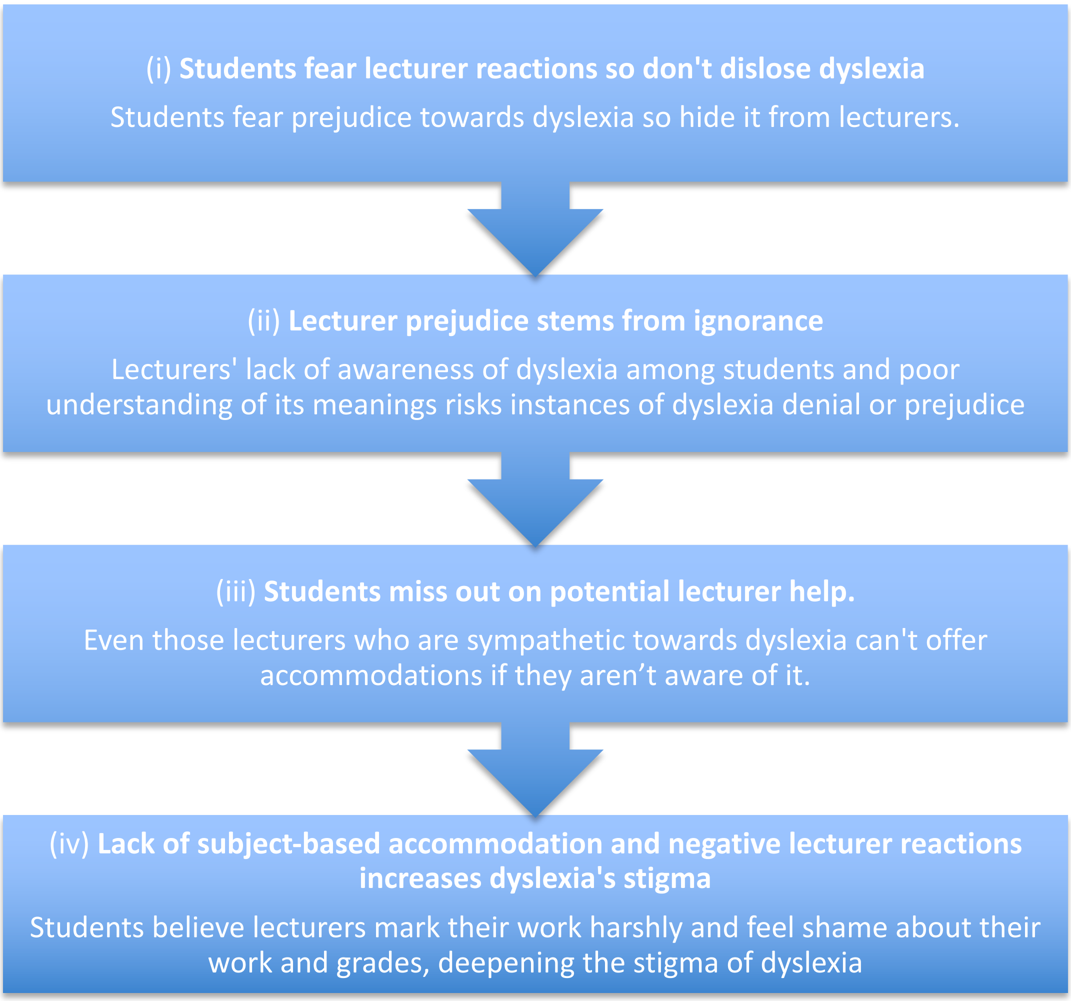
The main reason students gave for not wishing to highlight dyslexia to lecturers was that they worried about prejudice or misconceptions (Findings 6.2.3). This shows a fear of betrayal of trust: if the student chose to disclose dyslexia to a lecturer, they give the lecturer privileged information on the student. If the lecturer then expressed prejudice towards dyslexia (in Sylvia's case) or denied it existed (as with Selina) the student felt especially sensitive towards this (Findings 6.2.3.2). The current project also suggests that dyslexia denial or resistance may be a wider problem among lecturers than we might think. To date there is little research other than Cameron and Nunkoosing's (2012) study with 13 lecturers that investigates dyslexia misunderstanding and denial.

We can gain insight into a fear of trust betrayal from other research areas where identities such as sexual orientation are selectively disclosed and where neutral or negative reactions of confidants can influence the confider's feelings. Research shows that anything other than a positive reaction to disclosure of a hidden and stigmatised identity has a negative impact on the discloser's mental and physical health (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010 in Literature Review 3.4.3). There are parallels with the current study's findings: the students I spoke to said that their work and confidence suffered when they came across lecturer ignorance about dyslexia, prejudice against it, or unwillingness to take their difficulties into account (Findings 6.2.3). Publicly denying that dyslexia existed (as a lecturer did in front of Selina and her peers) equated to a social put-down by lecturers. Moreover, the lecturer is denying the student an explanation for their difficulties, which may only recently have been achieved through dyslexia identification at university, following years of unexplained struggle at school. Therefore, a lecturer's dismissal of dyslexia can take the student back to assumptions about academic slowness or laziness from school.

Further, in this project, Selina felt she had to accept the lecturer's half-hearted apology for dyslexia denial, delivered via a third party. She had accepted that the lecturer's prejudice was an example of a widely held attitude towards dyslexia and so could be excused. To counter societal misconceptions and prejudice evident above, work from mental health researchers Roe, Lysaker and Yanos (2014) is useful. They argue for three strategies to address prejudice leading to stigma (discussed in Literature review 4.4) and explored in the Conclusions 8.3.1. These involve better education of those involved to counter misinformation; contact and communication with individuals to break stereotypes; and protest and awareness raising more generally to highlight what is (or not) acceptable.

The evidence from the current study therefore suggests (i) students are not likely to find accommodation or understanding among lecturers who are unaware of their dyslexia; (ii) by not disclosing or discussing dyslexia with lecturers, students are diminishing the chances that those lecturers who are neutral or negative towards dyslexia may come to understand dyslexia better or be more sympathetic in the future; (iii) student non-disclosure of dyslexia also reduces the opportunity for understanding or support from those lecturers who are sympathetic to those with dyslexia; and (iv) lecturers' poor awareness of dyslexia, dyslexia denial or prejudice contributes to dyslexia's stigma. These findings are illustrated in Figure 28 below.

Figure 28: Non-disclosure of dyslexia to lecturers only increases its stigma



(i) **Students fear lecturer reactions so don't dislose dyslexia**

Students fear prejudice towards dyslexia so hide it from lecturers.

(ii) **Lecturer prejudice stems from ignorance**

Lecturers' lack of awareness of dyslexia among students and poor understanding of its meanings risks instances of dyslexia denial or prejudice

(iii) **Students miss out on potential lecturer help.**

Even those lecturers who are sympathetic towards dyslexia can't offer accommodations if they aren't aware of it.

(iv) **Lack of subject-based accommodation and negative lecturer reactions increases dyslexia's stigma**

Students believe lecturers mark their work harshly and feel shame about their work and grades, deepening the stigma of dyslexia

7.3.3.3 Students balance accepting support with building self-efficacy

The previous two sub-sections address dyslexia non-disclosure among lecturers and peers. Here I will explore the findings from the student and tutor discussions that shed light on dyslexia disclosure to the learning support department. Students with dyslexia who don't declare it to the university are a difficult group to access for research: many studies, including the current one, rely on contacting students through learning support departments, following dyslexia disclosure (project limitations such as this are discussed in Conclusions 8.5). Therefore, I could not examine student decisions on dyslexia non-disclosure to the university due to the recruitment method. However, I did hear from students who had later rejected the help on offer from university learning support departments. The discussion below sheds light on the reasons why.

While student uptake or rejection of learning support for dyslexia at university is difficult to probe, it is explored in a few studies such as Madriaga (2007) and Henderson (2017) (Literature Review, 3.4.1). These found that students who don't seek support cite a fear of stereotyping by negative traits. The current study extends existing research, finding that students made a trade-off between stigma and support as they weighed up the benefits of receiving support against the stigma associated with dyslexia (Findings 6.2.1.2 and 6.3.1.3). A clue to understanding the decision to reject support comes from Selina: she referred to rebuilding self-efficacy in her work (Findings 6.3.2.3). Selina preferred the ambiguity of not acknowledging dyslexia openly as part of her identity as it increased her agency in her studies, rather than identity clarity that brought stigma and lowered self-efficacy.

Previous work on rejection of a stigmatized identity highlights individual empowerment as key to removing stigma, giving a greater sense of power over the future, control over identity and being able to voice opinions. For example, Nalavany (2012) found students were able to lift some of the depressing effects of dyslexia, if they developed a sense of individual strength and ability, countering the association of dyslexia with defect, slowness and inability. This finding is echoed in studies on mental health disorders (Literature Review 4.4), where making individuals active participants in their social choices and support aided acceptance of the disorder and lowered perceived stigma (Ilic *et al*, 2014). Further, anti-stigma campaigns successfully tackled the stigma of disclosure and repositioned how those with mental disorders saw support (Corrigan, 2014). The current study suggests that for some students, in the absence of anti-stigma initiatives and given their low agency in support decisions, self-efficacy increases only once they reject university support.

We know little about the long-term consequences of these identity choices, or the impact of rejecting support on the student, both in terms of self-concept as well as academic impacts on their future. These findings of the current project merit further work to understand in more detail (discussed in Conclusions 8.6).

7.3.4 Management of dyslexia's stigma impacts student identity

In the Literature Review 3.1.2 I outlined definitions of self-concept as how we construct our identity in different settings and self-esteem as the effect of this on how we understand ourselves. For the past two decades researchers have asked questions of the relationship between difficulties in the school classroom, self-concept and self-esteem. For example, McNulty (2003), Madriaga (2007), Collinson and Penketh (2010) and Deacon, Macdonald and Donoghue (2020) found links between dyslexia, difficult school experiences and low self-esteem, which persisted into adulthood (Literature Review 3.2.1). Yet few studies have explored the link between dyslexia and low self-esteem specifically among students at university, which the current study explores. In this last sub-section of the Discussion, I will draw together the study findings on the impact of universities' dyslexia approach to student identity, specifically the effect of (i) dyslexia's stigma on student self-concept and (ii) students' concealing of dyslexia on identity authenticity.

7.3.4.1 The stigma of dyslexia at university influences academic self-concept

As discussed in the Literature Review 3.2.1, researchers have explored the impact of dyslexia on children's self-esteem (Humphrey and Mullins, 2002) and examined the links between literacy, low value and academic failure in schools (Tanner, 2009). The current study's findings extend this previous research with children, by exploring student dyslexia and self-esteem.

I have argued that universities' medical approach to dyslexia (i) locates the problem with the student (Discussion 7.2.3.1); (ii) reduces student agency in their learning support (7.2.3.2); and (iii) confers all three of Goffman's types of stigma (7.3.1). The findings from my discussions with students suggest these issues combined to have a significant impact on students' academic self-concept, affecting overall self-esteem, particularly when combined with a history of unidentified dyslexia in the school classroom (Discussion 7.1.3). For example, study participants wrestled with doubt over their academic abilities (Findings 6.1.1) and cited low confidence in academic settings (low academic self-concept), which contributed to low self-esteem (6.3.1). Three of the students (Sarah-Louisa, Sylvia and Stewart) felt that dyslexia had affected decisions on their studies, from lesson participation to course applications and overall academic ambitions. Sarah-Louisa said that she had previously dropped out of a course she had been accepted for, as she did not have confidence in her academic abilities due to concerns about dyslexia (6.1.2). Moreover, Sarah-Louisa confided to me that she had accessed psychological support to address low self-esteem and she was still coming to terms with dyslexia (6.3.1.2).

The current study therefore supports a link between student dyslexia, low academic self-concept and low mood, which has been hinted at by previous studies (Literature Review 3.2.1). For example, Terras, Thompson and Minnis (2009) connected dyslexia in US students with an increased risk of depression. While Burden's (2008) review was unable to make a conclusive connection between adult dyslexia and specific psychiatric disorders, he theorized a link between low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

In summary, universities' dyslexia approach and the resulting stigma impacted student academic self-concept, which affected not only their study choices but also overall mental health. Further work on this would develop our understanding of the connections between dyslexia, academic self-concept and mental health.

7.3.4.2 Non-disclosure of dyslexia affects identity authenticity

In the Discussion section 7.3.1 above I highlighted dyslexia as an invisible and situational identity aspect that is associated with stigma when uncovered. Existing research suggests that the primary factor why students don't disclose disability (Lindsay, Cagliostro and Carafa 2018) or dyslexia (Henderson, 2017) at university is fear of stigma (Literature Review 3.4). Therefore, students with dyslexia are under threat of being discredited in academic settings (discussed in 7.3.3). Moreover, work by Nalavany, Carawan and Sauber (2015) suggested that the fear of discovery of dyslexia in adults led to low self-esteem.

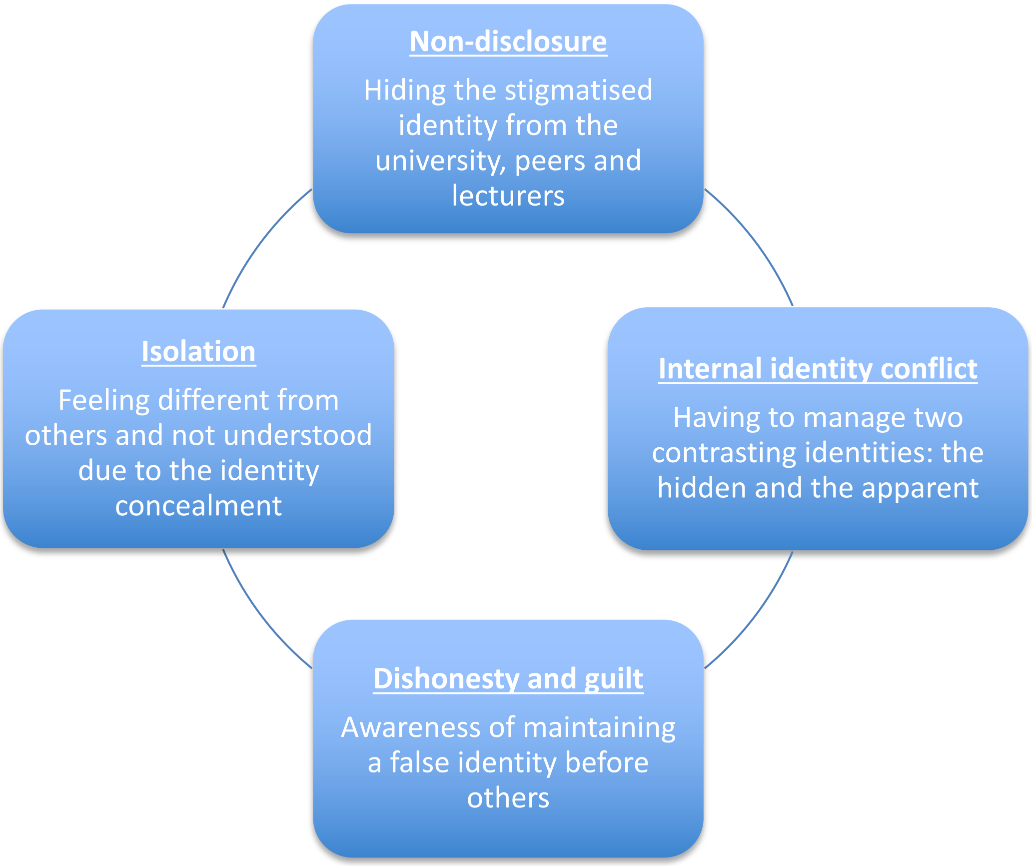
The impact of identity concealment has not been explored in depth among students with dyslexia. The current study therefore extends our understanding of the rationale of dyslexia non-disclosure decisions and the impact of this on student identity authenticity. For example, the students I spoke to chose to deceive lecturers and peers, preferring to conceal dyslexia rather than openly acknowledge it, which risked stigma and prejudice (Findings 6.3.2). Moreover, they accepted significant inconvenience to hide dyslexia, such as Selina avoiding her usual car-share when going to a support lesson. The students found it particularly important to hide dyslexia in situations when it could become obtrusive rather than just visible, for example Stewart avoided study classes where he struggled to read aloud in a group.

These findings relate to wider identity work, which has explored this area further, as discussed in Literature Review 3.4.4. Research suggests that low self-esteem stems from the stress of having to conceal an identity, isolation through being perceived falsely or from fear of rejection from social groups, and conflict in hiding the identity aspect in different settings. For example, identity researchers such as Newheiser and

Baretto (2006) explored how hiding a stigmatised identity aspect requires acts of deception, which Ragins (2008) argued led to self-denial (total identity concealment) or disconnect between identity domains (identity conflict) as the individual only publicly rejected the authentic identity to fit in with those around them. Burke and Stets (2009) found identity disconnect through non-disclosure led to stress from fear of discovery and feelings of isolation. Further, Newheiser and Barreto (2014) agreed that concealment of a stigmatised identity led to feelings of rejection and lowered a sense of belonging, despite suppression of stigma.

By examining students' dyslexia disclosure dilemmas, the current project highlights how students with dyslexia choose between being perceived falsely, or with stigma. If they choose to conceal dyslexia, they faced stress in having to manage dyslexia as a hidden identity aspect, isolation in being aware of their difference to hide it, and conflict in supporting a false identity in certain settings. These negative impacts of dyslexia non-disclosure are illustrated in Figure 29 below, highlighting a vicious circle affecting student self-esteem. There is scope for further work to explore these ideas of identity deception, disconnect, denial and authenticity among students and adults with dyslexia, which will be explored in Conclusions 8.6.

Figure 29: The impact of hiding dyslexia as a stigmatised identity at university



Sub-section 7.3 Concluding comments

This section of the Discussion addresses the third research sub-question, exploring the impact of universities' dyslexia approach on student identity (see Figure 30 below). From the evidence of the study, the medical approach to dyslexia confers all three of Goffman's stigma types, by positioning dyslexia as defect, disability and a condition needing segregated support. Alongside the stigma, students undergo a complex process of rationalisation before they accept dyslexia as part of their identity, which late identification at university delays. Moreover, they hide dyslexia from peers and lecturers, fearing assumptions of academic weakness. Therefore, in addition to the low academic self-concept resulting from the stigma associated with dyslexia, students risk stress, isolation and identity conflict through the deception of hiding dyslexia as an aspect of their identity.

Figure 30: The discussion themes responding to the third research sub-question

Research questions	**What is the impact of this approach on student identity?**			
Discussion sections	7.3 Universities' dyslexia approach undermines student self-esteem			
Sub-section and themes	7.3.1 Dyslexia confers three types of stigma at university	7.3.2 Students need time to process dyslexia as part of their identity	7.3.3 Students use dyslexia's invisibility to manage stigma	7.3.4 Dyslexia stigma and its management impact student identity
Issues	Medical framing of dyslexia as defect and disability needing support	Students rationalise dyslexia in stages, acceptance requires resilience	Students hide dyslexia fearing prejudice, some even reject support	Low academic self-concept and identity conflict
Other relevant research areas	Goffman's types of stigma and work on disability stigma and identity	Identity work on rationalising and accepting illness	Identity work on invisible disability and disease	Identity work on concealment and authenticity
Pathway forward	Forming a positive framing of difference and reframing support	Promoting early identification and a strong internal locus of control	Educating lecturers on dyslexia and encourgaging group support	Understanding links between hidden identity, self-esteem and low mood

8. CONCLUSIONS

As the thesis contributes to an emerging research field, the findings, analysis and theory developed offer exploratory rather than exhaustive themes, aiming to highlight areas to be examined in future research. With this in mind, in this Conclusions chapter I will first review the context of the thesis and its philosophical approach in 8.1, appraising how the research question addresses gaps in the literature and frames the goal of the thesis. Next in 8.2, I will highlight the theoretical contributions to dyslexia research, addressing the primary audience of this thesis. Then in 8.3 I will draw out implications for (i) those who develop universities' dyslexia policy and (ii) student dyslexia support practitioners as the project's secondary audience. Lastly, I will reflect on the study methodology in 8.4, the limitations of the project in 8.5 and the potential for further research in this area in 8.6, before offering a few final comments in 8.7.

8.1 The context of the thesis research

The goal of the thesis was to theorise the identity impacts of students' experiences of dyslexia in the context of the university approach to dyslexia. The thesis therefore aimed to contribute to dyslexia research by asking the research question: **What is the identity impact of dyslexia for students in UK higher education?** To respond to this question, I divided it into three sub-questions that address specific gaps in the dyslexia literature, as follows:

1) What is the student experience of dyslexia?

Dyslexia persists throughout an individual's life, yet comparatively few studies address the experience of dyslexia among adults or students, most are studies with school-age children. Further, the existing research that does address students with dyslexia focuses on their specific study challenges and the practicalities of supporting them (outlined in the Literature Review 2.1.2). As mentioned in the Introduction, dyslexia researchers such as Cameron (2016) highlighted a need (as yet still unanswered, despite repeated literature searches during the course of the thesis) for research that specifically sets out to understand the wider experiences of students with dyslexia, with a view to exploring the context of attitudes to dyslexia, which is the subject of the current thesis' first sub-question.

2) How do universities approach dyslexia?

University policy requires students to identify dyslexia as a disability to qualify for accommodations, which are offered through segregated support departments. Prevett, Bell and Ralph (2013) called for work to explore the institutional and societal beliefs that affect the experiences and self-esteem of those with dyslexia in education (Literature Review 2.2.3). Since then, few researchers have probed universities' dyslexia approach in detail, evident through their policy and practices, or theorised the impact of this on the relationship with students with dyslexia. These are the topics explored by the second sub-question.

3) What is the impact of these on the identity of students with dyslexia?

Existing literature (e.g. Burden, 2008) suggests a link between dyslexia and low self-concept, which has been explored among children but only touched on with students. The third sub-question addresses this gap in the literature and brings together the first two sub-question areas, by asking about the identity impact of the student experience of dyslexia in the context of universities' approach to dyslexia. The thesis theorises how dyslexia's stigma affects student self-esteem and explores the reasons behind their preparedness to disclose dyslexia, or preference to conceal it with different audiences, in different settings, or at different stages of their academic journey.

Other researchers' understandable difficulties in recruiting students with dyslexia (e.g. due to data protection rules), particularly across multiple universities, has led to a concentration on small focus group discussions, mostly led by a support tutor-researcher at a single university (e.g. Cameron and Billington, 2015), which limits research extensibility. This thesis provides insights to develop theory, derived from one-to-one qualitative interviews with students, triangulated through discussions with support tutors at four UK universities.

To answer the first sub-question on the experience of university students with dyslexia, the project used the discussions with students to examine their experiences of dyslexia as an identified and unidentified phenomenon and their thoughts on dyslexia at university, including its identification and accommodation. In responding to the second sub-question, I explored the meanings that students and support tutors associated with dyslexia in the context of university teaching and support and the implications of this, particularly in terms of the power relationship between individual and institution. The third sub-question explored students' and support tutors' perspectives on the interactions between institutional dyslexia approach, stigma, student self-concept and identity management through decisions on dyslexia disclosure and concealment and the impact on students' overall self-esteem.

To develop the thesis Methodology and as a basis for the Discussion, I applied a critical approach (discussed in Methodology 5.1), following Frauenberger's (2015) ideas of critical realism as a framework for the ontology and epistemology. This helps researchers to explore the different ways that individuals perceive reality, through the lens of our own socially constructed perspectives. The thesis aimed to confront societal assumptions, challenge the status quo and raise questions of social justice, for example identifying issues such as dyslexia's status as a defect, the disability label and segregation of university support. The thesis does relational work, theorising how universities' approach to dyslexia changes the power dynamic in the student-institution relationship, as well as impacts student identity and self-esteem. I also discuss the findings and analysis in the light of literature that draws from critical perspectives in education, disability studies, social justice work, as well as identity research on stigmatised identities in the fields of health and disease.

8.2 Contributions to dyslexia research

In this section I will discuss how the current project informs the work of dyslexia researchers, as the project's primary audience. I highlight the thesis' contribution to our understanding of (i) the identity impacts of the student experience of dyslexia in UK higher education; and (ii) the interactions between societal attitudes, institutional policy and practices and dyslexia stigma.

8.2.1 Contribution to theory on the identity impact of dyslexia in higher education

In the Discussion (7.3.1) I argued that dyslexia confers all three of Goffman's stigma types: Students experience the stigma of (i) mental illness (dyslexia positioned by the university as a neurological defect); (ii) physical disorder (dyslexia labelled as a disability in order to qualify for support); and (iii) tainted group identity (through segregated learning support). Specifically, I suggested that dyslexia's stigma impacts student self-esteem through low academic self-concept and self-efficacy. As a result of this, study participants had dropped out of classes, failed to complete courses or chosen not to apply for further studies. Therefore, the project contributes evidence that dyslexia's stigma impacted negatively on students' participation in their studies.

One of the most startling contributions of the thesis is an exploration of how students manage dyslexia's stigma through its disclosure or concealment, and the impact of this on their self-esteem. In particular, student participants were reluctant to disclose dyslexia to lecturers and most peers (Discussion 7.3.3), fearing prejudice and misunderstanding. They used dyslexia's invisible and situational nature to hide it. This led to contradictions between students' goals and their behavior, for example, students wished lecturers to take dyslexia into account, yet they were shy of declaring dyslexia, fearing prejudice or dyslexia denial (7.3.3.2).

Moreover, dyslexia concealment led to identity conflict, personal inconvenience, and fear of discovery. In some cases, the student even later rejected their hard-won learning support to internalise the locus of control over their studies (7.3.3.3), as support tutors put it "taking ownership of their dyslexia." These revelations and their link to dyslexia's stigma at university enhance our understanding of the identity impacts of dyslexia and suggest areas to explore further (see Conclusions 8.6).

Further, the thesis highlights that unidentified dyslexia throughout school (Discussion 7.1.3), when a student is denied an explanation for difficulties and delayed access to support, lowers confidence in their academic abilities. The study participants associated dyslexia with disruption and truancy in school and lower achievement and reduced ambition at university. Therefore, the project underlines the importance of early dyslexia identification and the need for further work (see 8.6) to understand the role of this in improving academic potential and self-esteem.

Participants were also conscious of prevailing societal low academic expectations for those with dyslexia (Discussion 7.3.1.1). However, they rejected the association of dyslexia at university with negative traits, low academic ability, or a type (7.1.1). The conflicts between students' and institutional conceptualisations of dyslexia raise questions about who controls dyslexia's meanings. From the evidence of this study, it is the university's framing of dyslexia as defect and disability that prevails, with consequences for student identity. Further, participants emphasised dyslexia's heterogeneity, highlighting it as an individual phenomenon with variance in how it manifests between individuals and over time (7.1.2). Students' varying struggles contrasted with standardised dyslexia testing and support on offer in education, questioning its relevance to dyslexia's heterogeneous and changing nature.

The project also contributes to our understanding of how students rationalise and accept dyslexia as part of their identity over time, progressing from relief to anger, despair to determination (Discussion 7.3.2.1). I suggest that dyslexia acceptance is related to how early it is identified and how long individuals have, to come to terms with its meanings (7.3.2.3). Further, the succession of emotional and rational reactions to dyslexia depends on the extent to which the student internalises difficulty associated with dyslexia and externalises control over their studies, or whether they develop personal resilience, externalise difficulty and see dyslexia as a challenge to master (7.3.2.2). Understanding dyslexia conceptualisations will have implications for dyslexia support, particularly for those only discovering dyslexia at university, as well as emphasising the role of identification at school.

8.2.2 Contribution to understanding the interactions between societal attitudes, university policy and dyslexia's stigma

In the project discussions, I was aware of universities' medical approach to dyslexia as defect and disability (Discussion 7.2.2). Support tutors justified this approach as they were anxious not to lose the special status of the disability label for dyslexia, as it conferred legal rights and funding. The student participants had internalised the universities' conceptualisation of dyslexia as a defect to remediate (7.2.2.1), which impacted their academic self-concept, reduced ambition, affected academic choices and lowered self-esteem (7.3.4.1). Further, students had little agency in dyslexia's identification or accommodation: they felt they relied on learning support for help (7.2.3.1), even if they were uncomfortable with the disability label and its segregation from subject teaching. This externalised students' locus of control over their academic success, further lowering self-efficacy and impacting self-esteem.

This thesis theorises universities' dyslexia classification (Discussion 7.2.1), applying ideas from disability research and social justice work. These suggest that we should take into account the socio-cultural nature of classification and reflect on the impact of blurred boundaries and non-alignment to fixed binary categories (e.g. of gender or sexuality). I highlight dyslexia as a plural and changing phenomenon, raising questions over the fairness of a dyslexia test as a binary classification, made at one point in time. Universities' dyslexia classification as a disability is a gateway to restricted support and its binary identification may lead to disadvantage for those who just fail to qualify at (7.1.3).

While universities' current dyslexia approach appears to satisfy UK disability law and balances this with university funding constraints, it also raises questions. The project highlights that students must navigate between different approaches to dyslexia, balancing their own socially situated approach (emphasising its heterogeneous and situational nature) alongside the medical approach underlying university policy (Discussion 7.2.2.2). The thesis asks questions of who must adapt to access support (e.g. currently the student adapts to university teaching, not the other way round) and highlights the identity impositions necessary (e.g. the disability label).

In the Discussion I also argued that universities' medical approach to dyslexia changes the power negotiation with students, forcing them to seek support segregated from subject teaching and diminishing student agency in their support (Discussion 7.2.3). I highlighted the impact of locating student support in siloed departments, which focuses on the otherness of needing help for dyslexia, "like going to a sexual health clinic" (Discussion 7.2.3.1).

This thesis therefore suggests that university policy towards dyslexia fails to (i) remove disadvantage (e.g. with suggestions of unfairness in binary dyslexia testing), (ii) reduce barriers to study (e.g. requiring the student to adapt and accept identity impositions to request help), (iii) increase inclusion (e.g. with little subject-based accommodation), or (iv) raise awareness of difficulty (with few lecturers aware of or engaging with those with dyslexia).

I also offer a new understanding of how the institutional approach to dyslexia affects students' rationalization of dyslexia and its stigma, influences disclosure decisions as part of stigma management and impacts student identity, academic self-concept and ambitions. The study opens the way for further work to explore the interactions between societal attitudes, institutional practices, and dyslexia's stigma (discussed in Conclusions 8.6), which it was beyond the scope of this project to answer. However, the findings suggest that improving the academic self-concept and self-efficacy of students with dyslexia should be a priority, potentially impacting academic ambition and self-esteem as well as student participation and academic performance.

8.3 Implications for university dyslexia support

This thesis agrees with researchers such as Cameron & Billington (2015) who recognise it is important to clarify the social and political construction of phenomena to understand and counter prejudice and stigma in education (Literature Review 3.3.2). Disability research has explored the societal constructions of disability, highlighting policies and practices that address social justice and inclusion (Literature Review 4.2). However, little work to date addresses dyslexia in this light, even less in higher education. The current project emphasises the need for a change in attitudes and policy as well as institutional practices, to challenge assumptions, highlight prejudice and improve support for students with dyslexia in higher education.

In this section I will consider the implications of the study for its secondary audiences, (i) those who work teaching and supporting students with dyslexia and (ii) those who influence university policy concerning dyslexia.

8.3.1 Suggestions for practices in dyslexia support

The current project advocates that universities consider a more open, inclusive and individual approach to how dyslexia is identified and how support is delivered and presented to students, to improve its relevance to individual profiles, to reach a wider range of students who may benefit from study support and to include student agency in that process. I therefore suggest the following implications for dyslexia practitioners who develop student support.

Student participants tended to seek help only when they encountered problems with their studies, delaying access to potential support (Findings 6.1.1.3). In addition, the current study concludes that later dyslexia identification at university delayed the process of dyslexia identity acceptance, impacting student academic self-concept. This highlights the importance of early dyslexia identification, prior to or at university, a crucial take-away for support tutors, not just at universities. By encouraging students with dyslexia to come forward early in their course and accelerating the identification and assessment process, support practitioners will help students to understand and accept dyslexia as soon as possible, as well as develop timely support strategies.

Those students who only learn of dyslexia during a degree (or graduate) course will take time coming to terms with what it means for them. The findings in this study suggest that few of these students may see it in a positive light at university, instead hiding dyslexia and wrestling with the stigma of support. Therefore, when identifying dyslexia, support practitioners should signpost access to emotional support as well as practical study help, to counter the low self-esteem associated with dyslexia.

A further recommendation of the current project is that widening access to general study skills training to all students would enable support tutors to focus their limited one-to-one time on personalised support for specific issues. Learning support departments could post online tutorials on general study techniques for all students and offer drop-in group sessions to discuss issues or signpost to a study tutor in subject departments. Open access study-skills tutorials would have the benefit of de-stigmatising learning support as it is available to all, furthermore this would reach some students with mild dyslexia who might not have otherwise requested support.

In this thesis I join researchers such as Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012), Henderson (2017) and Blessinger, Hoffman and Makhanya (2019) who call for universities to promote student peer-group dyslexia understanding and support, to lessen the stigma of dyslexia highlighted by this study. An inclusive student education and leadership programme, led by the support department, would encourage appreciation of diversity across the whole student body. This is important particularly in the first year of study, to encourage inclusive thinking among new arrivals and to encourage students to come forward early for dyslexia testing, rather than waiting until they face issues with their work, such as missed deadlines.

Student mentoring is another way to decrease stigma and encourage group cohesion around a common experience. Yet fewer than half of universities offer student mentoring of any sort, despite evidence it increases student satisfaction (Dobson, 2017). Research by dyslexia support tutors such as Loveland-Armour (2018), discussed in Literature review 3.3.2, found that students do not see dyslexia as an issue for group cohesion. However, group identity work has been used in disability support, for example Burgstahler and Crawford (2007) advocated online-mentoring and peer support for students with disabilities. Only one of the support tutors that I spoke to knew of a mentoring scheme. This was aimed specifically at current students with dyslexia, linking them with alumni in a vocational area who also had identified with dyslexia and was claimed to be successful in boosting the confidence of current students with dyslexia as well as engaging former alumni.

8.3.2 Consequences for university policy towards those with dyslexia

In the current project I argued that segregated departments offering dyslexia support under the disability banner and using the language of defect and remediation, stigmatised those seeking help and reduced student agency in support (Conclusions 8.2.2). Study participants associated dyslexia at university with low academic self-concept and self-efficacy and they attempted to manage the stigma by concealing dyslexia, further impacting self-esteem (8.2.1).

The thesis highlights suggestions from disability studies (Literature Review 4.2) on repositioning impairment to reshape unhelpful attitudes and counter exclusionary practices. Disability re-framing focuses on lessening stigma and opening up dialogue on the subject to broaden the support sources available (e.g. to include lecturers and peers as possible sources of support for students with dyslexia). Further ideas come from mental health research (4.4), which has applied education, contact with those affected, and protest to raise awareness and highlight prejudice.

Universities have an opportunity to apply these ideas to dyslexia, to re-think the labels, language and implementation of dyslexia policy, administered through learning support. We can reframe dyslexia as one of a range of plural and overlapping cognitive differences (e.g. ADHD, autism, dyscalculia), where dyslexia's differences present as vulnerabilities to certain challenges, evident in our current education system. Dyslexia is therefore positioned as a heterogeneous difference where the disadvantage experienced depends on the setting and the individual's coping strategies; it is not an innate defect associated with specific traits and expectations of academic struggle and low achievement.

However, re-framing dyslexia as cognitive variance still allows for specific differences to be described. This affords legal protection and accommodations, but on a spectrum where an individual's experience of dyslexia can change over time and depends on the demands of the setting. It also argues for flexible accommodations, available at different stages of a student's career and adaptable to varying difficulties over time. This opens the possibility for greater student choice in the appropriate emphasis, mode and volume of support.

Universities also have a moral and arguably a legal obligation to counter dyslexia prejudice and misunderstanding among staff, e.g. lecturers. As the student participants Selina and Sylvia highlighted, lecturer dyslexia denial or prejudice has a disproportionate effect on students particularly in a public environment, given lecturers' status. Universities need to open discussions on dyslexia among their teaching staff, whether as part of wider awareness of disabilities or as part of teaching training on pedagogy development. Institutions should consider how to achieve this when (as the current study found) few lecturers attend voluntary workshops run by support departments. However, most lecturers will come across many students with dyslexia in their teaching career, even if they are not aware of it. Compulsory training for teaching staff via an online module may be a viable way forward (as with GDPR, intellectual property rights, workplace safety and other awareness training). The training should include positive messaging on cognitive differences and suggestions for pedagogy that is inclusive, with further information available online, for example ‘How To’ guides that suggest best practice in engaging students and presenting teaching materials to include students with dyslexia. Researchers such as Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Boucher and Evans (2018) offer examples of Universal Design for Learning in practice, to support students with dyslexia in the US.

By raising awareness of dyslexia and encouraging lecturers to discuss it directly with students, universities have an opportunity to build choice in where students can turn for help and reduce study barriers for those with dyslexia. While there are many demands on lecturers’ time, finding ways to solve a student’s difficulty early is in everyone’s interests, before it becomes a major problem leading to course drop-out, failure or seriously impacting a student’s academic self-concept and self-esteem.

Lastly, universities should consider how the support department implements policy, as part of a wider dyslexia policy review. While prejudiced attitudes persist in society and pedagogy still disadvantages those with dyslexia, I do not argue to disband support tutors who have a deep understanding and experience of dyslexia support. Students may still benefit from specialist support and advice, particularly when dyslexia is first identified at university. Also, specialist services such as learning support are one area where universities can differentiate their offering. However, in the face of funding reductions, universities have a clear incentive to reduce the costly standard award of 30 sessions a year of one-to-one time with support tutors. Support departments could develop a flexible role in (i) encouraging dyslexia awareness and support across the university; (ii) being the anchor point for a student’s dyslexia support journey including subject departments and specialist help; and (ii) advocating for and including student input into support decisions.

8.4 Reflections on the methodology

In chapter 5, I presented the methodology used in the project. This included the ontological and epistemological approach; the research design and methods; how participants were recruited; how discussions were conducted; the questions addressed and the analytical approach taken; reference to how data was handled; and the ethical and risk considerations taken into account. In this section I will reflect on specific aspects of the methodological approach that may have influenced the data gathered and analysis of findings before I highlight the overall limitations of the project in the next section. I will focus on the participant recruitment process, the decision to use dyslexia self-reporting, the modes used for the participant discussions and my reflexivity as researcher in the project.

8.4.1 Participant recruitment

The interview process, as part of an exploratory project, aimed to collect qualitative data from in-depth interviews with a limited number of information-rich participants to explore the research question areas (the research design is discussed in Methodology 5.2). This enabled me as researcher to develop, assign and analyse themes, and by applying a critical perspective, inductively to develop theory and introduce further ideas from outside dyslexia research.

Over the one-year data-gathering period and despite extensive efforts to recruit participants from 12 UK universities, fewer than 10 students volunteered to contribute to the project. This culminated in discussions (via email and phone) with five students (current and recent), in addition to interviews with four support tutors (with overlap where one tutor was also interviewed as a recent student).

I made a strategic decision that the detailed and wide-ranging discussions with five students and four support tutors were an appropriate number for an early-stage study such as this, where the contributions were from developing and applying theory rather than from quantitative data analysis. Consequently, the project does not claim that that the participants are a representative sample of the body of UK students with dyslexia and I did not attempt to ensure a particular distribution across subject, university type, or location or indeed across student demographics, socio-economic background or other descriptor. It was, however, useful to include a range of perspectives from male and female students, plus a mix of undergraduate, graduate and mature students.

As outlined in the Methodology section 5.3, the email notice to potential participants was unproductive when published via The Helen Arkell Centre. This, while an early disappointment for the study, was interesting to note as an absence of willingness on the part of students to participate, although the reasons for this are unclear. A more successful strategy recruited participants directly through university support departments via email and noticeboard flyers. The efforts and timescale needed to recruit even these few participants underline the difficulty of encouraging students to participate in research that discusses dyslexia at university.

I also reflected on the appropriateness of including a recent student (Sarah-Louisa) who worked as a support tutor in a learning support department. I believed that there was value in including this dual perspective from one individual, a rare opportunity in dyslexia research. I therefore conducted two separate interviews with her, one interview considering each role. These two perspectives enabled me to explore the complexity and conflict of a student's and learning support tutor's experiences and thoughts on dyslexia and identity, when combined within the same individual. I highlighted illustrations of this conflict throughout the Findings chapter.

8.4.2 Participant dyslexia self-identification

In the project I acknowledge that participant recruitment (discussed in Methodology 5.3) by posting a flyer for the project on a learning support department noticeboard or via an email to those receiving learning support, meant that the student participants would most likely have been aware of and declared dyslexia to the university. Therefore, the project is not likely to have recruited those in ignorance or denial about dyslexia or to include those with dyslexia who had not sought learning support at university. Individuals who may not be aware of dyslexia or who do not wish to identify it to a university are not well understood in dyslexia research, due to the difficulty of accessing these participants. The absence of their voice in dyslexia research makes these individuals even more important to include in future projects.

Further, the student participants in the current study must have been comfortable enough with their dyslexia to be prepared to have a conversation or email discussion with an unfamiliar researcher on the topic. They may also associate dyslexia at university with either particularly positive or negative experiences, as speaking to an external researcher may be a relatively safe way to vent any frustrations, outside of their own university context. In the project, I therefore acknowledge that relying on self-identification of participants and self-reporting of dyslexia may introduce a bias towards students who are more concerned with and aware of dyslexia, or those who were aware of difficulties with their studies that they wished to communicate.

As I was aware of the potential for bias towards highlighting difficulties associated with dyslexia, I attempted to balance this by asking specifically about any positive aspects of dyslexia; probing students' coping strategies; enquiring how the university supported them; and asking about the impact this has had. It was also useful to triangulate the difficulties and issues raised by students with the support tutors, to check whether the tutors were aware of the issues the students raised and ask if they were widespread across students who access learning support for dyslexia.

8.4.3 Participation mode

This project is one of the first to use email dialogue as a method for conducting a discussion with student participants with dyslexia, therefore it tests this mode of interview alongside a verbal conversation by phone. The rationale for offering a dialogue via email (outlined in Methodology 5.4) assumed that most participants had developed coping strategies so they were comfortable with email as a mode of communication, given its widespread use. I noted that one student chose to respond only via email, three chose email and telephone as the modes for their discussions, and only one student (Sylvia) chose to participate via a phone discussion not email.

8.4.3.1 Students appreciated the asynchronicity and reflective nature of email dialogue

As researcher I found that the email mode of recruitment and interview offered the project access to hard-to-reach university students with dyslexia. This finding highlights the potential for email discussion to contribute to future research among students (with or without dyslexia). Not only is email a feasible mode of interview, but most of the participants in the current project actively chose to use it.

The reasons why students chose to communicate via email centred on a desire for flexibility in scheduling when they could respond to my questions. Students said they wanted to respond when they had time and could address a few short questions each day. Further evidence of the convenience of email came from their timing of replies. For example, most of Selina’s email dialogue responses were sent to me after 8pm, some after midnight, reflecting a time preference that would not easily have matched mine as researcher, if trying to arrange a synchronous discussion.

The students also valued the time delay of the email mode for them to reflect on each question and to compose their replies. The students found it helpful to follow the train of questions and responses in the email chain below the most recent response. As a simple tool, both student and researcher could therefore easily see what had been said and asked in the previous few exchanges, avoiding repetition, or enabling them to expand on the words they had used when I asked.

While I appreciated the potential for email as a discussion mode for students, as researcher I found that the written responses via email were often quite short and condensed. This reflection aligns with other authors who have used it (e.g. Kitto and Barnett, 2007) but the fewer words were balanced by rich and rational responses, unencumbered by verbal digressions. Also, I could then ask further questions in a follow-up email: the email mode enabled me to read through and check what would be useful to clarify, it allowed me the reflective space to deliberate how to frame the next question, considering carefully what the student had just written.

I noted that Sophia, who participated only via email, features the least in the quotes in the main Findings chapter below. Her email replies were less forthcoming and tended towards simple factual answers and I did not have the chance to follow-up for detail in a phone discussion. These responses did not give the added context that is helpful for a quote, to explain the thoughts behind her answers. While I considered her comments in the construction and presentation of the themes which inform the analysis and discussion, hers is a quieter voice in the thesis quotes.

Email also did not offer the immediacy of response, delaying me from probing an idea when it was first mentioned by the participant; nor did it offer the emotional transparency that tone of voice offers on the phone. However, in the current project I was able to follow up the email discussion with an in-depth phone conversation with three out of the four students who participated via email, which offered me the opportunity to benefit from the advantages of both modes.

8.4.3.2 Phone interviews enabled deep and flowing discussion

In contrast to email, the phone discussions with students and tutors were more expansive, particularly when I asked for detail. I used the semi-structured questions as a guide to the areas I wished to discuss, to steer the conversation with each student or tutor (see **Appendix II**). However, some most interesting points and in-depth quotes came from allowing a student or tutor to expand in their own time to a question prompt, with gentle verbal encouragement from me.

One student relished the opportunity to discuss openly and in depth her struggles with the university and dyslexia. What was scheduled initially as an hour's discussion continued for over three hours: she noted the discussion was a release for the pent-up frustration that she had felt. The feelings the student articulated were not significantly more negative than the other students', however I felt that she had not had the chance to discuss her struggles with anyone who could empathise or have the time to listen. The in-depth nature of this discussion was helpful for developing my understanding of the themes and issues raised in the study.

Interestingly, Selina noted an advantage (to the researcher) of the project using both modes: she said that I would experience both the instant and emotive responses of a verbal conversation, as well as the more considered response of an email discussion. Her perceptive comment on the benefit to the project of using both modes for discussions between researcher and participant reflects my own assessment adeptly.

In the Findings thematic analysis and quotes, there is not a predominance of one mode over the other: both modes afforded useful discussions. Also, the data collected from one mode did not contradict the other, where I interviewed a student on both modes. Therefore, I did not expect to develop a one-sided view or be misled by conducting a discussion with a student participant on a single mode. As the mix of email and phone quotes in the main Findings chapter show, I gathered valuable perspectives from both modes of participation. The flexibility and asynchronicity of an email dialogue balanced the immediacy and depth of a phone interview.

8.4.4 Researcher reflexivity in relation to the project

When we study the social world, we do not escape it or our innate biases, so we must be mindful of our interactions and perspectives as researcher, to justify the rigour of the research undertaken (discussed in more detail in section 9.5 below). One aspect of research credibility is researcher reflexivity, where, as Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) argue, researchers must acknowledge their own beliefs, knowledge and assumptions throughout the research.

The most important aspect of my identity that may impact my assumptions and analysis in the project is my own relationship with dyslexia. Although I have not been formally tested for dyslexia, it is an aspect of my identity through my experiences in education and it has been formally identified in my children and extended family. Realization of dyslexia coincided with starting work on the current thesis. Therefore, my awareness and acceptance of dyslexia has come late in my academic life, after I had studied for and attained a science-based Bachelor's degree and Masters degrees, as well as worked for over 10 years writing analytical research. I have not shied away from academic study and work involving writing, however since my early school days when I was labeled a late developer and was poor at spelling, I have not found writing or presenting information easy. Like the students in the current project, I attribute my progress to a combination of dogged determination and stubborn persistence, combined with the support of parents, teachers and editors. Added to this is judicious use of technology to check spelling, grammar and sense.

Why do I acknowledge my dyslexia in the current project? I have multiple aspects of my identity that I could consider in the research: for example, based on my educational or socio-economic background or political leanings. Any of these could be significant to how I approached the topic. Yet it was dyslexia that was important when discussing the project with supervisors. I do not claim a dyslexic identity to prove my competence in the area, or to be in a superior position to accept or reject claims that other researchers may make about dyslexia, who may not experience it directly themselves. Instead, as Kerschbaum (2014) asserts (discussed in the

Literature Review 4.2.2), disability self-disclosure aligns us with disability as a minority group, pointing the way to social criticism, challenge and action. Self-disclosure can give us, as researchers, shared identity, experiences and understanding with our research participants. Kerschbaum (2014) also points out that self-disclosing an identity associated with disability may have unpredictable and unfavourable results and therefore carries risk. I took the view that identity disclosure is a mutual process between researcher and participant in a specific context, so I acknowledge that the impact of my claim to dyslexia will depend on the understanding of that identity by the thesis audiences.

Therefore, when approaching students with dyslexia for the interviews, I believed it was relevant and helpful for me to declare my solidarity with potential participants, by sharing my dyslexia identity and experiences of dyslexia through school and university. I mentioned it on the recruitment flyer, I alluded to my own experiences in the interview dialogues and I found common ground with the students' stories of their experiences. This common bond would, I hope, enable students to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences on a sensitive subject.

However, during the discussions with students, I was conscious that I should hear and record the students' views and not colour these with my own. I also aimed not to impose my own concept of dyslexia on others' experiences of it through the analysis. As researcher, I recognized that having had experience of dyslexia and of how those with a dyslexia identity can be typecast, I had the potential for empathy when speaking with the participants, which could give me insights into appropriate questions to ask and be able to listen as someone who shared the experience of dyslexia, even if it manifests in different ways. While I may be able to draw out participants' experiences and empathise with their dilemmas, fear of prejudice and frustrations, I do not necessarily have the same interpretations of those experiences.

Historically I have been shy of declaring struggles with spelling and reading, not wishing to be judged as someone who would find an in-depth academic project difficult. I am conscious that claiming an identity associated with disability and academic slowness risks undermining my credibility as an academic researcher. It is perhaps in this fear of stigma that I most keenly related to the student participants in the current project, who decided not to disclose dyslexia to their lecturers or peers as they anticipated prejudice, resented assumptions of academic deficit and felt uncomfortable with labels associated with stigma.

The self-discovery aspect of conducting dyslexia research has been enlightening to me, again I identify with students’ expressions of initial relief at dyslexia as an explanation of difficulty. It has helped me to understand what I find difficult and why. Like the student participants, I developed coping strategies and formed study patterns that worked for me. While in my earlier studies I was not aware of my dyslexia to request support, I can appreciate the attraction of accessing the guidance or tools that are now available to help with academic study.

How the project’s audiences interpret my dyslexia self-disclosure in the project will be influenced by each reader’s understanding and attitudes towards dyslexia. As our understanding is shaped by our experiences, I hope that the research and analysis undertaken through this project will contribute in a constructive way to its primary and secondary audiences’ reflections on the meanings associated with dyslexia and the impact this has on conceptions of identity.

8.5 Project limitations

As noted at the start of this chapter, the project is an early-stage exploration of themes and theory, highlighting areas for future research. Bearing this in mind, I will reflect on the conceptual and practical limitations in responding to the project's research questions, before exploring the potential for further research below. First, I will address the rigour and extensibility of the project as a contribution to qualitative research, defined usefully in Shenton (2004), using the framework of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility: In the project I aimed to present as true a picture as possible of the experience of dyslexia at university and students' views on dyslexia and identity through several factors. First, I considered the appropriateness of the methods used to collect data (through in-depth phone and email discussions) and checked the data collected with any relevant previous findings. I also immersed myself in the ideas and practices of university support departments by attending conferences and through initial discussions with support tutors and I attempted to give as detailed descriptions as possible when discussing the participants' views of dyslexia.

When recruiting and interviewing students, I did not select specific individuals for interview but engaged in each student discussion as an information-rich case. I encouraged honesty in the discussions and did not coerce participants to participate or give specific responses. I triangulated the student findings with discussions with support tutors to verify views and experiences (discussed in Shenton, 2004). I also checked the student responses in subsequent questions, probing to ensure I had understood participants correctly, using both the email and phone discussions.

The sequential email dialogues enabled me to verify and develop over time the points that students made to me on that mode and I was also able to check my understanding with students in a subsequent phone discussion in three out of four cases. I also used my regular supervisory updates on the thesis to raise and reflect on points arising from the discussions as well as on the project, following ideas of reflective commentary (discussed in Lincoln and Guba 1985). Further, I recognised and reflected on myself as a researcher with dyslexia (discussed under reflexivity 9.4.4 above) to further bolster the credibility of the project.

Transferability: The project scope and methodology limited the specificity of the study to the few participants, universities and settings that were explored. We cannot immediately extend the findings to all students with dyslexia, or to all UK universities, or in all situations. However, by giving contextual and some biographical detail on the student participants (pseudonymised), researchers and practitioners reading the study can use their own judgement on how far they can apply the findings and analysis to other students and situations. Due to the small sample size, it was not appropriate to separate out data from students who differed by criteria such as age or gender, subject studied or socio-economic background. However, where relevant I have noted where comments were from students who differed from each other on factors such as undergraduate vs graduate status; or those who identified with dyslexia at school vs at university. While the findings may not be transferable to all students of that profile, these factors may be useful to consider when developing further research questions to ask in future projects.

Dependability: While the individual and contextual nature of this project as qualitative research meant it could not be repeated to produce the exact same findings, the work and its analysis is still dependable. I have given detail on the research design, methods used to collect data and the analytical framework so the study could be repeated and the process checked, enabling future researchers to follow or adapt the methodology in further research projects.

Confirmability: As Shenton (2004) acknowledges, some bias is an inevitability in qualitative research, but I attempted to minimise or acknowledge this in the following ways. In this project I aimed to be aware of my subjectivity as researcher, by identifying and considering areas of potential bias throughout the research design and analytical process, particularly through the researcher reflexivity discussed in the Methodology above. I also aimed to check the interview findings by triangulating the student discussions with support tutors, who had experience across a wide number of students. When designing the study, I also considered how to increase the extent to which the findings would reflect the views of the participants and not the researcher, particularly in the questions asked and how I addressed students, as well as how I applied thematic analysis and wrote the discussion.

8.5.1 The student experience of dyslexia

Researchers are only starting to explore the experiences of students with dyslexia or other cognitive differences, either as a branch of disability studies or as a research area in its own right, as with the current project. There are many aspects of a student's experience at university that further work is still needed to address, such as understanding better the process of identifying dyslexia, applying for support, and the experience of accessing learning support. However, this thesis has provided useful insights into, for example, students' rejection of assumptions regarding stereotyped negative traits and the importance of early dyslexia identification on academic achievement and ambition, as well as on self-esteem.

While the current study did not address questions of the severity of, or variations in, how individuals experienced their dyslexia, this would have been difficult to independently verify given the individuals were at different universities and had taken different forms of tests identifying dyslexia. However, I did ask the students how they felt that dyslexia affected them and the coping strategies they used, which prompted them to share their perspectives on how dyslexia had impacted their studies and the efforts they made to mitigate for the difficulties they experienced.

8.5.2 The university approach to dyslexia

The thesis adds to criticism of the current medical approach to (and classification of) dyslexia at university: it theorises about the reasons behind this approach and highlights the implications for students with dyslexia. However, I did not aim to provide a definitive strategic or tactical pathway for universities to take going forward. Instead, in the discussion I explore possible alternative approaches or re-framing of disability, mental disorders and social differences, suggesting how ideas from these areas could be applied to cognitive difference, such as dyslexia, to reposition defect as plurality; maintain support for difficulty; seek inclusion and reduce prejudice and discrimination.

I also acknowledge that there are other people with perspectives on the approach to dyslexia at university that have not been included in the current study, specifically I did not extend the recruitment process to collect the views of lecturers. I took this decision (i) given the difficulties in accessing student participants for interview and bearing in mind that the project is an early exploration of a limited number of students' experiences and views; (ii) I already had the added benefit of triangulation with support tutor perspectives; and (iii) interviewing lecturers could create tensions or anonymity issues due to the small proportion of acknowledged students with dyslexia in their classes, that we might refer to. For a study devoted to the perspectives of university lecturers on dyslexia I point to Cameron and Nunkoosing's (2012) UK study (discussed in the Literature Review 2.2.3.3), which would be an interesting study to update a decade further on.

8.5.3 The impact of the university approach to dyslexia on student identity

More than a decade ago Burden (2008) called for further research into the complex connections between self-esteem, academic self-concept and dyslexia, which has been touched on in children but barely addressed in adults or students. Large gaps remain in this area, which the current exploratory study has started to address, specifically in the understanding of the relationships between the university approach to dyslexia, stigma and student identity.

Once students learn of their dyslexia, we know little of how and why some develop acceptance or resilience; have a strong or weak internal locus of control over their studies; and internalise or externalise the difficulties associated with dyslexia. A full exploration of this was beyond the scope of this thesis to draw out and the number of student participants in this project limits the conclusions we can draw in terms of generalizability, but the current study does propose that the student participants had been through a process of rationalising and accepting a dyslexia identity (7.3.2.1). The project offers tantalising glimpses of a dramatically different view among a very few students who reject the stigma associated with dyslexia. These students have had time to shake off dyslexia's negative connotations and construct it as a positive part of their identity.

Due to the methodological limitations of recruitment described in 8.4.1, this project only accessed students who had identified dyslexia to the university and accepted learning support. Therefore, I was not able to determine if a proportion of students with dyslexia choose not to come forward to acknowledge dyslexia to the university, or why (mentioned in Discussion 7.3.3.3). However, the study adds to our knowledge by highlighting that university students experience dyslexia prejudice and stigma. At least two of the students I spoke to (Selina and Sarah-Louisa) did not feel comfortable accepting a dyslexia identity or accessing the university's support under the current university and societal approach to dyslexia.

8.6 Opportunities for further work

The current project advances our understanding of the identity impact of dyslexia at UK universities and theorises about the interactions between approach to dyslexia, stigma and students' dyslexia disclosure decisions. In the three sections below (organised around the research sub-questions that respond to gaps in the literature, as outlined in the Introduction) I will suggest opportunities for researchers to overcome the project limitations in 8.5 above, to add to our knowledge in this area.

In the first instance there is an opportunity to extend the current project's insights around dyslexia's identity impact in more depth with students, lecturers and support tutors, for example through focus groups (used by Cameron and Billington, 2015), reflective diaries (see Cameron, 2016) and in-depth interviews with students at more universities. Narrative research is a useful methodology to explore a few individuals' personal journeys and rationalisation of dyslexia's meanings (see for example Deacon, Macdonald, and Donaghue, 2020). Further, these topics could also be explored at universities in other countries, taking local considerations into account.

8.6.1 The student experience of dyslexia

As highlighted in the Introduction 1.1, Cameron (2016) identified a gap in our understanding of the experience and impacts of dyslexia in the context of societal attitudes towards dyslexia. While this thesis presents exploratory qualitative findings (7.1), there is further opportunity to collect and analyse quantitative data to understand the prevalence and impact of dyslexia at university. Universities have the chance to collect data (with permission) from students who identify with dyslexia, for example, when students' dyslexia was identified, what support they have accessed, as well as to track what support they use at university, their academic progress and dropout rates (from subject courses or support). While we should be aware of potential subject bias among students with dyslexia (see 2.1.2.1), data on these factors may uncover bottlenecks or barriers for students with dyslexia.

Qualitative research using interviews could enrich this quantitative data with contextual information on students' academic challenges and views on dyslexia identification and support. Studies could use student profiles as lenses to explore the experience of dyslexia at university, cross-referencing this with factors such as the subject studied, student socio-economic background, family attitudes or the student's previous awareness of dyslexia. These variables are little understood in relation to student dyslexia and support but offer an opportunity to study the inclusion and support of students with dyslexia from different backgrounds.

For example, narrative research on students' views of the process of dyslexia identification could be compared with data on students' persistence with identifying and applying for support. Studies could follow individual students applying for and accessing support, pursuing the ideas of researchers such as Ryder and Norwich (2018) who question the reliability and consistency of UK university dyslexia tests. The current project (7.1.3) has argued there is scope to build nuance into dyslexia assessment, as an understanding of an individual's profile can help tailor support.

The current study suggests that unrecognised dyslexia impacts students' studies (through class disruption and truancy) as well as self-esteem (Discussion 7.3.1). However, a gap remains in the literature on the nature and extent of this. Future identity work could explore the potential effects of late dyslexia identification on an individual's education. For example, it would be useful to ask whether students whose dyslexia was identified earlier at school find the transition to university easier, are less likely to drop out, or have a higher academic self-concept than those who only identify with dyslexia at university.

8.6.2 The university approach to dyslexia

The current project questions institutional policy attitudes towards dyslexia among four UK universities, but this needs to be tested at a wider range of institutions. Researchers could collect data, for example, on whether the university labels support under a disability banner; ask students or support tutors what terminology applied to dyslexia identification and accommodation; and probe the subject-based inclusion of cognitive differences such as dyslexia through teaching, as proxies for the university's approach to dyslexia.

As the current project did not include the perspective of lecturers, there is also an opportunity for research to set the views of students and support tutors in the context of lecturers' perspectives on dyslexia. Qualitative research among lecturers could explore the foundations of dyslexia resistance or denial, also looking for examples of successful strategies to counter this. In addition, it is important to collect the experiences of those lecturers who identify with dyslexia themselves (extending and updating the work of Burns and Bell, 2011). One example of enlightening research in this vein is the personal experiences of Skinner (2011), a lecturer with dyslexia who gave an intimate account of the impact of her university's approach to dyslexia. In this she describes the medical approach to dyslexia that she felt prevailed at the university where she worked, recognising her desire to hide, deny or normalize dyslexia with different audiences.

Finding ways to lessen the emphasis on dyslexia as otherness will be critical to universities' strategic and tactical development regarding dyslexia. As outlined in Discussion 7.2.2 universities have an opportunity to learn from the changes in approach in other areas (such as re-framing disability and mental health). This thesis also highlights (see 2.2.3.3) that inclusive pedagogy could play an important, but underexplored, role in reducing the stigma and impact of dyslexia at university, applying frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning. Research projects could explore, for example through Action Research, how universities may (i) lessen the barriers in current teaching and assessment methods; (ii) increase student agency in support; or (iii) reposition, destigmatise or widen access to support, perhaps situating it alongside IT and library support. Researchers and dyslexia support practitioners have an opportunity to develop and test best practice to improve student dyslexia accommodation.

8.6.3 The impact of the university approach to dyslexia on student identity

The thesis responds to a call for further work relating dyslexia, societal attitudes, stigma and segregation, with identity and self-esteem (see Burden, 2008, extended by Prevett, Bell and Ralph, 2013). The project's exploratory work among UK university students leaves scope for further qualitative research in this area. Dyslexia researchers could use semi-structured interviews with a greater number and range of students than were possible in this study. They could also apply novel methods of data collection to triangulate students' perspectives on identity impact alongside interviews, for example to capture students' emotional reactions to dyslexia at university with mind maps (Burden and Burdett, 2007) and to probe self-concept by developing self-perception profiling (Terras, Thompson and Minnis, 2009).

At a fundamental level, dyslexia research would benefit from a better understanding of why some students are prepared to acknowledge dyslexia to different audiences and some are not. As mentioned in Discussion 7.3.4.2, identity-based qualitative studies, such as narrative research, with students could explore the impact of dyslexia non-disclosure on feelings of isolation, stress, or inner conflict.

As highlighted in Discussion 7.3.1.3, we are only starting to explore the impact of accepting support on student identity, influencing for example why students don't tend to request support until they really struggle, or why some later reject it. While dyslexia researchers will find it difficult to access participants who are either not aware of their dyslexia or who actively choose not to identify dyslexia at university (see Project Limitations 8.5.3), researchers could recruit those who have chosen to come forward and ask about the reservations that these students had. This could help to understand the issues that affect student access to dyslexia support and the extent to which the university's approach to dyslexia may inhibit this.

Most students in the current project managed the stigma of dyslexia by hiding dyslexia from student peers, yet one of the support tutors highlighted that universities could use peer support or student mentoring to decrease the stigma of dyslexia and increase cohesion around dyslexia as a common experience. Action research or focus group feedback could be a way to investigate whether mentoring schemes, linking students with dyslexia with each other or with alumni, could encourage group cohesion, foster career-relevant contacts and importantly improve the self-esteem of students with dyslexia.

The current study also proposes that students take time to rationalise dyslexia as an aspect of identity, discussed in Discussion 7.3.2. Few other researchers have considered dyslexia acceptance as a journey, leaving a gap in our understanding of how students make sense of dyslexia and the factors that influence this. Qualitative studies could use interviews to explore how students internalise or externalise difficulty and where they situate the locus of control over their studies. Researchers could explore how students' perceptions of dyslexia change over time and the factors from their background or education that may influence this. For example, this could include a study into parental and schoolteacher influences on early dyslexia acceptance and later student self-esteem, highlighting best practice in helping students to build their academic self-concept. By asking students to reflect on dyslexia and comparing this with how long they have known of it, research could contribute to our understanding of the meanings, processes and influences associated with dyslexia acceptance.

8.7 Final comments

This thesis contributes to dyslexia research by exploring the identity impacts of dyslexia among UK university students. It sets the experiences of students with dyslexia in the context of dyslexia's classification as defect and disability by universities, leading to stigma, segregation and power imbalances between student and institution. The study points to an impact on students' academic self-concept and self-efficacy, affecting not only their ambitions and study choices, but also their decisions on when and with whom they disclose dyslexia (with further associated identity impacts) and even whether they accept support. The current project also applies critical perspectives from outside of dyslexia research (from wider education work, disability studies, social justice research, and identity work in health and disease) to theorise the identity impacts of universities' policy and practices towards students with dyslexia and suggest ways to move forward.

This exploratory thesis raises awareness of the challenges faced by UK university students with dyslexia and highlights the potential for further work, also outlining the implications of the findings for policy and practice in dyslexia support at UK universities. These include (i) reframing cognitive difference at university so it is not a defect of the individual; (ii) reducing segregation for support to diminish the stigma of dyslexia and accepting support; (iii) allowing individuals time and supporting them in accepting dyslexia as an identity aspect; (iv) encouraging student peer support and group cohesion around dyslexia; (v) increasing the emphasis on inclusion through pedagogy and assessment in subject teaching; and (vi) increasing students' agency in their support decisions.

The project's call for greater openness about dyslexia and the need to destigmatise its identification and support, positions this work alongside studies that call for us to recognise the importance of a diverse and inclusive student body, which enhances higher education for all in an environment that seeks to understand as well as learn.

APPENDIX 1

Information on the project and consent form sent to all potential student participants by email [this was adapted for the support tutor participants]

Dear xxx,

Thank you for your email – I am delighted that you are interested in taking part in a research project.

I am a doctoral student at the UCL Institute of Education and I also have personal experience of dyslexia. In this project I will use email and face-to-face/phone interviews to explore the experiences of UK university students with dyslexia to form a written report/thesis. An outline of what participation would involve is below and I would be grateful if you could tick, sign and return the attached consent form if you are happy to participate.

Who will be in the project?

I am interviewing students aged 18+ years with dyslexia who are taking a degree (undergraduate or graduate) at a UK university.

What will it involve?

You can be involved in either or both of two stages.

1) The first stage is an email exchange over a couple of weeks, developing a discussion between myself, as researcher, and yourself, as student. In each email I will ask a couple of questions. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, as I hope to explore your individual experiences and views. You can stop the email exchange at any point without having to explain why.

2) The second stage is a one-off interview with myself, which may take an hour. This could be by Phone, Skype or in-person. Ideally, I would like to audio-record the interview and take brief notes, to allow me to remember the details of our discussion later. If there are any questions that you do not wish to answer, or prefer to stop the interview altogether, you can do so at any point without explaining why.

Why is this research important?

The information you share with me will be used to form a research report, which aims to help understand more fully how students with dyslexia interact with university teaching practices, what they find helpful or a hindrance, and how they manage their studies. If you would like to be given a summary of the report, please tick the box in the consent form provided at the end of this document.

I hope that this project will help students reflect on their own study practices, as well as offer an opportunity to hear experiences from a wider community of UK students that identify with dyslexia.

Who will know if you take part?

As the project researcher I will not share any participants' personal details with anyone, in accordance with data protection rules. The information collected by email or in the interview recordings will be password protected and stored securely. Names will be changed so that no one will be able to link you to anything that you said. The information will be used for the purposes of the research project, for conference papers or journal articles and no identifiable personal data will be published. The information will be retained for 10 years from publication of the report, after which it will be destroyed. This project has been reviewed by the UCL Institute of Education Ethics Committee and received ethical support.

How can you become part of this project?

If you agree to take part, please complete the informed consent form attached below (this can be done electronically or printed). Please email this to me at [email address]. Then we can start an email exchange or arrange an interview, or both.

You can stop your participation in this study and you can withdraw your consent for your data to be used at any point without having to explain why. You can also choose not to answer some of the questions if you don't wish to.

Thank you for reading this information. If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me via the email address below.

I look forward to hearing from you,
Best wishes

Charlotte Clark
Postgraduate Researcher
UCL Institute of Education

Information on Data Protection

The information collected will be stored on a password-protected computer and only be viewed by myself as project researcher. All information will be treated as confidential and names will be changed so the data is pseudonymised. The emails will be deleted from my account once the information is securely stored. Data will be stored in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. The information will only be used for the purposes of research and no identifiable personal data will be published. Results from this research will be written up for conference papers and peer-reviewed journal articles. However, neither your identity nor your personal details will be made available in those publications. The information will be retained for 10 years from publication of the report, after which it will be destroyed. Personal details (name and email address) will only be used to conduct the email interview and to send a short summary of the final report, if you wish.

Informed Consent Form:

Please read the statements provided below and tick the boxes that apply to you. Please sign and date at the end of this form.

I have read and understood the information in the attached email ☐

I am over 18 yrs old ☐

I agree to take part in (can tick both):

Email dialogue ☐

Spoken interview ☐

In a spoken interview, I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview ☐

I understand that my email address will only be used for the email exchange and/or set up an interview and to send a summary of the results of the project if requested.

I would like to be sent a summary of the project results by email. ☐

Signed:

Date:

APPENDIX 2

Email question areas for university students with dyslexia

The questions in **bold** show those that have been added in subsequent email dialogues, as the project evolved. The numbering refers to each email sent by me in the dialogue, so I asked only a few questions at a time.

1) Please tell me a bit about your university and course (subject area, are you resident or studying remotely, undergraduate/graduate, how long the course is and what year you are in)?
What environments do you work in: home, library, study space?
What aspects of these environments are important to you when studying?

2) For today, could you please tell me a bit about your experiences with dyslexia in your education to date?
Have any other learning differences been identified in addition to dyslexia?
May I ask have you formally notified the university of dyslexia and if so, how and when you did do this?
And lastly for this email, what do you identify with your experiences of dyslexia – how does it affect your studies? And how do you feel about it?
Can you tell me about your previous school experienced of dyslexia? For example, when was dyslexia first identified and by whom?

3) Today may I ask about how you study?
Are there coping strategies or study skills that you have developed to help with your studies and what are these?
Do you regularly use any tools (e.g. software) to help with reading and writing, time management or document management for your studies?
(if so, can I ask what are they please)
How has university support helped in developing coping strategies?

And lastly for today, are there any advantages that you feel dyslexia has given you, in what areas? [added as a question in later student interviews]

4) Now I would like to ask about dyslexia and your view of yourself:
How do you identify yourself first and foremost: e.g. as a student, as a student with dyslexia, as a student with another characteristic (e.g. by background, where you live, who your friends are)?
Can you explain to me why you see yourself this way?
Is your view of yourself at university different from at school and why?
Do you feel that dyslexia defines who you are and how?
Do you feel that dyslexia affects how you value your self-worth? To what extent do you think this is affected by your grades? [added as a question in later student interviews]

5) Can I ask about the learning support at your university:
Are you enrolled with learning support at the university and if so, at what stage did you enroll? What does the support consist of for you?
How is the learning support that is offered to you at university different from support at school?
Are you aware of the Disabled Students Allowance and do you claim it? If so, can I ask what this goes towards (e.g. computers, software programmes)?
How well does your additional support meet your study needs in your view? What would you change?
Is your additional support integrated with course teaching and how?

6) We are halfway with the questions and I have a few relating to your self-perception as a student with learning support.
What does your university call any additional support that you receive?
Is the label 'disabled' used in connection with learning support and dyslexia at your university (some universities put learning support into 'disabled services')? If it is, how do you feel about it and do you think this is appropriate?
How do you feel as a student that receives additional support? Do you feel in any

way different or marked out? Is this a positive or negative feeling that you associate with learning support?

7) Today I will ask about your interactions with your course tutors/lecturers.
Could you give me examples that you feel highlight what you find helpful or not helpful (for you as a student with dyslexia) about how your university teaches?
How do you communicate with your tutors on the course and do you have choices in this? (e.g. face-to-face in seminars, via email, any other ways?)
Are you ok with the level of feedback and how it is delivered?
Is there an opportunity for you to reflect on your progress, together with course tutors and/or learning support? If yes, how does this work?
Have you let your lecturers know that you identify with dyslexia and why/not? How do the tutors/lecturers react to this? Are they supportive or have you come across barriers or unhelpful attitudes? [added as a question in later student interviews]

8) Here are a few more questions about the university's teaching, we then have just a couple of question sets left.
Do you have comments about how information is presented, how courses are structured, or how you are expected to learn as a student? (please be reassured your comments are confidential)
Do you use a phone or recorder to record lectures, or are the lectures available online, recorded by the university? What are tutors' reactions to audio recording? Would videorecording of lectures be helpful?
Does your university course use an online study platform (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard collaborate, or other web-based study and sharing platforms)? If so, what are these used for: e.g. to post work assignments, submit work, online discussion?
And, how do you find using these online study platforms?
Are there any other web-based interactions that you use as part of your studies (e.g. online chat/messaging) and how well do these support your approach to your studies?

9) Having covered your interactions with tutors/lecturers, can I ask about your communication with other students for today please.

How do you communicate with other students about your studies? (e.g. face-to-face, phone, text, online message boards)

Do you have choices in how you communicate and what are your preferences?

Have you used real-time messaging online (online chat) as part of your studies and, if so, how well did this work for you?

Have you used collaborative online tools in your studies to work together with other students (e.g. a Moodle discussion board, or any other online groups, such as Facebook) to share discussions or written work and, if so, how well do you feel they work for you? [added as a question in later student interviews]

10) For the last few questions can I ask you to sum up a few thoughts:

What has been the most challenging part of being a student?

What have been the main barriers you have faced in your university studies?

What would you like to see change about how your university teaches and communicates with you?

Lastly, can I ask what you thought about this email method of interview: Did you like the experience of corresponding in an interview via email and can I ask why?

Why did you choose to respond via email? Would you choose it again?

At the end of the email dialogue:

We have been through my question areas, thank you for sharing your time and thoughts with me. Is there anything further you would like to tell me on this subject, that I haven't asked about?

I look forward to sharing the summary report with you, this may take more than a year to prepare and write as I hope to include the experiences and views of a number of students at UK universities. I am grateful for your contribution to this project through the email interview. In the meantime I wish you all the best with your studies and career, thank you very much again for your replies,

If student has agreed to a further verbal interview:

As you indicated that you would be prepared to speak to me also for an audio-recoded interview, shall we arrange this? This can be via phone, Skype or in person if you prefer. It would be useful for me to ask a few more detailed questions further to the email dialogue if this is OK, I anticipate this would take about 30-60 minutes.

APPENDIX 3

Sample email dialogue with a student

Initial email sent with information, options, consent form and data protection statement, as in Appendix I.

Email 1

Thank you for agreeing to take part in an email interview dialogue and a phone conversation (to be arranged later) with me, exploring the experiences of UK university students with dyslexia. Some guidelines to help us manage the conversation are below:

The email interview

I will ask a series of questions, a few at a time on a topic in each email, and I hope that an on-going dialogue will develop between us. In order to achieve this, please answer at the TOP of the message and question sent to you. This will ensure the sequence of questions and answers is not broken.

Please do not delete any part of the email dialogue. This will be your and my record of the conversation.

Please do not forward the email on to anyone else; I will similarly keep the emails confidential between us, only using information in pseudonymized form in the research.

Please reply to each email question as soon as you can. I will also reply to your response within a day or so.

I anticipate that the email dialogue will be completed within 2-3 weeks, or sooner if you wish.

First questions

1. So that I can ask appropriate questions, please tell me a bit about your university and course (subject area, are you resident at home or studying remotely, undergraduate/graduate, how long the course is and what year you are in)?

2. What environments do you prefer to work in: home, library, study space? What aspects of these environments are important to you when studying? Why?

I look forward to hearing from you,

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 1 reply

1. I am in second year at XX doing XX. The course is part time. I work full time and live at home.

2. I like studying alone in library or at home. I don't like studying for example on the train or where there is too much noise. I need to be relaxed when studying so I can focus. I don't like studying in groups because they always want to discuss things out loud so I try and avoid group study.

Kind regards

Email 2

Thank you for your replies yesterday. For today, could you please tell me a bit about your experiences with dyslexia in your education to date? For example, when was dyslexia first identified and by whom?

Have any other learning differences been identified in addition to dyslexia?

May I ask, have you formally notified the university of dyslexia and if so, how/when you did do this?

And lastly for this email, what do you identify with your experiences dyslexia - how does it affect your studies? And how do you feel about it?

I look forward to hearing from you again,

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 2 reply

Hi Charlotte

I used to struggle in school a lot. Could never concentrate, was very easily distracted, hated reading and writing and was generally quite disruptive. Left handed as well so my work used to smudge a lot which was another reason I didn’t like writing. I was held back a year and put into my brother’s year who was in the year below me. It was very embarassing. I think it was identified when I was about 6. My mum put me on all these courses which was meant to help me focus/calm down.

I then went into secondary school where I struggled but the school had better facilities to accommodate me like teaching assistants and extra classes. I also had nice teachers a long the way.

My mum organised lots of private tuition for me after school which helped me a lot. In year 11 i would say that I came out of my shell a lot and managed to get decent GCSEs.

No other learning difficulties have been formally identified but friends have always asked if I have ADD or ADHD because I can get super intence about things and also be very distant. They also think it because I struggle to make eye contact.

I just told both my unis and I received computer equipment and extra time. However I think by that time I had been trained to study my own way without lots of help from electronic devices.

Dyslexia certainly affects my studies but I am at an age where I know I need to put the work in. I still hate reading so much and I will hardly ever read allowed if asked. I am not ashamed to be dyslexic at all. It’s better to be unique and I kind of see it as being an advantage because your mind works differently. What does annoy me is when people make a spelling mistake and then just say ‘oh it’s because I’m dyslexic’ despite not even being it. Paints a bad picture

I hope this is useful and look forward to hearing from you.
Kind regards

Email 3

Thank you again for your replies and for sharing your thoughts and background with me, it is very helpful. May I ask about how you study, you mention below that you have trained to 'study your own way'.

- Are there coping strategies or study skills that you have developed to help with your studies and what are these?
- Do you regularly use any tools (e.g. software) to help with reading, writing, time management or document management for your studies? (if so, can I ask what are they please)
- And lastly for today, are there any advantages that you feel dyslexia has given you, in what areas?

I look forward to hearing from you again,

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 3 reply

I have a good memory so I re write notes until I condense them down to just key words. Once I see the word then I know what I need to know for that. I just keep refreshing myself. It was also hammered into my head to be organised and prepare early because I am very forgetful so I make sure I keep all my study work organised. The routine helps me.

Coping strategy is just to be prepared well in advance so that I can relax on the day of an exam where I do not need to cram and panic.

I used software called dragon which was for speech and reading but I think I was introduced to this far too late because I was set in my ways.

Dyslexia has helped me purely because you think and see things in a different way. The disadvantage I believe which I only realise318d recently is that I am a bit socially awkward

Email 4

Thank you for your swift reply today. I am interested you say that you think and see things differently (through dyslexia) and wonder if you could expand on this a little please? How, in what context?

Next I would also like to ask about dyslexia and your view of yourself: there are a few related (but subtly different!) questions below.
- How do you identify yourself first and foremost: e.g. as a student, as a student with dyslexia, as a student with another characteristic (e.g. by background, where you live, who your friends are)?
- Can you explain to me why you see yourself this way? Would you think to associate with other students with dyslexia?
- Does the fact you have learning support at university influence your view of yourself and, if so, how?
- Is your view of yourself at university different from at school and why?
- Do you feel that dyslexia defines who you are and how?
- Do you feel that dyslexia affects how you value your self-worth? To what extent do you think this is affected by your grades?

I look forward to your reply, thanks
Best wishes
Charlotte

Email 4 reply

I am not sure how I can expand. I guess because your mind works differently you inherently think differently.

I view myself as a student with dyslexia but I don't really tell people.

I see myself as a student with dyslexia because it's what I am. There is another student on my course with it but she has used all the technology whereas I don't feel comfortable using it. She was introduced to it earlier so could adapt.

I used to have a very low self esteem from it and I still do sometimes and I wish I could just read and write etc like a normal person.

I am definitely different at uni than at school. I think this was because I somehow got an extremely intelligent gf who is now my ex. However I worked extra hard because I didn't want to look stupid so I got serious about my studies and aspirations.

Dyslexia definitely defines who I am. Being it and left handed certainly makes you feel like the black sheep especially through school where the learning system was never designed with dyslexia or left handedness in mind.

It used to affect myself worth but now that I have my established ways of studying I feel I am competing reasonably well. I think this is because I have had to try and move things into my long term memory hence I revise early so I can move things there.

Email 5

Thank you again for your replies and time taken to respond. For today can I ask about the learning support you experience at university (please be reassured that this is not shared with the university and any response is pseudonymised in the research project):

Are you enrolled with learning support at the university and if so, at what stage did you enroll? What does the support consist of for you?
How is the learning support that is offered to you at university different from support at school?
Are you aware of the Disabled Students Allowance and do you claim it? If so, can I ask what this goes towards (e.g. computers, software programmes)?
How well does your additional support meet your study needs in your view? What would you change?
Is your additional support integrated with (or linked to) course teaching and how?

I look forward to hearing from you again,

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 5 reply

When doing undergrad degree I enrolled in 3rd year because I was not aware of the support. I received laptop etc and 25% extra time plus a learning support tutor.

At [university] I enrolled as soon as possible and get given 25% extra time in a separate room.. No new equipment this time. I did have a learning support tutor but I was just being taught the same things again so I decided to stop that.

School learning support was better than uni because it was easier to attended.

I am aware of dsa but I was not allowed new equipment despite my current laptop being so slow now.

My current support id say is fine. However there is a lot of note taking and I struggle to keep up.

My support is only integrated in so far as I get extra time in exams. No proviosn is made for teaching

Email 6

Thank you again for your replies. I am interested that you say school learning support was easier to attend. Is this due to timetabling issues, or where support is located, or the fact that you work now, or another reason?

- Can I also ask to clarify what your learning support consists of now, as you say you have stopped seeing the LS tutor?

We are half way with the email questions and I have a couple relating to your self-perception as a student with learning support.

- How do you feel as a student that receives additional support? Do you feel in any way different or marked out? Is this a positive or negative feeling that you associate with learning support?
- What does your university call additional support that you receive? Is the label ‘disabled’ used in connection with support and dyslexia at your university (some put learning support into ‘disabled services’) and if so, how do you feel about it?

I look forward to hearing from you again

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 6 reply

It was time tabling issues because I don’t live in London and work full time.

Right now my learning support is extra time and I have permission to record tutorials but I don’t find this helpful because lots of it is group work and I hate group work.

I feel slightly different but I’m pleased I get support because it’s been very helpful. I see it positive that people who struggle get help.

I think it is marked out as disabled but it doesn’t really bother me because as long as I get my course completed I don’t care so much. I have the support to do it and that’s what matters to me.

It might be more appropriate to not call things like dyslexia a ‘disability’ though. I see myself as dyslexic not disabled. I think there is a big difference because dyslexia is more of a learning struggle which wasn’t addressed and where people didn’t realise that people have different ways of learning.

Email 7

Thank you for the reply below. For today I will ask about your interactions with your course tutors/lecturers.

- I noted you say below that you hate group work. Can I ask why this is, what aspect of it don't you like? What alternative type of tutorial or learning sessions do you find more helpful?
- Could you give me examples of what else you find helpful or not helpful (for you as a student with dyslexia) about how your university teaches?
- Have you let your lecturers know that you identify with dyslexia and why/not? How do the tutors/lecturers react to this? Are they supportive or have you come across barriers or unhelpful attitudes?
- How do you communicate with your tutors on the course and do you have choices in this? (e.g. face-to-face in seminars, via email, any other ways?)
- Are you ok with the level of feedback from tutors and how it is delivered?
- Is there an opportunity for you to reflect on your progress with a tutor or with learning support, and if so, how does this work?

I look forward to hearing from you again

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 7 reply

I've never really liked group work. I get easily distracted. I find listening to teacher more helpful rather than group work because it give you a focus point. I'm better at group work now than I was.

If our tutorials were more like teaching sessions or like a mini lecture I'd find that more helpful because then you can concentrate instead of giving us a task to do in a group.

I don't think my teachers or lecturers are aware. I haven't told them. Since it's mostly group work I don't find myself in a situation where I'm struggling to keep up with note taking. The course is mainly self study which I'm fine with because I do my work early so it's out the way.

The uni is quite terrible at providing feedback. We had a mock recently where I scored 76% and the only feed back was that I had a good grasp of the subject matter.

I have just started my revision for the next load of exams where I'll get my head round most of the course content. Hense my late replies.

Email 8 reply

Thank you again for your email. I'd noticed the late replies, I am grateful for your time to respond particularly as you are busy: we only have a couple more question sets left. Here today are a few more about the university's teaching.

- Do you have further comments about how information is presented, how courses are structured, or how you are expected to learn as a student? (please be reassured your comments are confidential)
- Do you use a phone or recorder to record lectures, or are the lectures available online, video/audio recorded by the university? If so, what are tutors' reactions to recording lectures? Would video-recording of lectures be helpful?
- Does your university course use an online study platform (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard collaborate, or other web-based study and sharing platforms)? If so, what are these used for: e.g. to post work assignments, submit work, online discussion? And, how do you find using these online study platforms?
- Are there any other web-based interactions that you use as part of your studies (e.g. online chat/messaging) and how well do these support your approach to your studies?

I look forward to hearing from you,

Best wishes

Charlotte

Email 8 reply

I think the uni is bad at presenting the info. The teachers they have are very good but the course is very rushed.

I have permission to record and I have a recording device for this. There are online lecture which are accessible.

The uni uses blackboard. It’s quite good but I don’t like having to go and find my assessment. I’m from the generation where we were just given the work rather than having to rely on finding it.

There are some online tutorials but they are very boring

Email 9

Thanks for picking up the email thread, this is my last set of questions via email! Can I first ask to clarify a couple of your points below please:

1 - How could your university present the information better? Is it about how the teachers deliver it, the accessibility of information, or something else that isn’t helpful?

2 - Do you find the online lectures helpful and why are the online tutorials boring?

For the last few questions can I ask you to sum up a few thoughts:

3 - What has been the most challenging part of being a student: what barriers have you faced?

4 - What would you most like to see change about how your university teaches and communicates with you?

5 - Would you say technology is a help or an obstacle with your studies and why?

Lastly, can I ask what you thought about this email method of interview:

6 - Did you like the experience of corresponding in an interview via email and can I ask why?

7 - Why did you choose to respond via email? Would you choose it again?

I look forward to hearing from you, then perhaps we can arrange a good time to speak on a couple of further points: I am interested in the differences between the two interview formats (email and phone) and it gives me a chance to ask a few questions in more depth (with your agreement).

Many thanks and best wishes

Charlotte

Email 9 reply

Small classes at a slower pace and a lot less group work would be perfect.

The online lectures are good because you can rewind etc. Problem you can't ask questions.

Barriers are being able to keep up with note taking. Especially in some lectures where the seat had a writing pad because usually they are for right handers. Also I think I have had a confidence barrier.

I'd prefer the uni to be more personal. The teaching is good. The teachers do make the effort to get to know you but the uni as a whole just sees you as a money cow really. I'd like to see maybe extra classes for people with LD.

Tech has been both obstacle and help. Obstacle because I prefer hand writing my notes but that takes more time. Help because I am able to research information and print it.

I prefer email because I can think about my replies.
I chose to respond by email because I can keep track of the conversation.
Happy to speak on phone. Evenings are best for me

Email 10

Thank you for the replies [below] and for sharing your time and thoughts with me via email, as well as offering to speak by phone, perhaps for 30 mins.
[Arranged to speak by phone]

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