

Learning from dyslexic students' experiences of academic referencing: a more integrated approach to teaching academic literacy skills to first year undergraduate students.

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The issue

Accurate and consistent referencing is an expectation of all students throughout their academic journey,

however, ...

dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities,

so, ...

What is the experience of dyslexic students with respect to academic referencing?

How can we improve the teaching and learning experience of academic referencing to better meet students' needs?



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How is this relevant?

- Library services in UW provides teaching across the university to support students in learning how to reference accurately and consistently.
- Currently no targeted teaching methods or tools are used to specifically support dyslexic students during teaching sessions.
- Support is provided to dyslexic students through the university's dedicated disability and dyslexia service, but how this supports referencing is unclear.



Why no specific referencing support for dyslexic students?

- There is only anecdotal evidence of what works for dyslexic students.
- Any tools/support/teaching should be evidence based, but NO research could be identified that directly addressed dyslexic students' experiences of referencing.
- A gap in the literature indicated a need for research to be conducted so that teaching could be informed by student experience.

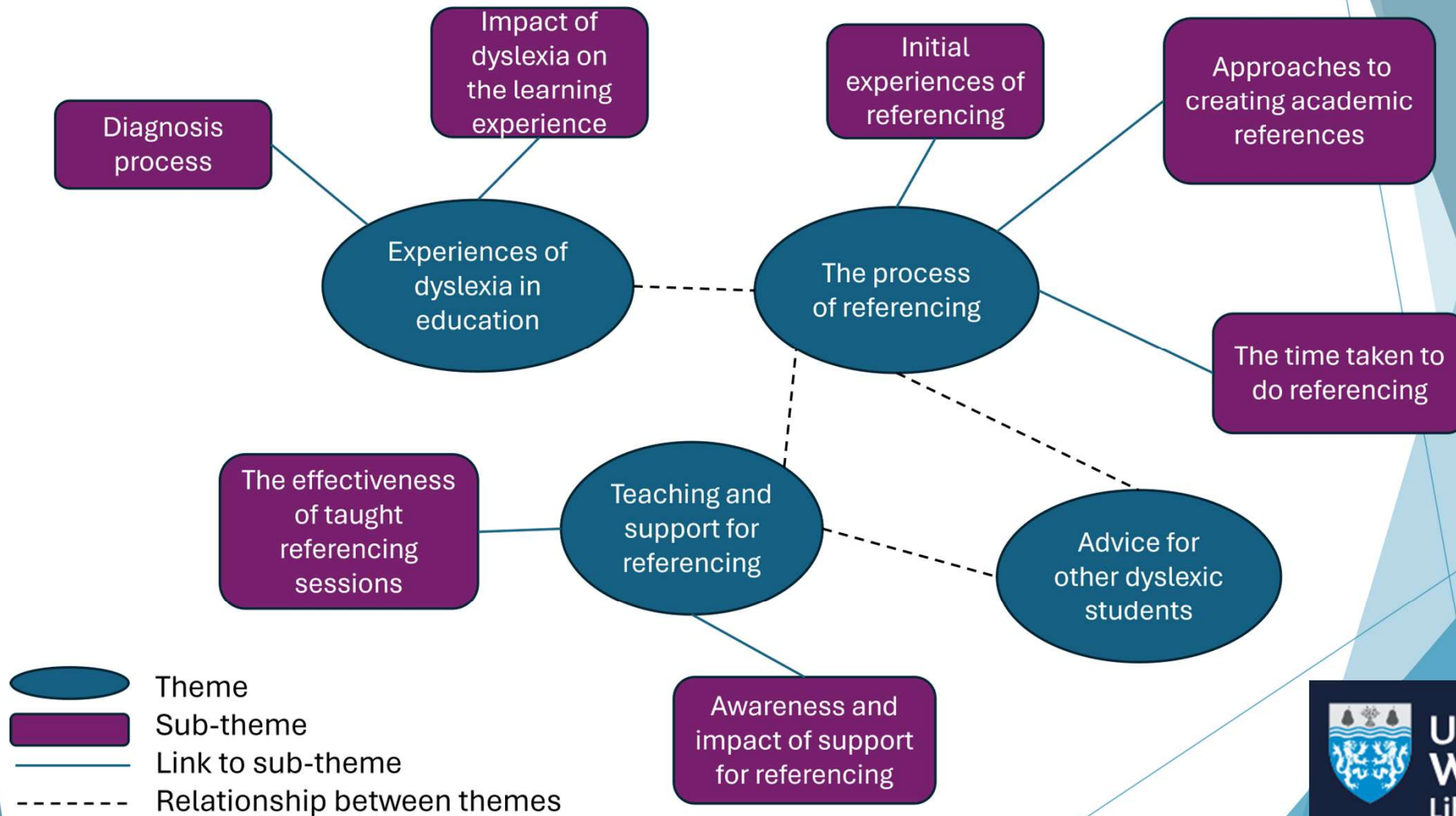


The research

- 9 semi-structured interviews were conducted with dyslexic students from across the school of Nursing and Midwifery and the School of Allied Health & Community.
- Topics discussed included pre-university experience, initial response to teaching of referencing, impact of referencing on their academic work, methods/tools used for referencing, experiences of getting help with referencing and their personal recommendations to improve the experience of referencing for dyslexic students.
- Thematic analysis was conducted of interview transcripts.



Mapping of Themes Identified (Byrne, 2022))



Student responses: General Experiences of Dyslexia in Education

Responses talked about both the difficulties they experienced as a result of their dyslexia and also difficulties related to the process of being formally diagnosed as dyslexic. As would be expected, participants mentioned issues related to spelling and reading and how these impacted on writing, however one of the most notable features discussed by participants was related to negative feelings and negative feedback.

“I am anticipating that I've got it wrong.”
(Participant A)

“I was told at the very start in year seven that I wouldn't get my English GCSE.”
(Participant J)

“It was really hard. It was really difficult. I didn't get any support.”
(Participant H)

“I got a bunch of GCSEs which I was told I was never going to get when I was in primary school.”
(Participant G)

Diagnosis of dyslexia: Some participants reported having obtained diagnosis prior to starting university, but five of the nine participants reported only receiving diagnosis and associated support in their second or third year.



Student responses: first experiences of referencing.

"I didn't cope very well. It was completely overwhelming - where do you put the full stops? Where do you use italics? When do you not use italics? It is those kinds of things that I particularly struggle with." (Participant C)

"I'm never going to be able to get this right, because there's so many dots and commas and things." (Participant D)

"That added pressure of dyslexia, it makes it 10 times more complicated." (Participant B)

Student responses: initial experiences of submitting assessed work with academic references.

My referencing was all incorrect. I was definitely graded down for it." (Participant F)

"Every assignment I'd have a comment saying your referencing is wrong." (Participant J)

"I did get marked down for references and it's something that I was pulled up on in my first year, saying things like this isn't right but there's no direct feedback. Well, how do I make it right?" (Participant C)

"I always got comments about my referencing basically saying it's not very good." (Participant B)

Student responses: Impact of initial teaching sessions

Most students talked about teaching sessions being very content heavy and not focussed on practical examples. Issues with the timing of the taught content were also raised by several students.

“You talk about it in theory, and you don't actually have the opportunity to apply it and give examples: this is what the paper is, how would you reference it?”
(Participant C)

“We didn't have anything on referencing until I think it was December and we had assignments due middle of December. The referencing sessions need to be much sooner.” (Participant E)

“I like to see things and have it in front of me rather than people just say stuff, so it doesn't hit the target, it doesn't hit dyslexic people.” (Participant B)

“It's all in one go, buried beneath everything else you do in the day.”
(Participant H)

Student responses: approach to referencing.

Students reported using **referencing tools**, including the online sites ZoteroBib, Cite-this-for-me and MyBib and the software tools Zotero and Grammarly. Two participants also reported **doing references manually** without reference generator software. Responses indicated a positive benefit of the software but also an awareness of issues related to using reference generators. Students were universally positive about **the printed referencing guide provided by library services**.

“There are different websites you can use but it doesn't always give me the correct layout.” (Participant F)

“I used Zotero for my second year. It was so useful. Without that, I would be spending hours writing references.” (Participant D)

“I have found I'm using the library recommended referencing guide and I go through it absolutely full stop by full stop.” (Participant A)

“I do have to go through it and double check that everything's right. And there's been a few issues a couple of times.” (Participant H)

Student responses: workload and stress.

Workload: All the participants made comments relating to the time taken to create references and the additional workload. Several participants also commented on the **resultant stress** that this creates.

“What might take someone else 5 minutes to do, you will probably have to spend 15 doing it.” (Participant A)

“It was taking a lot more time to do things and it was a lot harder work than when I spoke to some of my colleagues that were doing it.” (Participant C)

“I find it all time consuming, a lot of stress. I'm not on top of my essays as much as I should be.” (Participant F)

Additional time: Participants also commented on the **need for extra time** in written assignments to reflect dyslexia.

“I'll get extra time for in-person exams, but not extra time for deadlines.” (Participant C)

“What I really want is extra time. I'll probably say at least a week compared to others” (Participant H)

Student responses: support for dyslexic students.

DDS Support: Six of the nine participants mentioned help received from tutors that they accessed through the dyslexia and disability support system in the university. The comments related to these tutors were very positive.

“The main person that I go to is my tutor. Going to the tutor has significantly helped me.” (Participant F)

“I contacted DDS [Dyslexia and Disability Service] and have a study skills tutor. I meet pretty much every week if we can. I don't know what I'd do without her.” (Participant H)

Library services: Almost all participants were aware of services available from the library. Opinions expressed were positive about the value of these services.

“If I've got something in particular that I'm like struggling with, I have gone to the librarian one-to-one on teams.” (Participant C)

“I took advantage of the library's Zotero training and I did use live chat to get some clarification on how to reference and that was really useful.” (Participant D)

Student responses: advice for other dyslexic students.

Seek help early-on:

“Go into the university services in the first instance and make it known that that's something that you struggle with. Seek out help straight away.”
(Participant C)

“Go to the disability services sooner rather than later.” (Participant E)

Engage with referencing right from the start.

“Pay attention during that first session. Don't just sit in that lecture and go ‘I'll figure it out’.” (Participant B)

“You are never going to be able to make this referencing easy. This is going to be tough, but if you want to get this degree, you have to do this referencing.” (Participant A)

Summary of Key Findings

- ▶ Significant time and stress impact in written assignments.
- ▶ The limited effectiveness of initial taught sessions.
- ▶ The importance of a simple printed referencing guide.
- ▶ The range of tools employed by dyslexic students to help in referencing.
- ▶ The positive impact of support services.



The Teaching intervention

Following the presentation of these research results to Worcester University teaching staff, we were approached to design and deliver an extended program of referencing and wider academic library skills teaching. This replaced the previous teaching which comprised two 90 minute 'one-shot' sessions.

In line with the concept of Universal Design for Learning, these sessions were delivered to all students.

This took place in the Autumn semester of 2024 with a cohort of 25 first-year undergraduate occupational therapy students.

The following semester students were polled about their levels of confidence in the skills taught during these sessions.

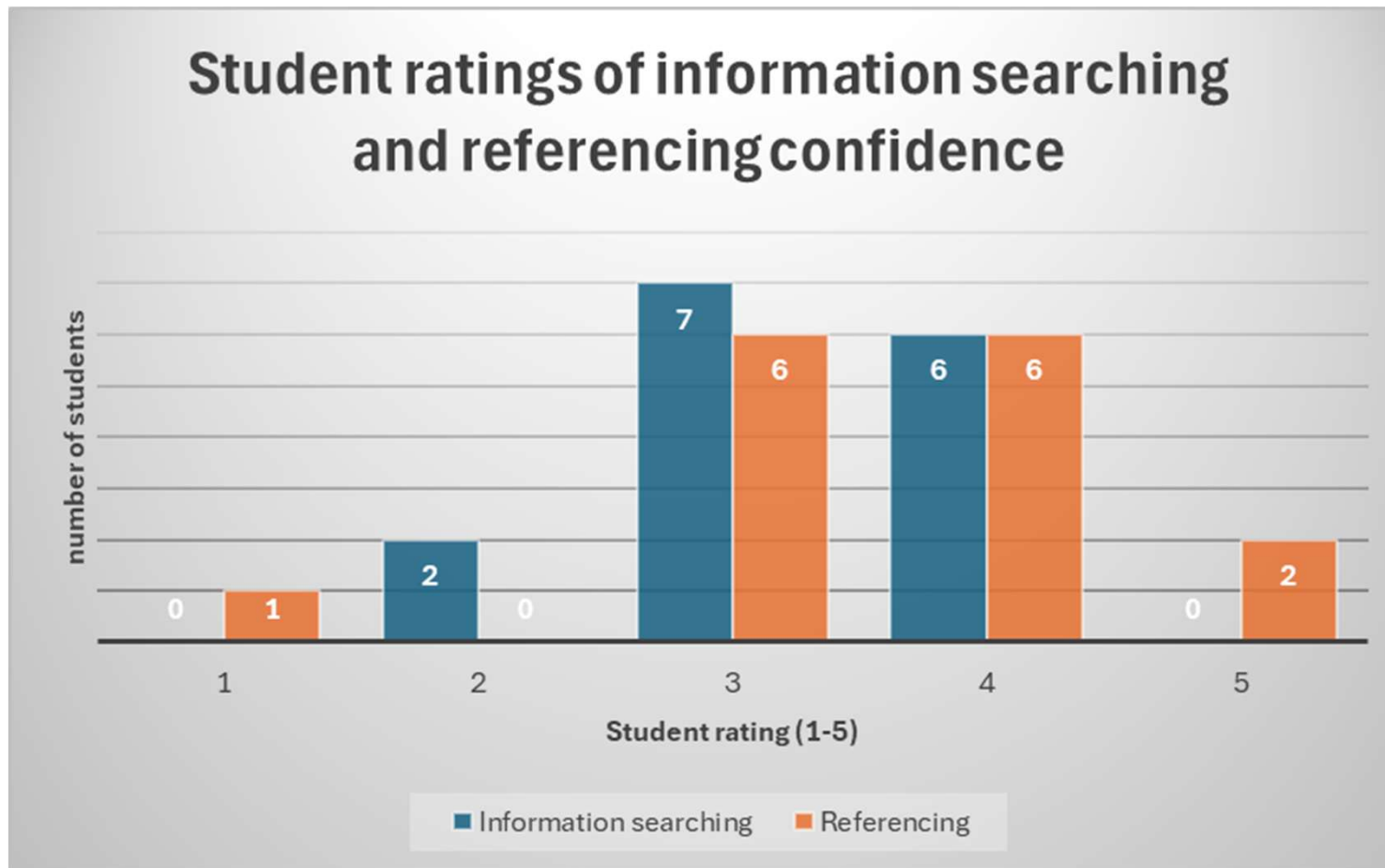


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Teaching program

Library Teaching plan: Semester 1 2024-25 Occupational therapy OTCH1201			
	Location	Topic	Content
Week 1	Library	Library: Know your shelf	Signing into eduroam
			Accessing resource lists.
			Finding books on the shelf.
			Borrowing books.
			Using Ebooks.
			Tips for notetaking and getting organised
Week 2	Campus	Introduction to searching	Academic sources
			CRAP test
			Websites
			Journal articles
			Library Search
			Keywords
			Boolean
			Subject guide
			Lib key
Week 3	Campus	Citing & Paraphrasing	Academic integrity
			Scholarly community
			Harvard style
			Ways to cite
			Tips for paraphrasing.
			Recap notetaking
Week 4	Campus	Writing your reference list	Recap on citing
			Using the guide
			Exploring the cite them right website
Week 5	Library	Critical Reading	Descriptive vs critical
			CRAP test activity
			Cross checking references
			Gen AI
			Useful tools
Week 6	Campus	Tools to support with referencing	Recap tricky questions
			Zotero
			Mybib
			Zotero
Week 7	Campus	Critical writing (Academic English Team)	Academic Style
			Reflective writing
Week 8	Campus	Workshop/Q&A	Review sessions and Q&A

Student confidence levels 4 months after the teaching sequence.



Conclusion

The lived experience of dyslexic students points to the need for a more effective process of teaching referencing.

This provides an evidence base for extended embedded teaching of referencing, and by extension general academic library skills.

A series of 8 teaching sessions embedded in a first-year module was designed and delivered.

After these sessions, students' confidence levels in using academic library skills were generally positive, particularly in referencing.



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Questions?



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