

Dyscalculia and access arrangements for exams and assessments

1. Introduction

Dyscalculia is considered to be a learning difficulty or difference. It is increasingly being recognised and “diagnosed” within adult learning. However, practitioners are often unclear about whether learners who are considered to have dyscalculia are entitled to access arrangements for examinations and assessments, and which access arrangements would be appropriate for these learners. This briefing sheet is intended to provide general information to practitioners about dyscalculia and access arrangements. However, all questions about arrangements for individual learners should be addressed to the appropriate awarding body.

2. What are access arrangements?

Access arrangements for assessments and examinations are intended to give a “level playing field” for learners with a health condition, learning difficulty or disability that may affect their ability to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in an examination or assessment context. Practitioners may be familiar with learners who have extra time in examinations as a result of dyslexia, for example, or with learners who take frequent rest breaks because of a medical condition. All UK awarding bodies should have clear guidance on the access arrangements that are available for learners with learning difficulties, disabilities and health conditions. The largest awarding bodies are represented by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). JCQ awarding bodies share processes and policies for access arrangements. Information about these arrangements is available from www.jcq.org.uk.

3. What access arrangements might be appropriate for learners with dyscalculia?

Advice from the JCQ is that learners with dyscalculia may be assessed by specialist teachers or psychologists as having:

- A slow processing speed
- Poor working memory

Evidence of these may be used to apply for additional time (usually up to 25%) in examinations or timed assessments, including numeracy assessments, as long as the speed of working is not the skill being assessed. It is worth noting that providing extra time must be the learner’s “usual way of working” and so any practice tests should have similar arrangements made.

Learners with dyscalculia would not be allowed to use a calculator, unless all candidates taking that particular assessment or examination were also entitled to do so: this is to ensure that the access arrangement does not give an unfair advantage to a learner. It is also worth bearing in mind that

learners with dyscalculia may also be affected by other learning difficulties, disabilities or health conditions. For these learners, additional access arrangements, relating to the additional learning difficulties, disabilities or health conditions may also be appropriate. For example, a learner with dyslexia and dyscalculia may be awarded a reader, because of the reading difficulties caused by dyslexia, and additional time, because of the slower processing speed related to dyscalculia.

4. What evidence of dyscalculia is needed?

As is the case with dyslexia, it is not usually necessary to “prove” the existence of dyscalculia in order to secure access arrangements. What does need to be proven is that there is a reason for providing access arrangements. A specialist teacher or psychologist will usually be able to assess speed of processing and working memory. The evidence of these assessments may be in the form of a specialist teacher assessment, a psychologist’s report or a statement of special educational needs.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there may be an opportunity for learners who you consider to have dyscalculia to be awarded access arrangements when undertaking assessment or examination activities. In all instances it is in the interests of the learner to seek advice from the relevant awarding body.

For further information about this briefing sheet, or other aspects of NIACE’s work on dyscalculia, please contact Rachel Davies, NIACE Development Officer (dyslexia) on rachel.davies@niace.org.uk

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