

Supporting allied health professional students with additional learning needs on clinical placement

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Review date: December 2020

Document endorsed by



The Association
of UK Dietitians

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Acknowledgements

With thanks to Glenys Heap of Dyslexia Action for the expert support and guidance kindly offered to develop this resource and to the dietetic and AHP reviewers who provided their helpful advice and feedback.

The development of this resource was initiated whilst undertaking a Masters programme at the University of Nottingham and was inspired by the Royal College of Nursing Dyslexia Toolkit.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Executive summary

This resource has been developed to aid with the planning and management of clinical placements for allied health professional students who have an additional learning need or specific learning difficulty (SpLD), in particular, dyslexia, dyspraxia or dyscalculia.

The aim of the resource is to guide clinical educators in supporting students on clinical placement who have been identified as having an additional learning need.

Objectives:

- Provide practical ideas to share with students on clinical placement
- Increase understanding amongst clinical supervisors regarding the needs of individuals with specific learning difficulties (SpLD)
- Highlight the importance of encouraging the student to take responsibility for their own learning and develop their own strategies
- Signposting to further support and guidance

Introduction

The aim of this resource is to guide clinical educators supporting students on clinical placement who may have an additional learning need or specific learning difficulty (SpLD). An additional learning need affects the way information is learned or processed (dyslexiaaction.org.uk). This can present a challenge to the way we are used to working. It is our responsibility as clinical educators to provide a learning environment which suits the student's preferred way of learning (Morris & Turnbull, 2007), and it is against the law to fail to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the additional needs of a student with SpLD (Equality Act 2010).

Each student is individual and each will have different needs in terms of the support required to complete tasks. It is important to discuss with the student in advance which types of learning strategy they may have used in the past and guide them to find their own ways of managing new tasks. The strategies which were used within the University setting are unlikely to be adequate within clinical placement (Murphy, 2011; Walker et al., 2013). This may also be the case for students who have already successfully completed a placement – the coping strategies which have been successful in a previous trust may need to be adapted and practiced which can give the student a sense of “starting from scratch”.

This resource provides general guidance which can serve as a starting point for students with an additional learning need to develop their personal learning strategies within a range of clinical settings. Each section is colour coded for ease of reference based on typical tasks that may be undertaken by a student on clinical placement. The strengths and positive qualities that a student with an additional learning need may bring to that area are outlined at the beginning of each chapter, followed by details of practical solutions for common challenges the student may encounter.

Wards

In a ward environment, someone with an additional learning need may have the following strengths (Cowen, 2010):

- Caring
- Intuitive
- Holistic thinking
- Creative and original
- Methodical
- Good at problem solving
- Determined and hard working

Dyslexia

An individual with dyslexia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Information gathering	What may help
May have difficulty discarding irrelevant information	Work with the learner to devise a crib sheet of essential information that needs to be collected for an inpatient consultation
May have difficulty remembering patient names / drugs	Encourage the learner to keep a list of common drugs and their indications which can be added to as new drugs are encountered

May struggle transferring learning to a new setting	When moving to a different ward / different hospital, provide support to allow the learner to identify their new way of working
May have difficulty following instruction	Wherever possible, try to present information in 3 ways: show, say, do.
May be easily distracted	Try not to interrupt the learner unless necessary. Consider finding a quiet area for the learner to gather their information (e.g. collect as much information as possible, such as blood results, before going onto the ward or try to find a quiet space on the ward to work)
May sequence the order of tasks incorrectly	Work with the learner to devise a flow chart to use when the order of tasks is important
May struggle with multitasking	Give the learner one task to complete at a time until they feel they are ready to take on additional tasks
May read slowly / finding scan reading difficult	Allow sufficient time to enable the learner to gather information at their own pace
May find text distorts (particularly black writing on white background)	Consider using coloured overlays to read medical notes

May have difficulty reading in a noisy environment	Try to identify areas on the ward that could be used for information gathering (e.g. request permission from the nurse in charge to use a quiet room or office on the ward)
May have difficulty interpreting abbreviations	Carry a list of commonly used abbreviations – encourage the learner to add to the list as they encounter new ones
May need to read things several times	Allow sufficient time to enable the learner to gather information at their own pace

Inpatient individual consultation	What may help
May require information more than once	Encourage the learner to explain to the service user that they may need to make some notes / clarify points
Difficulty discarding irrelevant information	Work with the learner to devise a crib sheet of essential information that needs to be collected for an inpatient consultation
Struggling to find the right words / difficulty presenting information in a structured way	Encourage the learner to develop a crib sheet with common questions. Usually gets better with practice and increased confidence, so give as much opportunity to be involved as possible.

Tendency to go off on a tangent	Work with the learner to devise a crib sheet of essential information that needs to be collected for an inpatient consultation
Sometimes experience mental block, particularly if stressed	Build up consultation skills slowly to help the learner increase their confidence step by step. Encourage use of a crib sheet to refer to if the learner feels they are stuck.

Working with numbers	What may help
May have difficulty interpreting formulas (knowing what to put where)	Allow plenty of time to practice. Encourage the learner to try calculations independently before checking with supervisor.
May have difficulty getting numbers in the correct order	Have a relevant example to refer to. Encourage the learner to double check answers.

Writing in medical notes	What may help
Difficulty ordering ideas	Encourage the learner to carry a good example of a medical note entry in a format they are used to or prefer using (refer to local trust guidelines if specific format is required)
May have illegible handwriting	Encourage completion of records electronically where possible. Choosing the right kind of pen and pen grip is important – pens with a wider body are usually easier to use.
May use inappropriate language	Provide a model of what is expected with a list of the words commonly used
Difficulty writing concisely or accurately	Provide a structured model of what is expected
Difficulty checking for mistakes	Work with the learner to identify common mistakes so the learner can look out for them in future. Check with a supervisor until more confident they know what to look for.
Getting numbers / letters in the incorrect order	Consider making a word list of common difficult words that may be encountered
May have difficulty understanding 24 hour clock	This is learnt over time, but a 'conversion' chart may be helpful

Consolidation	What may help
Difficulty planning ahead	<p data-bbox="1048 316 2051 533">Consider providing early opportunities to practice consolidation skills in smaller chunks: For example, working with one supervisor for the whole week and allowing the learner to be involved in deciding follow up time frames / planning which patients need to be seen on which day.</p> <p data-bbox="1048 576 2018 746">Consider introducing the learner to their consolidation wards as early as possible (ideally, from the 1st week) to provide ample opportunity to become accustomed to the layout, the staff and the environment.</p>
Difficulty estimating how much time is needed for a task	
Not completing tasks on time	
Sequencing the order of tasks incorrectly	
Difficulty multitasking	
Difficulty transferring learning to a new setting	

Dyspraxia

An individual with dyspraxia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Information gathering	What may help
Tend to be oversensitive to noise	Try to work away from distractions
May have poor memory	Keep a notebook to hand to record important information
May have poor posture / easily fatigue when standing	Low muscle tone may make it difficult to stand for long periods of time. Allow time for breaks when needed.
May have a tendency to day dream	Encourage the learner to maintain eye contact and to consciously stop themselves from fidgeting, yawning or looking around
May easily lose their place when reading	Use a clear A5 sheet of acetate with a line ruled on it to underline where they are up to. Small coloured sticky strip can mark places for reference.

Inpatient individual consultation	What may help
May veer off on a tangent during conversation	Consider making a checklist of important points to cover with different patient groups / different settings
May find it difficult to answer direct questions	May take things quite literally so choose your words carefully when asking direct questions
Concentration may be poor	Encourage the learner to maintain eye contact
Tend to be over sensitive to noise	Find a quiet place to hold your conversations. Try to identify areas on the ward that could be used for information gathering (e.g. request permission from the nurse in charge to use a quiet room or office on the ward)
Speech can be loud and fast	Be understanding – ask the learner to slow down and repeat what they have said – if they slow down the tone will drop. Practice in a calm environment, in small parts, to gain confidence. Provide constructive feedback.
May have difficulty organising sequence of speech	Crib sheet with questions will help to keep the conversation structured
May misinterpret what they hear	Ask the learner to repeat the question or instruction in their own words to make sure it has been understood and not misinterpreted. Encourage summarising skills with patients.

May have difficulty picking up non-verbal signs or judging tone / pitch	May need more verbal input to make up for this. Understanding non-verbal clues requires some training. Will need practice to know the meaning of certain postures so they can moderate their body language to reflect their feelings and to interpret accurately the signals sent out by someone else.
May become distressed at minor things	Feelings of frustration can build up – encourage the learner to try to explain the problem
May have poor memory	Keep a note book or digital recording device to hand. Encourage the use of a digital calendar if they find this useful.

Working with numbers	What may help
May have difficulty interpreting formulas (knowing what to put where)	Practice. Try calculations independently before checking with supervisor. Do not rush. Have a relevant example to refer to. Double check answers.

Writing in medical notes	What may help
Tend to be over sensitive to noise	Try to identify areas on the ward that could be used for information gathering (e.g. request permission from the nurse in charge to use a quiet room or office on the ward)
May have poor handwriting / poor pen grip /may have difficulty writing on a line	Use digital means when possible. Choosing the right kind of pen and pen grip is important – pens with a wider body are usually easier to use.
May have poor sequencing	Follow a good example of a structured medical note entry in preferred format (e.g. SOAP / ABCDE, etc.)
May have problems recording information	Encourage the use of digital means where possible

Consolidation	What may help
May become distressed at minor things	Feelings of frustration can build up – encourage the learner to try to discuss any issues at regular meetings (e.g. timetabled meetings with mentor)
Poor concept of time	Digital reminders may help
Poor memory	Encourage the learner to keep a notebook to hand
May have difficulty following instructions	Provide information in 3 different ways where possible (say, show, do)
May have poor posture / experience fatigue	Encourage the learner to take breaks as needed
May have difficulty planning and organising	Maintain a wall planner / diary. Encourage the use of colour coding for different tasks.
May be slow to complete tasks	Allow plenty of time to complete tasks, particularly when the task is very new
May be easily disorientated	Show the learner the best way to get to their consolidation wards. Highlight “signposts” along the way such as a café or shop. If looking after more than ward, try to choose wards that are in the same area of the hospital or are close to each other.

Dyscalculia

An individual with dyscalculia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Information gathering	What may help
May have problems reading numbers	Practice.
May have difficulty interpreting results	Do not rush.
May have difficulty reading charts / graphs	Double check answers.
May have difficulty understanding written numbers	

Working with numbers	What may help
May have problems writing numbers down	Practice. Try calculations independently before checking with supervisor. Do not rush. Have relevant examples / reference ranges to refer to. Double check answers.
May have conceptual difficulties (e.g. which is bigger: 10 or 100)	
May not understand concept of decimal places	
May have difficulty giving estimates or approximate answers	
May be unable to recognise that an answer is unreasonable	
May take a long time to work out answers	Allow sufficient time to calculate requirements
May have difficulty remembering what symbols mean (e.g. +, x, -)	Keep a crib sheet describing the meaning of different symbols they may come across

Writing in medical notes	What may help
May have difficulty interpreting 24 hour clock	This is learnt over time, but a 'conversion' chart may be helpful
May have problems with writing numbers down	Practice. Try calculations independently before checking with supervisor. Do not rush. Double check answers.
May have no appreciation of decimal places	
May have problems understanding units	
May have difficulty interpreting results	

Consolidation	What may help
May be unable to recognise that an answer is unreasonable	Keep a list of reference ranges relevant to clinical area to compare with own answers
May take a long time to work out answers	Ensure adequate time is allowed to carry out calculations
May have difficulty remembering appointment times	Encourage a weekly diary of commitments that can be carried around

Clinics

In a clinic environment, someone with additional learning needs may have the following strengths (Cowen, 2010):

- Caring
- Intuitive
- Holistic thinking
- Creative and original

Dyslexia

An individual with dyslexia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Individual outpatient consultation	What may help
May have difficulty remembering patient names and medical conditions	Check clinic list in advance. Consider making brief notes about each patient (name, relevant medical history, drugs, etc.).
May find it difficult to transfer learning to a new setting	Provide time, support and understanding to encourage and assist the learner to adapt their coping strategies to the new setting
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Encourage use of a structured crib sheet
May find it difficult to react quickly in a busy environment or in an emergency	Rehearse what to do in emergency situations / role play. Use pictures/symbols on posters for everyone to see.

May have difficulty understanding medical / pharmacological language	Keep a list of common medical terms / drugs / abbreviations which are relevant to clinical area
May have difficulty with abbreviations	
May find it difficult to discard irrelevant information	Have a structured checklist for what type of information needs to be collected for different patient groups
May appear to have a short attention span and get easily distracted	Encourage the learner to maintain eye contact and to repeat instructions
May interrupt frequently	Help the learner to understand when it would be an appropriate time to speak – practice consultations skills with supervisor until confident
May require information to be presented more than once	Repeat as required and ask the learner to feed back in their own words to ensure they have understood
May find it difficult to plan ahead or plan work schedule	Use a calendar or planner with coloured dots/stickers
May have difficulty completing tasks on time	Allow plenty of time. Go through the structure of the task and ask the learner to estimate the amount of time required and then to check when they have done it to see if they were right – this will help the learner to gain a sense of how long things will take in the future.

Letter writing	What may help
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Consider using a clinic letter template
May find text is distorted, particularly black writing on white background	Use coloured overlays or coloured background if using a computer

Dyspraxia

An individual with dyspraxia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Individual outpatient consultation	What may help
May veer off on a tangent in conversations	Use a structured crib sheet with sequence of questions
May have a poor concept of time	Keep a timer to keep track of time within a consultation
May have a tendency to daydream	Encourage the learner to maintain eye contact and to be conscious of whether they usually fidget, yawn or look around
May find it difficult to answer direct questions	May take things quite literally, so choose your words carefully when asking direct questions. Could rehearse common questions that may be asked by different patient groups.
May have poor concentration	Encourage the learner to maintain eye contact (but avoid staring)
Speech can be loud and fast	Be understanding – ask them to slow down and repeat what they have said – if they slow down the tone will drop. Practice in calm environment, in small parts, to gain confidence. Provide constructive feedback.

May have problems organising sequence of speech	Crib sheet with questions can help to keep the conversation structured
May misinterpret what they hear	Ask the learner to repeat the question or instruction in their own words to make sure it has been understood and not misinterpreted. Encourage the use of summarising skills with patients.
May have difficulty picking up on non-verbal signs / judging pitch or tone	May need more verbal input to make up for this. Understanding non-verbal clues requires some training. Will need practice to know the meaning of certain postures so they can moderate their body language to reflect their feelings and to interpret accurately the signals sent out by someone else.
May become distressed at minor things	Feelings of frustration can build up – encourage the learner to try to explain the problem
May have problems recording information	Could keep a note book or digital recording device to hand. Encourage the use of a digital calendar if they find this helpful.

Letter writing	What may help
May have difficulty recording information	Could keep a note book or digital recording device to hand. Encourage the use of a digital calendar if they find this helpful.
May have poor memory	Complete letters as soon as possible after consultation. Encourage to take notes if possible / able during consultation.

Dyscalculia

An individual with dyscalculia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Individual outpatient consultation	What may help
May have difficulty conceptualising numbers (e.g. which is bigger: 10 or 100)	Practice. Try calculations independently before checking with supervisor. Do not rush. Have a relevant example to refer to. Double check answers.
May not have appreciation of decimal places	
May have problems with units	
May have difficulty interpreting results	
May have difficulty reading graphs / charts	
May have difficulty remembering appointment times	Print out appointment list so that it can be easily referred to during clinic

Letter writing	What may help
May have difficulty reading numbers	Encourage the learner to ask supervisor to proof read letters until confident. If the same supervisor can be responsible, this may help to spot any recurring mistakes that the learner can then look out for themselves.
May have difficulty conceptualising numbers (e.g. which is bigger: 10 or 100)	

Presentations

When giving a presentation, someone with an additional learning need may have the following strengths (Cowen, 2010):

- Holistic thinking
- Creative and original

Dyslexia

An individual with dyslexia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Planning / writing a presentation	What may help
May have difficulty discarding irrelevant information	Discuss with a colleague / supervisor the important key points to cover within the presentation
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Use a mind map or cards with main points to keep on track. A series of PowerPoint slides can help to keep on track. Could use mind mapping app.
May have difficulty planning ahead	Keep a wall planner / diary with scheduled time to work on writing the presentation
May have difficulty estimating how much time is needed for a task	Seek advice from colleagues / supervisor regarding the amount of time that may be required. Estimate how much time the learner thinks they will need, then reflect on how accurate the estimate was.

May struggle identifying written mistakes	Ask a colleague or supervisor to look over written presentation material
May have difficulty with spelling / grammar	
May get letters / numbers in the incorrect order	
May use inappropriate language	Encourage learner to ask supervisor to go over notes until at a stage where they feel confident they are 'getting it right'
If using PowerPoint, text may distort (particularly black writing on white background)	Use coloured background for PowerPoint slides. Always use a sans-serif font such as Arial or Calibre.

Presenting	What may help
May have difficulty transferring learning to a new setting	Try to visit presentation venue in advance / get there with plenty of time to set up and prepare
May appear to have a short attention span / be easily distracted	Be well prepared, ask for questions to be saved until the end of the presentation
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Mind maps, sequenced cards – looking at the big picture first

May have difficulty estimating how much time is needed for a task	Encourage the learner to practice the presentation in advance to get an idea of how much time it will take and to be familiar with any words they may struggle with
May be embarrassed to read aloud	
May read slowly	
May use inappropriate language	Encourage the learner to ask their supervisor to go over notes until at a stage where they feel confident they are 'getting it right'. Could also provide a model of commonly used words.
May struggle to find the right words / may have difficulty expressing themselves verbally	Be well prepared, lots of practice. Encourage the learner to write down any complicated sentences / words.
May have difficulty giving clear instructions	If needing to give instructions to a group, consider writing them down step by step to help keep on track
May have a tendency to go off on a tangent	Stick to prepared notes
May struggle presenting verbal information in a structured way (may jump from topic to topic)	Stick to prepared notes
May sometimes experience mental block, particularly when stressed	Have well prepared notes and slides

Dyspraxia

An individual with dyspraxia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Planning / writing a presentation	What may help
May have poor concentration	Encourage use of mind maps to get big picture and then add details
May have poor sequencing	Encourage starting with mind maps and then structure the points
May have difficulty following instruction	Provide information in 3 ways – say, do, show
May have a tendency to daydream	Structured plan will help focus
May have poor visual perception	Large mind maps will help to structure and plan

Presenting	What may help
May veer off on a tangent during conversation	Be well prepared, ask for questions to be saved until the end of the presentation
Concentration may be poor	Use notes and slides to keep on track.
Speech can be loud and fast / may have difficulty organising sequence of speech	Encourage the learner to take their time while presenting – practice as much as possible in advance to increase confidence
May misinterpret what they hear	Encourage the learner to repeat the question in their own words to make sure it has been understood and not misinterpreted
May have a poor concept of time	Keeping a timer in sight so that the presenter can see how much time they have left. Have someone give a signal a few minutes before they need to finish.
May have difficulty listening to people in large groups	Start a session with “The way we work” (ground rules) asking that only one person speaks at a time

Dyscalculia

An individual with dyscalculia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Presenting	What may help
May have problems remembering appointment times	Keep a wall planner or diary with presentations scheduled in. Could set up a reminder on email or mobile phone.

Evidence of assessment / portfolio

When compiling the portfolio of evidence, an individual with additional learning needs may have the following strengths (Cowen, 2010):

- Holistic thinking
- Creative and original

Dyslexia

An individual with dyslexia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Organising a portfolio	What may help
May require information more than once / may have difficulty following instruction	Always provide information in 3 ways – say, show, do
May have difficulty transferring learning to a new setting	Do not assume that a C placement student will automatically know how to organise their portfolio because they have passed their A and B placement – they may require additional help or advice
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Keep a sample portfolio from a recently qualified practitioner as an example. Could use mind mapping app.
May have difficulty completing tasks on time	Keep a wall planner / organiser to help to plan when tasks should

	be started and finished
May have illegible handwriting	Typing up evidence rather than hand writing where possible. Choosing the right kind of pen and pen grip is important – pens with a wider body are usually easier to use.
May get numbers / letters in the incorrect order	Could use a colour coding system using stickers or highlighters to organise portfolio rather than letters or numbers

Completing assessment tools	What may help
May have difficulty discarding irrelevant information	Offer to look through the portfolio with the student if they require some help with knowing which evidence to include
May have difficulty transferring learning to a new setting	Offer support with completing assessment tools, even if the student has successfully completed previous placements
May have difficulty following instruction	Always offer information in 3 ways: say, show, do.
May have difficulty ordering ideas	Start with big picture, break up and sequence. Could use mind mapping app.

Text may distort (particularly black on white)	Try printing assessment tools on different coloured paper
May have illegible handwriting	Consider completing assessment tools electronically. Choosing the right kind of pen and pen grip is important – pens with a wider body are usually easier to use.
May have difficulty writing concisely or accurately (e.g. spelling / grammar)	Encourage use of electronic aids
May get letters / numbers in the incorrect order	Double check, saying aloud

Dyspraxia

An individual with dyspraxia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Organising a portfolio	What may help
May have difficulty following instructions	Always offer information in 3 ways: say, show, do.

Completing assessment tools	What may help
May have poor handwriting (poor fine motor skills)	Try completing assessment tools electronically. Using a large body pen can help with handwriting.
May have problems recording information	Use voice to text software and then check
May have a poor memory	Encourage completion of assessment tools as soon as possible after the event or make notes to refer to later. Encourage supervisors to complete assessment tools promptly to enable appropriate reflection and action planning for improvements.

Dyscalculia

An individual with dyscalculia may have difficulties in the following areas:

Organising a portfolio	What may help
May have problems sequencing numbers (e.g. from small to large)	Use a lettering or colour coding system to organise portfolio rather than numbers

Appendices

1 - Glossary

ADD/ADHD

Attention Deficit Disorder / Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Signs include inattention, restlessness, impulsivity, erratic, unpredictable and inappropriate behaviour, blurting out inappropriate comments or interrupting excessively. Some may come across unintentionally aggressive. Most fail to make effective use of feedback. May appear “dreamy” and not to pay attention due to problems remaining focussed. Very easily distracted, lose track of what they are doing and have poor listening skills (bdadyslexia.org.uk).

Dyscalculia

A difficulty understanding maths concepts and symbols. Characterised by an inability to understand simple number concepts and to master basic numeracy skills. There are likely to be difficulties dealing with numbers at very elementary levels; this includes learning number facts and procedures, telling the time, time keeping, understanding quantity, prices and money (bdadyslexia.org.uk).

Dysgraphia

The inability to perform the motor movements required for handwriting. Some typical features of dysgraphia include: poor, illegible handwriting; hand tiring quickly, making writing painful; difficulty keeping letters and words on a writing line or difficulty moving the hand across the page while writing (dysgraphia.org.uk).

Dyslexia

Affects the way information is processed, stored and retrieved, with problems of memory, speed of processing, time perception, organisation and sequencing. Some may also have difficulty navigating a route, left and right and compass directions (bdadyslexia.org.uk).

Dyspraxia

Disorder affecting fine and / or gross motor skills (bdadyslexia.org.uk).
Thought to affect around 3% of adults in the UK (nhs.uk).

**Specific Learning
Difficulties
(SpLD)**

Umbrella term used to cover a range of frequently co-occurring difficulties including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADD / ADHD. They affect the way information is learned and processed. Neurological (rather than psychological), usually runs in families and occurs independently of intelligence (bdadyslexia.org.uk).

**Text distortion
(or visual stress)**

Blurring of letters or words appearing to shake. Difficulty tracking sentences across the page. May also have sensitivity to light and suffer with headaches. The problem can be reduced by using non-white paper or backgrounds on the computer (bdadyslexia.org.uk).

2 – Disclosing additional learning needs

Students who have disclosed an additional learning need to University are encouraged to also disclose to placement supervisors in order for reasonable adjustments to be made in the clinical environment. However, a student may decide not to disclose.

If a student is having difficulties and is not known to have a diagnosed additional learning need, this resource can be used as a way of providing the student with some ways of optimising their learning within the clinical environment. Advice should always be sought from University if a student is struggling to meet their learning outcomes.

References and further reading

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