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## Equity or Advantage?

### The effect of receiving access arrangements in university exams on students with specific learning difficulties

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## THE DEBATE: the University's concerns

**Tension between:**

<p><b>Ensuring equal opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Levelling the playing field</li><li>• Statutory duty to relieve a student of any substantial disadvantage that might arise as a result of their disability in the exam</li></ul>	<p><b>Maintaining academic standards:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preserving the integrity of the examination for the full cohort</li><li>• Arrangements should not give one student an advantage over others</li></ul>
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THE DEBATE: The student voice		
EQUITY	OR	ADVANTAGE
<i>“The extra time helps to level the playing field and gives me the same opportunity as everyone else to access the questions and respond in a way that reflects what I’ve been learning”</i>		<i>“But you don’t want to tell your friends that you get extra time because they think it means you can write longer answers in the exams with more detail and are getting an advantage”</i>

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### Defining advantage

**What constitutes an advantage in exams?**

1. Does extra time and use of a word processor enable students with SpLD:
  - To write more than peers in exams (longer exam scripts)?
  - To achieve higher marks in exams than peers?
  - To achieve higher marks in exams than predicted by coursework marks (where no adjustments were granted)

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## Sample group 2016-18 Summer exams

Humanities	STEM
426 participants:	288 participants:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English (136)</li><li>• History (186)</li><li>• Law (104)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maths (152)</li><li>• Medicine (136)</li></ul>
<b>Total 714 (undergraduates)</b>	

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## Methodology: Group comparisons

Comparisons were made between the SpLD group and TD peers:

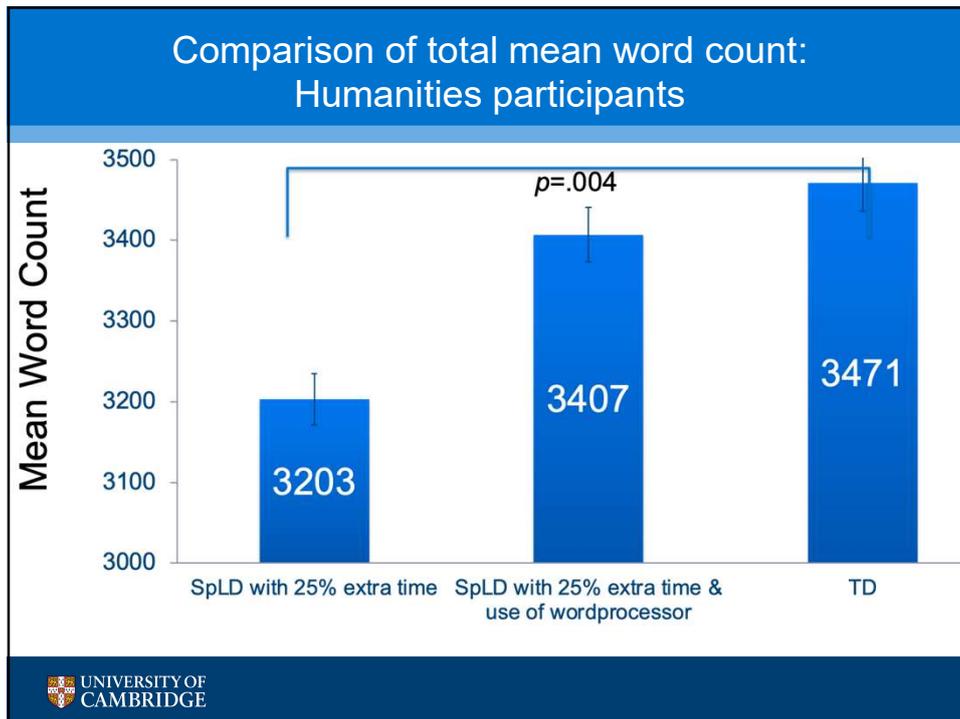
- Exam marks
- coursework marks
- Difference between exam marks & coursework marks

In Humanities exams only (essay questions):

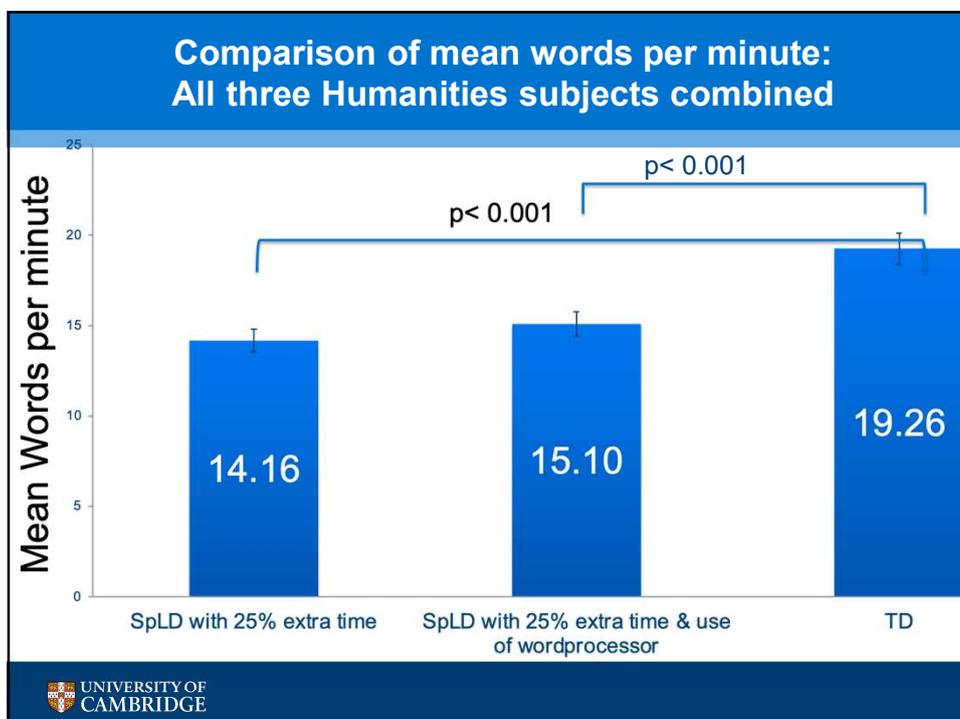
- total word count on paper
- words per minute

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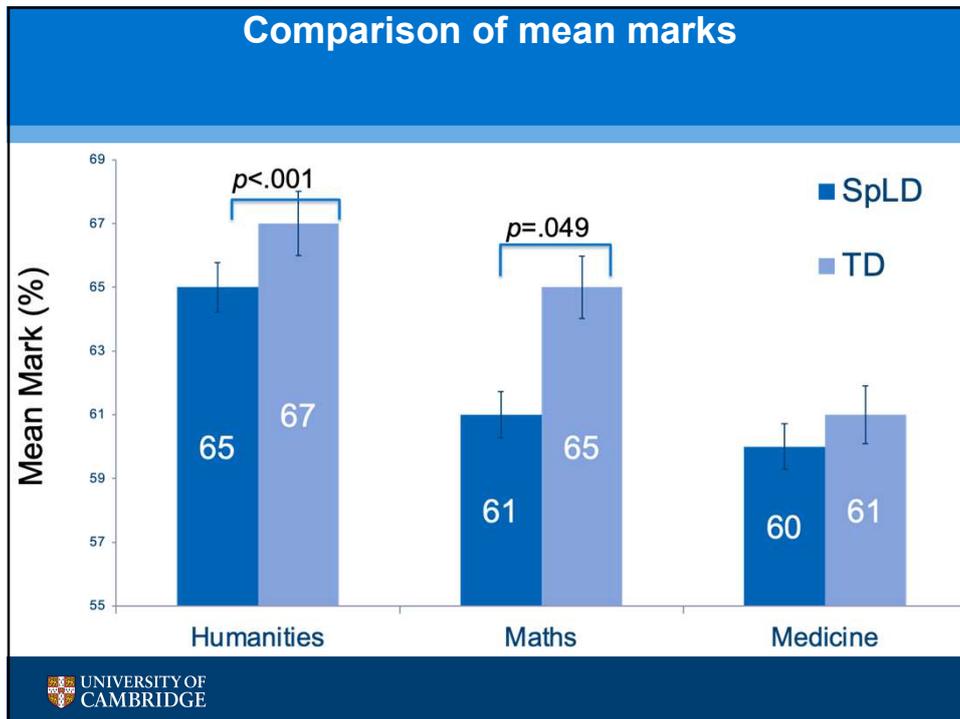
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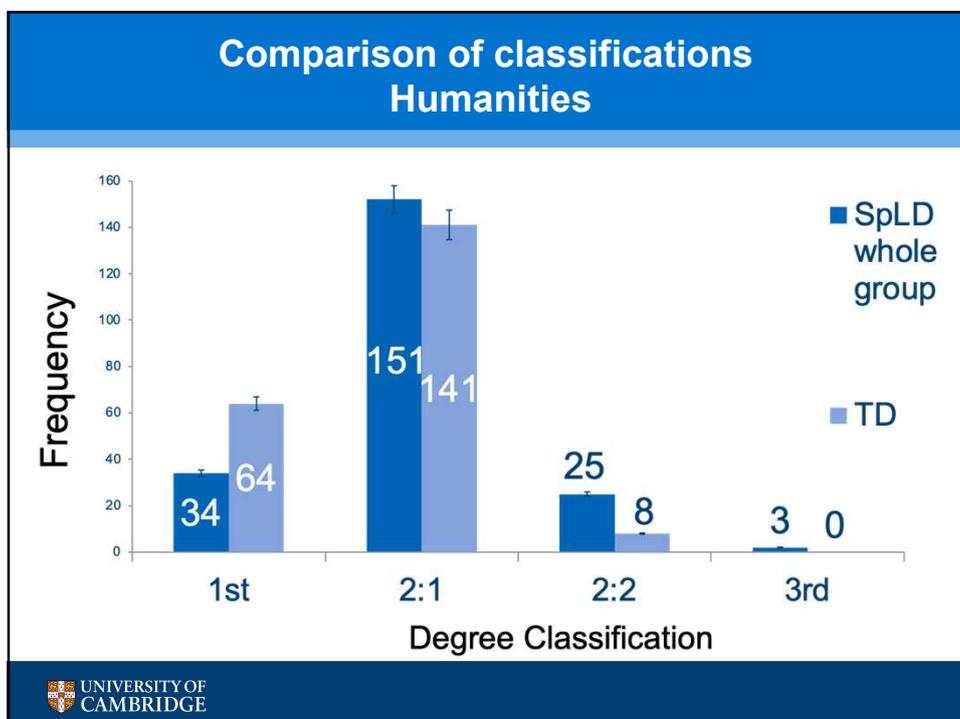
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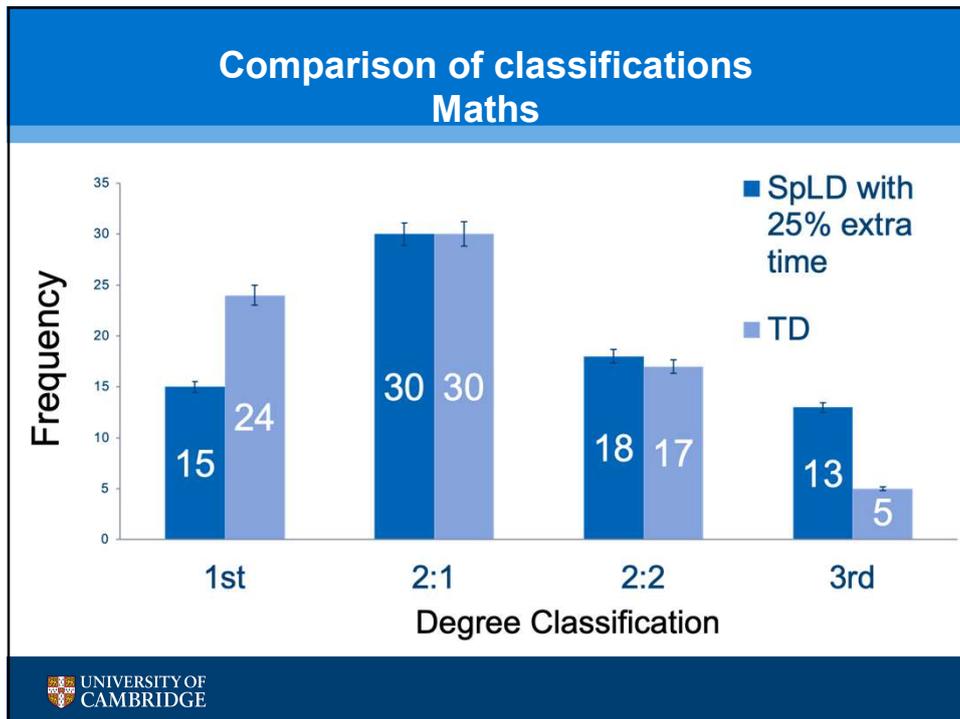
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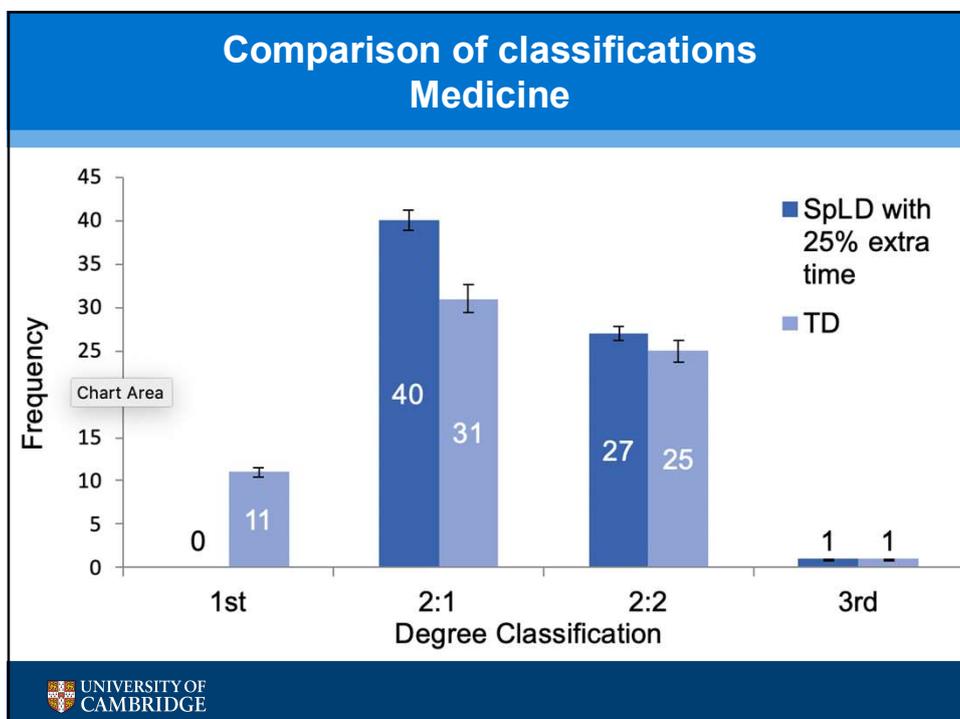
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## An attainment gap – but is this underachievement?

How do we know whether or not the exam results of the participants with SpLD reflects their potential?

- Coursework results should predict exam results
- Same person in both coursework as well as in exams
- Achievement should be similar in both assessment environments
- Comparison of the coursework marks of the SpLD and TD group



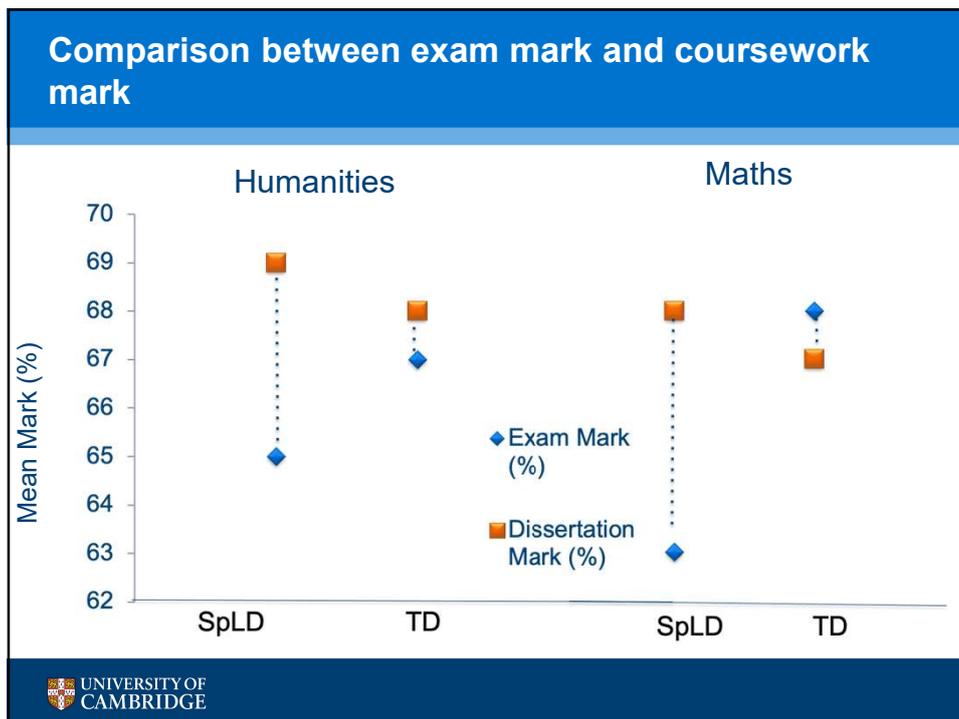
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## Dissertation / project marks

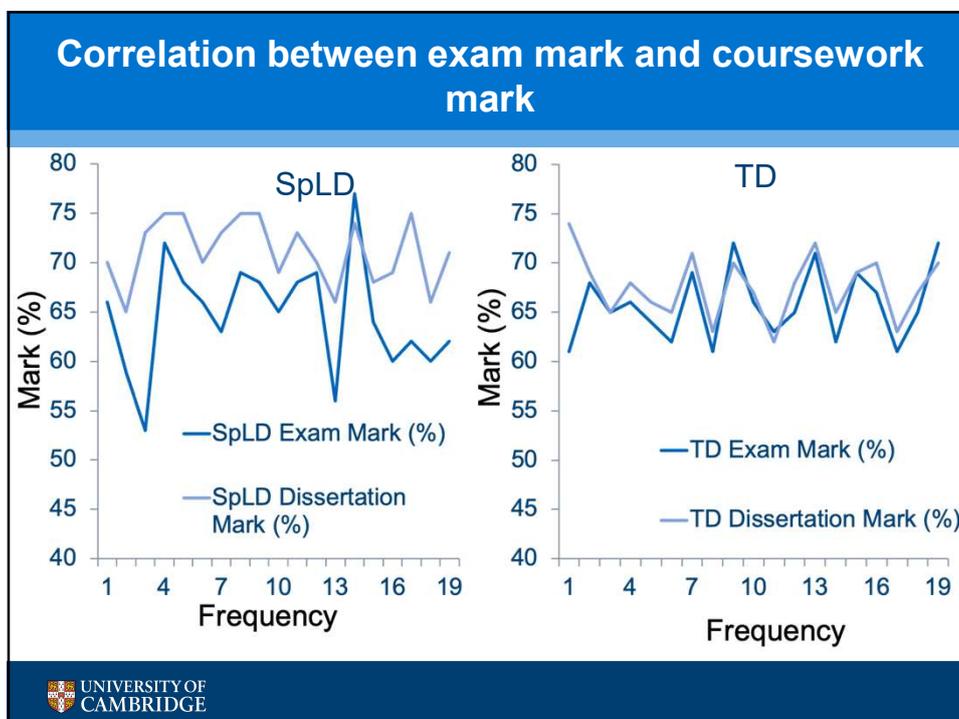
Humanities	Maths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean SpLD mark                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 69%</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Mean TD mark                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 68%</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean SpLD Mark                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 66%</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Mean TD mark                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65%</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
No significant differences	No significant differences



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## If the attainment gap in exams remains, despite the adjustments, do the adjustments even help?

Phase 2 of the study

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## Phase 2: Do the exam adjustments help?

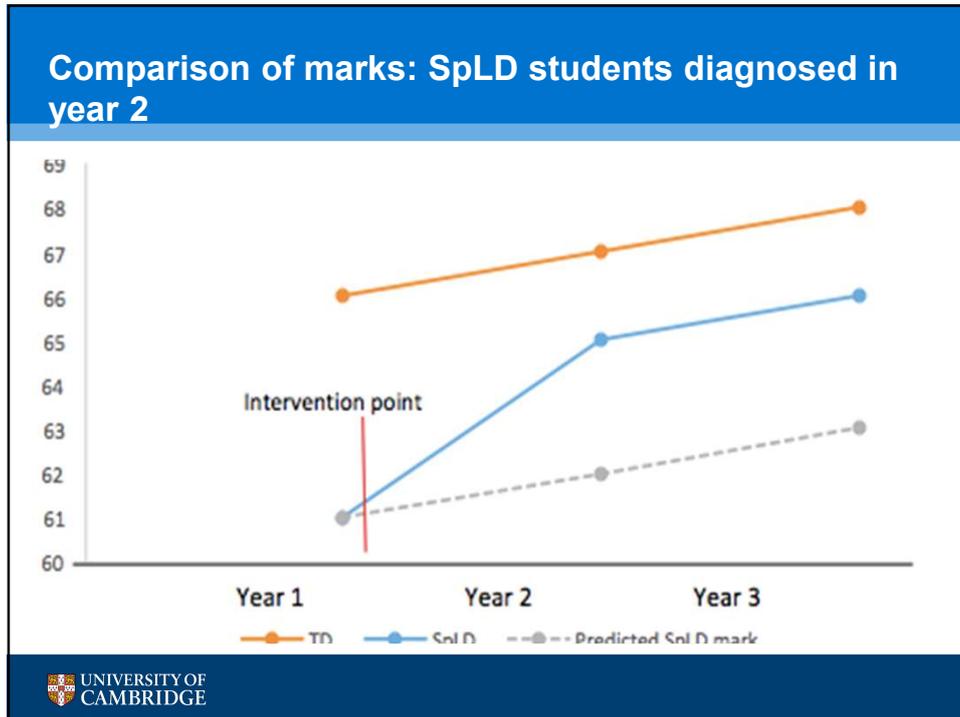
### Methodology

- Comparison of the exam marks of students who were diagnosed with SpLD part-way through the course before and after they received exam adjustments.
- Comparison of the change in mark of the SpLD group across the 3 years of the course with the change in mark of TD peers during the same time ('normal' maturation).
- 2 groups:
  1. Students who took their exams under standard conditions in yr 1 and received adjustments in yrs 2 and 3. (n= 30)
  2. Students who took their exams under standard conditions in yrs 1 and 2 and received adjustments in yr 3. (n= 50)

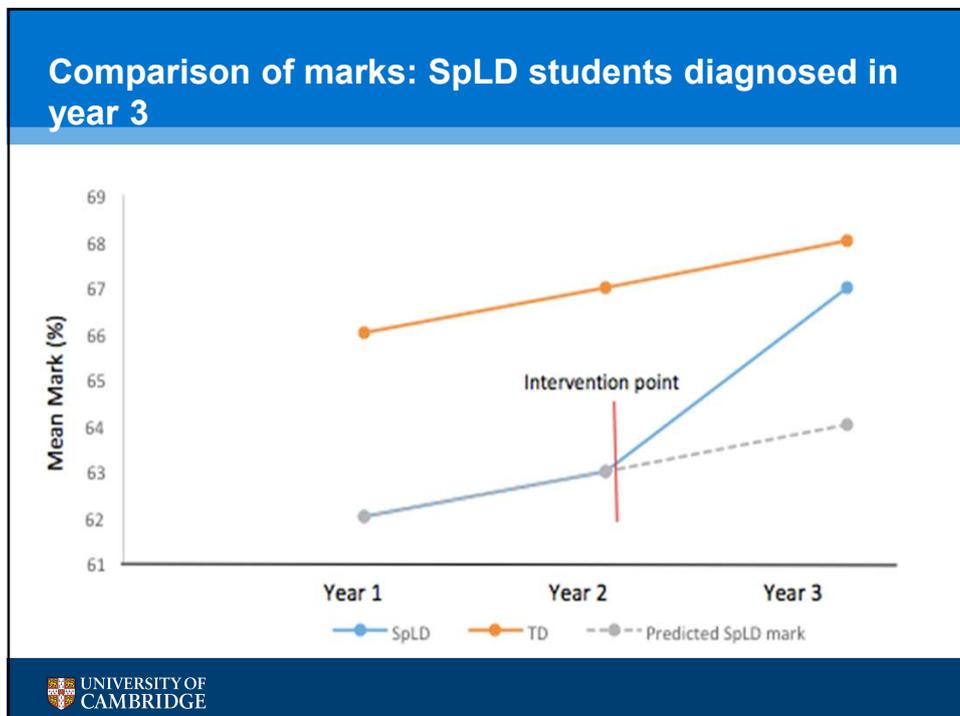


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**Now we know what is happening, the next question is why?**

Phase 3 of the study: qualitative data

10 semi-structured interviews with SpLD students who had exam adjustments.

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**The student's voice**

*“Having the extra time and laptop in the exam helps enormously. It makes a whole grade difference. However there are still things that it doesn't help with and so I still don't show my real ability in exam, even with the extra time and laptop. I can't fully express what I know in the way that the examiners want to see it in the exams. I can do that in conversation and in my coursework, but not in the exams. So I always get higher grades for my coursework”. (Law)*



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## What do students say the problems are?

### Problems with literacy skills

*“The problems that I have with spelling, grammar and structuring my ideas prevents me from being able to show my real knowledge in the exams. So I’m not showing what I can do just because I can’t do the spelling and the structuring. I end up dropping marks even though I know the material, its just that I’m not able to express it so well”.*

(History)

*“you are having to use words that don’t represent your vocabulary, just because you can’t spell the ones you want to use, or you have to focus on how to spell a word and then lose the flow of your sentence, and forget what you were saying. Or you re-word things to avoid using a word you can’t spell. Then the examiners judge you on your written expression and you lose marks” (English)*



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## What do students say the problems are?

### Problems with memorisation and factual recall

*“The hardest thing in the exams was remembering the names of the people you were meant to be talking about. They shouldn’t be marking you on your ability to remember the name, they should be marking you on your awareness of the theory and how to apply it. But unfortunately it’s a necessary requirement to know the name. (English).*

*In Maths you need to remember formulae. Its just a feat of memory, not about my day-to-day understanding of my subject. When I was in tutorials my understanding was fine, and I could do the work and understand it. It was just in the exams where you had to remember facts in order to work out the answer that it was a problem, as that was about testing what I remembered, not what I understood. That didn’t feel a very fair way of testing my knowledge and they wouldn’t have seen what I understood at all. (Maths)*



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## What do students say the problems are?

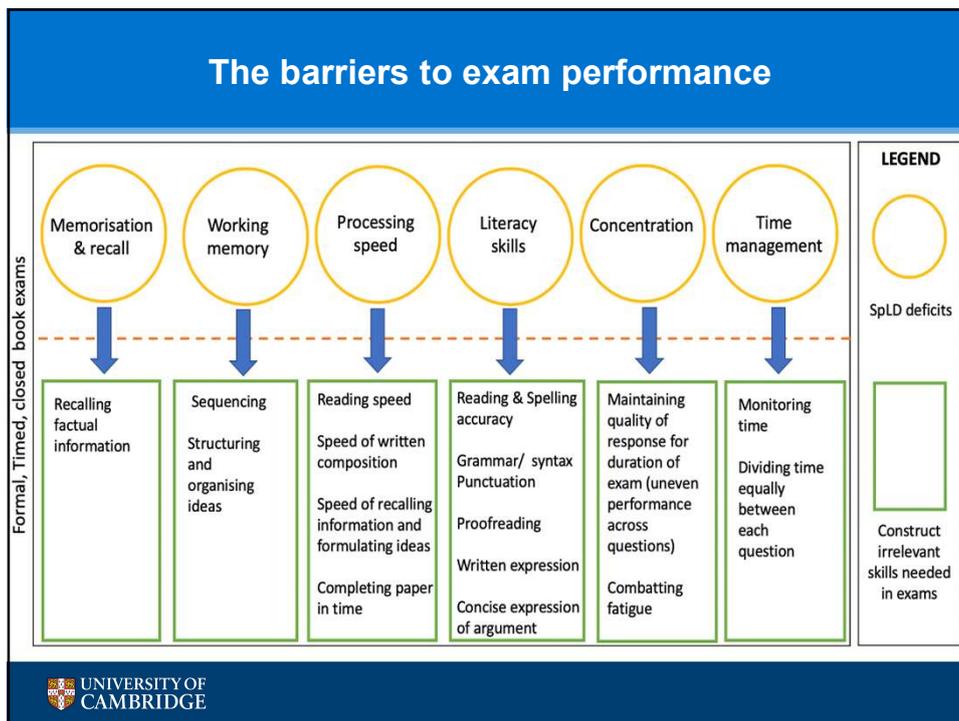
### Problems with fatigue

*"There are disadvantages of having extra time because you get tired and lose concentration because the exam is long, especially if it's the second one in a day. Other people have only had to have 6 hours of exams in the day and, with the extra time, I've had to focus intensely for seven and a half hours of exam time and that's exhausting, especially if you have exams the next day too. There isn't any recovery time and then you don't do very well in the later exams as you are too tired, more tired than other people who didn't have extra time". (Law)*

## What do students say the problems are?

### Problems with slow processing

*"inevitably I am slower than other people, so that's an issue all during the year as well as in the exam. Reading and taking notes takes me longer so I don't get as much learning as my peers. I get to cover less during my revision because I can't do that as fast, and I'm slower at getting my ideas down in the exams. So I am at a disadvantage all the way through"*



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### How to close the attainment gap? What the students say

- Inclusive teaching practices and universal design for teaching and learning across the course
- Diversified assessment (e.g. open book exams, team projects and oral assessment, assignment based assessment / portfolio of selected work from the year, etc)
- Co-design of assessment
- Assessment for learning, not assessment of learning
- Aligning learning outcomes with assessment modes
- More applied, meaningful, 'real-life' assessment with transferable skills to workplace (e.g. policy brief, speech)

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## How to close the attainment gap? What the students say

- Shorter exams (with longer extra time) across the year, rather than long exams just at the end of the year
- synoptic rather than siloed papers
- Feedback from exams
- Clearer and explicit expectations (exemplars)
- Being able to use assistive technology in the exam
- Tasks that allow students to demonstrate critical thinking skills, creativity, understanding and application of knowledge, rather than memorisation and literacy skills
- Tasks that recognize a broader skill set than just reading and writing
- Training in SpLD for examiners and test designers



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## Conclusion

- Use of a word processor and/or 25% extra time does not result in longer scripts or higher marks for students with SpLD
- Use of a word processor and/or 25% extra time reduces the attainment gap, but does not close it
- Students with SpLD perform similarly to peers in coursework but achieve significantly lower marks than peers in exams despite the exam arrangements
- Students with SpLD are disadvantaged by time-constrained exams but not coursework.
- Diversifying assessment could ensure that specific students are not disadvantaged by specific forms of assessment



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