



Australian Learning Disability Association

30th April 2002

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Suite S1.61, Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

SENATE INQUIRY SUBMISSION

Background information:

The Australian Learning Disability Association (ALDA) was established in 2000 to focus specifically on the area of Learning Disability (LD). This development was due to the lack of support services available in Australia for people with a LD. The goals that ALDA promotes are to:

- Create a climate of public understanding, awareness and acceptance of LD nationally
- Lobby at a national level to promote the understanding of LD in education, government and community sectors;
- Inform people with LD of their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act;
- Provide educative information relating to LD;
- Evaluate and disseminate information on current research and resources on LD;
- Promote education and training on LD for educational institutions and their teachers;
- Liaise with local, regional, state and international organisations that have an interest in LD;
- Retain an up to date web based Register that lists the location and contact details of Australian organisations, services and resources that focus on LD.

The issues raised in this submission reflect the views of ALDA not necessarily those of the author of this submission. ALDA has responded individually to each term of reference from a LD perspective only.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the inquiry are as follows:

Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

- a) **whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:**

- **the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap:**

A nationally recognised and accepted definition of LD is urgently required. There is a demonstrated lack of understanding of LD amongst policy makers and many practitioners. Whilst post school institutions recognise LD and subsequently provide accommodations for students, there appears to be a widespread reluctance to do so in the compulsory education sector where, more often than not, no differentiation is made between learning disabilities and learning difficulties. ALDA frequently refers to the Canadian, Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario's 2001 definition of LD:

"Learning Disabilities" refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning (**footnote**), in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Learning disabilities are specific not global impairments and as such are distinct from intellectual disabilities.

Learning disabilities range in severity and invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills:

- oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding)
- reading (e.g., decoding, comprehension)
- written language (e.g., spelling, written expression)
- mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving)

Learning disabilities may also cause difficulties with organizational skills, social perception and social interaction.

The impairments are generally life-long. However, their effects may be expressed differently over time, depending on the match between the demands of the environment and the individual's characteristics. Some impairments may be noted during the pre-school years, while others may not become evident until much later. During the school years, learning disabilities are suggested by unexpectedly low academic achievement or achievement that is sustainable only by extremely high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic, other congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors. They are not caused by factors such as cultural or language differences, inadequate or inappropriate instruction, socio-economic status or lack of motivation, although any one of these and other factors may compound the impact of learning disabilities. Frequently learning disabilities co-exist with other conditions, including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions.

For success, persons with learning disabilities require specialized

interventions in home, school, community and workplace settings, appropriate to their individual strengths and needs, including:

- specific skill instruction;
- the development of compensatory strategies;
- the development of self-advocacy skills;
- appropriate accommodations

Footnote: The term “psychological processes” describes an evolving list of cognitive functions. To date, research has focused on functions such as:

- Phonological processing
- Memory and attention
- Processing speed
- Language processing
- Perceptual-motor processing
- Visual-spatial processing
- Executive functions: planning, monitoring & metacognitive abilities

- **the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed;**

There is currently an inconsistent approach in the assessment of students with a possible LD. This is due to the different terminology and underlying philosophical beliefs within each education sector. The lack of guidelines and procedures for assessing the needs of students with suspected LD is problematic.

There is a need for consistent reporting documentation under the regulation of a national set of guidelines. The guidelines should outline:

- who should conduct assessment testing;
- who should pay for the cost of educational psychometric testing (can cost up to \$700 per assessment)?
- reporting documentation format to include; learning deficiencies & strengths, teaching & learning strategies, course & assessment accommodations and referral to specialist practitioners if necessary.

Assessment, and any resulting diagnosis, should not rely on any one test or sub-test but should consist of and be based on a comprehensive battery of tests. It is a matter of the assessor's professional judgement as to which tests will be used but, as a minimum, the domains to be investigated should include the following:

- Aptitude
- Academic Achievement

- Information Processing

It is only possible for education sectors to appropriately and efficiently accommodate any disadvantages when both the cause and implications have been accurately identified.

- **the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas;**

As mentioned previously, the lack of understanding of LD pertains to all Australians. The cost of an assessment; the availability of appropriate professionals to undertake the assessment, particularly in rural and remote areas; the cultural background of the person who needs to be assessed; all play a contributing factor in the poor recognition and understanding of LD

- **the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs;**

As with all disabilities the earlier the diagnosis and placement of intervention strategies the less impact that the LD will have on the person. An undiagnosed LD can ultimately lead to poor literacy and numeracy skills, maladaptive social skills, lack of employment opportunities and an increased potential for depression and suicide. ALDA is unaware of any early intervention programs for young children with a LD.

The development & implementation of early intervention programs, starting with psychometric testing conducted by School Guidance Officers (GOs), would be of extreme benefit to children with LD and their families. Testing at an early age by GOs would also provide the most cost effective means of conducting assessments.

- **access to adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors, and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students;**

Within all education sectors there is the ability to access assessments via educational psychologists. The cost of these assessments vary greatly, from free of charge, to, approximately \$700. There is widespread debate about who should meet these costs. The cost of interventions and accommodations for a LD is also problematic, noting that approximately 10% of the population will have some degree of LD with the majority being ineligible for access to an individualized State or Federally funded program.

The accommodations often recommended for students with a LD generally classified as ‘high cost’ are as follows:

- Assistive Technology (screen readers or speech synthesizers, voice recognition programs, LD specific programs, maths technologies, TextHelp)
- Notetakers
- Readers
- Transcription services (material transcribed to electronic format or audio)
- Scribes

Currently the State Departments of Education and Training do not have specific funds made available to provide ‘high cost’ accommodations for students with a LD. If these accommodations are required for a student, it is the responsibility of the individual school to fund these.

Generally speaking, Australian TAFE and University sectors fund 'high cost' accommodations for students with a LD. The types of accommodations generally provided by Australian universities are outlined at the following website: <http://student.admin.utas.edu.au/services/alda/options/edu/table2.htm>

Federal and State funding should contribute to the escalating costs incurred by school sector institutions in supporting students with a LD.

Alongside funding difficulties, there is also poor transition of documentation through the varying education sectors, relating to students' identified course accommodations, teaching and learning strategies, and, resources.

- **teacher training and professional development, and the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation;**

There are 3 issues in relation to teacher training and professional development. There is currently a lack of information:

- about LD in university education degree courses for prospective teachers;
- in the general community about LD and the limitations that it imposes on people's lives if it is not assessed and accommodated appropriately; and
- about accommodations that can be recommended for people assessed as having a LD, eg. the use of appropriate technology or study material presented in different formats.

All points need to be addressed if LD is to be better understood and accommodated in our educational sectors and the within the wider community.

In regard to legislation, Learning Disability is clearly identified under the Australian Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) as:

'A disorder or malfunction which results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder' or malfunction, (e.g. a person with autism or dyslexia)'

There have already been successful DDA complaints made related to students with LD not receiving study accommodations for the implications of their disabilities, eg <http://scaleplus.law.gov.au/html/ddadec/0/2000/0/DD000210.htm>. By providing correct teacher training, professional development and sufficient resources, the needs of students with LD can be met and the expensive litigation route can be avoided.

- b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

There are 4 issues that need to be addressed by the Commonwealth, states and territories:

1. Development of a national definition of LD.
2. Education providers must train teachers & support staff to identify possible LD as opposed to learning difficulties in young students.
3. Development of national guidelines for psychometric testing for the existence of LD that include:

- When should testing be undertaken and who can conduct the assessment testing?
 - Who should pay for the cost of educational psychometric testing (can cost up to \$700 per assessment)? Currently most students/families must pay the full cost of assessments to identify learning disability themselves.
 - What range of tests should be used?
 - Consistent psychometric assessment reporting documentation.
4. Creation & recognition of a national repository of up to date information of the accommodations that can be recommended for all forms of LD.

Finally, ALDA is keen to assist in addressing the issues related to LD that we, the Australian society, are currently facing within our systems of education.

For further information, please contact:

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