

My name is Susan Johnston. I am a Disability Teacher/Consultant for Students with Neurological Disabilities in TAFE, NSW. As part of my role as a Teacher/Consultant providing support for students with neurological disability, I provide educational support for students with Learning Disabilities (LD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/ADHD) and language related disabilities. I applaud your actions in calling for this enquiry.

The focus of this submission is students with learning **disabilities**. It is, however, worthy to note that educational programs for students with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) are almost non-existent. ABI is an area that has been sorely neglected educationally. In the school system students either cope in mainstream classes (albeit poorly; there is no itinerant service for ABI) or are often inappropriately placed in 'special' schools for students with intellectual disability. In TAFE, whilst there is mainstream support available for students with ABI, the ability of TAFE Disability Teacher/Consultants to offer special access programs for these students is severely restricted by budgetary constraints.

Over recent years there have been increasing numbers of young students referred to TAFE. Increased funding and dedicated programs for Youth At Risk are testimony to the increasing difficulty schools are experiencing in dealing with young people who do not 'fit' the current system of educational provision. Large numbers of students are experiencing failure in education, resulting in poor behaviour, poor skill-development (especially literacy and numeracy) and poor attitudes towards themselves (low self-esteem, lack of confidence) and the learning environment (truancy, aggressive behaviour, non-completion). These are the students who are increasingly accessing TAFE, in Adult Basic Education, General Education and vocational/apprenticeship programs in an effort to either complete their education or gain vocational qualifications in an adult educational environment where they may 'fit'.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that a large proportion of these students have learning disabilities that have been neither appropriately diagnosed nor supported throughout their school education. On accessing TAFE and experiencing difficulties with their course material, many students are referred to either counselling or disabilities and consequent assessment identifies learning disability. Alternatively, students come to TAFE with a

diagnosis and a history of learning 'difficulty' but have chosen to leave school because the 'system' is not able to cater for their learning needs where they have experienced continuing failure, harassment and lack of support.

In relation to the Terms of Reference for the inquiry I offer the following brief comments:

- i) There is inconsistency and debate re terminology. Within the Department of Education and Training (DET), The Department of School Education (DSE) uses the term 'learning difficulty' whilst TAFE uses the term 'learning disability'. This creates confusion and uncertainty, but, more importantly in the school system, it restricts access for students with learning **disability** to integration funding. For example, the narrow definition of disability used in schools in NSW (that is, the exclusion of learning **disabilities**) results in students with learning **disabilities** being excluded from support for T/VET courses whilst students with physical, visual and intellectual are supported. (NOTE: Should the same student enrol directly for the same course in TAFE they would be eligible to receive support through the TAFE Disability Unit).

The use of the term 'learning difficulty' is a misnomer that totally ignores current research findings and fails to recognise the chronic, neurological nature of the problem for children with a learning **disability**. Like other disability categories, learning **disability** requires on-going specialist intervention and remediation throughout the whole period of education and training. This issue needs to be addressed.

- ii) 'Disability related needs' with respect to education are primarily individually determined. Assessment must incorporate the recognition that each individual is different and the impact of disability on each individual varies. Two students with learning disability, for example, may present with similar psychometric results but their performance in a learning environment may be quite different; what needs to be assessed is how disability impacts on the **functional** competency of the individual. Functional abilities can be most appropriately assessed in the specific learning environment in which the individual is expected to operate. Some students with learning disabilities, for example, fail

in a school learning environment but flourish in a vocational learning environment where hands-on opportunities reduce the impact of their learning disability.

- iv) Early intervention is critical for students with all disabilities; unfortunately, in the field of learning disability, early intervention is a non-event. I refer you to the inquiry requested by the Minister for Education & Training (Foundations for Learning: A new vision for New South Wales? Issues Paper) into early intervention in learning difficulties in early childhood (0-8 years). As has already been noted, the use of the term 'learning difficulties' precludes access to funding and services that are available to students from other disability categories.

- v) In public education, funding is a critical issue in the recognition and provision of support for students with learning disabilities. The funding implications for appropriate intervention and the provision of specialist support for this group of students are huge; in the school system there appears to be a tendency to 'risk manage' the possibility of litigation under the Disability Discrimination Act rather than provide adequate and appropriate support. Like assessment, funding needs to be determined in relation to individual needs and reasonable adjustment requirements. This will vary across disability categories and between individuals within specific categories of disability. Fixed formulae for appropriating funding on the basis of degree of disability is inappropriate as it fails to address 'functional' issues with respect to disability and the learning environment.

Figures demonstrating the cuts in budgets to Disability Teacher/Consultants across TAFE Institutes are available (NSW Teachers Federation Special Interest Group). The increasing teacher transfer cost (the \$ rate of teaching, including on-costs), the increasing numbers of students with disabilities accessing TAFE and the extension of service provision to 'emerging' disabilities (specifically neurological and psychiatric disabilities) have further reduced the available budget.

- vii) Neither specific disability training nor disability awareness training is incorporated in generalist teacher training as part of the base curriculum. Learning disability is often referred to as a 'hidden' disability as there is nothing that 'identifies' a person with a learning disability. This impacts on early identification and intervention as the difficulties resulting from the disability are often interpreted as 'laziness', 'not trying', 'poor parenting', 'not concentrating', 'ratbag' etc. etc. It is imperative that teachers have an understanding of learning disabilities so that these labels are not attached to children and their self-esteem and confidence further eroded by inappropriate treatment and lack of proper intervention.

- viii) Schools currently avoid their responsibility to students with learning disability by using the terminology 'learning difficulty'. Until this issue is challenged students with learning disabilities will be denied access to funding (already severely restricted) and programs targeted for students with disabilities generally. Continued use of the term 'learning difficulty' restricts access to Disability Discrimination legislation and hence appropriately funded resources and specialist support services.

Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

Susan Johnston
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