



Australian Learning Disability Association

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Secretariat
Review of Australian Higher Education
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REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Background information about the Australian Learning Disability Association (ALDA):

ALDA was established in 2000 to focus specifically on the area of Learning Disabilities. This development was due to the lack of support services available in Australia for people with a learning disability. The goals that ALDA promotes are to:

Create a climate of public understanding, awareness and acceptance of Learning Disability nationally;

Lobby at a national level to promote the issue of Learning Disabilities in education, government and community sectors;

Inform people with Learning Disability of their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act;

Provide educative information relating to Learning Disability;

Evaluate and disseminate information on current research and resources relevant to Learning Disability;

Promote education and training on Learning Disability for educational institutions and their teachers;

Liaise with local, regional, state and international organisations that have an interest in Learning Disabilities; and

Retain an up to date web based Register that lists the locations and contact details of Australian organisations, services and resources that focus on Learning Disability.

The term **learning disabilities** refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organisation or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning, in combination with at least average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Other terms such as dyslexia and dyscalculia are used more in the UK and the US and refer to particular types of learning disability. 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)

People with learning disabilities may also have difficulties with organisational 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 or other congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors. They are not caused by factors such as cultural or language differences, inadequate or inappropriate instruction or socio-economic status or lack of motivation, although 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. Learning disabilities are not related to intelligence and can occur in severe, moderate or mild forms. People with learning disabilities have their own individual profiles of strengths and weaknesses; no two people are exactly the same and the impact on each individual is different.

Response to the key objectives of the Review of Australian Higher Education:

Terms of Reference:

....the Review Panel will examine the current state of the Australian higher education system against international best practice and assess whether the education system is capable of:

- contributing to the innovation and productivity gains required for long term economic development and growth; and
- ensuring that there is a broad-based tertiary education system producing professionals for both national and local labour market needs

The 7 key themes identified in the Terms of Reference are:

- diverse, high performing institutions with a global focus
- productivity and participation
- effective and efficient investment
- underpinning social inclusion through access and opportunity
- enhanced quality and high standards
- a broad tertiary education and training sector
- policy linkages

ALDA predominantly, but not exclusively, represents the needs of people with learning disabilities in the late school and postsecondary education sectors. It is in this role that we wish to make comment on some the key objectives identified in the Review of Australian Higher Education Terms of Reference and Discussion Paper.

ALDA notes the significance of the role of Higher Education (HE) in the development of knowledge and skills for people to be able to contribute to the nation's economic growth, their own wellness and wealth, the environment and culture, and to improved decision making which leads to better public policy. We also note the social, economic and demographic global changes that are becoming more evident and the need for the Australian HE sector to critically evaluate its role in being able to adapt and meet these challenges.

Two of the issues that are mentioned in the discussion paper and the Terms of Reference, are the concern about the loss of skills from the workforce due to aging and the need to meet the requirements of the labour market. To address these issues the discussion paper has identified, amongst many others, the need to:

- increase the skills of existing workers, who currently have no post school qualifications, so that they can remain actively engaged in the workforce
- broaden and increase the base of participation at all levels of educational attainment
- increase participation from groups that currently have low level of participation in the education sector - that is people from disadvantaged groups, particularly those people from indigenous and low SES backgrounds.

Interestingly learning disability plays a role in all of these identified areas.

Currently learning disability is poorly recognized within the primary and secondary school sectors, and ironically, is best understood and accommodated (assistive technology and tutoring) by the HE sector....somewhat back to front, one could say. What happens is that children go to school to learn to 'read and write' and these are the areas most affected by having a learning disability. These children and young people then develop avoidance techniques to cover for their lack of success at developing effective literacy skills – boys traditionally act out and girls internalize their angst. These children and young people then slip through the net as they don't qualify for any additional support unless they have parents or teachers that recognize the problem and 'go into bat for them'. Currently it is estimated that between 12-15% of the population have a learning disability of varying degrees. However, recent information from the USofA indicates that the number of people affected by a learning disability (dyslexia, in particular) could well be as high as 20% (Dalton, P., Freedom Scientific 2007).

The further into the school system these students progress the more embedded the difficulties become and eventually many leave the school sector at around the age of 15 or 16 years of age – disenchanting and disengaged from the education process. A large proportion of these students enter an apprenticeship program. Anecdotal information indicates that approximately 50% of apprentices have difficulties with literacy due to having a learning disability. Interestingly anecdotal information also indicates that the same percentage of teachers of apprentices have the same problems with literacy but have a vested interest in covering their difficulties.....further embedding the problem.

Learning Disability is well understood and accommodated in the UK, USofA and Canada. In the UK it is known as Dyslexia – which we know is only one, but the best understood, of the family of disabilities that come under the learning disability umbrella. Statistics indicate that 70% of students who register for disability services in UK universities identify as having dyslexia (M.Adams, Keynote Paper, Pathways Conference,2006). In Canada and the USofA approximately 50% of students who register for disability services have a learning disability. Here in Australian universities the number is approximately 11% - the reason being that learning disability is very poorly understood in the school sector and seldom accommodated, hence the students don't progress through the school system and enter the post secondary education system. But yet in recent years, learning disability is fastest growing disability type reported by disability support staff in universities (Mungovern, Allan, England & Hollitt, 1999: Holland 2001). The number of students indicating a learning disability has risen by 78.5% between 1996 and 2001 while the general student population has risen by 14.5% (Payne & Irons, Learning Disabilities Resource Package, 2001).

ALDA believes that the loss of productivity of the community (approx 15% of the population) affected by having a learning disability should be carefully considered especially when the Federal Government is concerned about falling domestic enrolments in the university sector and the need to look at widening access to higher education. Many of these people will be locked into the low SES statistics due to the fact that they need to learn differently, not that they are unintelligent.

Furthermore, if a student with a learning disability somehow manages to navigate through the maze of education and makes it in to the HE environment they are at a substantial disadvantage to their peers. As they usually do not have the same skill development or opportunity to develop skills as fellow students in terms of essay writing, organising skills and absorbing large amounts of information. If these students had been identified while still in the school system and adequate provision

had been made, at least in the use of assistive technology and in the utilisation of alternative formats e.g. MP3 to improve their learning and comprehension skills. Proper skill development to a university level in terms of written communication and essay writing could be made before the students arrive at university.

As it is, most students with a learning disability have an uphill task when they arrive in the higher education environment and require training in adaptive technologies to help them study. Most students learn essay writing and written communication skills in years 10, 11 and 12, for some students with a learning disability they are still acquiring these skills in their final year of study.

Another interesting issue to consider is the affect of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome within the indigenous communities. Foetal Alcohol Syndrome affects the development of the brain much like learning disability and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) does. Learning outcomes for young people who are affected by Foetal Alcohol Syndrome fall into the same basket as those that have a learning disability and together with ADHD make access to learning extremely problematic.

Some other interesting statistics that you may consider come from Canada (Learning Disability Association of Ontario) in the mid 1990s. They indicate that:

- 50% of adults who are functionally illiterate have a learning disability
- 74% of children and adolescents with a learning disability experience clinical depression prior to adulthood
- an unrecognised LD is implicated in 50% of youths who suicide or attempt suicide
- 80% of young offenders have a learning disability, and
- 80% of people diagnosed with ADHD have an accompanying learning disability

It is imperative that a better understanding of the teaching and learning requirements of all people who have a learning disability be addressed if the Higher Education sector wants to widen access to its system.

Summary:

There are 4 issues that need to be considered by the higher education review panel:

- (1) by addressing the learning needs of approximately 15% of the population, currently locked out of the education process, will open the door for the learning disability community to consider higher education as a viable option
- (2) by addressing learning disability issues will go some way to addressing the issues of why students from low SES and indigenous backgrounds have low participation rates in the higher education sector
- (3) by addressing learning disability issues will allow many people who don't have post secondary qualifications to upgrade their skills and stay within the labour force as effective workers, at the same time address some of the demographic changes that are predicted
- (4) by addressing learning disability issues in the school sectors will lower the incarceration rate of young people by keeping them engaged in the learning process

Finally, ALDA is keen to assist in addressing the issues related to learning disability and how it keeps people locked out of the education system.

For further information, please contact

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