LEARNING DIFFICULTIES:

Factsheet 1: The difference between a learning difficulty and a learning disability

The terms used to describe the unexpected and persistent learning problems experienced by some students, in specific academic domains, vary both nationally and internationally. In the United States students are identified with ‘Learning Disabilities’ or ‘Learning Disorders’, whereas in the United Kingdom there is a preference for the term ‘Learning Difficulty’. Some Australian States and Territories encourage the use of the term ‘Learning Difficulties’ for all students struggling to develop skills in literacy and/or numeracy, while others separate this quite large body of students into a number of categories.

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

For the purposes of this Fact Sheet, ‘Learning Disabilities’ will be viewed as a sub-set of the larger group of students generally referred to as experiencing learning difficulties. This is in line with the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Australian Disability Standards for Education (2005).

Students with learning difficulties underachieve academically for a wide range of reasons, including factors such as: sensory impairment (weaknesses in vision or hearing); severe behavioural, psychological or emotional issues; English as a second language or dialect (ESL or ESD); high absenteeism; ineffective instruction; or, inadequate curricula. These students have the potential to achieve at age-appropriate levels once provided with programs that incorporate appropriate support and evidence-based instruction.

Students with learning disabilities have difficulties in specific areas of academic achievement as a result of impairment in one or more of the cognitive processes related to learning. One of the defining features of a specific learning disability is that the difficulty continues to exist, despite appropriate instruction and intervention.

A learning disability has nothing to do with a student’s intelligence. Students with a learning disability:

- have difficulties which are inherent to the child and are lifelong
- can occur across the range of intellectual ability
- often have a family member with learning difficulties
- do not respond to intervention in the expected way.

Left unidentified, without appropriate intervention, a learning disability puts students at significant disadvantage, with little likelihood of achieving at levels close to their academic potential.