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## Terminology and Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties: An Examination of Australian State Government Education Department Websites

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*Abstract: Students with learning difficulties form the largest group of students with additional needs in Australian mainstream classrooms. However the terminology surrounding these students differs broadly across the country. A consistent and shared understanding of the term learning difficulties is vital, as this impacts the identification and equitable provision of support for students experiencing difficulties with learning. The website of each Australian state/territory government education department was examined to determine to how students with learning difficulties are formally identified and supported. It was found that considerable differences, and even conflicting information, exist both within and across education systems. Implications and the significance of this situation are discussed.*

**Keywords:** learning difficulties, learning disabilities, additional needs, inclusion

### Introduction

Internationally, inconsistencies in the use of the terms *learning difficulties* and *learning disabilities* have long been a source of tension in the international literature (Kramer et al., 2021; Skues & Cunningham, 2011). In Australia, students experiencing difficulties with learning are considered in different ways in each state and territory in areas such as terminology, identification and assessment of specific learning needs, intervention, personnel, and resources, including funding support models (Louden et al., 2000; Quick, 2020).

The curriculum is now streamlined across Australia using the Australian Curriculum (Harris-Hart, 2010) but, despite supporting legislation ensuring inclusive practices (Australian Government, 1992, 2005), student access to the curriculum differs across state education sectors, particularly for those students *without* disabilities, who experience difficulties with learning. The concept of equity requires the acknowledgement that some students need additional support and resources to address the impact of educational disadvantage. It is worthwhile, therefore, to explore how the identification and provision of support for students with learning difficulties is organised across Australia.

For this study, the websites of Australian state and territory education departments were used to access the policies and guidelines relating to the identification and support of students with learning difficulties.

### Learning Difficulties and Learning Disabilities

In the international landscape, consistent definitions of learning difficulties and learning disabilities are difficult to locate. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Version 5) (DSM 5) does not provide a definition for the term learning difficulties but defines specific learning disorder under neurodevelopmental disorders as “difficulties learning and using academic skills, ... that have persisted for at least 6 months, despite the provision of interventions that target those difficulties” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 66). The DSM 5 provides a separate definition for intellectual disability as “deficits in intellectual functions ... as confirmed by standardized intelligence testing” (less than IQ 70), and “deficits in adaptive functioning” (p. 33), although in the UK, individuals meeting these criteria are described as having learning disabilities. According to Schreiber-Barsch et al. (2020), in Germany the term intellectual disability is used for individuals with an IQ of less than 55. Those with an IQ between 55 and 70 are considered to have a learning disability, although in their research in Germany, based on their cultural model of disability, Schreiber-Barsh et al. (2020) used the term learning difficulties to describe their participants who would have met the DSM 5 definition of intellectual disability. Learning difficulties, learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities are often used interchangeably internationally. Kramer (2021) stated that “these terms can include various types and severities of learning limitations. Moreover, the boundaries between different types and severities are fluid, adding to the fuzziness of the distinctions between terms” (p. 434). Carroll (2020) called for “procedural consistency in identification and support for young people with SpLDs [Specific Learning Difficulties]” (p.6) in England.

The purpose of this research, however, is concerned with the Australian situation. Within the broader framework of Australian legislation and policy and within the scope of students with additional needs, the terms learning difficulties and learning disabilities encompass a variety of concepts (Thomas & Whitten, 2012). Students with learning difficulties are generally viewed as a broad category of students that includes students with identified learning disabilities, as a small subset, but also includes students who are struggling with learning but who do not have an identified disability (van Kraayenoord & Chapman, 2016). Learning disabilities are often referenced as including dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia, sometimes noted as specific learning difficulties or disabilities (Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation [dsf] 2021; Woodcock & Faith, 2021). In contrast, a graph provided on the AUSPELD (Australian Federation of SPELD Associations [AUSPELD] website (2020)), indicates that children with learning difficulties make up a separate group to children with learning disabilities. Children with learning difficulties are noted as underachieving academically for a variety of reasons including inadequate instruction, whereas children with learning disabilities have unexpected and persistent difficulties as a result of an underlying neurodevelopmental disorder (AUSPELD, 2020).

In comparing specific learning disorders with learning difficulties, however, the WA SPELD organisation, includes learning difficulties associated with a specific learning disorder (Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation [dsf], 2021), indicating that specific learning disorders come under the broader group of learning difficulties. Thus, even within one organisational group, definitions of learning difficulties and learning disabilities differ. When viewed as a disability, these students, with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, are addressed within the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). According to van Kraayenoord and Chapman (2016), this recognition under the legislation, and the funding allocation available to students, has led many school systems to use the term learning disabilities as defined broadly in the DDA, instead of learning difficulties, in order to ensure access to funding.

For the purposes of this paper, the following definition will be used, from Learning Difficulties Australia: “The term ‘Learning Difficulties’ most often refers to difficulties in learning to read and write, but is also applied in other areas of learning, including mathematics. Learning difficulties can be caused by internal factors (inherent, medical, physical, neurological), AND/OR, external factors, (family, communities, opportunities, experiences). Internal factors are intrinsic to the individual, can cause a person to learn differently, are usually life-long, and are usually considered a learning disability – also referred to as a specific or significant learning difficulty (in Australia and the UK), or learning disability (in the US and Canada). Dyslexia is generally considered to be a learning disability, or specific learning difficulty” (Learning Difficulties Australia, 2022).

### **Australian Landscape**

Students who are experiencing difficulties with learning, without a formal diagnosis of a disability, form the largest group of students with additional needs in any classroom (Watson & Boman, 2005; Westwood, 2015). One measure of literacy and numeracy standards across Australia is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2021). Results from the 2021 NAPLAN indicated that for reading, 4.1% of Year Three students performed below the national standard. This increased to 4.9% and 6.2% for Years Five and Seven students respectively, and in Year Nine, 9.3% of students performed below the national standard. Similar trends can be seen in other domains of the assessment, for example, in writing, 3.3% of Year Three students are below standard but this increases to 6.7% in Year Five, 9.3% in Year Seven, and 17.8% in Year Nine (ACARA, 2021).

Given that many students are performing below the national standard in their academic achievement, it is crucial that we understand how these students are identified and supported in Australian classrooms. Education is considered to be a federal concern, however the responsibility for the delivery of education lies with each state and territory through their various education sectors (van Kraayenoord & Chapman, 2016). This leaves states and territories to interpret federal legislation and policies in their own ways. A clear understanding of current legislation and policy is required before an investigation of terminology and support, which impacts students with learning difficulties, can be completed.

### **Relevant Legislation and Policy on Students with Additional Needs**

From an international perspective, the Salamanca Statement of 1994 (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) called for governments to consider policy shifts in order to promote an inclusive education approach. Alongside those with disabilities, the statement recognised students with learning difficulties as individuals who may require additional support. In developing policy and practices within their countries, governments were urged to consider a continuum of support and services for the diverse range of students currently enrolled in schools.

Australia’s educational response to the Salamanca Statement, and the support of students with additional needs, has been framed by a number of legislative acts. While Australia had already implemented the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1992 (Australian Government, 1992), the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) further expanded on the responsibilities of educators to ensure that provision of reasonable adjustments to support access to educational programs for all students with additional needs was provided. The first goal of the 2008 Melbourne Declaration was to

provide “excellence and equity in education” (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008, p. 7) and while the goal remained unchanged in the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, the process by which schools were asked to meet these goals was strengthened (Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019). Requirements in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) to recognise individual needs and identify barriers, indicates the need for a commitment to providing appropriate support to all students, no matter the source of their difficulties.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) includes the need for teachers to demonstrate a knowledge of differentiation strategies to meet specific learning needs across a full range of student abilities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). Teachers should “know students and how they learn” (standard 1) and “plan for and implement effective teaching and learning” (standard 3) for all students. To know students and plan for student learning, clear understandings of learning difficulties would support teachers in their planning. While assessments such as NAPLAN are being administered nationally, and national legislation impacts all levels of education, it is in the national interest to understand how learning difficulties are defined and students are supported in each Australian state or territory responsible for managing their own education sectors. Thus, there is a need to investigate the terminology of what constitutes learning difficulties from a national perspective. Furthermore, state support structures and systems need to be investigated as a way forward toward students with learning difficulties gaining equitable access to education across Australia.

### **Significance of this Study**

Given the prevalence of students experiencing difficulties with learning in Australian schools, it is necessary to have a shared understanding of the term, learning difficulties, as this impacts identification, assessment and instructional aspects, including resourcing and implementation of inclusive education initiatives. Although department policies and procedures available on websites may or may not be implemented in practice, the information provided publicly can demonstrate an understanding of terms, at the state level, and is worthy of study.

Policies and procedures are provided to guide practice. The Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties in the ACT highlighted both the inconsistencies and the confusions caused by various terms such as learning disabilities and learning difficulties being used to describe the same things but also used to describe different things (Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, 2020b). In an Australian study, Merga et al. (2021) identified the lack of a whole-school approach for struggling literacy learners and the impact of issues within identification of these students. This lack of a formal definition has led to inconsistent responses from state and territory education departments, confusion for parents, and a lack of clarity regarding education departments’ responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992), the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005), and the National Consistent Collection of Data (Australian Government, 2022).

With the review of the Australian Curriculum underway, it is timely that all Australian states and territories develop a shared understanding, clear definitions and process of identification and support for students who have learning difficulties. This will assist schools in being able to evaluate and address the needs of these students, and support research into assessment and instructional resources. The researchers of this paper wished to

investigate how the term learning difficulties is used across Australian states and territories education department websites and how students with learning difficulties are to be identified and supported. The research questions therefore being –

- Are students with learning difficulties noted as a distinct group in the websites of Australian state education departments and, if so, how is this group defined and identified?
- How are students with learning difficulties to be supported?

NB: State and territory government education websites will be referred to as “the websites”. State and territory government education departments, such as department of education, education directorate or department of education and training, will be referred to as “education department”.

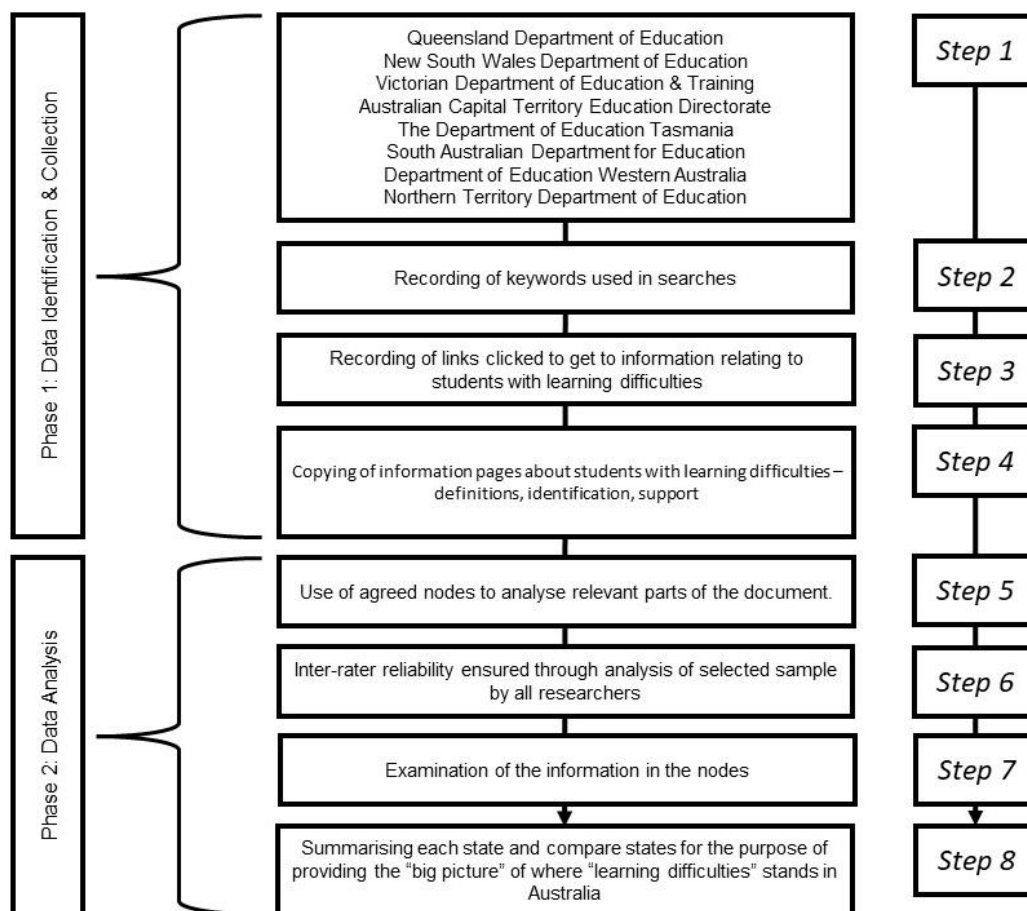
## Methods

The responsibility for the delivery of education falls on states and territories in Australia (van Kraayenoord & Chapman, 2016) and websites are a means for these government organisations to communicate information to school communities and members of the public (Kahan & McKenzie, 2020). As websites have become one of the most important means of communication, it is assumed that relevant information is usually present on them. Investigating school websites, and the websites of departments and sectors that govern those schools, has become increasingly used as a method to gain information (Quick, 2020).

This study focused on analysing the government education websites of each Australian state and territory to determine how the term learning difficulties is defined, and how students with learning difficulties were to be supported. The aim of this study was to investigate how state and territory departments defined learning difficulties but did not go further into why variations in definitions may or may not have occurred.

It is first important to understand how education departments define learning difficulties and provide support to students before investigating reasons for these variations and proposing ways of developing a shared understanding of these terms. A framework for what determines website quality had not been established previously (Allison et al., 2019). Therefore, we created our own process for data collection and analysis, informed by Pauwels’ (Pauwels, 2012) six step multimodal framework for analysis of websites and Kahan and McKenzie’s (2020) systematic content analysis.

As shown in Figure 1, our structure followed a two-phase approach; phase 1 – data identification and collection; phase 2 – data analysis. The adopted process shares similarities to a content analysis as it can be used to identify patterns and reveal the focus of establishments such as education departments (Azizan et al., 2018), which was done through a deductive lens. Furthermore, Azizan et al. (2018) state that websites can reflect the goals and beliefs of establishments, leading the researchers to investigate if the way state education departments classify and approach learning difficulties has any implications for the end users of those websites - teachers, parents and students.



**Figure 1: Steps in Research Method**

In phase 1, the collection of data from each website took place over the month of September 2020, to ensure a common timeframe was used between researchers. It is recognised that websites are dynamic and can be updated at any time therefore, our collection and exporting of data to NVivo12 (QSR International, 2020) used a snapshot approach, which was limited to one month. This ensures that the reliability is increased due to the specific time interval of collection (Hughes et al., 2015).

A keyword search and website browsing guided phase one. Initially, key search terms were agreed upon with an emphasis of words related to learning difficulties, additional needs, inclusion and sub-categories of learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. The researchers then independently analysed one common website and compared results. On the basis of this discussion, search terms and the procedure for completing the analysis were refined. This helped reducing researcher bias supporting inter-rater reliability. Similar to Pauwels’ (2012) framework, the purpose of this phase was to collect data that would assist in uncovering the dominant points of view towards the definition of the term learning difficulties, and how students with learning difficulties are identified and supported within each relevant website. Webpages and embedded documents that were deemed relevant to the agreed nodes and research questions were exported to NVivo12 (QSR International, 2020) for analysis with links to outside organisations not included, only noted in the resources node.

The use of a content analysis allows for objective and unambiguous interpretation of the data (Hughes et al., 2015) so inferences can be made about the communication of each department website. The results of this content analysis are reported below.

## Results

An analysis of the eight websites yielded conflicting information regarding students who experience difficulties with their learning. In addition, some websites had sections which were only accessible to the employees of a particular education department and therefore, were not available to the researchers. The data collected from the eight websites were analysed using a deductive approach. Four key themes were identified: terminology, identification, support – personnel and resources, and system and whole school response.

### Terminology

An analysis of the websites across Australia showed a wide variety of terms in use pertaining to students who are experiencing difficulties with their learning including inclusion, students with additional needs, learning difficulties, specific learning disabilities, reading difficulties, disability, learning and support, or student support. Learning difficulties was referred to as a specific term in Victoria (VIC), New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). In Queensland (QLD), Tasmania (TAS), South Australia (SA) and the Northern Territory (NT) the term learning difficulties was not defined though noted in lists and links to other resources (including websites other than the state government education department websites). The Western Australia (WA) website offered employee-only pages so the use of the term learning difficulties could not be determined by the researchers using public access to that website.

In VIC, within the section - *Supporting Students with Additional Needs*, under the heading, *Understanding types of learning difficulty*, it was noted, “All students learn in different ways and have different strengths and challenges. A learning difficulty can affect aspects of a student’s ability to learn” (Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training, 2020b, para. 1). Examples of types of common learning difficulty provided included dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. This situation is similar to NSW where under *Disability Learning and Support* information is provided about resources being available in all mainstream classes to support all students’ needs regardless of cause (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020c). Students with learning difficulties was a distinct section on the website for ACT Education Website (Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, 2020a) outlining the range of services and programs provided by school in order to support students to reach their full potential. Further evidence of emphasising and acknowledging this group of students as a unique entity in ACT, a specific Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties was established in 2012, to provide recommendations for classroom level intervention and support of children and young people with learning difficulties (Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, 2020b).

While the websites of SA, TAS, QLD and NT did not clearly define the term learning difficulties, they included reference to students experiencing difficulties with learning within a variety of sections within the websites. In various sections discussing identification of or support for students, the term learning difficulties was used as an area of need that led to further support (SA website), an area of professional development (TAS website), and a reason to provide adjustments or personalised learning plans (NSW and TAS websites). In QLD, learning difficulties were noted by The Autism and Reading Hub and in a transcript of an interview with an exemplary state schoolteacher discussing the school’s approach to inclusion.



Although the term, learning difficulties could not be located on the NT website, there was a description similar to that on a number of other websites, such as NSW and ACT, when describing students with additional needs (SWaN) – “Students with additional needs require specific and/or targeted support to participate in their learning on the same basis as their peers” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2020, para. 2). In addition to the term learning difficulties not being used consistently across the websites, how students with learning difficulties were identified and by whom, also varied.

### Identification

With no clear definition of learning difficulties available nationally, it is not surprising that the way each state website identifies students who require support, and who is responsible for this identification, also varied significantly across the states. Table 1 below provides a brief summary of the criteria and the people responsible for this assessment.

| State/Territory | Criteria for Identification   | Who Conducts Assessment   |
|-----------------|---|---|
| ACT             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identifying a learning difficulty is complex</li> <li>• criteria for dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia include                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ poor phonological processing</li> <li>○ speed of language retrieval</li> <li>○ long term memory</li> <li>○ difficulty processing concepts of numbers</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Classroom teacher: observes struggles and challenges<br>School psychologist: initial assessment<br>Formal identification: psychologist, occupational therapist, speech pathologist, paediatrician |
| NSW             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no set criteria provided</li> <li>• no formal diagnosis of disability required to receive support</li> <li>• wholistic approach informed by data including numeracy, language, reading and communication data.</li> </ul>  | Parents and caregivers work with Learning Support Team to plan for meeting their child’s needs  |
| NT              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no specific data provided about criteria for learning difficulties</li> <li>• additional support may be provided using                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Progressive Achievement Test (PAT)</li> <li>○ clinical assessments</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  | Teachers and school staff complete school-based assessments.<br>Clinical assessments (e.g., medical and allied health) can provide support  |
| QLD             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no formal diagnosis of disability required to receive support</li> <li>• schools respond to student need with ongoing monitoring and assessment</li> </ul>   | No clear information found about who conducts monitoring and assessments of students  |
| SA              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information for parents on indicators of learning difficulties</li> <li>• emphasis is on dyslexia, but others are included</li> </ul>  | Professional with expertise in learning difficulties (usually an educational psychologist or speech pathologist)  |
| TAS             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no set of criteria provided</li> </ul>   | Psychologists to provide assessment and identification services to teachers of specific learning disorders, however learning difficulties not specifically identified                             |
| VIC             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• criteria provided to support schools in identification of students with ‘learning difficulties and dyslexia’ in different age groups (5-8, 9-12, 13-16 years)</li> </ul>   | Classroom teachers use diagnostic tools to assess learning difficulties   |

|    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
|    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• criteria provided for students with numeracy and literacy difficulties</li> <li>• informal assessments such as             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ letter-sound knowledge</li> <li>○ phonological knowledge</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |  |
| WA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no set of criteria provided (however, much of the site was not publicly accessible)</li> </ul>  | Parents see family doctor or other professional; and advised to speak with teacher or school staff |

**Table 1: Identification Criteria and Responsibility for Assessment Across States/Territories**

Apart from VIC, the websites provided limited specific information about the criteria to identify a student with learning difficulties. States, such as the ACT and SA provided ‘signs to look for’ for parents who may be concerned that their child was experiencing some difficulties with learning. Many websites included information about learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dyscalculia and most websites directed parents to the teacher initially if they had concerns. The ACT and NT provided clear outlines of an evaluation process beginning with the classroom teacher, specialist teachers and moving to more formalised medical assessments. When looking for information about who provides support for students with learning difficulties, there were again, inconsistencies across the websites.

**Support– Personnel and Resources**

Once students have been identified as requiring support, the next issue for consideration is about who will provide this support and what form this support will take. In the analysis of the personnel it was found that information provided about the roles of teachers and specialist staff in supporting students with learning difficulties was either explicitly identified, or it was difficult to locate. This situation was similar when analysing the information surrounding how teachers could best support these students.

While all of the websites promoted inclusive education, as is required under Australian legislation, the websites that had provided clear role descriptions of teachers, specialist teachers and other professionals also clearly outlined the support to be provided for students with learning difficulties. The NSW website, for example, provided specific information about the role of specialist staff as well as information about support and resources provided specifically for these students (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020c).

Another key area of inconsistency across the websites was the provision of information about how classroom teachers should best support students with learning difficulties. Two different strategies were prevalent across the websites: information was either curated and provided by the education department directly on specific topics, or the information was provided mostly through external links to other organisations such as Australian Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD, 2020) or the respective state organisation of SPELD.

Some websites, such as NT, provided many external links for information, training and best practice (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2020). These contacts included links to the ACARA (2016) website and external organisations such as Understood (Understood for All, 2021). Other states such as QLD and NSW provided a combination of external and state department links such as AUSPELD (2020) and Learning Difficulties Australia (Learning Difficulties Australia [LDA], 2021). Additionally, both states provided access to a reading and writing centre; in QLD, the Autism and Reading Hub (Queensland

State Government Department of Education, 2020) and in NSW, the Centre for Effective Reading (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020a).

States such as VIC, TAS and the ACT provided a wealth of information and fact sheets on their own state education department websites as well as clear links and partnerships with universities that offered training. For example, the University of Tasmania offers training in supporting students with additional needs to both qualified teachers as well as teacher aides under the inclusive education initiative with the TAS education department (Tasmanian Government Department of Education, 2020).

The NSW website also notes under the heading, *Disability Learning and Support, Personalised support for student learning* “A personalised approach to teaching and learning ensures every student enjoys a rigorous, meaningful and dignified education” (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020b). This approach would include students with learning difficulties in inclusive education and the provision of adjustments being suggested in order to achieve the process of personalised learning and support.

A further area that emerged as variable across websites was the wider system approach to student support from an education department, region or district.

### **System and Whole School Response**

Although support can be provided on various levels to students with learning difficulties, it is important to recognise that such support may be indirect: it can be provided on a wider scale by entire education departments, regions or districts. Similarly, it can be provided on a school-wide level, whereby models of support - such as the Response-to-Intervention framework – are implemented. The results of this study found support for both system-wide and school-wide approaches.

#### ***System Support (Education Department, Region or District)***

Through the system-wide approach, each state and territory offered a framework or service that schools could access to help support students with learning difficulties. While each system uses its own nomenclature, the services all include elements of student support and inclusive education. Both VIC and SA had student support teams available to all schools within their respective departments. In VIC, the Student Support Services (SSS) is a referral service that assists schools to determine the best course of action for students with additional needs (Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training, 2020a). This website stated that SSS is responsible for deciding, based on the specific need, which experts are best placed to support a student. This is similar to the SA education department website where it states that the SSS team is a departmental initiative to assist schools and preschools that have students with learning difficulties. Furthermore, the SA department has an Inclusive Education Support Program (IESP) which aims to provide support based on students’ needs, rather than giving support only to students with a diagnosis or label (South Australia Department for Education, 2020).

System wide support was also provided in ways that built the capacity of individual schools to support students with learning difficulties. For example, the NT education department asks teachers to find national and state documents through the ACARA website and other external links. The aim is for teachers to develop their own inclusive planning to support students and puts the primary responsibility on teachers to implement system-wide support. WA’s School of Special Educational Needs: Disability aims to build the capacity of

schools to promote inclusive learning environments. The QLD website states that they take a system-wide evidence-based approach to implementing inclusive education and promote and develop policies, programs and practices to remove barriers and promote inclusive education across the state.

### *School Support (Including Models of Support such as Response-to-Intervention)*

The various state websites suggest that meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties was accomplished by either providing a framework to ensure that curriculum needs are met or by providing policies that ensure consultation with appropriate people occurs to develop a support plan. The VIC website outlines a combination of both approaches, suggesting that schools support students with learning difficulties through the Response to Intervention framework by providing strategies for teachers in line with the three tiers of that framework. Additionally, they weave literacy and numeracy skill-building into the model to target learning difficulties in these two areas. Schools provide learning difficulties support groups for students and parents to support collaboration, keep track of student progress and develop individual learning plans.

On other websites where the term *response-to-intervention* was not used, similar tiered levels of support were promoted as a school wide response to support students with learning difficulties. For example, the NT's three-tiered response model is used to help teachers plan and prepare for students with learning difficulties and to develop better pedagogical skills for inclusive education. Similarly, the TAS website supports a school-wide approach whereby the flexibility of the Australian Curriculum is leveraged to provide support to students with learning difficulties, ensuring consultation and collaboration among school staff, parents and other professionals (Tasmanian Government Department of Education, 2020).

TAS also focuses on ensuring consultation and collaboration among school staff, parents and other professionals to ensure the needs of students with learning difficulties are met and the Tasmanian education department specifies that strategies be provided to teachers to support targeted literacy and numeracy development. The inclusive education policy on the QLD website provides school support by ensuring all members of the community work together to meet the learning needs of all students and enable them to access and participate in all aspects of school life.

Although the websites of some education departments provided little or no information regarding school support, it cannot be said that these departments do not provide support as only publicly accessible sections of the websites were investigated. For example, the SA website provides only brief information: schools are supported with funding for students who 'struggle in school'.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Four key aspects related to learning difficulties examined in this study: terminology, identification, support – personnel and resources, and system and whole school response. Significant variations in the way each state and territory approached each aspect were evident on the websites. Variations included the terminology used to discuss learning difficulties; the way students with learning difficulties were identified, and who was responsible for that identification; the information provided about the personnel who support learners with difficulties, the resources they used, and the type of support provided; the differences in the

school, and system-wide, responses to students with learning difficulties. The variations in these responses have major implications for students' families, students' teachers, and the students themselves as they journey through the education systems.

The results presented in this paper support the earlier research of Loudén et al. (2000) and van Kraayenoord and Elkins (2004). As terminology is used to determine the who, what and how students are supported in their learning, it is important to note the different ways that states and territories use the term learning difficulties on their websites. Differing definitions have serious implications regarding the support that schools offer to students, which in turn directly impacts a student's experience of education. One of the advantages of providing a clear definition of learning difficulties is that parents may easily access information about learning difficulties if they are concerned that their child may be experiencing difficulties. For parents, ease of access to information may lead to greater parental engagement in their child's education which, research shows, can lead to higher levels of student achievement (Jay et al., 2018).

With no shared understanding of the terminology, no shared approach to identification is possible. Currently, different states follow different protocols for who is responsible for identifying student difficulties and what levels of assessment and labels are required before being eligible to receive support. While all states and territories implemented inclusive education policies and many specifically stated that diagnosis was not required to receive support, as Woodcock and Faith (2021) found, without a clear process of identification, limited planning may limit schools' capabilities in this area.

This leads to the third key aspect - the variance in the way schools and teachers provided support to students and the extra resources that were available. While there is a move away from the model of supporting only those students who have been formally diagnosed (Quick, 2020), the lack of shared understanding of the term learning difficulties, and specific identification and funding for these students (van Kraayenoord & Chapman, 2016) may lead to a risk of losing specialist knowledge of effective supports for students with learning difficulties. The lack of consistent information with some states providing their own information and others only providing links to external organisations such as AUSPELD, may lead to confusion for parents and the pathway to gain support for their child may be difficult and inequitable. Quick (2020) highlighted the need for further research into how schools identify students eligible for tier 2 and 3 level interventions in a response-to-intervention approach. The results of this study support this call for further research and highlight the need for a consistent approach in supporting students with learning difficulties across Australia.

Finally, the resources and supports available directly stem from the school as well as system wide approaches and planning decisions. States and territories provided support indirectly by including policies mandating inclusive education and response-to-intervention approaches. Capacity building of individual schools and teachers was also promoted through supporting professional development and training. While many websites provided information about students who may be struggling with learning to read, Merga et al. (2021) identified the need for considerable improvement in Australian schools' adoption of a whole school approach to supporting literacy across all learning areas in schools in order to optimize outcomes for struggling literacy learners beyond the early years. However, while reading is a common area of difficulty faced by students with learning difficulties, it is not the only area that poses challenges (Westwood, 2019). Attention also needs to be paid to other learning areas such as mathematics.

The inconsistencies in terminology, lack of uniformity in approaches to identification and support available to students has been previously highlighted (van Kraayenoord & Chapman, 2016). Updating the national curriculum seems to be an opportune moment to

address this issue. This study has confirmed the findings of previous research about these inconsistencies. However, the possible implications that this lack of shared understanding might have for students with LD is important to consider. Further research is required to see the impact on the supports provided to students, and its influence on equitable access to education. If learning difficulties are not clearly defined, and clear processes of identification and access to funding models are not developed across Australia, students may not be able to access supports from specialist teachers. The current updating of the national curriculum seems to be an opportune moment to address this issue.

### **Limitations**

While this study highlights the differences and similarities between each of the websites, there were a number of limitations. First, some of the websites, such as WA, had restricted access to people who did not work for the department itself, meaning that the full picture, for teachers, of what the website expressed about learning difficulties may not have been accessed. In addition, although the websites allow for public viewing of policy and official guidelines for the education of student in government schools, the implementation of such guidelines may not be included if studies and reports on implementation have not been conducted or uploaded online.

Second, this study did not include analysis of the websites of education sectors such as Independent Schools or Catholic Education Office across Australia. The researchers chose to compare only the websites of the Australian state government education departments as they are the largest education suppliers, and it was deemed there were more commensurate qualities among these websites.

Last, this study captured a brief snapshot in time of the views of government education departments (during September 2020). It is acknowledged that websites may not capture all information about the departments' views and that they are regularly updated, hence, may have changed since the analysis in 2020. The researchers also acknowledge that information contained on websites may not be fully reflective of each departments' views or actual implementation of policies.

### **Future Research**

As this study involved the websites of state and territory education departments, an examination of a broader range of websites such as other education sectors (Catholic Education Office and Independent Schools) and relevant organisations such as Learning Difficulties Australia and SPELD in each state could be included to gain a deeper understanding of the various sectors across Australia. These websites could be compared to determine the consistency of their approaches and views towards students with learning difficulties. In addition, views of stakeholders could be sought through surveys and interviews, and observations in classrooms could provide examples of provision of support to students experiencing difficulties. This wider analysis would paint a greater picture of how Australia, as a whole, views students with learning difficulties. Further research could also investigate the impact of the support that is provided to students and the resultant influence on equitable access to education.

## Conclusion

The lack of a shared and consistent understanding of the term learning difficulties across Australia has been highlighted by this current study. van Kraayenoord and Elkins (2004) originally identified the variance in responses by the different Australian states to the support of students with learning difficulties. The updated research presented here supports this viewpoint and calls for consistency across Australia in the identification of, and support for, students with learning difficulties to allow for equity of access to the curriculum.

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