

My name is Reece, I am 25 years old and I have dyslexia. The main supports I have for my learning difficult finally turned up at TAFE. In fact, I wasn't even diagnosed with dyslexia until I was a TAFE! I had a scribe during year 12 exams and I had a test to be entitled to have that person assist me, but they never told me I had dyslexia. I was just always put in the 'slow learner' class at school.

The main things I want to highlight in relation to a new Disability Care and Support Scheme are outlined below:

- **The new scheme should have a focus on early intervention for people with learning difficulties.**

A learning difficulty does not necessarily have to be a big deal with the right supports provided early, but if there are no interventions and supports, it can be debilitating.

If I had received early intervention, I don't think I would have suffered as much from the anxiety that I have had to overcome related to my ability to learn. The system tells you directly and indirectly that you are 'no good' and it gets you down. I think with supportive interventions early on, I also would have been a lot more ready for further education and employment. At TAFE I was playing catch-up. At the same time as learning my Uni course-work I was learning to use adaptive software and working on my literacy skills.

- **Supports offered for people with learning difficulties under the scheme should be individualized and comprehensive.**

The supports I had at Uni worked because there was a range of them and in combination, they all helped. They included a note-taker, remedial work on my literacy skills, mentoring and career counseling, assistance with learning to use adaptive technology as well as an equity scholarship to purchase some software I needed.

- **Supports under the scheme should be available for as long as they are needed.**

At the moment, many interventions (for people with a range of disabilities) are far too short-term, services do their bit and go. To be effective, many supports need to be available in the longer-term, as long as they are needed.

- **There should be a plan for any supports that are put into place. This should be developed with the student who it is designed to assist.**

Any interventions or supports should be driven by a learning plan which is developed *with* the student who is experiencing the learning difficult/ies. Learning plans often need to take into account things other than just a student's leaning needs— people need time to adjust when new supports are introduced, so, for example, putting things into place slowly and gradually might well be really important.

In my situation, the plan to meet my learning needs could have been better communicated to me. I would have appreciated if it had been developed with me. I should have been a central contributor in this process and known better where things were headed in terms of my learning supports.

- **There should be a 'central' health professional who has a good understanding of the 'whole of life' situation for a person with a disability - disability-related issues, wellbeing, family situation etc.**

Maybe this could be a GP, but whoever this person is, they would need to have good links to disability services. There were a lot of physical things for me that were not picked up very early, including, for example, my scoliosis and the fact that I needed orthotics in my shoes. There needs to be someone who knows you and your situation as a whole.

- **I think mentor/menteeship opportunities for people with a disability are really important.**

The guidance I received at Uni was really useful, but in general I don't feel like I have had a lot of opportunities to receive the kind of mentorship I would have liked in relation to my learning difficulty. I feel like in many instances, I have been the one 'trail-blazing'. If there could be more opportunities for young people with disabilities to participate in roles as both receiving mentorship and being mentors I believe that would be really positive.

- **In general, education needs to be more inclusive and flexible.**

There needs to be more awareness in schools, for both students and teachers about different people's learning styles and needs and about the kinds of tools and software that are out there to assist students with learning difficulties.

- **There needs to be more supports for students who are beginning to use adaptive learning software.**

At University, I was fortunate to have access to an adaptive technology advisor who worked with me as I was learning to use adaptive software. I could give this person feedback about what was working for me and what wasn't. It was a team effort in a bit of a 'trial and error' process to find the right software and put it to best use for me.

I don't know of any similar support that would have been available in primary or secondary school. I feel like it could be useful for there to be a specific person, maybe who operates across a region and in a number of schools, who could support and advise students who were learning to use different disability-related equipment. This person could also be an advocate for young people with disabilities in the school system. - As well as potentially in relation to their parents, where there are conflicting needs or interests between young people and parents.

- **Many learning difficulties continue to go undiagnosed. There needs to be more opportunities for people to be identified, assessed and to access supports throughout their lives.**

Opportunities for identification and assessment of learning difficulties need to exist throughout a person's education (at primary and secondary school and University), as well as at other points throughout life. For example, disability employment services need to have good links with assessment and support services so that people have the opportunity to access supports when they are seeking employment.

Likewise, **allied health professionals such as physio's or occupational therapists need to have additional training in recognizing young people who may be experiencing learning difficulties.** Support from a range of professionals is often necessary for a person with a disability, so the more understanding these professionals have of learning difficulties, the better.

Two students with similar learning difficulties do not stand the same chance of having these identified. In a school setting, for example, often it is the disruptive students who are diagnosed, or the ones whose parents are strong advocates. A quiet student may still be having a similar struggle, but their difficulty goes unnoticed.

One effective way to identify students with learning difficulties may be for **teachers to receive specific training so they are better able to identify and support students who may have learning difficulties.** Particularly primary school teachers, who have prolonged contact with students, may be in a good position to identify students who are experiencing difficulties with learning.

It was only after I had been diagnosed that I felt empowered enough to take on a writing-based course – social work. This has given me better life opportunities. When you can't read and write, which is the basis of the whole education system, it has a flow on effect to your whole personality, and life-choices.

I hope under a new Life-time Care and Support Scheme people with learning and other hidden disabilities can get the support they need and not just continue to 'slip through the system' as many have done in the past, particularly because their disability is not necessary recognized/diagnosed. It is in this circumstance, without recognition, that a learning difficulty is most 'disabling' but in a constructive environment with the right supports at the right time, it doesn't have to be.