



## Providing Evidence of Adjustments for Students with a Disability

The 2005 Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), which was created to “provide a framework to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as other[s]”, outlines clear expectations for Australian teachers regarding the way in which students with a disability should be supported in schools. Not only is it unlawful to discriminate against a person due to a disability, it is a responsibility of teachers to provide reasonable adjustments to learning. These reasonable adjustments ensure that students with a disability are able to participate in learning experiences and demonstrate their learning and skills in assessments where required.



More recently, the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) (Education Services Australia Ltd, n. d.) has raised the expectations of teachers in Australia about the way in which they record and provide evidence of the adjustments made for students with a disability. The adjustments required by students are considered as either: Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice, Supplementary, Substantial, or Extensive. Each of these levels brings with it a different amount of federal funding for the school (Education Council, 2019). While it is not new for Australian teachers to make reasonable adjustments for students with additional needs, the notion of class teachers providing adequate evidence to justify funding poses new challenges for Australian teachers and schools.

### One school’s journey in making adjustments more explicit

In my most recent middle leadership role, I worked in a secondary school in Brisbane that received NCCD funding for almost half of the enrolled students due to the adjustments that they required. Students had a range of reasons for requiring adjustments, and there was a range of students in all of the NCCD categories, namely: physical, cognitive, sensory, and social/emotional (see Education Council, 2019). While teachers at the school had been making reasonable adjustments for years (as the proportion of students with a disability was always higher than that of most other schools), the recording and reporting process that class teachers were required to undertake in NCCD was very different to anything that had been done before. In addition, teachers were generally well-versed in the adjustments required for students in the physical, sensory, and/or social and emotional categories of disability, but they were less confident about the adjustments they were making for students with cognitive disabilities.

### Adjustments for students with cognitive disabilities

Tomlinson and Allan (2006) state that differentiation to teaching and learning occurs through content, product, process and learning environment. When it came to cognitive adjustments, we found that many teachers in the school were uncertain about the practicalities of differentiating by product, process and content. As it was the first time that all teachers were explicitly being asked to provide evidence of adjustments, many were concerned that they were not doing it correctly. Early on, it also became apparent that teachers were able to make adjustments for students with cognitive disabilities in their classrooms and in formative tasks, but they were not as confident in making adjustments in summative assessment tasks.

The teachers' main concern was centred around equity for the student requiring the adjustment, as teachers wanted to ensure that they were doing the right thing for the student. However, an additional concern emerged about equity for other students in the class who were not entitled to adjustments, and therefore did not have the same changes made to elements of the assessment such as support, scaffolding, and/or the level of content.

### Our context and approach

As a school, we set out to make adjustments more explicit as well as to initiate a whole-school approach to making adjustments to both learning experiences and summative assessment. The first obvious issue was that there was a large number of students who were struggling with their school work, and thus demonstrating knowledge and skills at the Australian Curriculum achievement standards was difficult. Historically, many teachers had taught content and skills above the achievement standard, which immediately made the lessons inaccessible for some students. Many students with disabilities were also unable to demonstrate work at the achievement standard, and were thus given Ds on their report cards.

As a middle leadership team, we decided that we needed to strip back our curriculum and review units of work in line with the achievement standards, to ensure that teachers were aware of and working to the achievement standard, and that "extension activities" were labelled as such. We set out to minimise the "noise" in the curriculum, identify what had to be covered, and what would be considered as being additional or extension work. An additional factor that permeated our discussions at this point was that there were many students in the school who were capable of working above the achievement standard (and thus achieving Bs and As), so they needed access to learning activities at higher levels. In addition, depending on the type of disability as well as their strengths in different areas, the student would sometimes be working "at" the achievement standard in some subjects but need the opportunity to work "above" when the time was right.

At the end of 2017, all Years 7-10 units were reviewed and stripped back, and content and skills were labelled as being "at" and "above" the achievement standard. In some areas, it was clear that significant changes had to be made to ensure that there were opportunities for students to work "towards" and "at" the standard, rather than always "above". Consequently, many unnecessary inclusions in the previous units were removed, and content and skills that were missing were added in.

Once the yearly plan was reviewed, the bones of term planners were constructed by teams in department meetings. Following this step, we began talking about how we would assess students who required adjustments, knowing that we needed to cater for students who were working "at" and "above" the achievement standard. The senior leadership team decided to set a "non-negotiable" for that year to have an "expected" and a "modified" assessment task written for every learning area and year level. The idea was that the "expected" task would assess "at" and "above" the achievement standard, meaning that students were able to achieve C, B and A grades, and the "modified" task would cover content only outlined "at" the achievement standard. This meant that students who undertook this task were limited to a C grade; however, for many of our students, this provided an opportunity for them to experience success and demonstrate their knowledge and skills at a level that was accessible to them.

Through the individual curriculum plans and the inclusive education department, we created a list of students who required adjustments to their assessments, including the students that should have access to the "modified" task (there were, of course, many students requiring adjustments who still completed the "expected" task). As we progressed, and on a case-by-case basis, we adjusted this expected versus modified task based on the individual student's strengths and weaknesses, parent input, and the aspirations of the student. Some students, for example, were great artists, so we adjusted their curriculum plans to indicate that they would sit the "modified" task for all subjects, except Visual Arts where they would sit the "expected" task.

### Reflections on the process

The changes that we made throughout 2018 and 2019 were major, and they required significant time and opportunity to engage in this process. The curriculum middle leaders were exceptional in their willingness to adjust yearly scope and sequence documents, and the initial planning and structures for each term of learning. These documents were largely constructed in middle leadership release time, and in consultation with their teachers at department meetings. Without the middle leaders' willingness to review the curriculum and their buy-in to the process, the changes would never have happened across the school.

To assist with the time required for building new term plans and writing assessments, teaching teams were provided with a full day off-site in the final week of school in December of 2017. During this time, we focussed solely on writing Term 1 planners and assessments, and some teams progressed quickly and moved on to planning for Term 2. Once the new year started, middle leaders allocated department meeting time in Term 1 to write the Term 2 assessments; and in Term 2, the team worked on writing the Term 3 assessments.





Where possible, we tried to keep this planning time in department meetings, because quite a considerable amount was being added to teachers' workload.

The final reflection relates to the time it took to get this process right. Although all assessments in Years 7-10 were written for the 2018 school year, there were significant changes that were made in 2019. The process was never going to be perfect from the beginning, but teachers' willingness to adjust where necessary, and to recommend students for "expected" tasks or "modified" tasks, as well as the school officers' support in keeping these records up to date, meant that we made steady progress. The process will continue to be reviewed in coming years; but this model, for the most part, worked well for teachers, parents, and the students of the school.

Overall, this process was incredibly worthwhile as it built capacity in our middle leadership team and teachers, and students benefited from the time and effort that teachers invested. Teachers and middle leaders became more aware of aligning their teaching and learning activities with the Australian Curriculum as well as of their professional responsibilities to cater for students with a disability; and as a result of the tracking of student adjustments and different levels of assessment, staff had more evidence to support NCCD expectations. Ultimately, the reason for these changes was to ensure that all students had access to curriculum and assessment that were pitched at their level.

## References

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## THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

- How well do your teachers understand the adjustments that should be made for students across the adjustment levels of: Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice, Supplementary, Substantial and Extensive?
- How does your school make explicit the expectations for making adjustments for students with a disability?

## USE IT NOW

1. Share and unpack the NCCD "Selecting the Level of Adjustment" document (Education Services Australia Ltd, 2019) with your colleagues in a staff meeting. As a team, consider each individual's planning, the needs and challenges of the students in the class/classes, and what is required for each student.
2. Work with middle leaders to develop a school-based strategy for adjustments for students with a cognitive disability.
3. Review the Years 7-10 scope and sequence documents to ensure that planning is based on the Australian Curriculum.

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