

**Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills
and Employment**

***2020 Review of the Disability Standards for
Education 2005***

Occupational Therapy Australia submission

September 2020

Introduction

Occupational Therapy Australia (OTA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department) regarding the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (the Standards).

OTA is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of June 2020, there were more than 23,000 occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in Australia (AHPRA, 2020).

Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to access meaningful and productive activities. A significant proportion of occupational therapists work with people with a disability, including school-aged children and adults undertaking further education or training.

This submission seeks to respond to the following question from the Discussion Paper:

Do barriers still exist for students with disability wanting to access and participate in education and training? If so, how do you think the Standards could be improved to help address these barriers?

Context – Occupational Therapists in Schools

Occupational therapists form an integral part of learning support teams for students with a disability in schools across Australia. Their unique perspective focusses on addressing barriers to learning and socialising in order to maximise participation in all aspects of the curriculum.

In a classroom setting, occupational therapists recommend, implement and monitor services to support students' participation at school. School-based interventions can include:

- Assisting students to acquire and master the critical skills which underpin participation at school, including social and motor skills and emotional regulation;
- Collaborating with educational staff to adapt the social or physical environment to better meet the student's needs; and
- Engaging students in activities relevant to their capabilities to increase feelings of confidence and promote a positive self-identity.

For example, occupational therapists may work directly with a student to improve fine motor skills such as handwriting or turning a page independently. Occupational therapists may also modify the task or environment so that a student is able to participate by, for example, ensuring that the student is equipped with supportive seating at their desk.

Occupational therapists also provide training and support to other staff members who work with students with a disability.

Barriers to Access and Participation

Determining reasonable adjustments

OTA acknowledges the efforts made by the Department to ensure that the Standards are clear, accessible and understandable. The Standards clearly set out the obligations of the education provider regarding adjustments; and assist in the understanding of what is considered a reasonable or unreasonable adjustment.

However, OTA members are concerned that the Standards do not adequately identify *how* the most appropriate adjustments are designed, implemented and evaluated.

According to the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (2005, p. 12), an adjustment is a measure or action (or a group of measures or actions) taken by an education provider that has the effect of assisting a student with a disability:

- (i) in relation to an admission or enrolment — to apply for the admission or enrolment;
- (ii) in relation to a course or program — to participate in the course or program; and
- (iii) in relation to facilities or services — to use the facilities or services;

on the same basis as a student without a disability, and includes an aid, a facility, or a service that the student requires because of his or her disability.

The term 'adjustment' is used widely and frequently in the disability sector, often with the implication that others can readily identify what accommodations are needed for success and inclusion of people with a disability.

In fact, it is essential to understand the student's individual strengths and challenges; the specific environments in which they live, work or study; and the activities, tasks or occupations relevant to their role; *before* the most appropriate adjustments can be designed, implemented and evaluated.

Occupational therapists are well placed to conduct such assessments, yet the suggestion to seek professional input is included only as a footnote in the Standards (2005, p. 13):

A detailed assessment, which might include an independent expert assessment, may be required in order to determine what adjustments are necessary for a student.

This point is only briefly expanded upon in the accompanying Guidance Notes (2005, p. 32-33):

In deciding on a reasonable adjustment, it may be necessary to seek professional expertise. This might include a detailed assessment by an independent expert of the nature of the student's disability and the adjustment(s) that is (are) appropriate for the student.

Without professional input, education providers may not be able to provide the most appropriate adjustments for students with a disability, thereby lessening the extent to which they can fully participate in education and training.

Recommendation 1: Amend the Standards and Guidance Notes to place greater emphasis on the value of assessment by an occupational therapist or other suitably qualified health professional.

Access to occupational therapy services

In determining whether a particular adjustment is reasonable, the Standards require that consideration be given to its effect on the individual, as well as the education provider, staff and other students. Unfortunately, this often means that occupational therapists are denied access to classrooms, even when their client requires this level of support to participate at school.

OTA recognises that this is a complex issue, as having multiple therapists visiting a school – and potentially the same classroom – can be disruptive to the other students. Yet, the impact on the individual is also significant. Moreover, the prevalence of this issue is likely to increase with the full rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and its model of individual funding.

Given the scale of this issue, it would be appropriate for the Department to provide further guidance as to how principals may balance the needs of the individual with the rest of the class, with respect to external therapists and support workers visiting schools.

OTA notes that access to occupational therapy could also be improved by increasing the number of occupational therapists employed in schools or school support services as part of the education system. This would also alleviate concerns around allowing external providers to access schools.

Currently, the way each state and territory engages with occupational therapists differs according to departmental arrangements. In Queensland, the Department of Education employs just over 80 FTE occupational therapists to support the provision of learning and reasonable adjustments in schools. Queensland is leading the way in this regard and is a potential model for other states and territories.

Recommendation 2: Support consistent access to occupational therapy in schools, including by developing national guidelines to be used by education providers when deciding whether an occupational therapist may provide services in the classroom and/or during school hours.

Conclusion

OTA thanks the Department of Education, Skills and Employment once again for the opportunity to respond to contribute to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

Please note that representatives of OTA would gladly meet with representatives of the Department to expand upon any of the matters raised in this submission.

References

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Authority. (2020). *Occupational Therapy Board of Australia – Registrant Data*. <https://www.occupationaltherapyboard.gov.au/About/Statistics.aspx>.

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2005). *Disability Standards for Education 2005 Plus Guidance Notes*. Commonwealth Government. <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/16354>.