

# LEARNING DISABILITIES: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AT ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES

BY

John Logan  
Academic Colleague (Carleton University)

**JANUARY 2009**

For more information contact:  
Jennie Piekos, Research Associate  
Council of Ontario Universities  
416.979.2165 ext. 223; [jpiekos@cou.on.ca](mailto:jpiekos@cou.on.ca)

COU NO.813  
ISSN:1704-412X (Print);  
ISSN:1704-4197 (Online)  
ISBN:0-88799-433-4

COUNCIL OF  
ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES  
CONSEIL DES  
UNIVERSITÉS DE L'ONTARIO



## INTRODUCTION

Universities in Ontario have been required to accommodate students with learning disabilities (LDs) since the early 1990s. Despite the long-standing existence of policies regarding accommodation, many faculty members have only a limited understanding of LDs, the range of academic accommodations designed to compensate for them, and the underlying rationale for accommodation. A limited awareness of LDs and associated issues is not surprising given the lack of formal instruction the majority of faculty receive on this topic. In turn, this limited awareness has led to some faculty to feel uneasy when asked to provide accommodations to students with LDs. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to review the following topics related to the accommodation of students with learning disabilities: 1) the rationale for accommodation; 2) how learning disabilities are identified; 3) the range of learning disabilities that faculty are likely to encounter and how they would be typically accommodated; 4) how courses can be designed to “indirectly” incorporate accommodations; and 5) implementation of academic accommodations in Ontario universities.

### 1. THE RATIONALE FOR ACCOMMODATION

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada defines LDs as follows<sup>1</sup>:

“Learning Disabilities” refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency. ([Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2008a](#))

<sup>1</sup> This definition does not include Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Although considered clinically separate from an LD, this paper will treat ADHD as a subtype of an LD because substantial overlap exists between individuals diagnosed with an LD and those diagnosed with ADHD ([Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2008b](#)).

One important feature of an LD that is not described in this definition is that an LD is an “invisible” disability. Seeing a person with an LD, it is not obvious that that person has a disability. Nonetheless, its lack of obvious outward signs makes an LD no less a disability. And, like all disabilities, an LD requires accommodation.<sup>2</sup>

Accommodation for disabilities, including LDs, is mandated by Ontario Human Rights Code (the Code). As of June 30, 2008, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) is the government agency responsible for interpreting the Code and providing guidelines for accommodation, as well as advocating for human rights in Ontario, while the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario is responsible for enforcement of the Code ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008a](#)). The rationale for accommodation is centred on the recognition of “the dignity and worth of every person in Ontario,” and the requirement that “appropriate accommodation is available for students with disabilities” ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008b](#)). The OHRC uses the term “duty to accommodate” to reinforce the legal requirement for organizations to provide accommodation. This means that accommodation is not an option; rather, an organization *must* provide accommodation to those with a disability.

According to the OHRC, the goal of accommodation is *not* to provide an advantage to those with a disability. Instead, the goal is to “provide equal benefit” – meaning that persons with a disability are provided a means to accomplish a task that puts them on a level playing field with persons without disabilities. (Implementation of “equal benefit” in the context of LDs will be covered in Section 3.) A key concept in accommodation is that individual differences from person to person dictate the kind of accommodation that is provided. Therefore, accommodations will vary from person to person, with no “one size fits all” accommodation appropriate for all persons with a disability ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008b](#)). Finally, the concept of “reasonable accommodation” is important to consider. The Code states that accommodations cannot cause “undue hardship” for those asked to provide the accommodation, where undue hardship would include excessive cost or

<sup>2</sup> Limits on accommodation for disabilities do exist but Ontario government policy is to set a high threshold for not accommodating a disability. See later in this section.

violation of health and safety standards. That said, the bar is set high for those arguing that providing accommodation is not feasible.

The Code applies to all disabilities in all contexts. However, the OHRC recognizes that education is a unique area that requires specific guidelines for dealing with disabilities, including LDs ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2004](#)). The range of accommodations for LDs is reviewed in Section 4.

## 2. HOW LEARNING DISABILITIES ARE IDENTIFIED AND ASSESSED

Learning disabilities are typically (but not always) identified prior to postsecondary education. For example, if a child has dyslexia (defined as a problem in reading or writing that is not associated with general intelligence), a classroom teacher would likely identify this as the child learns to read. Parents or pediatricians may also identify a potential LD. Nonetheless, it is also possible for an LD to remain unidentified until adulthood. The requirement for accommodation changes critically depending on when the LD is identified: if a student with an LD is identified in elementary or high school, identification alone is sufficient to obtain accommodation of his or her LD; whereas if a student with an LD is identified in a postsecondary setting, accommodation of the LD requires confirmation ([Harrison & Holmes, 2008](#)).

Confirmation of an LD is determined by an in-depth assessment called a psychological assessment ([Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2008](#)) or “psychoeducational assessment” (for example, [Carleton University, 2008](#)).<sup>3</sup> In Ontario psychoeducational assessments are carried out by registered psychologists ([Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2008](#)).

A psychoeducational assessment consists of an assessment of psychological abilities and an assessment of educational performance compared to the performance of similar aged individuals. Both sources of information are needed to diagnose an LD.

The psychological tests evaluate intellectual functioning and include intelligence tests such as the Wechsler scales (WISC – Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children; WAIS – Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale) or the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. Intelligence tests are designed to measure a wide range of abilities, including verbal ability, spatial ability, memory and other basic intellectual capacities. Tests that measure educational achievement, such as the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement, can also be administered. (For more on specific tests used to assess LDs, see [Kidd, 2008](#).) Educational achievement can also be assessed by examining performance in academic settings (grades in different subjects, for example).

In addition to the psychoeducational assessment, information from several other sources is evaluated to diagnose an LD ([Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2008a](#)). This includes a detailed interview and an evaluation of the individual’s social and emotional history. The goal of these additional evaluations is to establish the individual’s developmental history, any family history of LDs, physical health (for example, any neurological issues, such as a head injury), possible concurrent issues, plus reviewing previous assessments. A thorough assessment of psychological and educational abilities and other information requires from four to six hours to complete.

The overall objective of the assessment process – defining an LD – is to determine if a difference exists between the average general intelligence of the individual and some subset of their intellectual abilities that would be consistent with a selective deficit of functioning. Thus, for example, reading could be selectively impaired while vocabulary, spoken language and spatial abilities are not impaired. Information about medical history is necessary to rule out neurological problems, such as a concussion, being responsible for the deficit. Similarly, an examination of academic records can indicate if the impairment has been an ongoing problem, consistent with a diagnosis of an LD.

<sup>3</sup> The terms are used synonymously by some sources but are used to refer to different components of the evaluation by other sources. This paper will use the term psychoeducational assessment because it describes more accurately the two primary components of the assessment process.

### 3. TYPES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES AND HOW THEY ARE ACCOMMODATED

LD covers a range of potential disabilities. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada:

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making).

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding);
- reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension);
- written language (e.g. spelling and written expression); and
- mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving).

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking. ([Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2008](#))

If ADHD is considered an LD, then impulsivity and lack of planning would also be considered characteristics of the disability.

The final part of the definition of an LD provided by the [Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2008](#) describes “interventions” that would permit an individual with an LD to achieve success in his or her life. These interventions include specific skill instruction, accommodation, compensatory strategies and self-advocacy. The first three interventions refer to a set of overlapping concepts that would permit an individual with an LD to deal with potential disadvantages that he or she may encounter in academic or workplace environments.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Characterization of these interventions as overlapping concepts is based on a lack of clear and distinct definitions in the LD literature for the terms “specific skill instruction,” “accommodation” and “compensatory strategies.” This paper treats them all as accommodations.

Accommodation, the nominal focus of this document, could include skill instruction and compensatory strategies if a broad definition of accommodation is used. Thus, interventions could include an awareness of the disability on the part of the individual and monitoring the relative success associated with various interventions, as well as the specific interventions themselves. (An example of how these three intervention components overlap is time management skills; these are critical for virtually all individuals with an LD yet are not really specific to any one setting, and would not seem to fit the definition of a compensatory strategy or accommodation. For a comprehensive list of compensatory strategies in a variety of settings, some of which also fit the concept of accommodation, see [Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2008](#).)

Accommodations for LDs in postsecondary academic settings span the range from general, broad-based accommodations such as extra time for completing assignments and tests or a quiet space for testing, to more specific accommodations such as having a reader for text-based information. Accommodations are designed to fit the needs of the individual student taking a specific course. That is why most university centres that provide services to students with LDs require that each student consult with the faculty member who will be teaching the student’s courses every term. Based on the student’s needs and the format of the course, specific accommodations will be proposed.

[Drover and Owen \(1997\)](#) provide the following list of accommodations for LDs in postsecondary settings:

- extended time for tests, exams
- reduced course load
- course counselling
- audio versions of texts
- reading scanner for print material
- voice output computer
- reader (support person)
- scribe for oral work (support person)
- specialized organizational tour
- audio recording of lectures

Not included in Drover and Owen’s list, nonetheless a frequent accommodation, is a quiet room designed to minimize distractions, a typical accommodation for students with ADHD.

Probably the most common accommodation is extended time for assignments and tests; it not only provides a straightforward way to compensate for the reduced information acquisition capacity that is often part of LDs, but is also relatively simple to implement in academic settings. Sometimes faculty question the extended time accommodation because they consider it unfair, arguing that all students would perform better if they had extended time. However, most centres that deal with academic accommodations cite evidence that providing extended time to those who do not have LDs does not significantly increase their grade (for example, [University of Illinois, 2008](#)). Other accommodations are typically added if extended time alone is insufficient to compensate for the student's LD. These additional accommodations will vary depending on the type of LDs present. For example, students with an auditory processing deficit would benefit from listening to an audio recording of a lecture in order to pause and repeat parts of the lecture if they were unable to process the information adequately in its initial presentation.

#### 4. ALTERNATIVES TO ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation can allow students with LDs to compensate for their disability. However, an alternative to accommodation has been proposed that in its most idealistic form requires students with LDs be treated no differently than students without LDs yet that maintains an equitable environment for all students in a course. Universal Design for Learning (UDL; also referred to as Universal Instructional Design or UID) "is a framework for designing curricula that enable all individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning. UDL provides rich supports for learning and reduces barriers to the curriculum while maintaining high achievement standards for all" ([CAST \[Center for Applied Technology\], 2008a](#)).

UDL incorporates three components: multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression and multiple means of engagement ([CAST, 2008b](#)). Multiple means of representation refers to providing information to students in different formats so that they can acquire information via at least one of the formats if they have problems acquiring the information in other formats. Multiple means of expression refers to an analogous idea applied to how students' knowledge of course material could

be evaluated. Thus, students would be provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in different ways or formats. Finally, multiple means of engagement refers to how an instructor could use different ways to motivate students to perform well in a course.

UDL may be a challenging concept for many faculty because it violates a long-held view in postsecondary education that a course is structured so that there is "one way" to present information and evaluate students, and motivation is limited to the instructor showing up for class and lecturing. While this description of university teaching may be something of a caricature, it is one end of a continuum that has as its opposite the ideas embodied in UDL, which is all about options. Options for many faculty will invoke the concept of "extra work," introducing "inefficiencies" into teaching a course. However, UDL has the potential to address this criticism because it also incorporates accommodations as a kind of by-product of designing a course with options. Thus any net loss in "efficiency of delivery" is offset by no longer having to explicitly provide accommodations. Moreover, UDL is akin to Universal Design in other contexts: it also benefits all students, even those who do not have an LD. An argument for this claim is based on designing physical objects. If a sidewalk curb has a cut-away design leading to the street (as seen in most modern intersections), the persons likely to benefit are not only those in a wheelchair, but also those who walk from one side of the street to the other (because they are less likely to trip and fall on the curb) as well as those who use a stroller or wheeled luggage ([University of Minnesota, 2008](#)).

Implementation of UDL ideally begins when an instructor designs his or her course since all the features of UDL can be "built-in." However, components of UDL can be accomplished by something as simple as placing course materials on a website thereby making them accessible to blind students, ESL students and students with LDs ([University of Minnesota, 2008](#)). The University of Guelph has an unusually detailed website that describes the tenets of UDL and practical advice for how to implement UDL in a course ([University of Guelph, 2008a](#)). The site contains a UDL checklist that is particularly useful for dealing with practical issues in applying UDL principles when designing (or redesigning) a course ([University of Guelph, 2008b](#)). While it may be the case that UDL will not completely

obviate the need for accommodations for LDs, it has the potential to reduce the need to make special arrangements in many cases.

## 5. IMPLEMENTATION OF ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS IN ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES

Based on an examination of information provided on university websites, academic accommodations for students with LDs are broadly similar across Ontario universities. This section will focus mostly on accommodations for tests, recognizing that accommodation also incorporates everyday classroom environments and academic environments outside the classroom. These latter environments will be examined in the final part of this section.

Accommodations require the active involvement of the student, instructors and an institutionally supported centre (hereafter referred to as the centre) that facilitates the accommodation process. The process is initiated by students who are expected to identify themselves as having LDs to staff at the centre. The centre provides information to the student about how accommodations are provided at the university, including the following: what forms of documentation are required to receive academic accommodation, the student's responsibilities in contacting individual course instructors, and the range of services that the centre can provide to students with LDs.

The accommodation process begins with the student contacting the centre. For any accommodation, whether LD or otherwise, the student is required to provide current documentation by a "regulated medical practitioner," such as a physician, psychiatrist or psychologist. For a diagnosis of an LD, the documentation takes the form of a psychoeducational assessment that must be completed by a clinical psychologist. The documentation must contain a statement that the student has a diagnosed LD that is ongoing and calls for academic accommodation. Documentation based on previous assessments may need to be updated to indicate the student's current status regarding his or her LD. When the appropriate documentation is provided by the student to the centre, the student is registered by the centre (meaning that the student is formally acknowledged by the institution as having an LD that requires academic accommodation); at the same time the

documentation is provided, the student would typically consult with a centre staff member who would be assigned to that student.

Depending on the university, once the student is registered with the centre the student either contacts the instructors of his or her courses or the centre contacts the instructors to arrange the specifics of the required accommodation. The centre determines the details of the accommodation based on the student's documentation. Instructors are consulted about the accommodation to determine if the accommodation suggested is appropriate for that course (for example, if a recommended accommodation were to not penalize the student for grammatical errors in tests and assignments and one of the stated goals of the course were to provide instruction in grammar, then the accommodation would not be suitable for that specific course). Students are typically required to make arrangements for accommodations anywhere from five days to two weeks prior to the test or assignment due date.

Historically, instructors were responsible for administering academic accommodations to the student. If an accommodation required the student be provided with 1.5 extra time to complete a test (for example, a one-hour mid-term test extended to 1.5 hours), the instructor or teaching assistant for the course would have to deal with the accommodation. Generally, this would require the test to be administered separately from the rest of class, in terms of both location and time, an arrangement that caused friction in some cases as faculty considered the hours spent administering accommodations as diminishing the hours available for grading and other course-related activities. One way to address this issue is to centralize facilities for administering tests to students who require academic accommodation. This typically takes the form of an invigilated room bookable by faculty or by the centre. Instructors arrange to have a copy of their test delivered to the centre or the institutional office administering the room; the test is returned to the instructor usually within 48 hours. Many Ontario universities have adopted this centralized model.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The model for administering mid-term exams and final exams may differ. At some Ontario universities, individual instructors and departments are responsible for administering accommodations for mid-term exams whereas the university exam office is responsible for administering accommodations for December/April final exams.

Another component of accommodation for LD is the provision of assistive services or adaptive technologies. Ontario universities make a variety of services available, including (but not limited to) the following:

- note taking
- writing/content tutors
- learning assistants, learning strategists, ADHD coaches
- screening and referral for assessment for suspected learning disabilities or ADHD
- laptop computers for tests and exams
- audio recording devices
- voice recognition and text-to-speech software

### CONCLUSION

Academic accommodation allows students with LDs to compensate for their disability. Ideally, accommodation permits them to compete on a level playing field with students without LDs. Although accommodation is required by law, it does not need to be viewed solely as an onerous, government-imposed requirement on institutions. Instead, it should be viewed as a mechanism that allows students with LDs to realize their goals and to maximize their contribution to society.

Ontario universities have developed effective procedures for implementing academic accommodations for students with LDs. These procedures will continue evolving to meet the growing and changing needs of students, instructors and institutions.

Nonetheless, Ontario universities must raise the level of awareness among faculty members about LDs and the legal and moral requirements to provide academic accommodation. As noted in the introduction, anecdotal evidence suggests that not all faculty have completely accepted the rationale for Accommodation. This paper posits that a major factor underlying the reluctance to accept the validity of academic accommodation is the lack of an effective communication strategy that presents a reasoned argument for providing accommodation. In addition, when materials are given to new full- and part-time faculty, generally, these materials are not as informative as they could be. Providing relevant information to instructors as they begin their academic careers would serve to facilitate faculty acceptance of the concept of accommodation.

## REFERENCE

- Carleton University (2008). Learning disabilities. Downloaded August 6, 2008 from [http://www.carleton.ca/pmc/docs/brochures/07-08\\_Learning\\_Disabilities.pdf](http://www.carleton.ca/pmc/docs/brochures/07-08_Learning_Disabilities.pdf)
- CAST (2008a). Universal design for learning. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.cast.org/index.html>
- CAST (2008b). UDL guidelines. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.cast.org/publications/UDLguidelines/index.html>
- Drover, J. & Owen, L. (1997). They can get there from here: Students with learning disabilities in Canadian colleges & universities. *National*, 33, No. 4, Spring 1997, Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, Ottawa. Downloaded August 6, 2008 from <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/InDepth/education-e.asp>
- Harrison, A. & Holmes, A. (2008). Affordable assessments for postsecondary available at ARCs. Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. Downloaded August 20, 2008 from [http://www.ldao.ca/aboutLDs/news\\_full.php?id=102](http://www.ldao.ca/aboutLDs/news_full.php?id=102)
- Learning Disabilities Association of America (2008). Compensatory strategies: Instructional & vocational rehabilitation for adults with learning disabilities. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/publications/LDGuide/Sec3/Compensatory%20strategies%20complete.htm>
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2008a). Definition of learning disability. Downloaded July 25, 2008 from <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/Defined/defined-e.asp>
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2008b). LD in depth: An overview of AD/HD. Downloaded July 25, 2008 from [http://www.ldac-taac.ca/InDepth/adhd\\_01-e.asp](http://www.ldac-taac.ca/InDepth/adhd_01-e.asp)
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2008b). The adult with learning disabilities and assessment. Downloaded August 20, 2008 from [http://www.ldac-taac.ca/InDepth/adult\\_assessment-e.asp](http://www.ldac-taac.ca/InDepth/adult_assessment-e.asp)
- Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (2008). About Assessments. Downloaded August 20, 2008 from [http://www.ldao.ca/aboutLDs/About\\_Assessments.php](http://www.ldao.ca/aboutLDs/About_Assessments.php)
- Ontario Human Rights Commission (2008a). Our changing mission. Downloaded August 6, 2008 from <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/commission/mission>
- Ontario Human Rights Commission (2008b). Disability. Downloaded June 2, 2008 from <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/issues/disability>
- Ontario Human Rights Commission (2004). Guidelines on accessible education. Downloaded June 2, 2008 from <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/Guides/AccessibleEducation/pdf>
- Ontario Human Rights Code (2008). Downloaded August 6, 2008 from [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90h19\\_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90h19_e.htm)
- Kidd, K. (2008). LD/ADHD Psycho/Educational Assessment. Downloaded August 20, 2008 from <http://home.qwu.edu/~kkid/testing.html>
- University of Guelph (2008a). Universal instructional design at the University of Guelph. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid/index.cfm>
- University of Guelph (2008b). UID quick-start checklist. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid/uidchecklist.cfm>
- University of Illinois (2008). Learning disability frequently asked questions. Disability Resources and Educational Services, University of Illinois. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://www.disability.uiuc.edu/page.php?id=17#q8>
- University of Minnesota (2008). Teaching students with disabilities: Universal Instructional Design: Best practices for teaching students with disabilities. Downloaded August 25, 2008 from <http://ds.umn.edu/faculty/teaching.html>
-