

Media release
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UPWARD TREND IN EXAM ACCOMODATIONS SET TO CONTINUE, SAYS DFNZ

Increasing costs of providing exam accommodations to students for NCEA only reveal the tip of the “students in need iceberg”, according to Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ).

The comments come on the back of latest statistics from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), released under the Official Information Act and reported by Otago Daily Times, which show the authority expected to spend close to \$433,000 in 2012 on the provision of Special Assessment Conditions (SAC), an increase of around \$159,000 from 2011. Actual numbers of students that received SACs in 2012 were 3418 of the total of 143,000 who sat NCEA external exams, which included 2535 new applicants.

DFNZ says the extra costs are likely to escalate as more parents and students become aware of their rights to seek SACs for learning differences, such as dyslexia. Support available can include extra time, reader/writer assistance or use of a computer, and is available for learning differences and those who have a physical or medical disability.

“Students granted SACs last year only represent 2.4% of students sitting exams. With a conservative estimate of at least 10% of the population having dyslexia, it is inevitable that we’re going to see more and more applications for this much needed support,” DFNZ Chair of Trustees Guy Pope-Mayell says.

“Dyslexia robs the dyslexic student of time, so these simple accommodations are vital to levelling the playing field and give equality of educational opportunity. They provide these students and others with the means to express what they know. While dyslexia is often misunderstood as just a problem with reading and writing, for example, it can affect a spectrum of skills from auditory and visual perception, planning and organising, and motor skills, through to short-term memory and concentration,” he says.

Although the recognition of dyslexia in 2007 is the likely cause of the surge in numbers, a planned review of the SAC assessment process criteria and guidelines by New Zealand Qualifications Authority will further fuel the trend, if only by making the process smoother for schools.

“NZQA has been under huge pressure over the last year dealing with the sharp rise in applications which is understandable, however a very unfortunate consequence was an escalation of initial denials of those applications” Pope-Mayell says.

“So while NZQA has reported increased costs, the other part of the picture is that they have been denying a greater number of applications, forcing schools to appeal. In many instances the denials were in contradiction to educational psychologists reports. Once issues with the assessment process are fixed, there are likely to be greater number of eligible students than ever.”

One of the more obvious issues with the application process is that SACs are currently only available to students of ‘at least average intelligence’, with schools expected to make a judgment call on this.

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“This is a fundamentally flawed variable because intelligence may be masked by learning difference, so everything depends on a school’s ability to extrapolate or see beyond this. It goes to the very heart of how the education system has related to dyslexia in the past, and reflects ignorance not truth.” Pope-Mayell says.

“Another concern is that private schools and decile ten schools have by far the greater number of students being granted SACs. SACs are expensive to manage, so clearly lower decile schools are at a disadvantage. All schools need to have access to a pool of funds that is specifically for this – otherwise other priorities steal this right from students that learn differently,” he says.

DFNZ had worked closely with NZQA in the last quarter of 2012 to identify some of the specific issues arising with current SAC guidelines and have supported schools & parents appealing SAC declines.

“We look forward to the formal NZQA review this year to sort out the SAC process and funding. In the meantime, we continue to urge parents to advocate for their children to get these SACs, and demand that schools prioritise this. In simple terms, accommodations allow these young people to show us what they know, which keeps them engaged in learning and allows them to reach their potential.” Pope-Mayell says.

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