

MEDIA RELEASE – 15/2/2022

Following Adam Carey's article in The Age on 9/2/22, **All year 12 students to be tested on literacy and numeracy** - SPELD Victoria has been in discussion with VCAA to better understand its intent in rolling out a new General Achievement Test (GAT) with a Literacy & Numeracy (L&N) test in September 2022; and to ask the many questions being raised by deeply concerned (indeed furious) Victorian parents with students who have Specific Learning Disorders such as Dyslexia, Dysgraphia and Dyscalculia.

The Age article states that the GAT L&N's purpose is to inform potential employers whether Year 12 students meet the basic literacy & numeracy standards. On the face of it, and as written up in The Age, this new GAT L&N test looks like an ill-conceived and ill-considered initiative that will raise far more problems than it solves. Not so simple.

In fact VCAA has been working towards releasing a new GAT L&N since 2018 and had intended to roll it out in 2020 but for COVID. It sees this new test as serving three purposes:

- 1) Giving employers a level of transparency on the L&N standards of potential employees
- 2) Affirming students either meet or exceed basic L&N standards
- 3) Accountability measure for schools

However, as currently planned, only one of these three purposes will be progressed. Consider these scenarios:

If a Year 12 student fails to meet the **basic** L&N standards after 13 years of school - it raises all sorts of questions around what the schools have been teaching over these years. One could say that all such outcomes simply indicate educational neglect.

Likewise, if a student with a diagnosed Specific Learning Disorder (SLD) such as dyslexia, dysgraphia or dyscalculia has not received the recommended learning interventions and accommodations either because the school is not willing or not able to support their access to evidence-based teaching, learning practices and accommodations, and then the student fails the new GAT L&N - who is responsible?

Certainly not the student. That would be like blaming a wheelchair bound student for not accessing the exam building when there's no ramp and lift. No one would do so. So much easier when the disability is visible, but SLD are invisible disabilities with impact. That impact needs to be supported not ignored and then blamed.

It is reported that 90,000 Victorian students will sit VCE this year. Statistically this means some 9,000 of them will have a SLD whether diagnosed or not. So what of the students who have struggled through 13 years of school with their Specific Learning Disability undiagnosed - and then they fail to meet the GAT L&N standard? Who failed exactly?

In all of the above scenarios it is easy to see that responsibility for the outcome does **not** rest with the student. Schools will indeed be on notice, but so too will the Education Department.

Yet, it will be the student that suffers the shame and harm if an academic single point in time test is used by employers to make judgements out of context about a student's suitability and competency for employment in a particular workplace environment.

And this is where the proposed GAT L&N will not meet employer needs either.

Put that together with the fact that this year's VCE students are just heading back to school after two years of remote learning, it is not difficult to understand why there has been a wave of parental fury growing across Victoria this week. The last thing this year's VCE students need is another mental health challenge. The timing is less than ideal and no doubt challenging for schools too.

Prior consultation would have been helpful and may have averted some of the distress caused.

In the meantime, SPELD Victoria is now able to clarify a few points:

- 1) The GAT L&N test results belong to the student and they will decide whether to share these results with potential employers. So there will be no breach of the *Privacy Act* or *Health Records Act* with unauthorised disclosure of the results. (The results will be on a separate certificate to VCE results).

On the other hand, if an employer asks a student to share their results and they refuse – that raises other risks for the student seeking employment. And if they do share their results, there is no protection for them from potential employer bias, discrimination and misinterpretation of the test results. (Potential relevance of the *Disability Discrimination Act*).

- 2) The specific L&N tests to be used (names not yet shared with SPELD Victoria) will be normed with other national tests.
- 3) If a student fails to meet the basic L&N standards test in September this year, VCAA has stated they can re-sit the test (maybe more than once) anytime up to February 2023. (Another challenge for the schools).
- 4) It is understood that from 2023 VCAA is seeking to run the GAT L&N in Year 11.

It is not clear what the exemption process will look like yet, or how VCAA will manage or account for potential absenteeism from the GAT L&N.

The purpose of the GAT has always been to provide a proxy measure for student attainment in case something goes awry at the time of the VCE exams. A GAT L&N will not serve this purpose. Any upside for the student is hard to identify. If the student wants to go to TAFE, university, or an RTO – these organisations will run their own L&N to know how best to support the student.

SPELD Victoria along with its AUSPELD colleagues across the country support the use of L&N tests when they are done at the appropriate time which is **years earlier**. We also support the use of the Year 1 Phonics Check.

If the Year 1 Phonics Check, evidenced-based teaching practices, relevant interventions and accommodations for students with learning difficulties were all in place throughout school years – then the failure rate of basic L&N standards in Year 12 would be a rare exception, not a depressing reoccurring theme.

SPELD Victoria is encouraged by VCAA's willingness to now consult on the proposed GAT L&N further. We welcome this particularly as the Victorian Disability Inclusion Education policy places emphasis on engaging with disability organisations such as ours; and directly with student voice. Doing so is also enshrined in our own Disability Standards of Education, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol. It's 2022. Student voice can no longer be ignored.

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