

CADSPPE/ACCESHP: Brief History and Introduction

On behalf of the Canadian Association of Disability Service Providers in Post-Secondary Education (CADSPPE), we would like to thank the Legislative Committee on Bill C-32 for inviting us to present today.

CADSPPE is a national group of professionals committed to the ongoing creation of accessible, equitable, and inclusive post-secondary learning environments for students with disabilities. CADSPPE is a division of a larger professional association, CACUSS (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services). A National Working Group was established in 1996, which led to the formal recognition of CADSPPE as a division of CACUSS in 1998.

The CADSPPE membership includes disability service providers from colleges, technical institutes, and universities as well as both Anglophone and Francophone professionals. The CADSPPE Board is comprised of an Executive, as well as representatives for each province/region in Canada, all of whom donate their time to the organisation as volunteers.

Access to print materials

Across Canada, students with print disabilities, such as those who are blind or have reading disorders, have limited access to textbooks and course material that are accessible to them. As a result, these students are further handicapped by publishers that do not make textbooks available to them in a format that meets their needs.

During the last decade there have been major advances in assistive educational technologies for people with disabilities, such as screen readers that can take a digital file and read it aloud to a student who cannot see the written word, or is unable to comprehend the written word due to a severe reading disability. This technology opened opportunities to students with perceptual disabilities, which make up the single largest group of students with disabilities in Canada's colleges and universities. Students are now able to utilize sophisticated text to voice software programs that can convert digital text into formats that allow a student to listen to their textbooks, and required course materials. It is also now possible to read along visually by following the printed text on the computer monitor. For students with language-based learning disabilities, this is especially important because it

allows them to both see and hear the written word. For learners who are unable to see printed text on the monitor, it is important for digital files to be structured in such a way that that student can file chapters and portions of text easily.

Many provincial student loan programs already recognize this important need. Students with disabilities who qualify for student loans also qualify for grants to purchase the necessary software and hardware to utilize digital materials in this way. However, the hardware and software does them little good if they cannot access the digital materials required, such as an electronic version of a textbook on sociology or psychology, etc.

Unlike their non-disabled peers, a student with a perceptual disability cannot simply go into their college bookstore and purchase an accessible copy of a required textbook. As a result, they then become dependent on disability service providers to undergo the labour intensive process of trying to either contact the publisher on the student's behalf to obtain a digital copy of the text or convert a print copy of a textbook into a format that meets their needs. In many cases the service provider engages in both requesting a digital copy and converting all or part of the print copy while the student waits for the digital copy of the text. This process can take weeks, resulting in the student not having access to course material in a timely fashion.

When manual scanning is necessary, students must purchase a print version of the text, cut the spine from the book to allow for scanning, and physically scan each page to allow for translation by screen reading programs. The scanned information must then be edited for accuracy, as the electronic translation process is not always accurate. Across Canada, disability service providers struggle to keep up with the many requests for scanning and editing texts. Some post-secondary institutions, especially those in rural areas, do not have the staffing, expertise, or equipment to support students in scanning and editing information.

In the case of texts provided by publishers, students purchase a print version of the text and then must rely on permissions from publishers to obtain texts in alternate format. They also must rely on disability service providers to assist in obtaining texts, as publishers, citing concerns about copyright, will not provide alternate format texts directly to students. Some publishers make excellent support available and students receive appropriate alternate format

copies of information. In other cases, the alternate format texts may take weeks to reach the student or are not available at all.

Recommendations:

- The Government of Canada must insist publishers make texts and materials readily available to students with disabilities. Ideally, students with disabilities would purchase structured, alternate format texts from bookstores in the same manner other students purchase print texts.

Furthermore, we urge the Committee to include clear legal provisions to include language that will require publishers and producers of print and non-print instructional materials sold and used in Canadian institutions of postsecondary education to provide structured e-text files of those instructional materials to institutions upon request and in a timely manner. We see the legal thrust of the proposed law on copyright placing the burden of providing access to e-text files of content upon those responsible for creating and marketing the instructional materials in the first place. It is CADSPPE's view that those producing and marketing textbooks already possesses electronic files of the products they publish and it would be a relatively simple matter for them to provide them upon special request for students who require alternative access to this information. In addition, it would effectively address the issues of timeliness of delivery and accuracy of translation. Obtaining e-text files directly from publishers would also conserve institutional resources for other worthwhile activities.

Students with disabilities are not asking for a free ride when it comes to textbooks. They are willing to purchase their textbooks like every other student. What they are asking for is the right to be able to go into their local university or college bookstore and buy textbooks that are accessible to them, at the same time as their peers. Without this right, students with perceptual disabilities will continue to face barriers to what should be a fair and equitable Canadian education.