



**UNDERSTANDING ADHD
AS A DISABILITY IN THE
POST-SECONDARY ENVIRONMENT**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

CADDAC, a national not-for-profit organization that provides leadership in education, awareness and advocacy for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) organizations and individuals with ADHD across Canada, has developed this white paper to assist with the understanding of ADHD as a Disability in the Post-Secondary Environment.

It is our sincere hope that this paper will not only increase the awareness and understanding of ADHD in this environment, but also assist young adults with ADHD in accessing the appropriate academic accommodations they require to be successful in post-secondary education.

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INTRODUCTION

ADHD is neurodevelopmental mental health disorder, characterized primarily by impairments in attention regulation, but also possibly higher than normal levels of activity and impulsivity. For most young adults with ADHD, approximately 150,000 in Canada, resulting impairment will continue throughout their lifespan.¹ The good news is that many more are now able to qualify for entry into post-secondary learning institutions, due to the advances in awareness, diagnostic procedures and the care and support of children and adolescents with ADHD. However, since impairments continue, most will still require appropriate services and learning accommodations be put in place in academic settings.² Unfortunately ADHD and its resulting impairments continue to be inadequately understood by post-secondary institutions. This has resulted in some of these institutions demanding that students with ADHD undergo unreasonable costly testing in order to be identified as having a disability.

Thus, many students with ADHD are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to access the disability services and accommodations that they require, and which are made available to students with other disabilities. This has caused inequity in access to post-secondary education. It is essential that students with ADHD, like other students with mental health disabilities, be recognized as having a disability qualifying them for appropriate services and accommodations.

ADHD SIGNIFICANTLY IMPAIRS LEARNING BUT IS NOT A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

Post-secondary students with ADHD will exhibit marked functional impairments in organizational and time management skills, note taking; reading comprehension; written expression; and keeping track of materials, despite their success in gaining entry to post-secondary institutions. These impairments often result in incomplete and late assignments, which in turn frequently leads to students with ADHD becoming easily over-whelmed and anxious.³ While students with ADHD may present with significant difficulties in executive function, memory, learning, and speed of information processing, ADHD is not medically categorized or recognized as a learning disability.⁴ Nor is it assessed or documented in the same way as is a specific learning disability. ADHD is not classified under “Learning Disorders” in the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) in the US; rather it is covered under the “Other Health Impairment” category. Nonetheless, it is imperative to note that without



assistance many students with ADHD – not just those with a concurrent Learning Disability – are at high risk for academic underachievement or failure despite having average or above average intellectual abilities.^{5,6}

ASSESSMENT AND DIAGNOSIS OF ADHD

National and international medical societies have developed and published Clinical Guidelines for the assessment and diagnosis of ADHD.⁷ Accordingly, in Canada, assessments for ADHD should follow Canadian ADHD Practice Guidelines and include screening for any other mental health and/or physical disorders that may mimic the symptoms of ADHD.⁸ In Canada, ADHD is diagnosed by medical experts in the field of ADHD (that is, physicians and psychologists in accordance with the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*; RHPA). In childhood, the assessment and diagnosis is commonly done by a developmental paediatrician, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, or a child and adolescent psychologist. In adulthood, the initial assessment and diagnosis of ADHD is most commonly done by a psychiatrist or a psychologist, not by a family physician unless specifically trained in the process. However, a family physician may provide follow-up care.⁹ It should also be noted that not all students with ADHD who end up in a post-secondary environment will have been previously diagnosed. While evidence of ADHD symptoms must be seen before the age of 12¹⁰ this does not mean that all students with ADHD would have been diagnosed in childhood.¹¹ Some students are able to function well enough when supports are in place and academic loads were lighter, but once challenged to a greater degree their impairments become evident. These students will need to be assessed and diagnosed once in the post-secondary education setting.



DOCUMENTATION OF ADHD-RELATED IMPAIRMENTS IN THE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION CONTEXT

All current Clinical Practice Guidelines for ADHD (including the Canadian guidelines), as well as the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for ADHD, require evidence that the symptoms impair social, academic, or occupational functioning. Thus, evidence of impairment is one of the required diagnostic criteria for ADHD. However, a diagnosis of ADHD alone (albeit implicating impairment) is not sufficient for documenting impairment as required by Post-Secondary Education institutions, which require evidence that the person's functional limitations impact academic performance.

The Canadian government requires that impairment in post-secondary students be a permanent disability that impacts functioning in the post-secondary setting.¹² Since persistent functional impairments such as poor organizational and time management skills, difficulty with note-taking, reading comprehension & written expression constitute a permanent disability, ADHD clearly qualifies as such.

Currently, there are no agreed-upon national or provincial standards for assessment and documentation practices to assure fair access to accommodations and services in post-secondary education for students with ADHD. There is marked inequity across and within Canadian Provinces, with many post-secondary institutions requiring similar documentation for ADHD and for Learning Disabilities: that is, they require neuropsychological or psycho-educational testing to determine the severity of ADHD and to quantify the impact of ADHD on cognitive or academic functioning. The latter are not reasonable or valid requirements, since few if any of the standardized tests quantify accurately the nature of the cognitive or academic impairments that characterize ADHD.

Neuropsychological tests of executive function have low ecological validity in adult ADHD: less than one third of adolescents or adults with ADHD, although functionally impaired by their ADHD, show impairment levels in test data alone on standardized psycho-educational assessments.¹³ Furthermore, if testing has been done, testing results should not be required to demonstrate below "average" functioning in anything other than attention regulation for a disability to be recognized and for the student to qualify for services and accommodations. Doing so would be discriminatory.

A detailed report by an ADHD medical expert would be required to meet Canadian government requirements and provide post-secondary institutions with the necessary information they require to understand the student's unique impairments and need for accommodations.

THIS REPORT SHOULD:

- ✓ Identify the permanent disability and list specific impairments
- ✓ Indicate how these impairments would negatively impact functioning of the student in the post-secondary academic setting
- ✓ Link requested accommodations to existing impairments of the student

SUMMARY

In summary, ADHD is a neurodevelopmental/mental health disorder that can cause significant impairment for a student in the post-secondary environment. These impairments when documented by qualified medical professionals, psychiatrists; developmental paediatricians; psychologists; or other physicians with specialized ADHD training, and directly linked to functioning impairment in the post-secondary environment should qualify students with ADHD as having a disability and receiving appropriate services and accommodations. Post-secondary institutions that fail to recognize students with ADHD as being disabled and disallow accommodations unless data driven testing and reporting is completed indicating functioning below normal levels are misinformed on the accuracy of these tests in identifying ADHD impairments in the post-secondary environment. The current inconsistencies in requirements and the request for invalid data driven evidence of functional impairment for students with ADHD results in post-secondary accommodation practices being discriminatory and therefore open to legal challenge.¹⁴

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