Supporting Students with Visual Impairment

Visual Impairment (VI) is a reduction in vision that cannot be fully corrected with standard glasses, contact lenses or by surgery. **Total blindness** is the inability to tell light from dark, or the total inability to see. The amount of sight a student with visual impairment has will vary between individuals and may be impacted by their level of fatigue and the level and/or type of light.

1) How might VI affect someone at university?

- Difficulty finding unfamiliar locations. Students may need specialist mobility training to help them navigate the university campus and different teaching buildings. This will take time and students may never be able to learn all areas of campus.

- Students may use one or more support workers, a guide dog and/or a white cane.

- Difficulty accessing teaching materials in certain formats; may take longer to read texts, conduct class preparation tasks and complete assignments; and, may experience difficulty with time management due to the longer time taken to undertake study tasks.

- Will experience fatigue due to concentration levels required when relying on memory and high levels of auditory input, especially when there is significant background noise.

- May experience communication barriers with staff and fellow students which may impact individuals' confidence working in groups.

2) Suggested teaching and learning adjustments

General considerations

- **Don't make any assumptions** about students in advance. Remember that students with visual impairment will experience different degrees of vision loss and will utilise different support strategies and assistive technologies. Be prepared to meet with students before teaching commences to get to know their individual needs.

- If initiating conversation in passing, **always introduce yourself** as the student may not have seen you approach or know your voice. If you get called away or interrupted **always tell the student that you are leaving** and if and when you will be back.

- When meeting a visually impaired student **speak directly to them** rather than through a third party; always say who you are and make sure they know you are talking to them. If someone else joins your conversation, say hi to the new person using their name, which will give a verbal cue to the student that someone else has joined.

- If you think a student is having difficulty, do not grab/pull them where you think they are going. Instead, **lightly touch them on the arm** and ask if they would like assistance. If this is their preference, allow the student to take your arm and guide them slowly, telling the student when approaching steps, a kerb and mentioning potential hazards.

- **Guide dogs** are working animals and **should not be stroked or fed** without the permission of the owner. This can disorientate both the guide dog and the student.

Teaching resources/materials

- **Individuals will have preferred ways of accessing texts** which may include enlarged text on coloured backgrounds for printed resources, electronic text only or braille. Be prepared to adjust your teaching materials or have them adjusted accordingly. Dyslexia and Disability Support (DDS) work with a number of specialist services (including **Autism and Sensory Support in Staffordshire, ASSIST)** to support students with sensory disabilities, including the conversion of teaching resources into accessible formats. Speak to DDS to find out more about conversion of teaching materials and the notice period required to get different materials converted.

- **Support students to revisit and revise lecture content** by using lecture capture technology or allowing audio recording of lectures. If students have a reasonable adjustment in place to allow audio recording of lectures, this must be permitted.

- **Give students and their support workers time to prepare** by providing presentation slides (PowerPoint, Google slides, Keynote etc.), handouts and other teaching resources (including any documents for classroom activities and discussions) well in advance of class sessions in an accessible format. This will allow students plenty of time to access, print and read materials. Be aware that students may require teaching materials to be emailed directly to them if they are unable to access the KLE.

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- **Provide reading lists as far in advance as possible**, clearly highlighting and emphasizing key chapters and articles as well as core from secondary readings, enabling students to prioritise.

- **Provide accessible file formats** for use with text-to-speech/screen reader software:

    o **Use a plain, evenly spaced Sans Serif font** such as Arial, Comic Sans, Verdana or Tahoma in minimum size 12 for printed resources and size 24 for presentation slides, although some students will require much larger font.

    o **Microsoft Word documents are generally the most compatible**; however, it is wise to provide teaching resources in a variety of formats, e.g. Word and derived PDF files/derived PDF versions of slides, as well as original slide formats. **Google Docs are also very accessible** and can be emailed to students directly as well as embedded in to the KLE.

    o **Create presentation slides from blank templates** (using 'text boxes' and 'title boxes') so that all material on slides is recognised by screen reader software.

    o **Use headings on all presentation slides** for ease of navigation.

    o **Use a simple/constant colour scheme** for presentation slides with sufficient contrast between text and background colours, i.e. dark text on a light background.

    o Any pictures/illustrations/diagrams in presentation slides will need **written descriptions and/or sound captions** ([instructions here](#)).

    o Video clips should be emailed to the student in advance so that they can view them using magnification software and/or with their support worker.

    o The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) website has a [style guide](#) with instructions on designing resources for use with screen reader software.

    o There is an easy-to-use function within Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel to check how accessible documents are ([instructions here](#)). For Office 365 use the 'Check Accessibility' button on the 'Review' tab or for older Microsoft versions click File-Info-Check for Issues-Check Accessibility.

- **Space things out** avoiding the use of long, dense paragraphs and cramming material on to pages or slides. Use sub-headings, bullet points, numbering, 1.5-line spacing, limit slides to small numbers of key points and highlight key words/phrases in bold.

Classroom set-up and teaching practice

- **Consider accessibility, hazards and changes in advance:**

    o Check that teaching rooms are accessible and be aware that movement of everyday objects/features in classrooms and buildings can be disorienting for students with vision loss. **Inform students of changes** to schedules, classrooms, buildings, etc. in advance via email.

    o Advise students of any **potential obstructions or hazards** and think carefully before you: leave doors or windows half open; move bins, barriers or screens; trail wires across classroom floors; or, congregate in corridors or doorways.

    o Encourage other students to store bags under desks.

- **Create an accessible environment in the classroom:**

    o Students may need to **sit at the front of class** with extra space for their guide dog and/or support worker(s).

    o Ensure **sufficient lighting at all times**, using natural light where possible and avoid standing in front of windows which will cast your face in shadow.

    o Be aware that turning lights down to view on-screen presentations may limit students' ability to see and take notes.

    o Try to **minimise background noise**, e.g. by closing doors and turning off noisy background equipment and be aware that students may close their eyes to try to concentrate on what you are saying.

- **Provide clarity and structure:**

    o **Recap key themes** of the previous teaching session at the start of class.

    o **Provide a clear overview** for each session and what will be covered.

    o **Explicitly outline Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)** and revisit ILOs at the end of each session.

    o Use an audible and clear presentation style, provide regular examples and clarify language when introducing new topics.

    o A document provided in advance of classes with key arguments, concepts and new/difficult vocabulary is ideal, as is a glossary of concepts for each module.

- **Verbalise and describe in detail:**

  o Always introduce yourself.

  o Give a **verbal cue** when changing to a new presentation slide.

  o **Describe features of visual aids** (e.g. diagrams, graphs) in detail using specific language, e.g. don't just say *'on this bit'*, or *'over here'*, say, *'on the top left in the blue square'*.

  o In group discussions students may not know who is speaking. Try to learn student names quickly and use them when responding to students and when initiating discussions.

  o **Ask students to introduce themselves and use each other's names during group discussions.** Do not pair the student with their support worker or ask the support worker to 'join in' discussions.

  o When handing things out, accompany this with a verbal comment, e.g. *'Hi Joe, I've got this handout for you'* so the student knows you are giving them something specifically.

Assessment and feedback

- As appropriate, provide assessment questions, details and deadlines **as far in advance as possible** using specific instructions and concise/simple language. If seen exam questions are being used they will need to be provided a few weeks before holiday periods commence to enable students to access their reader support.

- Always use **clearly defined assessment criteria** which link to the module ILOs.

- **Notify changes** to assessments or deadlines in plenty of time, preferably via email.

- If there is a significant amount of research/reading to be undertaken, **some students will require extra time** and deadline extensions where appropriate as they will need to be able to schedule time with their reader support.

- All comments on assignments will **need to be accessible** to the student depending on their individual requirements for accessing texts. If using electronic marking (e.g. Grademark) please be prepared, if required, to download and email the assessment with in text comments as well as the overall feedback comments to the student.

- Students may **require specific adjustments for exams and other assessments**, including the **provision of alternative forms of assessment** where necessary. Discuss requirements with your local Disability Liaison Officer (DLO), examinations officer and as required, contact Disability and Dyslexia Support (DDS) for advice.

3) Bibliography and additional reading

- [Royal National Institute of Blind People](#) website
- University of Sheffield: [Supporting Students with Visual Impairments](#) guidance
- Oxford Brooks University: [Supporting students with sight problems](#) guidance

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Disability and Dyslexia Support

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