



POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING Guidelines for ensuring access for people with vision impairment

1.0 Preamble

- 1.1 The Association for the Blind of WA seeks to maximise the quality of life for all Western Australians with blindness or vision impairment. Access to effective education and training is a key factor to enhancing a person's quality of life as skills and knowledge for communication, interaction, economic pursuits, and literacy skills, including reading, writing, numeracy and technology are developed.
- 1.2 In 1998 the Western Australian unemployment rate for males with vision impairment was estimated at 18.9% and for females 11.1%. These rates are significantly higher than the rates for the general population, 8.5% and 8% respectively. People with vision impairment also experience lower levels of educational attainment, and higher non-completion rates in post secondary education compared to people without a disability.
- 1.3 The Association believes that improving access and participation in education and training will lead to greater employment opportunities and help to reduce the negative effects of unemployment, which include psychological, social and financial difficulty.
- 1.4 The purpose of this paper is to highlight the barriers experienced by people with vision impairment in the education and training sector and encourage action by key stakeholders in the sector to implement the solutions provided.
- 1.5 The statements in this paper are the collective views of people with vision impairment regarding post secondary education and training and draw on their experiences as students.

2.0 Alternative formats

- 2.1 Alternative formats enable people with vision impairment to access the printed word in a format suitable to their needs, they include large print, Braille, audio and electronic. Course materials in alternative formats must be provided at the same time as other students receive their materials.
- 2.2 Information such as text book lists, handouts, and lecture notes can be prepared in electronic formats to make accessibility more timely for the student. Indicating compulsory texts in reading lists and noting important chapters or specifying the order of reading is helpful for transcribers as it can take many weeks to have a book reproduced into audio, electronic or Braille formats.

- 2.3 Where information is posted on a website, this material should be presented according to the World Wide Web Consortium Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0.

3.0 Information technology

- 3.1 Being able to operate a computer is almost an essential skill requirement in today's workplace and educational environment. Fortunately, there is an extensive range of adaptive equipment on the market that aids access to print, course materials and most mainstream technologies for people with vision impairment.
- 3.2 Training in adaptive technologies is imperative for both students with vision impairment and teachers. A sound knowledge of the technologies available will enhance the future decision-making efforts of both the student and the teacher.
- 3.3 The training and assessment strategies of courses that develop computer skills must be adapted to meet the needs of students with vision impairment and the technology they use.

4.0 Access to resources

- 4.1 Access to adaptive technology both on and off campus is crucial to people with vision impairment. Equipment most frequently used by students include: microphone-sensitive tape recorders, computers, speech output software, large print magnification software, and low vision aids such as magnifiers. Having someone to read and take notes for students is also a significant means of support.
- 4.2 The funding models for providing student supports should empower the student to make decisions about the choice of adaptive technologies and other necessary aids needed to assist their studies both on and off campus.

5.0 Teaching practices

- 5.1 There is a general lack of awareness by lecturers in the post-secondary education system of the issues that face students with vision impairment. Factors such as the use of inappropriate teaching aids (without verbalisation), for example whiteboards, videos, inaccessible computer programs, and an inability to adapt assessment frameworks, are significant learning barriers for students.
- 5.2 To improve the outcomes of students with vision impairment in post-secondary education, educators and other campus staff need to be made aware of the issues facing these students. Such issues include the ways in which learning barriers can be resolved and how inclusive teaching environments can be created.
- 5.3 Awareness raising can be achieved by the provision of ongoing workshops or by incorporating a specific module about inclusive education practices into post-secondary teaching programs.

- 5.4 The Association's website, www.abwa.asn.au provides an extensive list of resources that will assist educators to become more aware of the needs of students with vision impairment.

6.0 Preparatory training

- 6.1 In addition to systemic matters, such as access to resources and teaching practices, factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation, a lack of readiness and commitment, and a lack of social integration of young people contribute to early withdrawal of all students in post-secondary education. It is strongly recommended that students with vision impairment be offered transitional or pre-vocational programs to help familiarise and prepare them for post-secondary education.
- 6.2 Preparatory programs should develop or refresh the following skills: Orientation and Mobility, adaptive technology, studying/researching methods, writing assignments, effective note taking and organising readers, accessing print material, career counselling, arranging financial assistance, registering for classes, developing social networks, accessing public transport, and self advocacy.

7.0 Assessments/Examinations

- 7.1 Students with vision impairment must be provided with appropriate accommodations that take into account their needs. Accommodations may include: extra time for reading, undertaking oral examinations, provision of materials in alternative formats.
- 7.2 Consultation with students who are vision impaired, specialist agencies, and Disability Officers are essential to ensure that appropriate accommodations are identified and implemented.

8.0 Field work/practical experience

- 8.1 Work experience placements are crucial to the learning experience and for preparing students for employment. Particular considerations and forward planning must be conducted for students with vision impairment. This may include the need for orientation and mobility training, the provision of accommodations such as adaptive technologies and tactile markings, and linking students to an appropriate mentor.

9.0 Access to the environment

- 9.1 Educational facilities must ensure students with vision impairment are able to access and negotiate the environment safely. Key features of an accessible environment for students with vision impairment include:
- Continuous accessible paths of travel which are free of hazards such as bollards, street furniture and sandwich boards
 - Bright lighting
 - Ground surface tactile indicators
 - Strong colour contrasting of structural features within the environment
 - Braille and tactile signage
 - Occupational Health and Safety procedures that notify students about changes to pathways and key routes or proposed building works

- 9.2 Building designers and owners should consult relevant building codes and guidelines such as the Australian Building Code, Australian Standard 1428.4, and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Access to Premises Guidance Note.

10.0 Identification of students with vision impairment in VET

- 10.1 There are a variety of definitions of disability used by data collection agencies and most surveys and data collection methods rely on participants to self identify. These practices make comparison and interpretation of statistics difficult. To ensure the level of participation and achievement of students in the post-secondary sector is accurately assessed, it is imperative that data collection methods are applied consistently across agencies and departments.

11.0 Social inclusion

- 11.1 People with vision impairment have a right under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* to access education and to be provided with reasonable accommodations to meet their educational needs. The proceeding statements have identified some of the issues that present barriers for people with vision impairment in the post secondary education system. However there are less tangible actions that can improve the completion rates of students. In particular, social integration has been found to have a positive effect on student outcomes.
- 11.2 Educational institutions can enhance the student experience and therefore positively influence the retention rates of students by facilitating social interaction. This may be achieved through:
- organising study groups and class projects
 - encouraging students with vision impairment to reside on or near campus to negate the need for transportation and provide increased leisure time
 - encouraging students to become involved in on-campus activities, such as social and recreational clubs
 - exploring peer mentoring and 'buddy' programs
 - delivering awareness training to all staff involved in providing services to students including the student union, the library and recreational services.

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Date