

Guidelines for Supporting Blind or Partially Sighted Students

Background

Someone is considered 'partially sighted' if their sight cannot be corrected by the use of glasses or contact lenses etc. There is a huge variety of sight loss including blurred, tunnel or speckled vision, eye shuddering and blindness.

The Educational Support Office (ESO) and the International Building have Braille embossers with translation software (including the ability to translate most European languages into Braille). Bedford Library has a PC with specialist magnification software (Bigshot) and screen-reading software (WindowEyes), also CCTV magnification equipment.

Funding and Support

Most partially sighted students who are UK residents have extra disability funding from their LEA via the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). This can fund a Student Helper employed through the ESO as a:

- Note-taker
- library assistant
- a reader
- mobility helper
- laboratory assistant
- translation support to translate documents into Braille

The DSA can also fund a specialist to help with:

- orientation and living skills for the student
- mentoring sessions – life and study at University can be challenging and often frustrating for blind and partially sighted students; sometimes these students need extra personal and psychological support

The DSA can also fund specialist equipment such as:

- Laptop with screen-reading software
- Printer for printing out assignments
- Scanner for scanning printed text, to then emboss into Braille
- Specialist, electronic dictionaries (e.g. languages or science-based dictionaries)
- Braille translation software and embossing equipment
- Mini-disc recorder with foot switch control

Non-UK residents are eligible to apply for Student Helper support via the College-based fund; the International Students' Disability Support Grant.

Suggested Strategies – General

- The student may not know you are there and waiting to talk to them unless you say their name
- Ask if the student needs help – do not assume

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- Explain to the student where something is by describing it according to their own body (e.g. in front of you, by your right elbow)
 - If you are walking with them, talk your way through it – “to our left, we have Café Jules and straight ahead we are coming to a set of four steps with a handrail up the right side”
 - Most blind people prefer to take someone's elbow, half a step behind
 - Even if student has a Student Helper, always communicate directly with the student
 - The student may have a guide dog; this might have practicality implications in your department and buildings
 - All the reading, joining in teaching sessions and completing of assessments required will take longer for a partially sighted student so allow extra time
 - The student will require extra concentration and memory skills for getting around and studying
 - Careful timetabling; enough time between lectures, tutorials etc, rooms close together, regular lectures in the same rooms
 - Considered planning and support for year abroad, field trips or work placement, arranged in consultation with the student and ESO well in advance
 - Awareness of Health & Safety issues (e.g. in labs, bags or photocopiers in walkways, fire evacuation)
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Suggested Strategies – Teaching

- They may choose to have a note-taker in lectures, use their own laptop to take notes (they would need access to a plug socket) or record the lectures via a minidisk recorder (they can electronically transfer the recording into Word format)
- A multi-sensory approach to teaching
- Reliance on auditory input so verbalise what you are doing (e.g. say what you are writing on the board)
- Use black or dark coloured pens on whiteboards (red or green are particularly difficult to read)
- Stand in a well-lit place; not directly in front of a window, as your face will be in a shadow
- Keep background noise to a minimum (e.g. buzz from the OHP, clicking of pens)

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- Explain at beginning of lecture what the structure and main points will be; providing a written summary in advance if possible – this will assist the student and note taker
 - Summarise regularly and build in regular stopping points to check understanding
 - Say if something specific should be noted
 - Be sensitive to new lecture venues and short notice lecture relocations (i.e. the student can not read the usual message on a notice board and may not be familiar with the relocated room) perhaps contacting the student as soon as you are aware of the change
 - Gestures and other non-verbal communication can not be seen therefore it can be difficult to infer irony and interpret a facial expression
 - During group discussions and oral sessions have a strict 'one at a time' rule and use names – not being able to pick-up on non-verbal communication makes knowing when it is your turn or when to jump in with a point very difficult
 - Possible absences from teaching sessions for hospital appointments etc
 - Speak clearly, giving explicit instructions and directions
 - Explain visual material verbally
 - Awareness if student is expected to give presentations
 - If videos are used as teaching aids, the student will need a copy well in advance of the lecture viewing to enable the Student Helper to watch the video with the student and explain what is happening; in addition, the Student Helper might need to attend the lecture viewing and quietly commentate
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Suggested Strategies – Course Materials

- Tell the student which of the recommended reading is 'essential' as early as possible so they can convert it into an accessible format and allow for pre-reading taking longer
- Written material should be clear and simple with a strong contrast in colour and tone and no overcrowding on the page
- Provide subject word lists, glossaries of terms and acronyms
- Keep pictures and diagrams to a minimum or provide text or audio alternatives
- Give electronic copies of handouts in advance of lectures via e-mail or on the Intranet (the student can then access the material either enlarged on the screen, print off the material in Braille or use their screen-reading software to hear the material)

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- Provide paper-based reading lists, notes and handouts in large print (16+ point) with a clear font (e.g. Century Gothic) preferably on buff or Ivory-coloured paper
 - Left-justify typed material and use 1.5 spacing where possible
 - Use clear headings and bullet points
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Suggested Strategies - Assessments

- Extra time in exams and possible rest breaks (e.g. for eye strain etc)
 - Exam papers need to be printed in large font or in Braille
 - Invigilator to face the student when giving instructions
 - Possible need for amanuensis (scribe) or screen-reading software in exams
 - Possible need for student to use their own, familiar laptop and keyboard with their own specific software in exams
 - Table large enough to house laptop and Braille papers
 - Allow leniency with assignment deadlines
 - Allow submission of assignments by email
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