Visual Impairments

Information about Visual Impairments (VI)

'Visual impairment' (VI) is a term used to describe a loss of sight that cannot be corrected using lenses. Sight loss is usually categorized into partial or severe impairment and once formally identified, the individual automatically meets the definition of a disabled person under the Equality Act (2010). However, degrees of sight loss, the impact on daily functioning, and the type of support required varies considerably from person to person. Many individuals will have some level of functional sight and the VI will often not be obvious to others (even if registered blind).

Fully sighted individuals can read the top letter on an optician's eye chart from 20 metres; partial sight loss reduces this to 3-6 metres and severe loss from 3 meters at best or no light perception at worst.

Implications for study

Although students might have developed good coping strategies, new elements of University life will likely be challenging. These will probably extend to: all aspects of accessing written materials, especially coping with the reading volume at Oxford, notetaking and/or copying information; participating in group work and practical activities, in addition to all the difficulties of orientation and navigation in a new city and learning environments.

To access and produce written material, some students use Braille, but many rely on technological equipment, all demanding greater concentration and time. They might need to take regular breaks due to eye strain, headaches and fatigue, even when material is transcribed into a more accessible format or they are the most adept user of assistive technology.

Guidance for working with students with VIs

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with visual impairments and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

Communication

- Talk to the student about their disability. Ask them discretely about the impact of their disability and discuss with them what might be helpful (never ask or expect a student to discuss personal or medical details with you); check the format in which the students prefers written information.
- Consider if meeting the student more regularly than might usually be expected is needed to promote progress; additional individual support to establish priorities for work might be

needed given the extra time required for study; maintain open communication with others who provide support.

Environment

- Assess the teaching environment for hazards and obstacles, and for adequate lighting; good lighting can significantly improve levels of functional vision – add flexible task lighting if needed; consider whether a risk assessment is required in practical/laboratory settings, and whether a Personal Emergency Evacuation (PEEP) is required for College/Department buildings.
- If the student uses a guide dog, respect its presence as a working animal and do not touch or pet without the student's permission.

Planning / Organisation

- Give course information, timetables and schedules well in advance.
- Keep timetables as consistent as possible; give advance notice of changes to allow student/support workers to plan journeys; provide opportunity for orientation/route-finding for new venues; make allowance for possible additional travel time needed; give additional consideration to student needs when planning field work, placements, and years abroad to ensure support is in place in a timely manner.

Study

- When teaching, describe all visual material presented and anything written on a board; and reserve seating if needed to ensure the student has a good line of sight to the lecturer, slides, and other materials; investigate if video materials can be made accessible.
- In group work, establish communication guidelines for all students so the visually impaired student can participate fully (e.g. people speaking one at a time and identifying themselves if their voice is unfamiliar); consider that the student might not wish to read aloud in-class.
- For reading support: help the student to identify as early as possible any required preparatory reading as alternative format resources can take several weeks to be produced. Please consider whether the whole book or only part of it is required, and whether footnotes, diagrams, tables, bibliographies, indexes, etc, are needed; allow more time both for private and in-class reading; consider providing a more targeted reading list that points to specific chapters or paragraphs to ensure the student prioritises their reading energies appropriately.
- Occasional flexibility with deadlines might be required to allow the student to manage their workload; extra time might be needed for activities such as practicals or field work.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments. **Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.**

- Provide written materials in an accessible format; reading lists and lecture/teaching materials (includes handouts, notes, PowerPoint slides, and articles for discussion) in advance to allow the student adequate time to prepare in light of their disability.
- Provision of a note-taker in lectures; permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer; access to lecture capture.
- Support from a practical / lab study assistant; provision of assistive technology for in-class computer work.
- Support from a mobility trainer to help route familiarisation to support independent travel.
- Provision of examination and assessment adjustments for example extra exam time or assessment extensions, rest breaks, use of a scribe or assistive technology, enlarged/electronic papers or alternative modes of study or assessment.
- Privileged reader status at libraries including extended library loans and/or proxy loans so that someone can collect/return the books on the student's behalf.
- Provision of onsite accommodation and the option to be able to keep the same room throughout course (and vacations); space for large volumes of printed/Braille material and specialist equipment.

Additional resources

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on **disability@admin.ox.ac.uk** or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our student and staff web pages.
- University of Oxford Accessible Resources Unit (ARACU).
- RNIB provides information about visual impairments, likely effects, and types of support, information about support for blind or partially sighted university students, and guidance on working with students with a vision impairment in Higher Education.
- Government Service Design Manual for creating accessible documents and PDFs.
- NatSIP resource for supporting the achievement of learners with vision impairment in HE