

## **Education and Lifelong Learning Committee**

### **Higher Education Review Presentation: by Nicola Crews and David Groves of RNIB Cymru.**

Preamble:

Autobiography:

Nicola Crews is a qualified and experienced teacher of the visually impaired. She gained her Bachelor of Education degree in 1981 and her Diploma in Special Education for the Visually Impaired in 1986. She is a registered team member for Ofsted Inspections and is able to inspect special needs in both mainstream and special schools.

From 1981 until 1987 Nicola worked as primary school teacher at a special school for visually impaired children. From 1988 until 1996 she worked as a special education consultant setting up and monitoring programmes for disabled children across Indonesia. She received the MBE for this work. From 1996 until now Nicola has been employed by RNIB, firstly as Inclusive Education Co-ordinator (promoting the inclusion of visually impaired children in mainstream educational settings) and more recently as Senior Education Officer at RNIB Cymru. Nicola currently has responsibility for developing policy and practice for the inclusion of visually impaired pupils and students, working with LEAs, Schools, FE and HE, and parents, across Wales.

David Groves is Parliamentary and Policy Officer for RNIB Cymru. After studying History and Political Science in Aberystwyth University, he worked first for the RSPCA before qualifying in Personnel Management. He then worked in Midland Bank both in Personnel Management and in service development for customers with disabilities and, for a year, in the BBC. He has worked for RNIB since October 1998, and, since January 1999, has been Parliamentary and Policy Officer with responsibility for presenting the priorities, needs, concerns and aspirations of blind and partially sighted people to Welsh MP's and members of the National Assembly for Wales.

#### 1. Introduction

The imperative of removing all barriers to higher education for blind and partially sighted people is graphically illustrated by the fact that at least 75% of blind and

partially sighted people of working age are unemployed and those in employment, are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying grades. (Reference: Bruce ET Al, The adult needs survey, RNIB, 1991.)

Our presentation draws upon three pieces of research: a 1999 Welsh Focus group of 15 blind and partially sighted people's experiences of higher education; the October 2000 RNIB "shaping the future" report based on interviews with over 1,000 blind and partially sighted young people about their experiences, needs and aspirations and our 2001 survey of higher education institutions in Wales. Our recent survey of Higher Education establishments invaluablely gives us the present picture. Of the 10 (out of 13) responding establishments:

33 visually impaired students are studying full time

5 are studying part time

28 are studying for bachelor degrees

2 for master degrees

3 for HND qualifications

5 for other degrees.

4 students either did not register or are known to have changed or dropped out of their courses during the last year.

The focus group and "Shaping the future" identified some key issues. These included: travelling to and from the university; overcoming the difficulties posed by some non-empathetic staff and studying and note-taking.

## 2. Issues and Solutions:

### Travel

Getting around safely and confidently is imperative for blind and partially sighted students. Evidence emerged in the focus group of VI students having to rely on friends and relatives to get them to and from the campus. Only 2 of the 10 establishments replying to RNIB Cymru questionnaire provided orientation / mobility training.

It is vital that the physical accessibility of college campuses and regular, local accessible public transport are in place to facilitate ease of access for blind and partially sighted people

RNIB's Shaping the Future Survey (2000) found that blind and partially sighted young people are less likely than their sighted peers to travel independently and confidently.

It is therefore very important that specialist mobility training is provided for blind and partially sighted students both with regard to the route to the college and the campus itself with all relevant specialists working collaboratively together to ensure a high-quality and comprehensive service.

RNIB Cymru recommends that:

\* High quality orientation and mobility tuition should be available to all students immediately prior to the commencement of their University studies. This should incorporate the University campus and also the main routes to and from home, around town etc.

#### Lack of staff awareness

Most of the establishments responding to RNIB Cymru's HE questionnaire did not provide visual awareness training as a matter of course to the staff teaching visually impaired students. 7 said that it was available on request, only one stated it to be compulsory.

The RNIB Shaping the Future Survey (2000) found that whilst the majority of visually impaired young people feel confident, the attitudes of others can make many feel isolated.

It is essential that high quality, specialist training is provided for all staff with responsibilities for teaching and supporting blind and partially sighted pupils in order to make the learning process fully accessible. Moreover, lecturers may need additional support with understanding the role of ICT for students with a visual impairment. Any training that is offered should include elements of the benefits and limitations of ICT for students with Special Educational Needs. Disability and Visual Impairment Awareness training should be provided for care-taking, catering and other ancillary staff.

RNIB Cymru recommends that:

- \* Staff of colleges and universities should have training in disability awareness.
- \* Disabled Student Allowance Assessments are done ahead of time, so that the needs of students are known and catered for before the commencement of their courses.
- \* Teaching staff have opportunity to discuss the individual's needs before the commencement of the course.

### Studying / notetaking

Of the 38 students known to be studying at HE level in Wales, 8 are using Braille, 16 large print, 3 tape and 2 computer disk. Only one establishment provided tactile diagrams.

The general difficulties of studying were identified in RNIB Cymru's Shaping the Future report, published in October 2000. This found that half of blind and partially sighted students we interviewed said that they did not get their study materials in the right format; and 83% of students said that their course work took them much longer than their sighted friends.

Blind and partially sighted students must not be required to use up even more time preparing the materials for themselves. It must never be forgotten that blind and partially sighted students are being examined upon their ability to study and use the materials; not their capacity to make them accessible for themselves!

Web-based study materials can open up a whole New World of information to visually impaired students, as long as simple design standards are followed with the appropriate specialist technical support

RNIB Cymru recommends that:

- \* there needs to be standardisation of high quality, practical and effective support for blind and partially sighted students in higher education.
- \* Blind and partially sighted students must have the equipment available to both study on campuses and in their home environment.
- \* Visually impaired students must have comprehensive and timely access to all study materials, in accessible formats, when they need them.

This must be established as a common standard across all higher

education institutions in Wales. People have a right to study what they want and where they want to.

## 2. Conclusion:

We have concentrated on the difficulties that, in our experience, visually impaired students and young people face when studying at HE level. However, many young people simply never make it this far – helping to explain why only 14% of visually impaired people in employment are holding professional or management positions. (Bruce ET Al, Ibid.)

Visually impaired students often go from having good support from LEA visual impairment services during their GCSE courses to having no support at all during A levels. In school, support is provided for them – at HE they have the DSA which allows them to purchase their own required support. However, FE is a black hole which many students enter and fail to leave successfully with the qualifications they need and a positive experience of learning to carry them on.

We hope that we have highlighted some of the current difficulties experienced by visually impaired students and look forward to opportunities to work with the National Assembly to make Higher Education accessible for all. To conclude, we believe that in getting higher education right for blind and partially sighted people, we will get it right for everyone!

