THE AHEAD JOURNAL
No. 1

A Review of Inclusive Education & Employment Practices

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Welcome from Ann Heelan, Executive Director AHEAD

Welcome to the first edition of the AHEAD Journal. This journal is not a newsletter nor is it an academic journal. It is a space for you working out there on the ground to share innovations, your examples of good practices that deserve a showcase. Most importantly it is a celebration of what has been done and is done by the champions of disability in higher education, be they disability support officers, academics or professional staff. It is also a sneak peek at how this is evolving. The 4.6% of students with disabilities can grow and increase to become 10% to 12% comparable with our international counterparts.

The commitment of the higher education sector to increasing the diversity of the student body together with the greater use of technology, a deeper understanding of how the brain works combined with a move to learning outcomes have produced an environment in which massive change is inevitable. We now recognise that the traditional model of packing students into stuffy halls to take notes is at best boring and does not suit many students, but it excludes a diverse student body with dyslexia or disability that the sector wants to include. In essence we want the current champions to recruit more champions of disability in higher education, in the library, in faculty, in careers and other students in the classroom.

One interesting model emerging from the US and the EU is Universal Design in Learning (UDL). In a nutshell it means designing the learning environment with flexibility and variability so all students can learn. While this can mean many things to many people, it is an emerging model of inclusion and there’s a lot of buzz about it. New collaborations and synergies are emerging. Academics and disability support staff are coming up with exciting innovations everyday by gaining a deeper understanding of the student condition and its effect in education. They are becoming more open to embracing the possibilities of technology, and teaching in a way that enables students to have the same opportunities to learn.

The role of the journal will be to capture the emerging knowledge about universal design, to understand and debate the issues that arise for staff and students, to showcase new ideas and innovations. Let the conversation begin!
I am delighted to be able to bring you such a rich and diverse range of articles for this very first AHEAD Journal. We plan to publish two editions a year. I hope you will find it useful and stimulating – do feel free to share it amongst your colleagues and networks. I hope it might also inspire you to write something for a future edition of the journal yourself.

Contact our sub-editor Lorraine Gallagher for details on how to submit an article: lorraine.gallagher@ahead.ie

We would also welcome your feedback on the Journal and suggestion for other topics you would like to see covered.

We start the journal with two articles on universal design for learning which give some welcome definitions and ideas on how to move forward. You might then want to consider attending the AHEAD conference in March which explores the UDL framework http://www.ahead.ie/conference2015

Supporting students with mental health difficulties is high on the agenda for practitioners and Emma Farrell’s research aims to give insight from the student’s point of view.

It’s good to have employer input and James Quinn’s experience leads in to the article from Mary Quirk and Fiona Ring on the support the WAM programme has given to employers and students in getting into work.

But the seeds of success are sown early and Patricia McCarthy’s work highlights the importance of providing real choices for disabled pupils at secondary level.

I do hope you enjoy a good read, and along with all my AHEAD colleagues, I wish you a successful new year in 2015.

Barbara Waters, Editor
December 2014
# Table of Contents

Universal Design for Learning in Postsecondary Education: Foundations, New Directions, and Resources ........................................ 1  
Everyone Learns Differently: How to Respond ........................................ 7  
Supporting Students with Mental Health Problems in Higher Education: The Challenge of Bearing Witness to Shame .................. 11  
Enabling People for Employment ......................................................... 19  
Supporting Transitions of Graduates with Disabilities to Employment: The AHEAD/WAM Experience .................................. 23  
The Importance of Effective Access to the Curriculum for Transition Opportunities among Vision Impaired Pupils ................... 33  
A Day in the Life: A Director of a Further Education and Training College ............................................................... 45
Universal Design for Learning in Postsecondary Education: Foundations, New Directions, and Resources

David H. Rose, of CAST

Dr. David Rose is a developmental neuropsychologist and educator whose primary focus is on the development of new technologies for learning. In 1984, Dr. Rose co-founded CAST, a not-for-profit research and development organization whose mission is to improve education, for all learners, through innovative uses of modern multimedia technology and contemporary research in the cognitive neurosciences. That work has grown into a new field called Universal Design for Learning which now influences educational policy and practice throughout the United States and beyond. Dr. Rose has taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for nearly three decades.

Sam Catherine Johnston, Research Scientist, CAST

Sam Catherine Johnston, Ed.D is a research scientist at CAST. Dr. Johnston brings expertise in peer-based learning models, distance and blended education, and program evaluation. Currently, she is the CAST project director for a Bill & Melinda Gates-funded project with Creative Commons and Stanford Open Learning Initiative to integrate UDL into the design of community and technical college courses. She is also a research scientist on the U.S. Department of Education, Centre for Online Learning for Students with Disabilities and co-principal investigator for a National Science Foundation study on stereotype threat and its impact on inquiry science pedagogy.

The most consistent finding to emerge from the interdisciplinary study of learning is that when it comes to how individuals learn, natural variability is the rule, not the exception (Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice by Meyer, Rose, & Gordon [CAST, Inc. 2014]). What is perhaps most important to understand about learner variability is not that it exists, but that it is predictable. Because some variability is systematic, faculty and curriculum specialists in institutions of higher education can design for it in advance. Universal Design for Learning is an educational framework that guides the design of learning goals, materials, methods, and assessments as well as policies surrounding these curricular elements, with a diversity of learners in mind (Meyer & Rose, 1998; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Pioneered at CAST, UDL is built on two premises. First, that addressing students at the margins creates improvements for all students. UDL emerges from research that focuses on the needs of particularly vulnerable or underachieving students.
— historically, those with disabilities — for whom specialized instructional techniques have been shown to be effective and sometimes critical. What the UDL framework throws into relief is the repeated finding that what works for these specific groups also tends to be effective throughout the entire learner population (Meyer & Rose, 2005).

The second premise of UDL is that barriers to learning occur in the interaction with curriculum — they are not inherent solely in the capacities of the learner. UDL ensures that the curriculum is designed to account for systematic human variability without lowering expectations.

Three principles underlie the framework of UDL:
1. providing multiple means of representation,
2. providing multiple means of expression and action, and
3. providing multiple means of engagement (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

A key benefit of UDL is that it enables educators in higher education to plan and create learning environments that are conducive to learning for all students, without needing to identify specific students for whom to target particular interventions on an as-needed basis. The pedagogical, neuroscientific, and practical underpinnings of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are now well documented in the literature on teaching and learning (Rose & Meyer 2002; Rose, Meyer and Hitchcock, 2005; Rose and Meyer 2006, Meyer, Rose, & Gordon 2014). Further, the professional literature is replete with examples of how the UDL principles have been successfully applied in higher education as an approach to faculty professional development (Behling & Hart, 2008; Dar & Jones, 2008; Hall & Stahl, 2006; Scott & McGuire, 2008; Spencer & Romero, 2008; Yager, 2008). For example, in a study by Shaw, faculty trained in the UDL principles made changes to their courses, including restructuring syllabi to provide a greater range in the types of work that contribute to course grades, presenting information in multiple ways, checking student understanding of concepts more frequently, arranging for course materials to be
previewed before class and reviewed afterward by students, and supplementing in-class discussions with online options (Shaw, 2011).

In the USA, there has been significant progress in the adoption of UDL practices at the postsecondary level. The California State College System (Project ENACT), Colorado State University, Boston College, The University of Vermont, The North Carolina State University System’s College STAR program—a collaborative program on three campuses: East Carolina University (ECU), the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), and Appalachian State University have implemented program-based UDL initiatives with promising results. For example, students participating in UNCG’s intensive program (designed for students with AD/HD) received 0 disciplinary referrals during the 2012-2013 academic year, while students in ECU’s intensive program (targeted for students with identified learning disabilities) achieved a 90% retention rate, higher than the university’s overall retention rate (CollegeSTAR, Year 2 Project-Wide Program Evaluation 2012-2013).

Both of the authors of this paper have been teachers for a course at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. In that course there has been considerable evolution in the actual application of the principles of UDL. In the last two years, the focus has been primarily on reducing the amount of time spent in reading and lectures and devoting that time instead to highly collaborative “laboratory” projects that engage students in “doing” UDL rather than reading or hearing about it. We have learned, however, that students vary widely in their capacity to work productively in teams or to learn from them. As a result, like every other aspect of the course, we have had to learn to do two things:

1. to provide options and alternatives for participation by students with very different skills and abilities, and
2. to provide scaffolds to support students (of all types) in working productively on teams. Those scaffolds supported teams in working together more productively, and most importantly, they resulted in much better final projects (For discussion of this work, see Gravel et al, 2015, in press, Rose et al. 2008).
What is now needed is to increase awareness more broadly among institutions of higher education of the importance of UDL strategies for broadening participation and aiding retention of all students. This will require more comprehensive training, resources, and technical assistance to support institutions of higher education as they begin to implement UDL. Towards this end, CAST developed UDL On Campus, a collection of resources that help educators and administrators in institutions of higher education improve instruction through Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The online resource is provided at no charge to users at http://udloncampus.cast.org. UDL On Campus offers educators tutorials and practical resources in UDL theory and practice across five categories:
1. Assessment,
2. Selecting Media and Technology,
3. Improving Institutional Policies and Practices,
4. Planning Your Course, and
5. Teaching Approaches.

Within each category users can find resources that demonstrate specific ways to address learner variability in an effort to improve learning opportunities, retention, and outcomes at the higher education level.
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College STAR: *Supporting Transition, Access, and Retention: A UNC System Project Supporting Students with Learning Differences.* Year 2 Project-Wide Program Evaluation 2012-2013 Amy A. Germuth, Ph.D. EvalWorks, LLC


Everyone Learns Differently: How to Respond

Ann Heelan

Ann Heelan is a graduate of UCD with a background in adult education and staff training and development. She is currently Executive Director of AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability. AHEAD was established in 1988 to promote best practice and to improve the experience and participation of students with disabilities in higher and further education and in making the transition on into employment. Ann’s leadership and innovation in this field was recognized when she was awarded the Myriam van Acker award at the Eighth International Conference on Higher Education and Disability in Innsbruck 2013. Prior to joining AHEAD Ann worked in a senior capacity in programme development and training for NTDI. This involved managing a range of new projects and initiatives including Horizon and other EU funded projects in the disability sector. Before that she worked as a teacher in adult education, the Institute of Technology and secondary schools.

Today’s higher education campuses are very different from ten years ago. Crucially there is much more diverse population of students who are technology savvy. To say they are diverse spaces is a cliché, but none the less true as higher education is made up of 15% international students, 15% mature students, students from different socio-economic backgrounds and up to 6% of students with a disability and specific learning difficulties. In the recent HEA Consultation Document on Access, the HEA have outlined clear plans to increase the participation rates from previously under-represented groups in higher education.

But what does all this mean to the Lecturer on the ground, let us call him Dr. Smith, a lecturer in an Irish university? What is he to do? How is he to respond to this rapidly changing make up of students in his classroom?

We will assume that he is used to managing the learning environment for transmitting knowledge to students who are good academic learners. Today he will have to manage the learning environment for students with very different learning requirements. Students with dyslexia make up to 3.5% of the university population have difficulty with the volumes of reading, note taking and essay writing. But then so too will mature learners and international students for different reasons.

As you will have read in the article on Universal design for Learning in this journal from Dr. David Rose from CAST, US, the fictitious Dr. Smith could take a universal design approach to manage this diversity in his classroom. This approach means that he will reflect on his own teaching practice to identify inadvertent barriers student may meet. To do this he can use the tools of UDL,
the three principles underlying the UDL approach, multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression and action and multiple means of engagement.

So what do these three UDL principles mean for Dr. Smith and his colleagues at the coal face of teaching practice? Taking the three principles backwards, the third, engagement, the why of learning, acknowledges the complexity of learning and the difference within learners. It challenges curriculum designers to ensure the learning space stretches and interests the learners rather than cognitively overloading them. According to researchers such as Bruner, Vygotsky, and more recently Dr. Ray Land and Dr. Betty Higgs who spoke at the NAIRTL Conference 2010, many students do not navigate this learning space very well and become lost and confused about what they are learning.

Professor Liz Thomas (2013) in her research into the student experience argues for the importance of engagement particularly for those non-traditional students who do not believe they belong in higher education. Her research suggests a clear relationship between enabling the student to cope with the new academic demands of their discipline and the student’s sense of belonging on a higher education course. She gives examples of how students in first year benefit from instruction in the task of academic writing, she states that we cannot assume the student comes with this skill ready-made, they do not, it must be taught and learnt. Professor Guy Claxton (2011), very insightfully equates academic writing to a technical apprenticeship in which students must develop the academic habit of mind and learn the nuts and bolts of critiquing, drafting, writing and editing an academic paper. Embedding academic writing into the subject disciplines offers a variability of means of both representation and expression.

As well as considering ways of engagement, the fictitious Dr. Smith can create a learning environment that works for all of his students by building multiple ways of representation into his course using technology, eLearning, multimedia, problem solving and a variety of good practice teaching techniques into his course teaching plan. Ensuring he uses accessible formats and good communication strategies in his presentations will ensure the student with learning difficulties can learn within the mainstream classroom.
Dr. Smith can also consider the means of expression and action. Dr. Geraldine O’Neill (2010) argues for embracing self-monitoring as an essential learning tool for students in higher education. She advocates that students need to develop the skills to reflect on and self-monitor their own work. A very real example of this was demonstrated by Dr. Sheera Murphy at the Spotlight on Dyslexia Conference in IADT in June 2014. Setting assignments with explicit marking schemes and criteria for completion makes the learning outcomes explicit and enables self-monitoring. So for example in designing an assignment it is important that the tutor specifies the exact content, research, footnotes expected. It is important not to assume that the student has prior knowledge of the task and support their capacity to navigate the task successfully, thus improving capacity for academic engagement. For example her directions in relation to competence in essay writing states

The student will present well-structured progression of ideas, ideas throughout the essay, attention to the clarity of ideas and concepts, clearly laid out with attention to design and readability, correct use of formats, spelling and grammar.

By designing his curriculum around the expected variability of learners, our fictitious Dr. Smith is maximizing learning opportunities for all students and minimizing the need for retrofitting and subsequent accommodations.

Universal Design for Learning represents a complete shift in thinking about learning in higher education. It marks a change in thinking that reflects recent knowledge about neuroscience, the act of learning itself, technology and how to engage the learner by facilitating a process of learning that places the learner at the centre.

The implications for teaching in higher education are clear as higher education has been seen as a process of knowledge transmission. As diversity within the student population increases, so too will the idea that higher education should pay attention to Universal Design for Learning as the way forward to creating a culture of diversity in higher education.
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Dr. Sheera Murphy, Spotlight on Dyslexia Seminar, IADT June 2014
Introduction

It was the shame that kept me in check, you know, cos I kept thinking ‘you’re being weak, this is weakness’

These are the words of Bobby* a young man, barely out of his teens, when asked about his experience of journeying through higher education with a mental health problem. The word weakness emerged in many of the interviews I carried out as part of a study into the lived experience of third level students with mental health problems. It was a word that took me by surprise, one that was difficult to hear.

Arthur Frank (2013), writing about the responsibility of bearing witness to others’ experience of distress, notes that ‘the challenge is to hear’ (p. 101). To hear, not just to listen to, such basic emotional states is challenging as it brings us face-to-face with our own vulnerability and humanity. There are few emotional states more powerful and more basic than shame.
Shame

Of all the emotions that are likely to reduce our ability to be helped, to reach out to others and to treat ourselves with kindness, shame is the most important and the most destructive (Gilbert, 2009, p. 368)

Stemming from the Indo-European word skam, meaning ‘to hide’, shame is a self-conscious emotion ‘stimulated by experiences in which feelings of inadequacy or humiliation are provoked’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 65). Whereas its close cousin stigma refers to ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 13), shame is the feeling that one is a discreditable person.

Shame is that part of ourselves we do not want to acknowledge. It comes with the feeling that there is something not quite right, not quite acceptable, about us and if others knew they might not like us very much and might even be repelled by us. So we hide it.

If the part of us that we are ashamed of happens to be a source of great distress in our lives, as is the case for many who struggle with mental health problems, shame may prevent us from opening up or seeking help.

I didn’t want to be the weak person for asking for that [support] and in my opinion it would have been that I was being weak… it would have been like I’d given in (Áine, 24)

One of the biggest challenges in supporting students with mental health problems in higher education is the fact that many students who are struggling never seek help (Downs & Eisenberg, 2012; Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Gullust, 2007). Of the five students interviewed as part of this study, all of whom would be considered to experience significant mental health problems at times requiring inpatient care; just one had disclosed his mental health problem to his college. This disclosure was necessitated due to lengthy hospital admission during the course of the academic year and, in spite of being offered a range of supports, he chose not to accept them:
I stubbornly didn’t take a lot of what [the disability support service] offered because... I wanted to be more normal. I thought, ‘the others don’t need this, why are they giving me this special help?’
(Bobby, 20)

An awareness of the role of shame in students’ lives, the ways in which it manifests itself, where it comes from and the ways in which students may try to manage shame, is a useful starting point for those of us whose role it is to support students with mental health problems in higher education.

Elements of Shame

External shame
External shame is belief that others see us as inferior, inadequate or flawed in some way and look down upon us with contempt and condemnation.

Internal shame
Where external shame is the belief that others view us as weak or inferior, internal shame is the belief that we are weak or inferior. Internal shame is very much associated with negative self-evaluative thoughts and feelings (e.g. I am useless, weak, no good, a failure).

Emotional elements
Internal and external shame stimulate a wide range of emotions and feelings such as anxiety, anger, self-disgust and self-hatred. Some describe a ‘heart sinking’ feeling that engulfs them when they feel they’ve failed or been shamed in some way.

Behavioural elements
Shame is related to the submissive behavioural response (a response we share with other animals) where we can feel small, submissive, avert our eyes and try to make ourselves smaller.

Physiological elements
Feelings of shame activate the body’s threat and stress systems stimulating the ‘flight or fight’ response (sometimes referred to as the ‘fight, flight, freeze or fawn’ or acute stress response). There is often a strong urge to ‘vanish’ or to hide from exposure. Sometimes, however, feeling exposed or criticised can cause us to retaliate, lashing out in anger against the one who is suggesting we are inferior in some way.
The evolutionary origins of shame

Shame is a self-conscious emotion that has been key to our survival as a species. In a world where 99% of all species that ever existed are now extinct, our survival is, or at least was, predicated on belonging to a larger social group. We are unconsciously motivated to seek acceptance and belonging, motives which rely on emotions such as shame for feedback and guidance (Gilbert & Choden, 2013). It is thought that shame evolved as an emotional indicator; designed to alert us if our thoughts, words or behaviours fall out of line with the values of the social group whose acceptance we desire. Paradoxically, shame can push us into withdrawing and hiding thus resulting in the very thing we were hoping to avoid, feeling rejected, unacceptable or inferior. This is particularly true of teenagers and young adults for whom the acceptance and approval of their peers, combined with the increased potential for shaming experiences, can have particularly profound effects (Gilbert, 2009).

Managing shame

Erving Goffman (1963), in his seminal text on stigma, outlines what he calls ‘the arts of impression management’ (p.155). These arts, namely the art of ‘covering’ or hiding the perceived flaw or inadequacy, and ‘passing’ (as normal) apply as much to shame as stigma and reflect the intimate relationship between the two phenomena.

Gilbert (2009) believes that when we are shamed we respond in one, or all, of three ways; compensation, concealment and/or violence.

Compensation

Compensation, as the term suggests, involves striving to compensate for our perceived flaw or shortcoming. American sociologist Brené Brown believes perfectionism to be the most common strategy used to ward off feelings of shame and inadequacy;
Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame. (Brown, 2010, p. 57)

Concealment emerged as the primary method the students interviewed as part of this study used to ward off feelings of shame. They described the feeling of being judged and their attempt to ‘compensate’ for their perceived weaknesses in order to measure up:

[There’s] always this feeling that people are judging you. No matter what, everyone seems to be judging you... you’ve expectations to meet while you’re at university (Alan, 23)

I suppose in my experience a lot of people who have had similar experiences to myself are high achievers so I don’t know... a lot of the pressure comes from within, it’s not always external pressure (Áine, 25)

A lot of times when you are shameful of yourself it’s because you have underlying, I don’t know, self-hatred or an underlying sense of defectiveness and you’re trying to compensate, you feel the pressure compensates, you know (Bobby, 20)

This pressure to compensate is a logical attempt to prove you are good and able and thus ward off being put in a position of inferiority. Such pressure, while it may, as Brown (2010, p.57) says, minimise the painful feelings of shame, judgement and blame, may also lead to enormous suffering. Failing to meet often unrealistic standards can compound the very feelings of self-hatred (as Bobby described it) and inferiority the standards themselves served to avoid.
Concealment
A second common form of ‘impression management’ is to hide or ‘cover’ the perceived flaw or inadequacy in order to ‘pass’ as normal [Goffman, 1963].

I would feel that [shame] still... I rarely tell people what happened to me, it’s definitely like an elephant in the room (Bobby, 20)

Attempts to conceal or avoid that which is potentially shameful can come in many forms. We may repress memories which are too painful and shameful to know and feel. We may distract from our shame and our struggles with laughter. Humour can be a hugely adaptive response to adversity but laughter employed to conceal shame often feels empty and uncomfortable. As discussed above, concealment can also lead to emotional isolation and prevent opening-up or seeking help.

Violence
For some, feeling shamed by others can trigger a retaliatory response; ‘if you shame me I’ll fight back’. Violence, particularly between men, often arises as a shame avoidance strategy, a form of face-saving [Gilbert, 2009]. Shame interactions rarely result in violence yet we are all evolutionarily hard wired to fight back if we feel threatened, whether the threat be to our physical safety or personal integrity.

Compassion
While compensation, concealment and even violence are understandable attempts to keep painful feelings of shame at bay, they often fail to serve our best interests. Compassion, on the other hand, has evolved as a more adaptive response to feelings of inadequacy or shame. Compassion, both self-compassion and the compassion of others, ‘awakens the emotions of kindness, affiliation and caring that heal shame’ [Gilbert & Choden, 2013, p. 142].
Stemming from the Latin compati meaning ‘to suffer with’, compassion has been defined as ‘as sensitivity to suffering in oneself and others with a deep commitment to relieve and prevent it’ (Gilbert, 2013). This definition reflects how compassion requires that we first turn toward suffering in ourselves and others and then act to relieve it. Acting to relieve it does not necessarily involve a physical act or direct intervention. The very act of reading this article, of trying to understand the phenomenon of shame, is an act of compassion. To act with compassion is to turn towards suffering, to be honest with, and respectfully acknowledge, the dark bits in ourselves and others and to seek to nurture and cultivate the good.

Conclusion

In order to support students with mental health problems we must first challenge ourselves to hear their stories; to listen to their experience and look at their behaviours and responses (such as perfectionism, non-disclosure/refusal to seek help, and self-criticism), not as maladaptive behaviours to be addressed, but as perfectly reasonable responses to an overwhelming emotion. The challenge is to hear, accept and respond with empathy and compassion. If we do nothing else we will have done our students a great service. Because for many, it is only with compassionate acceptance from others that they may begin to accept and respond compassionately towards themselves.

*all names have been altered in order to protect the students’ identities.*
References


Enabling People for Employment

James Quinn, former Senior Vice President, Citi Dublin

James Quinn is the former Senior Vice President, Citi Group Dublin. He was instrumental in working with AHEAD to establish a strong business case for the inclusion of disability in the mainstream workplace. James brought an insight from the employers’ perspective while eagerly taking on the challenges of organisational culture and its norms.

My career with Citi began in 1988 when I moved to the UK with my wife to be closer to her family. We lived in the Kent countryside and I commuted into London. It was a good time, surrounded by family and friends and I was fortunate to be able to work on a number of projects building new capabilities for Citi customers. The job involved extensive travel because we were global teams working on global projects. In my years with Citi, I have met and made friends with people all over the world – easily one of the most rewarding aspects of the job.

My first encounter with disability involved my wife’s family. Congenital deafness runs in my brother-in-law’s side of their family and two of my nieces were partially deaf. The eldest daughter was quite severely deaf. The first time that I met her was when she was about 6 years old. Mary was a bright, enthusiastic and fun loving child. Even at that age, she was full of confidence and barely aware of her disability. At the time, Kent County Council had arranged for her to be in a special school for deaf children but that was not satisfactory to her father. He strongly believed that this school was not challenging her enough and was allowing her to use her deafness as an excuse for not working hard enough. Bill was also deaf and refused to allow this to hold him back. After many meetings with school officials, they succeeded in getting Mary placed in a mainstream school.

Facilities for disabled people are much more advanced in the UK than they are in Ireland. Part of getting Mary into a mainstream school involved having her ‘Statemented’ by the council. This involved visits to audiologists and tests. It was worth it because once the Statement was issued, an amazing amount of support was provided. Induction loops were installed in the house and connected to the TV and stereo and a door bell light was installed. In addition, Mary was provided with an amplification system for school. The teachers were given a microphone and Mary had a receiver that connected to her hearing aids. The whole system was portable so that it could move from class to class.
As Mary grew older, the subject of work experience came up. The UK policy was that all second year students had a two week opportunity to visit a workplace and see what the world of work was really like. I was lucky in that Citi London strongly supported this and I was able to secure a placement for Mary. What I didn’t realise was that I was going to learn as much about disability as Mary was going to learn about work! She came in with her usual confidence and, within the first morning had introduced herself to all of the team. In the process, she learned that one of the managers was also partially deaf – something that the rest of us hadn’t realised! Mary attended all of our project meetings. She came into the meeting room, proudly placed her portable microphone in the middle of the table, and was able to hear what was going on. It was my first exposure to the power of Assistive Technology.

After 19 years in London, I was given the opportunity to transfer to a new role in Citi Dublin. I arrived with excitement and quickly felt at home. One of the things that differentiates Citi Dublin is its extensive Employee Engagement and Diversity Network. Word came round that a few people were starting a new network named ‘Citi Disability’ and I became involved in the initial meetings. My reason was simple – my experiences with Mary had sparked an interest in disability, especially in the workplace. It was as part of the Citi Disability network that I first became exposed to AHEAD and the WAM programme. We were approached to provide Internships for disabled graduates and were pleased to be able to place two people. As I became more involved with
WAM, I was particularly impressed with its practical and pragmatic approach. In my opinion, one of the barriers that people with disabilities face in finding employment is a fear among employers that they are going to say the wrong thing, or be forced to provide unreasonable accommodation. There is a fear that people with disabilities will be difficult to manage or to discipline if their performance isn’t up to scratch. WAM provide a huge amount of support – essential to a manager having their first encounter with a disabled person. They also have an excellent employer friendly attitude – helping to dispel the myths and understand that a disabled employee is, and should be treated as, the same as any other employee. They just need a little extra simple and practical help.

One aspect of my work with AHEAD that never fails to impress is the quality of the candidates that are provided to us as potential interns. I have managed people for over 30 years and seen thousands of CVs come across my desk. It is fair to say that the CVs I receive from WAM are easily amongst the most impressive with superb qualifications and a wide range of experiences. Something that is easy to forget is that candidates with a disability gaining degrees have shown extra focus and dedication and will bring those qualities to the workplace.

That is also a source of immense frustration to me. The work that AHEAD does should be replicated across the length and breadth of the land but it is not. When I think of the supports that were provided to Mary, I wonder why those supports do not exist in
Ireland. When I talk to employment agencies and ask specifically for disabled candidates, I am met with blank stares. When I talk to the candidates themselves, they seem reluctant to put themselves forward because they don’t believe that they will be given consideration.

Something needs to be done to break this cycle – there needs to be a national debate. I believe that the government has a role to play here. Enabling people for employment is good for everybody. It increases self-esteem and reduces the social welfare bill. Ireland is coming out of the recession now and good jobs are being created. There is even talk of skills shortages, especially in IT. Many of the disabled graduates that I have met could easily fill those roles – we just need to get people talking and acting.

My journey in Ireland is coming to an end. I have chosen to take early retirement from Citi and will be returning to the UK to re-join our family. I am unsure of my future plans, but certainly hope to continue the work in the field of disability that started here. I will deeply miss my colleagues in Citi Dublin and AHEAD, but I am sure that modern technology will allow us to keep in touch!

For more information on the WAM programme, see the AHEAD website [www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie) or contact wam@ahead.ie
Supporting Transitions of Graduates with Disabilities to Employment: The AHEAD/WAM Experience

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This article explores the background to barriers to employment for disabled graduates and how the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme has developed and lessons learned on the way to successful outcomes.

Context

In the last 20 years there have been changes across most western countries with regards to the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Governments have brought in incentives and laws compelling both universities and employers to be accessible for persons with a disability [Gillies, 2012]. Whereas physical barriers are continually being removed it is harder to address attitudinal barriers. Figures available from the CSO can give some insight into how people with disabilities fare. According to the latest CSO census figures 13% of the Irish population have a disability (CSO, 2011). Overall, people with disabilities have lower education and employment rates when compared to the rest of the population. In addition, 20% of over 15s with a disability were in employment compared to 50% of overall population (CSO, 2011).
Although research on graduates with disabilities is lacking, AHEAD has been tracking the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education for a number of years. In 1994 there was just under 1,000 students with disabilities across higher institutions within Ireland (AHEAD, 1994). This figure is now over 9,000, representing 4.6% of the total student population (AHEAD, 2013). But what happens to these students once they graduate? Literature from other countries highlights how making the transition from school/college to employment can be particularly difficult for students with disabilities (AGCAS, 2013) (Trainer et al, 2008) (Gillies, 2012) (Chen, 2013). Research from the UK on the first destination of graduates with disabilities highlighted how overall non-disabled graduates still fare better then disabled graduates but they did note that this also depended on the disability. For example, graduates with unseen disabilities, particularly dyslexia, fared best.

But what exactly is disability and what does it mean to employers?

Under the Employment Equality Act 1998, it is against the law for an employer to discriminate against an employee or a prospective employee who has a disability on areas of employment including:

- recruitment to employment.
- conditions of employment (other than remuneration or pension benefits).
- training or work experience.
- promotion or re-grading or classification of posts.
- advertising a job in such a way that the advertisement could reasonably be interpreted as indicating an intention to discriminate.
The Employment Equality Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Act, 2000 define disability as:

1. the total or partial absence of a person’s bodily or mental functions, including the absence of a part of a person’s body
2. the presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness
3. the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person’s body
4. a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction, or
5. a condition, illness or disease which affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or which results in disturbed behaviour, and shall be taken to include a disability which exists at present, or which previously existed but no longer exists, or which may exist in the future or which is imputed to a person.

Rather than focusing on the disability and getting ‘bogged down’ on medical facts – it is perhaps more helpful to consider an alternate definition of disability: a disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability – disability being the result of negative activities that take place in a situation between a person with an impairment and that situation. While the impairment is part of the negativity, it is not the reason for, nor does it justify, the loss of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others.

An NDA survey on employer attitudes towards disabilities found that ‘negative attitudes resulting in discrimination in the workplace continues to be a significant problem for people with disabilities’ (NDA, 2006). In fact only 6% of respondents knew a work colleague with a disability, highlighting how many people
have little contact with disability in a work environment. A FAS survey (2007) of private sector employers attitudes found that only one in four claimed to have employed a person with a disability and the main reason cited as to why they have not done so was ‘lack of disabled candidates applied’

Insight into employers’ perspectives gained from the WAM evaluation process indicated that employers often had pre-conceived perceptions and expectations of disability that often relied on stereotypes. One of these was the perceived extra cost of hiring a person with a disability. There also is a tendency to focus on the disability rather than the ability of the person and how they can do the job with the appropriate reasonable accommodations in place. As a consequence attitudinal barriers that affect the recruitment and selection process were formed, however unintentionally. Fear of some form of reprisal if they ‘get it wrong’ is very real. This fear and negative attitude can stem from a lack of knowledge of disability, and a lack of experience of disability at work – in particular in graduate entry level and professional positions. Other concerns included how to deal with performance issues that are not disability related, how to address health and safety concerns and how to ask the appropriate questions at interview.

The graduates with disabilities’ experience
Making the transition from college into the workplace can be difficult for any graduate, but a graduate with a disability will face additional challenges that must be navigated and overcome for successful integration. This includes issues around disclosure, grants/accommodations for the workplace, benefits and dealing with negative attitudes and discrimination. In addition, fear of loss of social welfare entitlements can be of major concern for a person with a disability and can provide a disincentive to work.

WAM was set up in 2005 in response to growing evidence that graduates with disabilities were experiencing difficulties in making the transition into the workplace. This was evident at an AHEAD conference whereby the students and graduates expressed their frustrations at not being able to access graduate entry level jobs in spite of having graduated with first and second class honours. Employers on the other hand stated that they were unaware of this population of potential employees seeking access to the labour market.
AHEAD explored this further and anecdotal evidence suggested that while graduates with disabilities wanted to work and organisations stated they were committed to hiring people with disabilities, the transition to employment was not as successful for graduates with disabilities as their peers.

The WAM programme has been in operation for over 10 years now, promoting access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities while simultaneously building the capacity of employers around disability in the workplace. WAM has over the years become the ‘go-to’ place for employers who want to engage in a proactive way with disability in the workplace.

For many of the graduates with disabilities placed on the WAM programme it is their first job and they often lack the work experience that non-disabled graduates gain from working in part-time or summer jobs in college. In addition, the college environment is completely different to the world of work, and where disability supports and services are now the norm for college campuses, no such services are available in the workplace. These means that a graduate with a disability is on their own when it comes to advocating for what they need, as often employers lack the knowledge of how to manage disability in the workplace. Graduates must decide when and how to disclose their disability, how to ask for a reasonable accommodation and how to manage their disability on a day to day basis usually without any support.

One of the main objectives of the programme was to identify the potential barriers that prevented the inclusion of graduates into the Irish labour market and to find effective ways as to how these barriers could be overcome. WAM was developed in partnership with employers whereby a number of structured mentored work placements that brought graduates with disabilities and employers together in the mainstream workplace were established.
What we have learnt and continue to learn

WAM’s learning comes from engaging with over 1500 graduates with disabilities and facilitating 240 work placements with over 20 employers over the last ten years. All WAM placements have been evaluated over the years. Through this process WAM explored what worked for graduates making the transition into employment, not just from the graduate’s perspective but also the employer perspective.

We know that graduates and employees with disabilities may need some support, so do employers and hiring managers!

WAM’s dynamic network of employers provides a safe place to have open conversations about disability in the workplace. Annual events, training days, publications and online resources support employers. Employers choose the agenda for the events and ‘an organisational memory’ and culture is thus created and sustained.

Employers are supported in the first six months of a placement in what we term a ‘walk the line’ approach. This involves addressing any fears and concerns pre-placement through disability awareness and pre-interview training. By upskilling staff on legislation and how to put in place reasonable accommodations employers can have confidence that once supports are put in place, disability essentially should disappear. WAM supports managers and mentors for the duration of the placements, checking in on them regularly, meaning that there is always someone on hand if issues arise on placement. Knowing that there was an external support they could call and rely on was of significant benefit for employers and acted as an incentive to participate in the programme.

Attitudes and assumptions will always be a problem; but the more we know the job, the better we can deal with it!

In order to facilitate the transition of graduates with disabilities into the mainstream workplace, WAM’s continues to explore the original issue: employers did not receive applications from
graduates with disabilities, and graduates with disabilities were frustrated at their lack of success in job-hunting. Sometimes depending on the job and other factors, this can continue to be an issue.

As WAM placements are real jobs, in-house standard recruitment procedures are followed. WAM has over the past 10 years worked with its employers on the importance of well thought out job advertisements and detailed job specifications. Often language used in job description can act as a deterrent to a person with a disability. Therefore, disability-proofing job descriptions and making employers aware of the language used was and still is a key part of not just attracting candidates to certain roles, but also addressing barriers that may arise at the early stage of the recruitment process.

The importance of a well-defined job description is key to creating a smooth transition in to the workplace and can help prevent problems arising later on. By identifying the core competencies of a job and being aware of the physical and social environment the work tasks take place in, the best job/person match can be found.

A clear, well-defined job description is also paramount when looking at what supports may be required. Every graduate who is placed on the WAM programme undergoes a needs assessment. This process identifies what, if any, supports or reasonable accommodations the candidate requires to do their particular job. For employers, the needs assessment provides reassurance that any supports required will be identified. For graduates with a disability the needs assessment also gives confidence that supports will be identified and put in place if required. This can take away some of the worry and fear around how to ask for supports and deal with disclosure.

More often there is a lack of expertise and knowledge on how to accommodate disability in the workplace. WAM provides assistance and advice, where required, seeking to upskill employers involved and increase their capacity to manage disability in the workplace. The needs assessment is a significant part of this process as it
allows a safe place for a graduate to discuss his/her needs and an employer to learn how someone can and will work best. It seeks to take the focus away from the disability and instead focus on what is needed in order to include.

The ongoing challenge is to maintain the focus on ‘how’ someone can do their work best and have faith in this process.

For a graduate with a disability, as with any employee with no work experience the first couple of weeks in a new job can be a daunting experience – they do not feel work ready! And their colleagues and managers offer do not feel ready either! Having a mentor available who will help with the settling in phase is of enormous value to both the graduate and to the organisation as a whole.

Mentoring is a process through which an experienced person provides support, guidance and encouragement to a less experienced person. Each graduate who is placed on the programme is allocated an in-house a mentor who works with them over the six month placement. The mentor fundamentally acts as a sounding board for the mentee and also helps with social integration into the workplace. The mentor can assist the mentee with gaining insight into the organisation and can give advice on any issues that may arise during the settling in period.

During its evaluation process WAM consistently found that the mentoring model was one of its major successes, with the majority of managers, mentors and participants stating that they found the process beneficial and that it had something to offer the workplace.
Learning in the future

It is our experience that having worked with students with disabilities for over 25 years and graduates with disabilities for over 10 years now, that employers should not ignore the increasing pool of talent - that for one reason or another – continue to face barriers accessing the workplace. As workplaces and work changes so too do the barriers; the numbers of students graduating with honours professional degrees continues to increase and employers face new challenges and demands in how work can be done and needs to be done. Employers and graduate advisers can adapt the steps we describe for their own recruitment and selection programmes, to the benefit of all employees. What’s good for disabled graduates is good for all graduates. Of course, further learning is needed as we look to the future.
References


URL: http://www.fas.ie/NR/rdonlyres/9ABC5EE1-CF20-4AA5-ACA4-C5B81DD9FE5E/246/Disability9991.pdf


The Importance of Effective Access to the Curriculum for Transition Opportunities among Vision Impaired Pupils

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Patricia McCarthy attended a special school for her primary and secondary education. She returned to education as a mature student completing a B.Soc.Sc in Sociology and Social Policy and an M.Soc. in UCD. Patricia recently graduated with a PhD from Trinity College Dublin. Her thesis focused on the educational experiences and transition opportunities of vision impaired people. In 2014 Patricia was awarded a Post-doctoral bursary from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. She also supervises M.Ed. dissertations, gives occasional lectures and is actively involved in the research community within the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Introduction

Until comparatively recently in Ireland the education provision for blind/vision impaired children occurred primarily within special education settings. Restructuring of the education system began in the 1990s and led to significant changes in special education including a language of inclusive education within policy initiatives. This article explores the experiences of blind/vision impaired young people in relation to accessing aspects of the school curriculum and the factors that impact on these access issues. Furthermore, it examines how decisions taken at post-primary school can impact significantly on post-school choices and opportunities.

Inadequate access to the curriculum, disabling environments, and disabling attitudes have all been identified as significant factors that curtail curriculum choices for disabled students. Mathematics is recognised as an integral subject to gain access to many third level courses. However, it is accepted that the teaching and learning of mathematics can be particularly challenging for blind/vision impaired pupils. Consequently, when this section of the population experience unresolved challenges accessing the mathematics curriculum, their post-school choices can be significantly curtailed.

In Ireland decisions taken at secondary school regarding subject choice, the level at which these chosen subjects are undertaken and which Leaving Certificate programme to pursue, all have implications regarding what pathways are open to people once they leave school. Therefore, it is imperative that policy and practice within the school arena is supportive of the subjective realities of blind/vision impaired young
people. It has been argued that appreciating the personal choices and how these are shaped will help to unravel what matters to blind/vision impaired individuals in making their post-school decisions.

**Methodology**

There has been a paucity of research undertaken in Ireland involving blind/vision impaired people as primary participants. This has resulted in research that does not generally represent the true experiences of this section of the population. A qualitative approach was used for the study described here. It is recognised that a worthwhile aspect of some types of qualitative research is the ability to give voice to those who previously were unheard within the research arena. A life history approach was utilised for data collection as one of the most salient aspects of this approach is its recognition of the importance of insider perspectives. Furthermore, it acknowledges the integrity of the individual and recognises their experiences as valid. It is recognised that biographical accounts can “provide a useful empirical lens through which to observe change in disabling societies” (Shah, & Priestley, 2011). The research questions examined for this research were:

1. What are/have been the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired people?
2. What factors have impacted on these educational experiences?
3. What factors in their lives have impacted on their life choices/opportunities?

A number of sampling techniques were utilised including purposive, personal contacts and snowballing. In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with twenty three participants (see table below for demographic details of participants).

| Male | 14 | Urban | 15 |
| Female | 9 | Rural | 8 |

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Table 1.1 Participant Demographics.
Interviews occurred over a number of time periods commencing in January 2009 and concluding in late 2010. All interviews were audio-recorded on a digital recorder and were later saved onto a computer. These recordings were destroyed following completion of the study.

My ontological position as a disabled researcher was central to the development of this research. Self-disclosure was an important aspect of building rapport and empathy with participants. I believed that this facilitated a high level of trust with participants and gave them the opportunity to discuss openly, aspects of their educational and transition opportunities in a manner that many had not previously experienced. As a researcher I was aware that the closer one’s subject matter is to one’s own life experience the more likely it is that bias can occur but as Plummer (1983) acknowledged, to eradicate research of all sources of bias is to rid research of human life. I remained cognizant of my position as having an insider perspective within the research to ensure that this would not cause unintended biases. This was achieved through the methodological safeguards that were in place including regular contact with participants for clarification of information and providing them with copies of transcripts. It is agreed that qualitative research is “a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship” (Finlay, 2002, p. 212).

Thematic analysis was utilized for analysing the data collected as it offered a theoretically flexible way in which to analyse qualitative data (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Following transcription of interviews, transcripts were read through carefully several times in order to identify emerging themes and sub-themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the function of the write-up of a thematic analysis is to represent the complex story of the data in a way which convinces the reader of the benefit and validity of the analysis.
Findings

The majority of participants in the study did not articulate experiencing particular challenges in accessing the curriculum at primary school level. There could have been a range of reasons for this, including that their primary education was some time in their past, the fact that print material is often larger at primary school level and therefore easier to access for those who are vision impaired. At second level a wide range of subjects were taken by participants. This was particularly evident among the younger age groups. This may indicate that greater opportunities are now available to blind/vision impaired young people. The availability of modified exam papers which are provided by the Department of Education and Skills for state examinations also proved beneficial where pictures, diagrams etc. were a standard component of an exam paper. This is recognised as a reasonable accommodation for blind/vision impaired students and means that these students are provided with a text only alternative question. Some aspects of the curriculum are quite visual in nature as they contain components such as map work and diagrams that could result in curriculum and assessment barriers for students who are blind/vision impaired. Consequently, modified exam papers have resulted in greater access to a wider range of subjects. This demonstrates how policy and provision can enable greater access to the curriculum for these students.

However, accessing particular aspects of the school curriculum were not always straightforward for participants and barriers were encountered at different levels. It was evident that components of the curriculum and the way in which subject information was conveyed could limit participation. This illustrated that inadequate provision and inappropriate teaching methodologies could impact on access to the curriculum. This was particularly noticeable in how participants accessed the mathematics curriculum. A number of factors contributed to this situation including ineffective teaching methodologies, inappropriate and insufficient provision of maths books and materials in Braille and accessible formats,
insufficient teacher training and insufficient appropriate supports. Findings from this study indicated that those who experienced greatest difficulty accessing the mathematics curriculum were those who were blind and/or worked through the medium of Braille. The following excerpts are illustrative of the challenges experienced by participants and demonstrate how teaching methodologies and provision can impact on one’s ability to access aspects of the curriculum:

...the maths I found hard... and even some of the maths things say...graphs...and for a sighted person to try and explain graphs to you they just don’t understand that say...the letter L in print they think it should feel the exact same in Braille. (Lisa)

A lot of maths teaching is visual. It is done on a blackboard, with the teacher calling out the lines as they write. Everyone else can read those lines back. I could not. (Joe)

The following excerpt highlighted the curricular and assessment barriers that can be experienced when accessing the mathematics curriculum and demonstrated how resilliance and determination facilitated access to the mathematic curriculum:

The way I had done all maths for Junior Cert was just having someone read off the question to me and me pretty much doing it up in my head so doing that for Leaving Cert honours maths or honours physics wasn’t really a viable option so I ended up developing a weird solution where I was writing down in an A4 refill pad even though I couldn’t see it but it was enough that by writing it down I could see it in my head and work it out line by line it was a crazy way to do it but it worked. (Ted)

Occasionally participants were advised to give up mathematics. One of these participants was Joe who got a B in honours maths at Junior Certificate level, but because of the difficulties he was experiencing was advised by teachers and his visiting teacher
to drop maths. Joe recognised the importance of keeping on mathematics as not doing so would impact negatively on his range of post-school choices. Research shows the importance of resilience and the following quote exemplified the resilience and determination demonstrated by Joe when faced with systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers

*"I was advised to consider dropping maths. I declined to do this on principle and because I thought I might need it. It is something about which I am still very annoyed because I do not think that I got a fair chance."* (Joe)

The introduction of foundation level maths appeared to have offered blind/vision impaired students greater access to the maths curriculum. Foundation level maths can appear to be the solution to the access difficulties blind/vision impaired young people experience in relation to maths. However, the decision to take maths at foundation level immediately restricts post-school choices and opportunities. A number of those in the younger age group who attended the resourced mainstream secondary school were among those that did maths at foundation level. A number of those who did foundation level maths recognised that while they may have got an A at this level it was not satisfactory for entry to college. This is evident in Paul and Claudia’s quotes below and demonstrated that while foundation level maths may be appropriate for some blind/vision impaired young people it should not be the primary solution to access difficulties

*"I got an A in the maths... but it’s not a high enough grade you know when they look at foundation they look at not good enough."* (Paul)

*"I got an A in maths but it was foundation so it was good for me but it was also bad because it is very hard to get to college with that."* (Claudia)

Occasionally access to the curriculum was blocked for unknown reasons. The following two excerpts indicate how policy decisions within schools regarding subject choice and attitudinal barriers greatly restricted Maria Kelly’s ability to access the curriculum:

*"...the languages were really out because the teachers that taught the languages weren’t willing."*
...apparently I couldn’t do French...one of the teachers said that I’d only need to know fruit and veg. [Maria Kelly]

A small number of participants had exemptions from Irish. This may indicate that some blind/vision impaired students experience barriers when accessing aspects of the Irish curriculum and offering exemptions may be a policy solution to this difficulty. Exemptions from particular subjects can also provide schools with the additional class periods required by some blind/vision impaired students who need additional learning support in particular subjects. The following excerpt suggested that this was a pertinent factor in the school Michael attended:

**Michael...up until Junior Cert it was the normal maths and English. I didn’t do Irish at all or French, there was geography, history, science, business and home economics.**
**Patricia:** OK and was there a reason you didn’t do languages other than English?
**Michael:** Well I got extra help but I was finding those subjects difficult to grasp so I applied to get extra help in the other subjects like in maths and geography and English during those times...

Some participants sat the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. This programme has a strong vocational dimension which can provide greater access to the curriculum for some students. However, careful consideration is required when making such decisions as it can restrict future choices and opportunities.

**Discussion**

The findings examined in this article indicate that blind/vision impaired pupils are generally experiencing greater access to the school curriculum with a wide range of subjects being taken. This was particularly apparent among participants in the younger age group. However, it was evident that access barriers were still experienced at a variety of levels. The reasons for these were varied and included ineffective teaching methodologies, inappropriate and insufficient provision of materials in Braille and accessible formats and attitudinal barriers. Furthermore, it was recognised that policy decisions within the school arena impact on subject choice and transition opportunities.
Teaching and learning practices can present significant barriers to disabled students’ learning. This was significant for participants in this study as there appeared to be an emphasis on conveying information visually which were often not accessible. Therefore, access to the curriculum was restricted. This was particularly evident when accessing the maths curriculum. Issues around teachers not having the relevant training to impart mathematical information to blind/vision impaired pupils, the inadequacy of Braille for mathematics and expectations regarding students’ ability were all contributory factors to the access barriers within the maths curriculum experienced by those who participated in this research.

It is accepted that reading and writing mathematics is significantly different from reading and writing text (Karshmer and Bledsoe, 2002). One of the main reasons given for this is that while text is linear in nature maths equations are two dimensional in nature.

It is recognised that blind students encountered greatest difficulty when accessing the maths curriculum and may be due in part to the confusion with Braille notation that can be experienced by those who are unable to access the maths curriculum through the medium of print. A further factor identified by Karshmer and Bledsoe, (2002) of significance was that the majority of maths teachers do not know Braille maths notation. These were relevant influences for participants in this study where generally only those that attended a special school or a resourced mainstream secondary school had access to the required level of supports to access maths appropriately through the medium of Braille as some teachers knew Braille. This meant that those who attended mainstream schools in their own locality generally had no one available to them that could read Braille or enable them to write complex mathematical equations in a satisfactory manner.

Participants including Lisa and Joe who were both blind found this particularly challenging. While Lisa struggled with the ordinary level maths curriculum, Joe took maths at higher level as he recognised that aspects of the higher level maths curriculum were less visual than the ordinary level maths curriculum. Cahill and Linehan, (1996) noted that it is unusual for blind/vision impaired pupils to do higher level maths. However, a small number of those who participated in this research took honours level maths. Joe took this decision even though he had been strongly advised by
both teachers within the school and his visiting teacher to give up maths altogether. Joe continued with higher level maths because he expected that he would go to university and therefore did not want to restrict his future opportunities.

While the majority of participants did maths a number of the younger age group took maths at foundation level which immediately limits post-school choices.

While foundation level maths may be appropriate for some students it should not be the main option offered to blind/vision impaired students when decisions regarding maths are being considered. Furthermore, it should not be considered a solution to access difficulties experienced by this section of the population as it is widely accepted that mathematics is an important subject for entry to third level education (AHEAD, 2008).

Some of the younger participants in this research did the Leaving Certificate Applied course rather than the traditional Leaving Certificate. As the former is more vocational in nature and has more ongoing assessments this may have facilitated access to components of the curriculum. While this is a worthwhile programme it does limit post-school choices and opportunities.

Therefore, it should only be pursued if it is truly considered to be the best option for a student and not simply a solution to an access issue.

A variety of flexible and complementary teaching approaches should be common practice at all levels of education. Some participants had to refrain from certain activities and classes due to disabling environments and disabling attitudes. One participant indicated that she was prevented from doing French as the school perceived that she would not require French once she had left school. This demonstrated how attitudinal barriers can prevent access to the curriculum.

Evidence of resilience and agency were demonstrated by a significant number of participants in this research. This enabled participants to achieve life course opportunities even when faced with significant challenges at both institutional and attitudinal levels. Demonstrations of resilience and agency were particularly evident among many of those who encountered the greatest challenges when trying to access components of the curriculum. These displays of resilience and agency often made the difference between being able to continue with a chosen subject or course, or being actively encouraged by others to pursue another subject or course.
Ableist attitudes can impede meaningful access to the curriculum and can result in disabled people having to challenge existing concepts of normative performance.

In modern society public examinations are an integral component of most education systems. However, it is recognised that standard examination formats and procedures may pose particular challenges for blind/vision impaired pupils resulting in them being unable to demonstrate their abilities under standard examination conditions. It is acknowledged that accommodations are intended to level the playing field for blind/vision impaired people so that they can demonstrate what they know, without being thwarted by their disabilities. Modified examination papers were availed of by participants in particular subject areas. This meant they received alternative ‘text only’ questions or components of questions in an alternative format where diagrams, pictures, maps etc. were an intrinsic part of the exam paper. This enabled participants to access more fully aspects of the examination that may otherwise have been inaccessible to them. This demonstrates how policy and provision can have a positive impact on enabling blind/vision impaired pupils participation in aspects of the school curricula that were previously considered inaccessible because of their impairment.

Adolescence is a difficult period of transition as there are a myriad of choices to be contemplated. Decisions have to be taken regarding what subjects to take, what courses to pursue, what career to follow, and decisions must be made, regarding where to seek advice and from whom. Furthermore, it is recognised that there are often disconnections between what young people aspire to do and what they are capable of doing and another disconnection between what they are capable of doing and the opportunities open to them.

In Ireland decisions taken at secondary school regarding subjects undertaken, the level at which these subjects are undertaken and which Leaving Certificate programme to pursue can all have significant implications as to what pathways are open to people once they leave school.
Conclusion

While access to the curriculum has improved for blind/vision impaired young people it was apparent that substantial barriers still exist. Therefore, awareness of accessibility at all levels of the education system should be considered a priority rather than an afterthought. At the compulsory school level, access to the Maths curriculum presented greatest challenges. Consequently, greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing appropriate teaching and learning methodologies that facilitate blind/vision impaired young people to access the Maths curriculum. This necessitates that teacher training programmes are cognisant of this and develop their programmes accordingly. It is essential that adequate supports are made available to both teachers and blind/vision impaired young people to ensure access to required specialised knowledge to ensure that this section of the population can participate to their optimum within all aspects of the school curriculum.

It is apparent that decisions taken at secondary school can curtail the post-school choices and opportunities of blind/vision impaired young people. Consequently, it is essential that decisions regarding exemptions from particular subjects, and which Leaving Certificate programme is pursued is taken in the best interest of each individual. Assumptions of ability should not be determined by an individuals’ disability. Therefore, it is essential to identify the reasons behind such decisions. Furthermore, it is imperative that policies and practices are developed that enhance rather than limit the transition opportunities of blind/vision impaired young people to ensure that they can progress to third level education on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers.
References


A Day in the Life: A Director of a Further Education and Training College

Ms Ann Marie Lacey, of Cavan Institute

Ann Marie Lacey is director of Cavan Institute, a further education and training college with an enrolment of 1,400 full-time and 800 part-time students. Since taking up that post in 2006, Ann Marie has spearheaded a number of pioneering initiatives at the Institute, as well as being involved in several national agencies and international projects. Previously, Ann Marie was principal of St. Aidan’s Comprehensive School in Cootehill, Co. Cavan for 17 years. She is a founder member of the North East Further and Higher Education Alliance (NEFHEA) and has recently brought to fruition a Memorandum of Understanding between Cavan Institute and Athlone Institute of Technology, both of which promote progression from further to higher education.

Cavan Institute is a large further education and training college in the North East, the third largest FET college in the country, which is quite remarkable given that we are situated in a rural county. Further education and training has really come of age in the last couple of years, thanks to the Further Education and Training Act 2013 and the establishment of SOLAS, the further education and training authority. This sector has for so long been a beacon for school leavers and mature students alike who wish to access or return to college, and we have seen at first hand the remarkable difference it has made to people’s lives, whether as a result of enabling access to higher education, preparing people for work or simply facilitating access and participation in college life.

With over 1,370 students enrolled this year, diversity among our student population is a given for us. We are proud to be an inclusive college, welcoming students of all ages and abilities. About ten years ago, Cavan Institute established a student service dedicated to supporting the needs of students with special educational needs, as well as those who might need extra tuition or help to get through aspects of their course or exams. The Open Learning Centre, as it is known, enables students to apply for and access funding from the Higher Education Authority, to which they might be entitled. It also arranges additional supports based on the needs of the students that make themselves known to the service, some of whom are not eligible for funding.

On a given college day, my journey to the office takes me through the busy college canteen which is where the diversity of the student body is self-evident. Here I’ll see students working on their laptops, others tucking into a sometimes not-so-healthy breakfast, and still more getting ready to attend classes with their personal education assistants. This latter group of staff is an extremely valuable asset to
the college, and it is through the support of the HEA Student with Disabilities Fund that we are in a position to support students with physical disabilities or learning difficulties to participate in their chosen course.

As the morning progresses, I might find myself in a meeting scheduled with the four heads of school at the Institute who do a superb job of managing the day-to-day running of their individual schools. It is often through this forum that I learn of the immediate needs of students and how the staff at the Institute are working to help ensure that every student gets the individual attention and support that they need. This is a challenging undertaking, but through the class tutor model and with the support of the student services team, we manage to do this quite successfully. The tutors at Cavan Institute, over 70 in total, make a point of getting to know the students on a one-to-one basis early in the year so that we can monitor their progress and attendance, ensuring that they don’t just get lost in the sea of students or mountain of college work.

I try to have lunch with the deputy directors, who support me in the running of a large college such as ours. This is a chance for us to share the news of the day, learn about developments in particular issues or projects that we are each working on or discuss concerns around students that have been brought to our attention. At a further education and training college such as ours, thankfully, student misbehaviour is rarely an issue. What is more likely to be of concern is how a timetable might need to be adapted to suit a particular student’s needs, for example, ensuring that all classes are held in one particular building rather than spread across a number of campus
buildings, if that student has a mobility problem or physical disability.

Although no two days are the same, it is very likely that I will be required to attend a meeting, seminar or conference off campus. I have been the chair of the further education subcommittee of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals for the last number of years, for example, and this has allowed me to engage with my fellow directors of further education and training colleges to champion the reform of the sector and to promote the valuable work that is achieved within the sector. A recent vision statement published by the NAPD demonstrates the vital role the FET colleges play in supporting access by disadvantaged students to further and higher education. It is vital that we spread the word to students, parents, career guidance counsellors and other agencies about the excellent learning opportunities, tailored supports and myriad progression opportunities that are available through the further education and training route.

I am proud to lead a college that makes such a difference in people’s lives and I am particularly proud of the difference we have made to the lives of students with disabilities. I see it first hand as I walk through the college, as I talk to the students and when I meet those same students at graduation. As I write this, I am very much focused on the graduation ceremony for the class of 2014, where I am looking forward to celebrating the success of all our students. But I will reserve an extra special congratulations for those students who have overcome challenges, such as the students supported through the Open Learning Centre. I commend them and all who supported them to achieve their academic goals.
Ahead would like to thank all contributors to this publication for their time and input.
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A Review of Inclusive Education & Employment Practices

AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation.

AHEAD provides information to students and graduates with disabilities, teachers, guidance counsellors and parents on disability issues in education.

AHEAD works with graduates and employers through the GET AHEAD Graduate Forum and the WAM Mentored Work Placement Programme.

AHEAD coordinates LINK, a worldwide network of professionals promoting the inclusion of students & graduates with disabilities in Higher Education managed by 6 European partner organisations.