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Seeing Ahead: A Study of Factors Affecting Blind & Vision Impaired Students going on to Higher Education

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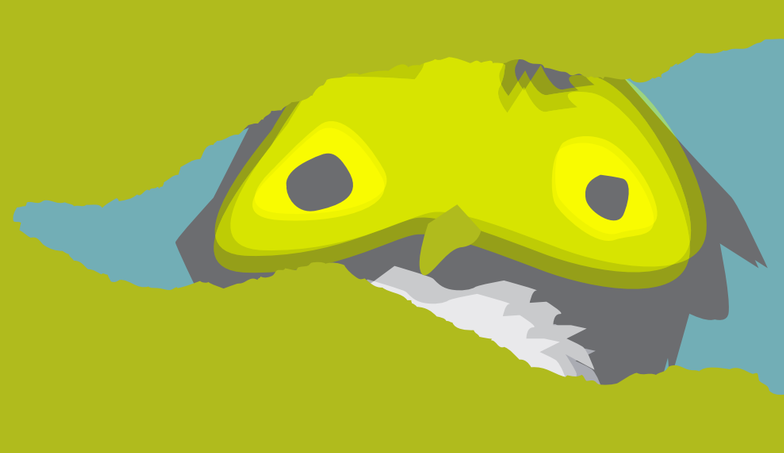

AHEAD

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Executive Summary

Introduction:

AHEAD commissioned this research for two reasons, firstly our own research indicates that in spite of a high rise in the numbers of students progressing on to higher education, the numbers of students who are Blind or Vision Impaired appeared to have remained static. Secondly, FEACH the association of parents of Blind and Vision Impaired students in second level have expressed real concerns about the experiences of their children in secondary school. As AHEAD is an organisation that works to create awareness of the factors needed to create equality of experience in education for students with disabilities, we set out to investigate this challenging issue with a view to establishing if Blind and Vision Impaired students were under-represented in higher education, and to investigate the factors which affect their experiences of the education system.

The values of AHEAD are based on values of inclusive education: the right to belong in mainstream education; to independent and meaningful learning; to reasonable accommodations and supports and to equality of outcomes; in particular to qualifications and employment.

Inclusive education:

AHEAD recognises that while students who are Blind and Vision Impaired have been included in mainstream education for some time now, the challenge is to change the system to meet their needs. This presents significant cultural, structural and practical challenges to all those involved in the education system. There are myths, mindsets and cultural assumptions about Blindness which collectively have a very negative impact on both the education and achievement of Blind and Vision Impaired students. The attitude:

"isn't it great he is doing anything at all"

This report acknowledges that despite the additional resources the Minister for Education and Science has provided to support mainstream schools to be more inclusive in their practices, many children are experiencing discrimination in education. It has established that parents feel very strongly that mainstream education is the correct educational environment for their children, but that the resources are not sufficiently targeted to meet children's educational needs. It also highlights the many challenges that exist in ensuring that Blind and Vision Impaired children can exercise their rights. This means deliberately creating an inclusive school environment that will ensure that Blind and Vision Impaired children can learn and have the same opportunities as all other children to reach their potential and progress on to further or higher education.

Challenges:

If we pose the question: **are Blind and Vision Impaired children in mainstream secondary education in Ireland getting an education that meets their needs and enables them to develop the core skills outlined as essential by the NCCA?** The answer raises considerable challenges for the current educational system.

The Government has stated its commitment to Inclusive Education but in reality an inclusive approach presents considerable challenges to the system. The education system is, after all designed around children with similar learning needs who are catered

for by more traditional teaching methods. The greatest challenge is to move away from this traditional approach and to recognize the diversity of all children's learning needs.

Challenges identified in this research include:

- designing a broader curriculum to meet the learning needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children and develop essential core skills such as Braille, literacy, technical skills, Maths, personal effectiveness skills.
- taking a more creative approach to teaching and learning
- providing greater guidance to teachers to enable them to be more inclusive
- assuring easier access to supports and alternative learning materials.

Revised Curriculum:

Creating an inclusive educational culture is not simply a matter of adding on additional teaching resource hours, but requires fundamental changes to the whole system, all of which must interact and come together at the same time. If we include children who are Blind or Vision Impaired with different learning needs in the classroom, then this must affect what is taught, and how it is taught. A revised curriculum would be expected to include a range of core skills essential to ensure that child has opportunities to learn meaningfully and achieve the same results as any other child. These essential core skills include Braille, computer technology, assistive technology (voice synthesiser software), personal effectiveness and independent learning skills. According to this research Braille is an absolutely critical factor in the capacity of Blind children to acquire literacy skills and independent reading skills. Furthermore it is linked to the complex acquisition of language, which is a fundamental competency in a knowledge and information-based society.

Role of Braille:

Yet, parents have concerns about the adequacy of Braille teaching particularly in relation to the acquisition of Braille skills needed to deal with the secondary school subjects. The teaching of Braille is the responsibility of the visiting teacher service and appears to be somewhat ad hoc and dependent on the skills of an individual teacher rather than being available to all Blind children on a systematic basis within the school system.

While the visiting teaching service are doing considerable work to support schools to include students who are Blind and Vision Impaired, it must be noted that they are an advisory service and cannot be solely responsible for the teaching of Braille. Teaching Braille has an equivalent imperative to that given to literacy skills by the NCCA. It is an essential core skill without which children who are Blind will be severely disadvantaged in the acquisition of the literacy and reading skills that are vital to work in an increasingly knowledge-based society.

Core Skills:

The research identifies other critical coping skills for Blind and Vision Impaired children such as personal effectiveness, social skills, sports and physical education, communication skills and assistive technology all of which should be available through the school curriculum. The acquisition of competence in social skills is linked to self esteem and mental well being and these may be more pronounced in children with sight difficulties. Assistive technology can be a key factor in learning for Blind and Vision Impaired students. For example a book CD or a scanned document can be accessed by the child using a voice synthesiser software package such as JAWS. This gives access to all kinds of articles, textbooks and materials for school work but more importantly builds a foundation of independent learning skills required in third level and in the knowledge economy of the modern workplace.

Computer Technology:

In spite of the advances in technology, the practice of using it on the ground is not advanced, and according to data published by the State Examinations Commission, very few students apply to do their examinations electronically. Teaching and learning methods must adapt to become more hands on and incorporate new technology so that Blind and Vision Impaired children can gain easy access to electronic learning materials. There appears to be a perception that new technology will replace Braille, but in fact this research indicates that the function of learning Braille is to develop the cognitive skills required for literacy and language acquisition and the function of new technology is to develop very practical skills. Clearly, it is not *either or* as both areas of learning need to be part of an essential learning curriculum for Blind and Vision Impaired children.

Alternative Materials:

The school system is a text based system and in order to access learning Blind students require alternative materials in real time, in the classroom when they are using them, just like other children. Accessible materials include Braille or alternative text books such as taped books or electronic books in DVD format. These can not be bought like other books but often have to be created. From a parent's perspective, the system for getting alternative textbooks is unacceptably slow and the system for producing Braille books is inadequate as the Braille production Unit simply does not have the capacity to deal with the demand for provision, the result is that many school children in the Leaving Certificate year do not get key textbooks. Many in examination classes for example do not get complete texts in Braille, but are given chapters at a time. Such a practice undermines the child's capacity to develop independent learning and study skills and could be discriminating. The Department of Education and Science needs to review this system so that a more co-ordinated approach can be set up to producing alternative materials which utilises expertise on the ground such as the NCBI

Legislative Framework:

This research outlines the background to the legislative framework that has been put in

place to underpin the development of a mainstream system of education for children with disabilities in Ireland. While this legislative framework is visionary in particular the EPSEN ACT 2004, in terms of aspiring to give school children the right to equality of education, nonetheless, the interpretation of the vision of the act appears lost in the experience of many children and their parents. Equality of educational opportunity for children with disability will not be achieved without equality of educational conditions, in other words that all children have the materials and resources to learn. The National Council for Special Education in their recent Implementation Report highlights the considerable challenges needed to develop all schools as inclusive schools and is seeking additional resources, staff training and supports to be put in place and have outlined a road map to inclusive education as a process to be engaged with rather than a destination.

Application system for supports:

This research is unique in that it outlines clearly the challenges which need to be addressed in accessing vital additional accommodations and supports specifically for Blind and Vision Impaired school children. All children will undoubtedly benefit from supports, however for the child with a disability they are so critical that without them the child will not be able to engage with the learning process in any meaningful way. This report has found that getting supports can be extremely difficult. The actual application process to the Department of Education and Science to acquire additional supports is a highly complex architecture of validations, confirmations, certifications and approvals and therefore most inaccessible to parents and professionals. The process of even getting basic information on entitlements is so lacking in transparency as to undermine eligibility for supports.

Transfer to third level:

Children with sensory disabilities are less likely to progress on to third level by a factor of three than their non-disabled peers. The rate of progression to third level is currently 55% for school-leavers, while for students with sensory disabilities it is between 25% – 26%. Unfortunately the research is unable to answer this question definitively as there is no national data available on the participation of Blind and Vision Impaired students in secondary schools in Ireland that is reliable and transparent. However, we have extrapolated from recent CSO statistics that this group is significantly under-represented in entry to third level. This low

level of entry is not about the ability of Blind and Vision Impaired children, but a consequence of a lack of learning opportunity and supports.

Absence of National Data:

The absence of robust national data on the number of Blind and Vision Impaired students participating in secondary school or taking part in state examinations is a major problem. It is of concern that we need to be able to interrogate reliable data and to be in a position to establish a baseline from which to monitor future progress and to provide us with information on the nature of the challenges to be addressed. This is of particular importance given the history of exclusion and missed opportunities experienced by Blind and Vision Impaired people in the past. Current participation rates of students with sensory impairments are, according to the National Access Office draft National Plan at 17%, well below the national entry rates of non-disabled students at 55%. Robust research into areas such as the effectiveness of outcomes for Blind and Vision Impaired children in mainstreaming education needs to be carried out. Progress in terms of transfer to third level education, further education and/ or other outputs of second level education should be tracked and monitored in order to establish the level of inclusion in mainstream Irish society today.

Conclusion:

The research found that children who are Blind or Vision Impaired are 50% less likely to progress from second level education on into third level and that they are significantly disadvantaged in comparison with their non-disabled peers. The progression rate to higher education for school-leavers with sensory impairments is 26%, half of the national progression rate at 55% of school-leavers to higher education. The participation rate of this group of students in third level has remained static and has not increased in spite of a rapid increase in numbers generally.

This situation is totally unacceptable. Yet the numbers are relatively small, which means that finding solutions so that Blind and Vision Impaired children can learn on an equal basis with other children, should be manageable. It does however require a willingness to make some changes to both the culture and implementation of education for Blind and Vision Impaired children.

A number of key changes would make a significant difference. The development of a robust national data collection system would provide baseline data with which to monitor progress. The curriculum needs to become broader so that it includes a range of subject options that meet the unique needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children, in particular Braille and the use of ICT. A co-ordinated approach together with more easily available funding arrangements would ensure that children have key materials and textbooks in alternative formats such as Braille or CD when other children have them.

Teachers and other professional staff need greater supports and opportunities to develop knowledge about how to teach Blind and Vision Impaired children and how to encourage full participation so that they have the same opportunities as other children to attend higher education and develop careers.

Recommendations:

In order to address the inequality of entry to third level by students who are Blind or Vision Impaired, the Department of Education and Science could look at addressing a number of issues occurring at second level.

1. There is a dearth of data on the participation of Blind and Vision Impaired children in secondary education and there urgently needs to be a national database to track the attendance of these children attending mainstream schools. An analysis of such

data would greatly advance our understanding of the issues for Blind and Vision Impaired children. It would provide a baseline of data against which to measure attainment and progression to higher and further education. Quality data would better inform future policy development in this area.

2. Blind and Vision Impaired children require a separate, structured programme of learning in the essential core skills outlined in this report. Without these skills Blind and Vision Impaired children are being severely disadvantaged in second level and are not able to deal with the disadvantages of their disability, in particular communication skills, use of computers and assistive technology, (such as voice synthesisers), and negotiation of the built environment.

3. Learning Braille is essential for the acquisition of literacy skills, cognitive development, and the development of independent learning capacity for Blind children. Braille needs to be integrated into the curriculum of secondary education for Blind children. Children who are studying through Braille need to have a structured programme of Braille instruction, identified skill outcomes and appropriate monitoring. Due to the dearth of data, already outlined, we do not have precise numbers of Blind children, however the numbers are relatively small as the visiting teachers deal with approximately 226 children in the secondary school system.

4. The visiting teaching service provides a good service, but there are disparities in how they address the needs of the child. The service needs a more defined structure, and greater development opportunities to enhance their level of Braille so that it is appropriate to the age of the children. Children who are studying through Braille should have a Visiting Teacher qualified in Braille to second level standard.

5. The practice of offering half or a quarter of a textbook in Braille or alternative formats to school students should be discontinued. A coordinated and systematic approach should be taken to recognising the numbers of children likely to require a service and to fund the process appropriately. Currently produced by the Braille Production Unit and funded by the Department of Education and Science, the creation of alternative materials needs a coordinated approach between organisations such as the NCBI and the Braille Production Unit. This would ensure Braille books are produced on time and that school books could be made available in new technology such as Daisy or eBooks.

6. This report recommends that the Department of Education and Science opens discussions with publishers of Irish school books to **ensure that ALL school books are sold with a DVD of the book attached**. The Department could consider making approval to publish schoolbooks conditional on attaching a DVD which has minimal cost and would be of benefit to the thousands of disadvantaged children within the school system.
7. School children who are Blind or who have visual impairments should be provided with additional careers advice and at an earlier stage than other children to enable them to make more informed career decisions.
8. Disability training should be a mandatory part of all **teacher training programmes** and staff development and information should be available to all teachers to reach a deeper understanding of the different learning needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children.
9. The administrative system for students to obtain learning supports and assistive technology in schools should be simplified and made more transparent. The subject should be raised with representative bodies of School Principals as well as with the DES and the National Council for Special Educational Needs.
10. The Department of Education and Science should produce an information booklet for parents and other stakeholders such as school principals, teachers and others, providing them with information on the supports and aids available to Blind and Vision Impaired children in secondary schools.
11. The extensive and formal documentation of the State Examinations Commission on its principles of operation, advice to Invigilators, scale and statistics of Reasonable Accommodations and advice to Examination Centres should be compiled into a **Parent and Teacher Oriented Handbook**, which lays out plainly what is being provided.
12. There should be funding available, (similar to the previous HEA Strategic Initiative Fund) to fund third level colleges to collectively offer post-school students with a disability, a summer computers course or orientation, or mobility training course. These have proved highly effective in the past but have been discontinued due to lack of funding.
13. The Department of Social and Family Affairs should be invited to publish a short **Discussion Paper** on the availability of the Blind Pension or Disability Allowance to teenagers based primarily on their own data and research on the topic.
14. The Department of Education and Science should grant aid **research into the teaching pedagogy of Mathematics** to Blind and Vision Impaired students to ensure that a lack of achievement in Maths does not pose a barrier for Blind and Vision Impaired students wishing to access third level.

Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge the support and advice of Ann Heelan, Executive Director of AHEAD. We are grateful for comments and suggestions from Tina Lowe of AHEAD

Féach, the Parent Support Group for Blind and Vision Impaired Children gave invaluable guidance to the researchers. The Board of Féach, in particular Bernie Beirne, were very helpful in organising discussion groups with parents and in signalling the research to a wide number of interested stakeholders.

Parents of school children and older students kindly gave their time to discuss the topic and share personal experiences and observations.

Disability Officers in Higher Education Institutions across the country supplied the

research with important data on the participation rates of Blind and Vision Impaired students. Furthermore, Staff at Disability Support Services shared knowledge and experience with the study.

A number of Visiting Teachers of the Blind and Vision Impaired gave generously of their time and expertise, despite very demanding work schedules.

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The authors were pleased to enter into an in-depth and informative discussion of the subject matter with Mr. Michael Kiely of the State Examinations Commission.

Dr Brian Butler agreed to have his educational career documented and included in the study. He spent time verifying and amending the piece.

AHEAD and Féach, together with Albinism Fellowship, gave help in contacting graduates and students to participate.

Finally, the work would not have been possible without the generous and frank contributions of students and graduates who gave accounts of their own experiences via phone and e-mail. Although their contributions were based on personal experience, each highlighted wider implications and recommendations for the potential and existing student body.

Darra Power-Mooney contributed to the study, in particular the sections relating to third level admissions procedure and policy.

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Preface: A note from Féach

Féach welcomes this report on educational service to Blind and Visually Impaired pupils in Ireland 2008. As parents we have been concerned that the number of pupils progressing to Third Level and then on to full employment has been dropping in recent years.

We have been frustrated at the lack of statistics available from the Department of Education and Science regarding the number of pupils in education, the subjects available to them as well as the level of achievement. AHEAD was also hampered in attempting to establish an accurate reading of the present situation because of the lack of statistical information in the drawing up of this report.

Féach acknowledges the extra recourses available to support pupils in mainstream schools however we feel that little or no adjustments to either the teaching methods or to the creation of a fully accessible curriculum have been made to accommodate the inclusion of Blind and Visually Impaired pupils.

New assistive technology is providing exciting methods and possibilities in education and there is a notion that this will overtake the place of Braille in education. However research indicates that learning Braille develops cognitive skills required for literacy, quite different to the function of learning technological skills which is to develop practical skills. There has been serious erosion in the teaching of Braille; pupils have suffered because of the difficulties in accessing Braille teaching, brailed books, materials and Brailed State Examination papers and past papers.

Féach urges The Department of Education and Science to seriously consider and implement the recommendations of the Seeing Ahead Report and to review the present delivery system to support both schools in their efforts and pupils in a fully inclusive education.

We might then be further along the long road of to seeing our children enjoying equality of the outcome which in turn will allow them to become fulfilled and contributing adults in our society.

We are most appreciative to AHEAD in their efforts to bring these issues to the fore and look forward to an active response to the measured recommendations of this publication.

Introduction

Background to the research problem, 2006

The talent and Intellectual ability of children who are Blind or Vision Impaired is an economic and social asset that we as a nation cannot afford to lose out on. AHEAD and the Association Féach, representing parents of Blind and Vision Impaired children, have for some time been concerned that schoolchildren who are Blind or Vision Impaired are not making progress into and through third level education at the pace which might have been expected from a mainstream educational process. To develop the discussion and policy further, AHEAD and Féach agreed to pool their thinking and commissioned a research project in July 2006. In the course of the study, the Albinism Fellowship expressed an interest in contributing to the research and kindly offered valuable support.

Féach is a Parent Support Group for Blind and Vision Impaired Children formed in 1994. The aim of the association is to support the Education, Training, Communication and Social needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children.

Although primarily a support group, Féach have lobbied for resources and services lacking across various government agencies. The free Travel and Companion Pass was successfully campaigned for in 1996 and Féach was instrumental in setting up the new National Braille Production Centre on the grounds of St Joseph's School, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.

The concept of under representation in education is complex. The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education has identified the need for greater consideration of the measurement of under representation[1] in relation to specific and identifiable categories of potential students of Higher Education. One of the identifiable categories is students with a disability.[2] The National Office has promoted evaluation of what types of access programmes work.[3] A number of general and specific studies address the participation of students with sensory impairments in higher education.[4]

Ireland's National Development Plan 2007 – 2013 commits to a €2 billion Student Support / Third Level Access Sub-Programme to provide adequate opportunities to certain groups, including students with a disability, to progress to higher education. The Sub-Programme signals the provision of a Third Level Access Fund aimed at tackling the under representation of students with disability at third level. It refers specifically to technical supports:[5]

> "Supports and services, including assistive technology supports and services, will also be developed for people with a disability in further and higher education. As well as general assistive technology supports, there is a need for particular national initiatives – for example, making print texts available in audio / large screen".

AHEAD has promoted, developed and participated in a series of education research projects which have focussed on access issues for students with disabilities in general and access issues for school students with specific impairments or difficulties. In this study AHEAD and Féach identified a sub-group within the population of people with disabilities – students who are Blind or Vision Impaired.

At the same time as this research was underway, another distinctive study started at the

Department of Applied Social Studies at University College, Dublin. Commissioned by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) the research is examining the progress of Blind and Vision Impaired children through mainstream school.[6]

The Research Method

The study which follows, explored the social and resource factors which impact on students who are Blind or Vision Impaired and which could play a part in their access to Higher Education. The study explored 16 factors separately, or in combination, to identify whether they played a part in access to higher education.

The study used three methods:

- Discussions with students, education staff and stakeholders
- Desk research
- Group discussion with parents.

The factors which could impact on students' take-up of opportunities in third level education were grouped into four clusters: Eligibility for Higher Education; Attitudes of people in the school student's life; Attitudes of school students and wider factors in the environment or social milieu of students.

Eligibility factors:

- Blind and Vision Impaired students presenting for the Leaving Certificate exams
- Blind and Vision Impaired students' exposure to specific mathematics teaching
- Blind and Vision Impaired school students acquiring enough points to go to Third Level
- Student capacities with assistive technology
- Access to study materials in Braille or electronic access

Attitudes of others:

- The information offered by Guidance Counsellors
- The readiness of parents to support students
- The outreach of third level colleges to Vision Impaired and Blind students
- The role of Visiting Teachers/Resource Teachers/staff of the National Council for Special Education.

1 NOEAHE (2006) *Annual Report and Outline Plans 2006*, Dublin.

2 Skillbeck and O'Connell (2000) *Access and Equity in Higher Education: An International perspective on Issues and Strategies, HEA.* Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, Stationary Office, Dublin.

3 HEA (2006) *Towards the Best Education for All: An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland*, NOEAHE, HEA.

4 Including Studies of AHEAD.

5 Department of Finance Ireland. *National Development Plan 2007 – 2013. Transformin Ireland. A Better Quality of Life for All.* Stationary Office, Dublin.

6 See NCBI and Bairbre Redmond *UCD Pilot Study of the Social Needs of Vision Impaired children in mainstream schools.* Study in progress 2006.

Student attitudes:

- Attitudes/confidence of students in relation to further or higher education
- Students' appreciation of the supports available
- Attitude and preparedness for mixing and interacting with sighted students.

Wider environment factors:

- Availability of income supports such as Disability Allowance from the age of 16 years onwards
- Peer pressures on students
- Attitudes of voluntary bodies such as the National Council for the Blind of Ireland
- Presumptions of preference for electronic formats as opposed to Braille.

This report addresses the question:

Are students who are Blind or Vision Impaired under-represented in Third Level education and what are factors affecting the transition to Higher Education of children who are Blind and Vision Impaired?

Chapter 1: Background

1. Government policy

There have been significant developments in the education of children with disabilities in Ireland in recent years. The most significant arises from the international leadership provided through the E.U. Maastricht Treaty to include children with disabilities in mainstream educational provision at all levels. In Ireland the Serc. Report 1993 attached particular importance to the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools and this move was endorsed by the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act 2004. This Act set out to give children with disabilities the right to an appropriate education, the establishment of NCSE and the provision of additional resources for special education.

There is clear commitment from the Department of Education and Science to including students with disabilities in mainstream education and the National council for special education estimate that there are now 17% or 190,303 children with disabilities in Ireland in 2004/5 (NCSE).

This commitment has led to establishment of the National Council for Special Education, the provision of additional resources and the passing of legislation such as the:

- Equality Legislation
- Education for persons with special needs Act 2004
- The Disability act 2005

Collectively this legislation has consolidated the rights of children with disabilities to equality of experience and to the provision of supports in education. The Epson Act 2004 in particular has challenged the traditional view of educational provision for children with disabilities as something separate and has moved towards an inclusive approach to education, moving the child with a disability into the mainstream classroom. The Government policy in relation to special needs education is to provide integrated education whenever possible in an inclusive environment.[7] This is formally provided for in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004. Once a child is assessed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), or in some instances by an approved private assessor, they are entitled to a response to their needs.[8]

The response to the child's needs should be provided in one of three settings:

- Mainstream schools with any necessary supports (for example, Special Needs Assistants)
- Special classes in mainstream schools
- Special schools

Until the early nineties children with disabilities in the main attended segregated schools, but since then there has effectively been a revolution and there are now according to a recent NCSE report over 190,303 children with special educational needs in education in Ireland. In addition immigrants from over 100 countries coming to live in Ireland, including children with different language needs are integrated into mainstream schools, placing extra pressure on already over-stretched teachers. Yet, an inclusive approach to curriculum development would have the capacity to value and meet the diverse needs of all children in the classroom.

1.2 Inclusive education, a definition:

If we are moving towards Inclusive education it is important to consider a definition of what it is and to debate the several practice models in existence. Children with special needs were catered for in the past in segregated education which often prioritised their medical needs rather than educational ones resulting in a very poor educational output. We now know that people with disabilities want to be included in all aspects of society in particular education and have through the Commission Report on the Status of People with Disabilities recommended significant change to the education system to ensure that it is fully inclusive of children with disabilities.

Inclusive education depends on full inclusion of children with disabilities into all aspects of education, policies and practices, curriculum design, teacher training, buildings and facilities, teaching and learning pedagogy and cultural activities. If equality initiatives are to succeed, then they cannot be introduced as add-on resources left to specialist teachers to implement, but must be introduced on a whole school basis. Both the structure and curriculum of education must change if children with disabilities are to be included in the education system and afforded the same opportunities to reach their full potential as any other child. According to Inclusive education centres in Canada and the UK mainstreaming:

> "Does not mean placing the child in the regular classroom where the child is considered more like a visitor to the class than part of the class, but rather it assumes that the child with special needs is part of the class and should be treated as such. Inclusive education is a concept that values all the children and reduces their exclusion from the curriculum, the culture and communities of schools. It is a basic human right and needs to be supported by a change in attitudes and a change in the distribution of resources so that all children can learn and reach their potential."

What this means is that the system is designed to ensure that the educational experience of the child should be as good as that of all other children in the classroom. Careful consideration needs to be given to the classroom experience of the child and to the curriculum which should be designed to enable each child to participate to the best of their abilities and to maximise the learning opportunities of all the children in the classroom. It means that a child who is Blind, for example, has alternative textbooks at the same time as other children, it means that the

7 See Oasis article *Special Education*, www.oasis.gov.ie

8 Comhairle (2005) *Entitlements for People with Disabilities*, Dublin. Pg.119.

child learns how to use assistive technology to communicate as early as possible. This approach has been endorsed by the UN and the right to inclusive education and entitlement is enshrined in Education Article 24 of The Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities and was adopted by the UN General Assembly in New York on December 2006. It stated that:

> "effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion."

In order for children to deal with the often considerable educational disadvantage caused by their disability, they will require accommodations or supports on an individual basis, this is particularly so within a mainstream educational system which is designed around the learning needs of children with full sight.

Current Equality Legislation recognises this need for additional supports and gives children the right to a reasonable accommodation; in fact the onus of the legislation is with the school to be proactive in providing reasonable accommodations to ensure participation.

Mr Ted Russell, TD Independent:

> Is the Minister satisfied that adequate provision is being made for secondary education for Blind children?

Mr Jack Lynch, TD and Minister for Education and the Gaeltacht:

> "There are two large national schools, one catering for boys and one for girls, and I understand the boys and girls attending these schools can remain there up to the age of 18. As far as the provision of secondary education is concerned, it would seem to me that education of a vocational or technical nature would be more in line with the type of education required."

Dáil Eireann, 28 January 1959

Moving towards Inclusive Education represents a significant change in the education system and the way we think about students with disability. We must acknowledge that changing the education system will not be easy. The recent NCSE report says of the concept of inclusive education:

> "it would be all too easy to understate the degree of challenge involved for an education regime that was not designed, constructed nor implemented to attain that goal." Pg 6

Every culture has deeply imbedded assumptions about what is normal and what is not and these assumptions influence our decisions and the education of disabled children has so far been dominated by specialised and segregated education and this thinking continues to drive the culture within education. It should be recognised that the present system of education which was designed for the majority of children may inadvertently discriminate against certain groups by neglecting to recognise, respond to or plan for their particular needs and circumstances.

Changing this culture will not simply be a matter of adding on additional teaching resource hours, but requires a planned deliberate strategy including fundamental changes to policy and practice. Moving towards inclusive education will require up-skilling teachers, addressing gaps in the curriculum and providing a system of individual support needs for children with disability. Most importantly it will involve changing cultures and belief systems about disability from seeing the disability to seeing the ability in children. It will also mean changing attitudes and behaviours of decision makers, of teachers, union representatives. All those involved

must open their minds to think about including students with disabilities in the classroom to come up with innovative and creative ways of teaching and communicating within it.

1.3 Changing workplace

The workforce of the future according to the **2006 National Workplace Strategy**, Ireland, will need to be highly skilled and will draw more heavily on marginalised groups:

> "Additional participation is also expected from those with disabilities as they remain a relatively untapped potential labour pool"

Unless there is real equality of access to educational opportunities and qualifications then we risk losing highly skilled individuals from the workforce.

Disabled children must have the opportunity to develop their skills and abilities in order to take part in the knowledge economy emerging in Ireland.

Mainstreaming education for children with disabilities is happening right now, but it is very new and this research sets out to document the experiences of children who are Blind or Vision Impaired in particular. It aims to identify their needs and any barriers to their full participation and to make recommendations that will accelerate the process of including those students into the mainstream school environment and to improve their opportunities to progress to further and higher education.

Chapter 2: Context of secondary education for Blind and Vision Impaired children

This chapter sets out to explore the context of education for children who are Blind or who are Vision Impaired in a mainstream school environment and to explore the particular barriers to learning.

The barriers can be categorised under a number of headings namely:

- Common Myths and Misconceptions
- An Exclusive Curriculum
- Teaching methods

In 2006 the National Disability Authority (NDA) published a report into the educational needs of primary school children with disabilities.

In relation to the transition between primary and secondary schools the report found that:[9]

> "These (Vision Impaired) children tend to cope reasonably well at primary level, but can encounter serious difficulties on transition to secondary school, where they can become isolated in the more complex environment".

A student's educational experience in secondary school is critical to their decision to engage with further education or higher education and it is important to identify the factors which affect their educational experience..

2. Common Myths and Misconceptions

2.1 Some common myths

There are many common myths and misconceptions associated with visual impairment and Blindness. These myths can have far reaching consequences as they effect how people, including some teachers and guidance counsellors, interact with Blind and Vision Impaired children and students. In the past there was an association between disability and lack of ability as the previous quotation exemplifies and unfortunately that attitude, (while changing) still prevails today.

According to Owen-Hutchinson et al (1998):

> "Visual Impairment is a complex phenomenon which has, over the centuries, been the subject of a wealth of myth and legend. This in turn has served to obscure many of the stark realities associated with Blindness and partial sight... If some practical understanding of visual impairment is to be gained, these myths – and the assumptions behind them – will need to be challenged."[10]

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) and the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) have pages on their websites that try to dispel some of these myths.[11] No Irish literature on common myths around Blindness and visual impairment was found during the course of this study.

The box below illustrates some of the myths stated by the CNIB and the RNIB.

Myths about Blindness and Visual Impairment

Myth 1: Blind people see nothing
The most common of the myths is that Blind people live in complete darkness. However, only around 18 per cent of Vision Impaired people are classed as totally Blind and the majority of these can still distinguish between light and dark.

Myth 2: Blind people have special gifts or a sixth sense
Some people believe that Blind or Vision Impaired people have a better sense of touch, hearing, taste or smell to compensate for their loss of vision. In fact, the opposite is often true with many Blind or Vision Impaired people actually having a poorer sense of hearing or touch, especially when they are older. It takes common sense, practice and appropriate support and training for a Vision Impaired person to be able to catch the right bus or prepare a meal and not some intrinsic sixth sense.

Myth 3: Blind people feel other people's faces
It is a myth that Blind people feel other people's faces in order to work out who they are. In fact, 77 per cent of Vision Impaired people retain enough vision to recognise people they know up close. If a Blind person does not know who you are they will generally ask you. However, a small number of people with additional disabilities may use touch as a strategy for identifying people and objects.

Myth 4: All Blind people can read Braille
Some but not all Blind people can read Braille fluently. Some Vision Impaired people use large print instead of Braille.

Myth 5: All Blind people own guide dogs
Guide dogs are used by a small fraction of the total number of Blind and Vision Impaired people. There are only 164 Guide Dog partnerships in Ireland.

Source: www.rnib.org.uk and www.cnib.ca

9 NDA (2006) *Special Education Provision for Children with Disabilities in Irish Primary Schools*, Dublin.

10 Owen-Hutchinson, Jane, Atkinson, Karen and Orpwood, Jenny in collaboration with the RNIB (1998) *Breaking Down Barriers: Access to Further and Higher Education for Vision Impaired Students*, Stanley Thornes, Cheltenham. Pg. 6.

11 There is no equivalent page on the National Council of the Blind Website.

The prism through which people with disabilities are seen affects how they are treated and negative attitudes can extend to all areas of the classroom, affecting Blind and Vision Impaired students, as well as Blind and Vision Impaired teachers or lecturers. This is illustrated by Rod Michalko, a University lecturer who is Blind:[12]

> "They sit there in surprise, some are confused and others sit at their desks in disbelief. "I couldn't believe it when you walked in with Smokie[13] at the beginning of the class" one student told me about half way through the term… Yet this disbelief goes much farther than merely the expression of surprise. For example, a former student dropped in to visit me about a year after he graduated. During our visit, he, Stuart, was reminiscing about the first class he took from me. He said that about a month into the class, Brian (the student who sat next to him) became suspicious of my Blindness. Stuart said that Brian pointed out that "He looks right at me", as he put it and asked Stuart if he thought I was really Blind".

The above extract illustrates people's disbelief or shock that a Blind or Vision Impaired person is capable of having a *normal* working life. The student's *disbelief* that Rod was Blind demonstrates a lack of knowledge about Blindness or Visual Impairment.

A student participant in this study described the potential impact of common myths surrounding Blindness on educational achievement:

> "I believe that there are many myths and stereotypes around visual impairment and Blindness that teachers and teacher training colleges have failed to address. It's unfortunate as I believe that as a result of this, teachers may have low expectations for students who are Vision Impaired, when this may not be necessary. If a child is underachieving, teachers may believe that they may be unable to cope due to lower intelligence, but in fact it may be just down to a lack of adequate resources".

2.2 Blind and Vision Impaired children's stepping stones to learning

Myths can have consequences for Blind and Vision Impaired children. For example, if a child's teacher believes one or more of these myths it could have an effect on his/her behaviour towards the child in the classroom and will affect the child's development and experiences of the world. Likewise, if a parent or teacher has no awareness of the child's experience of Blindness or Visual Impairment, the child's development may be affected as a result. This issue is most acute as Blind and Vision Impaired children experience education in mainstream classrooms.

Frances K. Liefert explained how a Blind or Vision Impaired child learns and develops using two examples of a child's first visit to the beach. In the first scenario a Vision Impaired boy is taken to the beach without an explanation of where he is going or what to expect. For him, the experience may be strange or even frightening. Someone may slather the child with cold sun cream, which startles him. His shoes may be taken off and set aside and he may not be aware of where they are. The shoes are now lost to the child until they are returned to him at the end of the day.

According to Liefert:[14]

> "The cawing of seagulls, the barking of a dog, and the buzzing of insects have no visual cues connected with them, making them mysterious, perhaps meaningless, or maybe anxiety provoking".

In the second example a girl goes to the beach with someone who enjoys *'introducing her to the joys of summer'*. This child's experience will be completely different:[15]

> "Her companion, who may be sighted or Blind, has described where they are going so that she has some preparation for what awaits her as she first sets foot on the beach.

She anticipates eating a picnic lunch on the beach, and she has helped to buy the food and pack it in the ice chest… Together, they have paused to pick up some sand and feel it sift through their fingers before they venture to the shore. Her friend has pointed out how the sand becomes damper the closer they get to the water. She may have picked up some more sand on her own to examine the change in texture".

This child listens to an explanation about why it is important to protect her skin from the sun and puts cream on all the areas she can reach herself and asks for help for the part she cannot reach. With her companion's assistance, she has placed her shoes in a bag on a particular corner of their blanket so she can retrieve them herself when it is time to go".

These examples help to illustrate the different ways that a child who is Blind or Vision Impaired perceives the world and interacts within it, as well as the effect that their caregivers can have on their experiences and learning:

"Children who are Blind or Vision Impaired lack the opportunity for what is termed 'incidental learning', the ability to learn about the world simply by watching what goes on around them. Blindness or visual impairment may interfere with learning through the other senses as well, since sight is the sense that people who are sighted use most frequently to unify the experiences of their senses. To compensate for the missing sources of information, caregivers must create an environment rich in other sensory experiences and that includes verbal descriptions early on".[16]

However, it is important to be aware that children who are Blind or who have visual impairments are a very diverse group with different needs. It is important that their caregivers and teachers are aware of these needs and that every effort is made to compensate for the reduced access to their environment.[17]

The learning and development of children with low vision may also be affected by the

"false assumption that direct instruction in specific visual, social and academic skills is not necessary… in order for them to develop competence in home, school and community environments simply because they have some sight".

The significance of formal learning of social skills for mixing in society is frequently underestimated and under taught. This can be forgotten in mainstream classrooms as much as in special classes or special schools.

12 Michalko, Rod (2001) *Blindness Enters the Classroom*, Disability and Society, Vol.16, No. 3. Taylor and Francis, London, Pg.350.

13 Rod Michalko's guide dog.

14 Liefert, Frances K., (2003) *Introduction to Visual Impairment* in Goodman, Stephan A. and Wittenstein, Stuart H. (eds.) Collaborative Assessment: *Working with Students who are Blind or Vision Impaired, Including Those with Additional Abilities*, AFB Press, New York. Pg. 2.

15 Liefert, Frances K., (2003). Pg. 2.

16 Liefert, Frances K., (2003) *Introduction to Visual Impairment* in Goodman, Stephan A. and Wittenstein Stuart H. (eds.) Collaborative Assessment: *Working with Students who are Blind or Vision Impaired, Including Those with Additional Disabilities*, AFB Press, New York. Pg. 4.

17 Lewis, Sandra and Allman, Carol B. (2000) *Seeing Eye to Eye: An Administrators Guide to Students with Low Vision*, AFB Pres, New York. Pg. 7.

Some parents felt that attitudes towards their children would improve if the children could learn the social skills that other children picked up automatically from observation. Examples cited were children learning the importance of making eye contact in conversation or avoiding looking towards the ceiling in social situations. A mother described to the study how her son – a teenager – felt *weird* and that he absolutely did not want to stand out in this way because he was *different*.

The experience of early education for a Blind or Vision Impaired child and whether this experience is positive or negative will affect their aspirations to engage with third level education.

2.3 Curriculum and pedagogy

The recent transfer of children who are Blind or who have Visual Impairments into mainstream schools raises the question of suitable teaching approaches and methods. The method of differentiated teaching in a single classroom is a complex approach for which some teachers are unprepared.[18]

Lizbeth A. Barclay (2003) argues that many educators are only beginning to recognise that Blind or Vision Impaired students need a larger and more complex core curriculum in schools. Furthermore the school curriculum should meet these students' unique needs in *"areas such as Braille instruction, O&M[19], and assistive technology"* as well as *"supporting the inclusion of the concept of core curriculum"*. This means including compensatory skills, such as communication and listening and extended school year services, which include social interaction skills, recreation and leisure and career education.[20]

The presence of children who are Blind or Vision Impaired in mainstream classes challenges many notions of the core curriculum and the essential constituents of a core curriculum.

The current Primary School Curriculum was developed in 1999. The English curriculum gives significant consideration to the importance of all aspects of language acquisition – oral, reading and writing – in a child's development through Primary school and beyond:[21]

> "The ability to read effectively is an essential requirement if the child is to benefit fully from the educational process, to develop his/her potential, and to participate appropriately as a citizen in society. This is a crucial element in the child's language learning.
>
> The acquisition of literacy is a principal concern of the English curriculum and this reflects stated national policy. It is important that reading, comprehension and writing skills are acquired systematically and that children with particular learning needs are identified at an early stage and provided with adequate remedial support."

In addition to the development of skills, the Primary Curriculum goes on to highlight other important aspects of reading and literacy:

> "Building on a growing mastery of reading and comprehension skills, the child can be led to appreciate the usefulness and pleasures of reading. Through having access to a wide range of texts, by being encouraged to read silently on a regular basis, and in having the freedom to choose reading material he/she can develop personal tastes and interests. In turn, this will help to cultivate habits that can lead to a perception of reading as a continuing source of pleasure and satisfaction."

Reading and literacy retain their importance at Junior Cycle level in the Post Primary School English curriculum. A general aim of Junior cycle English is to foster an

> "awareness in the student of the interrelationship of these skills [speaking, listening, reading and writing], and of their central role in

the learning and thinking processes, …an integral element of personal growth through English".[22]

At Senior Cycle, and in the lead up to the Leaving Certificate, the English syllabus aims to develop in students

"a mature and critical literacy to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life in all contexts".

The curriculum acknowledges the *complex task* of becoming literate in *modern society*, it stresses the fundamental importance of that task:[23]

"Developing control and power over language is the most essential educational achievement for all students if they are to become confident, thoughtful and discriminating adults and citizens"

The school curricula at every level clearly demonstrate a huge emphasis on reading and literacy for students. Language acquisition, including reading and literacy, is considered an essential skill for full participation in society as individual students move into adulthood. The art of listening and communicating through speech are equally important in the school curricula but are considered separate elements in overall language acquisition and development.

The rights of people with disabilities to participate in education via appropriate means are set in international law. In 2006, the UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 – Education states that persons with disabilities will be enabled *"to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community."* Some appropriate measures towards this end are enumerated including *"facilitating the learning of Braille"* and *"ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are Blind, Deaf or Deaf-Blind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual"*. Ireland became a signatory to the Convention on 30th March 2007.
Blind and visual impaired children have an equal right to the acquisition of independent literacy and reading skills, however, exercising this right will require carefully planned interventions and instruction provided by teachers will help to prevent the issues of weak literacy skills, low self-esteem and slow rates of task completion, often associated with Vision Impaired students. Equality does not mean being treated equally, but having the same opportunities to learn as other students which in turn means different resources, having alternative books

18 Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (no date) *Provision for Students with Special Education Needs in Post-Primary Schools*, Dublin

19 Orientation and Mobility

20 Barclay, Lizbeth A. (2003) *Expanded Core Curriculum: Education* in Goodman, Stephen A. and Wittenstein, Stuart H. (eds.) Collaborative Assessment: *Working with students who are Blind or Vision Impaired including those with additional disabilities*, AFB Press, New York.

21 Government of Ireland Primary School Curriculum. English. Stationary Office, Dublin.

22 Government of Ireland (implemented 1989) Junior Certificate English Syllabus. Stationary Office: Dublin

23 Government of Ireland (no date) The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus. Stationary Office, Dublin.

learning Braille to facilitate independent learning and different pedagogic approaches.

2.4 Learning with Braille

Braille, invented over 180 years ago, is a simple system of six raised dots, used in 63 various combinations to formulate letters, numbers, punctuation, musical notes and even chemistry symbols.[24] These six dots are arranged three high and two wide in a cell type structure.[25] Braille can be read by touch or by sight.

Learning Braille is critical for the development of literacy and reading skills in Blind children according to Johnstone:[26]

> "If we were to propose that sighted children no longer needed to learn to read and write, that they could get all their information from radio, television, or tapes, the idea would be rejected immediately. Vision Impaired children are no different in that respect. The ability to read and write is absolutely essential if we expect them to become self-supporting in their adult life".

There are many recognised advantages to using Braille as opposed to other forms of communication for Blind and Vision Impaired people. For instance Braille is more easily scanned and therefore considered better for text heavy materials such as schoolbooks.[27]

Foulke also contends that Braille:[28]

- Preserves certain aspects of print which are lost in auditory translation
- Presents information in a spatial way allowing for spaced lines and headings
- Often displays numerical information more clearly.

A number of long-term benefits of Braille learning are enumerated in an American study which concluded:[29]

> "Of the 74 adults in the group 43 learned Braille as their original primary medium and 31 had learned to read using print… those who were taught [Braille] from the beginning had higher employment rates, were better educated and more financially self sufficient and spent more time doing pleasure and other reading than the print users"

adding:

> "It is imperative that vision professionals resist the urge to normalise Vision Impaired children by insisting that they read only print".

Visiting Teachers in Ireland have the responsibility for teaching Braille to Vision Impaired children in mainstream schools. Ryles discusses the use of Visiting Teachers and argues that due to the often wide geographical spread and large numbers of students, these teachers *"are forced to assume consulting rather than active teaching roles"*.[30]

A number of Visiting Teachers interviewed for this research highlighted the pros and cons of teaching Braille:[31]

> "there are lots of problems in getting Braille books for the beginning of term. We have discussed this with the Braille Production Centre and they have asked for book orders very early in the previous year. It's not possible to get those lists at that time as schools don't make final decisions until the spring."

"One of the strengths of Braille is that it is instant – which is important for the participation of Vision Impaired and Blind students in mainstream education"

"In order for Braille to be promoted it must be met with expressions of enthusiasm."

Students learning through Braille can make up their own Braille notes, read back their own notes and print out their notes on a Braille printer.

2.5 Learning without Blind or Vision Impaired teachers

Admission to primary and post primary teacher training courses is generally prohibited to Blind or Vision Impaired students. Under the Rules for National Schools, eligibility conditions for admission to teacher training courses in colleges are determined, not by the College, but by the Minister for Education. Student teachers are obliged to furnish their college with a Medical Declaration and to undergo a Medical Examination prior to completing their studies. The Certificate and Examination should show that they are

"free from any physical or mental defect likely to impair his/her usefulness as a teacher."

Blindness is regarded as a *defect*. Whatever the merits of this position, the outcome is that Blind children and students are never taught by teachers who have experienced being Blind or Vision Impaired. Ironically, Blind Third Level lecturers can be and actually are, employed in Universities and Colleges which are not under the directed governance of or auspices of the Department of Education and Science.

2.6 National Braille Production Centre[32]

The National Braille Production Centre (NBPC) produces Braille and large print books for 180-210 children, 130 of whom are in mainstream schools and 50 of whom are in St Joseph's or Rosmini Community College. This study learned that the number of requests to the NBPC for Braille books is falling. The NBPC do not currently have enough staff to produce the scale of books necessary. Instead, the centre must prioritise requests with top

24 National Council of the Blind of Ireland 2007.

25 Wormsley, Diane P. *Braille Literacy: A functional approach* United States: AFB Press

26 Johnson, L. (1996) *The Braille Literacy Crisis for Children* in Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness: Special edition on Literacy May–June 1996

27 Drexler, M. (1995) *The Decline of Braille* Braille Monitor 01.11.1996, pp. 634–636

28 Foulke cited in Catherine Mack, *How useful is Braille?* www.braille.org

29 Ryles, R. (1998) *The Impact of Braille Reading Skill on Employment, Income, Education and Reading Habits* in Braille Monitor Vol. No. 41 92-104

30 Ryles, R. (1998) *The Impact of Braille Reading Skill on Employment, Income, Education and Reading Habits* in Braille Monitor Vol. No. 41 92-104

31 Ralaheen interviews with Visiting Teachers for Vision Impaired Students, 2006.

32 Visit to NBPC, documents of NBPC, NBPC News 2006. The views expressed in this paragraph are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the NBPC.

priority going to the Leaving Certificate, then Junior Certificate and lastly Primary School children with large print Primary School books at the bottom of the list. Sometimes those books are simply not finished on time. Sixty pages of Braille text can make up a volume. So a single book can consist of five or six volumes, which take up a lot of space in schools. For copyright reasons, all the books provided are on loan to children from the NBPC.

Text files of books can also be produced. The Digital Audio Information Systems (DAISY) is a step forward in text technology and has less copyright issues than earlier systems.

2.7 Assistive Technology

According to Sally Cain it is important that the technology skills of children who are Blind or Vision Impaired are developed at an early age so that they become confident in *"utilising and harnessing its capabilities to extend their learning horizons"*.[33] Utilising assistive or adapted technology can prove essential in reducing the barriers to learning for Blind and Vision Impaired students. However, it is vital that before any technological devices are purchased, that the user's needs are determined to ensure the appropriateness of the technology. In other words, a technology assessment should be completed and *"should accurately identify the most appropriate technology solution for that individual within their particular environment"*.[34] It is also important that people are trained to use the technology properly if its use is to be successful.

There are many types of technological aids for people who are Blind or Vision Impaired and these include:

- Adapted PCs (with magnification software or large monitors)
- Speech output programmes
- Tactile technology, such as electronic Braille displays, and electronic note takers
- New forms of Braille printing

Some of these technologies have the potential to significantly reduce the learning disadvantages faced by Blind and Vision Impaired students.

Although the use of technology is valuable for Blind and Vision Impaired students, it is important that technology is used in addition to and not as a replacement for the teaching of Braille.

2.8 Teaching of Mathematics to students who are Blind or Vision Impaired

Mathematics is an essential subject to gain entry to Third Level education and to several courses of study. Mathematics is an area that is often regarded as particularly difficult for people who are Blind. Reading and writing Maths is different from reading and writing text, therefore Braille is not comprehensively adequate for the representation of Maths. This is because of linearity, meaning that text is linear in nature but mathematical equations are two-dimensional and also the character set, which is much larger for Maths than for text.[35]

There has been little development in the process or pedagogy of teaching Mathematics in Ireland. This is despite the use of Mathematics as an entrance qualifier to Third Level education. There is little evidence of *"group work, individualised work, whole class discussion or reflection"* [36] in Mathematics teaching. In this general consensual environment of acceptance of Mathematics teaching, the specific learning modes of Blind and Vision Impaired students can be not only neglected, but also ignored.

For younger children the main issue with Maths lies in the difficulty of developing suitable cognitive processes without the support of any visual experience. Although the limitations of Braille is an issue at this

time, it is as the students get older that these limitations are felt more and more *"as they manage to develop a series of processing strategies that take to abstraction and to consequent mathematical conceptualisation through other ways, while the need of more efficient tools grows accordingly".*[37]

2.9 Summary

There are many common myths and assumptions surrounding Blindness and Visual Impairment, all of which have consequences on the pedagogy employed when teaching Blind and Vision Impaired children and consequently for the ability of the Blind or Vision Impaired child to learn. Children who are Blind or Vision Impaired are a diverse group with different learning needs and it is important that Education takes account of these needs and compensates for their reduced access to the environment. In addition Blind children do not benefit from incidental learning and teachers need to be aware of how the Blind child interacts with the world around them and the effect they can have on the learning capacity of the child.

Differentiated teaching in a classroom is often something for which teachers are ill prepared and many educators are only becoming aware of the need for a larger and more complex core curriculum in schools which could meet the students unique learning needs such as Braille instruction, assistive technology, social skills and compensatory skills in communication, listening, leisure and career education.

The importance of learning Braille has been likened to the importance for sighted children of learning to read text. The Irish school curricula emphasise reading and literacy as an essential skill for the academic and personal development and fulfilment of students. In addition the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines *Communication* to include Braille and sets out the right of Blind people to both learn Braille and to learn through Braille. Yet, the structures in place to ensure all Blind children can learn Braille effectively appear to be inadequate. The use of technology alongside Braille has the potential to significantly enhance learning opportunities for Blind and Vision Impaired students.
Yet this research indicates that the take-up of essential assistive technology in state examinations is under-utilised and the introduction and engagement with the rapidly evolving new information technologies both in Computer Programme applications and hardware devices is too slow. New technology

33 Cain, Sally (2001) *Accessing Technology: Using Technology to support the learning and employment opportunities for Vision Impaired users*, RNIB, London. Pg. 10.

34 Cain, Sally (2001) Pg. 13.

35 Karshmer, Arthur I. and Bledsoe, Chris (no date) *Access to Mathematics by Blind Students*, University of South Florida. Available from www.snv.jussieu.fr.

36 See M. Lyons et al (2003) *Inside Classrooms – the teaching and learning of mathematics in social context*, Institute of Public Administration, pp. 1–22.

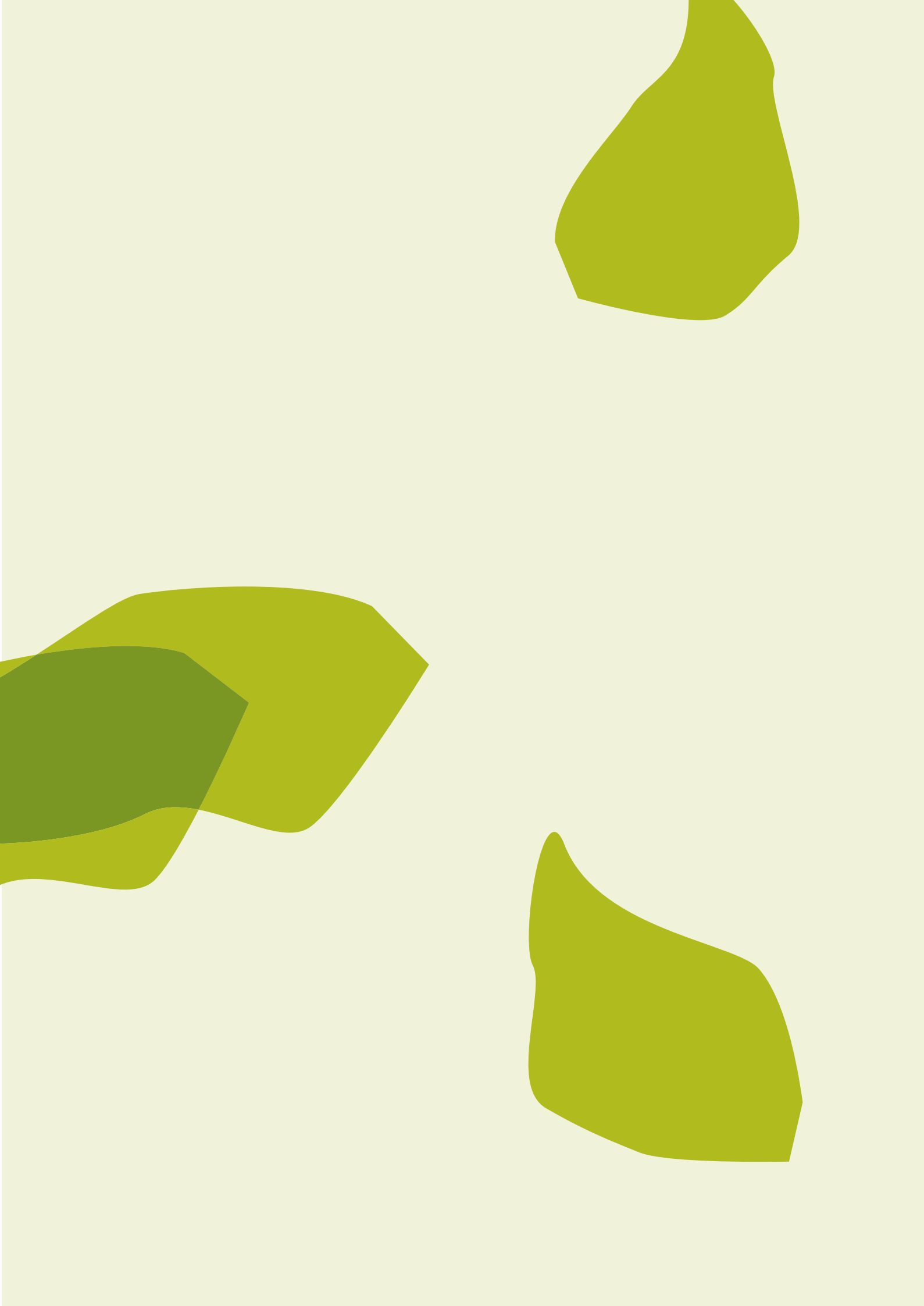
37 Fogarlo, Flavio (no date) *Maths and Blind Students: the LAMBDA project*, Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Universita e della Ricerca, Italy.

can remove many barriers to learning and make education accessible on a more equal basis to Blind and Vision Impaired children and open the way to more informed and rational allocation of resources designed to meet the specific communication modes appropriate to students with visual impairments.

The teaching of Mathematics to Blind and Vision Impaired students continues to pose particular difficulties for students and teachers.

2.10 Key Recommendations

- The current system in place through the visiting teacher service should be reviewed with regard to its capacity to implement Braille teaching to all Blind children on a systematic basis.
- Conduct a review of the role of Braille in the acquisition of reading and literacy skills amongst Blind and Vision Impaired children.
- There needs to be a programme of training and awareness for all teachers to up-skill them on how to include Blind children in all aspects of provision for Blind and Vision Impaired children in the classroom.
- Attendance at a programme of awareness of Blindness should be compulsory for all teachers with responsibility for Blind or Vision Impaired children
- The school curriculum at second level needs to be broadened to include ICT and assistive technology, social skill development as well as independent learning skills for Blind and Vision Impaired children.
- The structure and requirements of National School Teaching in which the medical requirements exclude Blind or Vision Impaired students from becoming teachers needs to be urgently reviewed so that talented students who are Blind are not excluded from the teaching profession.



Chapter 3: The legal context of equality in Ireland

The legal framework for access to mainstream education for school students is now in place although the disabled community objected strenuously to the Disabilities Act on the basis that it was not rights-based.

3.1 A comprehensive framework includes the following legislation

The Education Act, 1998
The Equal Status Act, 2000 to 2004

Both of these acts prohibit discrimination on nine grounds and it is prohibited in educational establishments and is defined to include indirect discrimination.

Under the terms of the Acts, disability is broadly defined as including people with physical, intellectual, learning, cogitative or emotional disabilities and a range of medical disabilities. The persons to whom the Acts apply must reasonably accommodate the needs of a person with a disability. This involves providing special treatment or facilities in *"circumstances where without these, it would be impossible or unduly difficult to avail of these goods, services, accommodation etc"*.[38] Services, goods, accommodation and education providers are not obliged to provide accommodations where they will cost more than a nominal cost. What amounts to a nominal cost depends on a number of factors such as the size and resources of the body involved.[39]

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 provides for the education of children younger than 18 with special educational needs. Although the Act focuses on children's education, there are some references to further and adult education for people with disabilities. Under the terms of the Act, you are a person with special educational needs if your capacity to participate in, and benefit from, education is restricted due to an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability.[40] Although the Act is passed, to date (September 2007) it has not been fully implemented.

3.2 The National Council for Special Education

The National Council for Special Education was formally established on 1 October 2005 under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 and took over certain functions from the Department of Education and Science. Section 20 of the Act sets out the general functions of the NCSE. In its recent Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 it reiterates the principles underpinning the EPSEN ACT 2004 amongst which are:

> "the provision of an appropriate education for all in an inclusive setting to be provided as a right, Universal access as a concept will challenge current practice in a very fundamental way".

This report acknowledges that the implementation of the substance of the EPSEN ACT 2004 is

> "only now commencing and which will evolve iteratively over the period ahead as the various implementation challenges, tasks and actions are progressively tackled over the five year implementation period."

This Implementation report clearly outlines the pathway to achieving an inclusive education environment in the future and identifies the many issues and challenges that have to be tackled along the way. However there is the danger that in the meantime, there will be a further diminution of educational experience for these children in secondary schools

The Disability Act, 2005

The year 2006 was the first year of implementation of the 2005 Disability Act.

The Act provides for:

- An independent assessment of individual health (including personal social services) needs and, where appropriate, educational services for persons with disabilities over age 18 years, a related service statement and access to complaints, appeals and enforcement mechanisms, where entitlements are not delivered
- Access to mainstream public buildings, service and information

This Act will have a long-term impact on the educational sector in particular in relation to the provision of assessment of need and the provision of services. The disability community in Ireland were very disappointed with the Act because it postponed compliance with access to public buildings and transport until 2015 and because it gave no recourse to take a case against the public body, however, there is the potential to take one's case to the Ombudsman.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

In the course of the study in 2006, the Member States of the United Nations finally agreed the new United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.[41] The Convention provides a complementary framework supporting the above legislative provisions. The Convention is not legally

38 The Equality Authority (No Date) *The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004*, Dublin Pg. 8.

39 The Equality Authority (No Date) *The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004*, Dublin Pg. 8.

40 See www.oasis.gov.ie, section on Educational Disadvantage – the law.

41 Eighth Session of the *Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities* (14-25 August 2006)

binding on any Government but does provide a recognised global standard for the rights of people – adults and children – with disabilities.

It makes specific reference to the education of Blind children and students as well as to communication through Braille. Pressure for additional change in relation to legislation on the educational rights and entitlements of students who are Blind and Vision Impaired may be applied in the near future on the basis of the Convention.

An excerpt from Article 24 of the text of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities illustrates the commitment to teaching disabled children in the most appropriate formats.

Article 24 of the new Convention refers specifically to Braille:

States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

(a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;

(c) Ensuring the education of persons, and in particular children, who are Blind, Deaf and Deaf Blind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximise academic and social development.

Article 24 (4) recommends appropriate practices and reasonable accommodations to facilitate the teaching of alternative forms of communication and access to third level education:

In order to help ensure the realization of this right, State Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including those with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities. (Article 24 (5))

3.3 Utilising the legislation

A number of discrimination cases have been taken to date by Blind or Vision Impaired people, including:

Ms. Mariyam Cementwala, who is Blind, complained (Case DEC-S2005-184-186) that when she attempted to rent an apartment from Ms. D. Colbert of Winters Property Management & Crescent Green Ltd. she was discriminated against on account of her disability. Ms. Cementwala paid her deposit and rent in advance and moved into the property but was subsequently asked to leave. The management agent agreed that she had asked the complainant to vacate the property as she had concerns for her safety using the metal stairs leading to the apartment. The Equality Officer ruled that Ms. Colbert had discriminated against Ms. Cementwala.

In case DEC-S2004-176, **Ms. Rita Kwiotek** alleged that the National University of Galway (NUIG) had discriminated against her under the terms of the Equal Status Acts, 2000 – 2004 when they failed to provide her

with adequate Braille material to meet her needs as a PhD student. The Equality Officer found in favour of NUIG.

Mr. A had a progressive eye disorder with decreased vision as well as asthma and depression. In DEC-E2006-009, he claimed that a third-level institution had discriminated against him on the grounds of disability and that the respondent had failed to provide him with reasonable accommodation in the workplace. The third level institution was found not to have failed to provide reasonable accommodation within the terms of the Act. However, the respondent was found to have directly discriminated against the complainant and was ordered to pay €5,000 to the complainant for the effects of the discrimination.

3.4 Summary

The Irish legal framework for the education and inclusion of children who have a disability is in place, however flawed it may be perceived to be, and clearly places the responsibility on educational institutions to proactively ensure a student with a disability can access and participate in all educational classes. In addition, under Equality legislation, the institution is responsible for the provision of reasonable accommodations and supports. It is vital that all schools and educational institutions have comprehensive policies and procedures in place and these are applied and documented.

In 2006 the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention refers specifically to the learning and teaching of Braille for Blind students and to the need to ensure that teachers are specifically trained to teach Braille.

It is timely therefore to examine outstanding obstacles which impact on access for a particular group of students moving through the education system.

Chapter 4: Measuring the participation of Blind and VI students in Irish Classrooms

4.1 Interpreting the data on Blind and Vision Impaired students

We set out in this chapter to establish the entry rate of Blind or Vision Impaired children to higher education and to establish how they fared in comparison with non-disabled children. Identification of this baseline data is important in identifying trends and raising questions about the progression rates of this group of children.

This research has established that there is a dearth of data on the participation of children in secondary school who are Blind or Vision Impaired. The Department of Education and Science states that it does not systematically gather data on the participation of students who are Blind or Vision Impaired on a national basis. This data is maintained at a regional rather than a national level. It is not possible to say with certainty how many children who are Blind or Vision Impaired sat the Leaving Certificate in any given year, nor is there discreet data available on the numbers of students in the Junior or Senior cycle of secondary school. It is therefore difficult to draw comparisons between the entry rates of Blind and Vision Impaired children and other students. According to the Clancy Report, *Who Went to College in 2006?*,[42] the proportion of first time entrants who progressed on to higher education over the past ten years has increased dramatically. The entry rates in 2004 were 0.55 or an increase of 10 points on the 1998 rate.

Estimated entry rates to third level

It is possible to make a direct comparison between the entry rate of school-leavers to higher education and school-leavers with sensory impairments, this includes children who are Deaf as well as Blind or Vision Impaired. Using the same denominator as the Clancy Report (2006), we get the average of the numbers of 16, 17 and 18 year-olds as recorded in the Census 2006 who have sensory impairments see Table 1 overleaf. We then compare this figure with the number of new entrants to higher education in 2006 who have sensory impairments, 88, see Table 2. This represents the progression rate to higher education of children with sensory impairments at 26%. This suggests that the entry rate for school-leavers of 26% who have sensory impairments is half of the national progression rate of 55% to higher education.

An AHEAD survey of the entry rates of students with disability in third level Table 2 shows that the number of new entrants to higher education who are Blind or Vision Impaired represents only 3% of the total number of students with disabilities, whereas the 2006 Census Report shows that people who are Blind or who have vision impairments make up 20% of the population with disabilities.

4.2 Representation of Blind and Vision Impaired Students at School

Participation in third level

An analysis of AHEAD surveys on the participation rates of disabled students, Table 3, reveals that percentage rates of participation for Blind or Vision Impaired students in relation to other students with disabilities has decreased progressively year on year and that they made up the smallest proportion of all students with disabilities in that sector in

2005/06. This decrease in the entry of students who are Blind and with VI is at a time when the admission rate for other school-leavers to higher education has increased by over 10%.

42 Clancy, (2006) *Who went to college in 2006?*, HEA, Pg. 16.

Table 1: Census 2006 Persons classified by single year of age and type of disability

Age	Total Persons	Total Persons with a Disability	Blindness, Deafness or a Severe Vision or Hearing Impairment
16	56,551	2,815	307
17	56,716	2,651	290
18	58,326	2,824	403
19	60,346	2,759	382

Table 2: AHEAD Survey of the Disability Profile of new undergraduate students for 2005/2006.

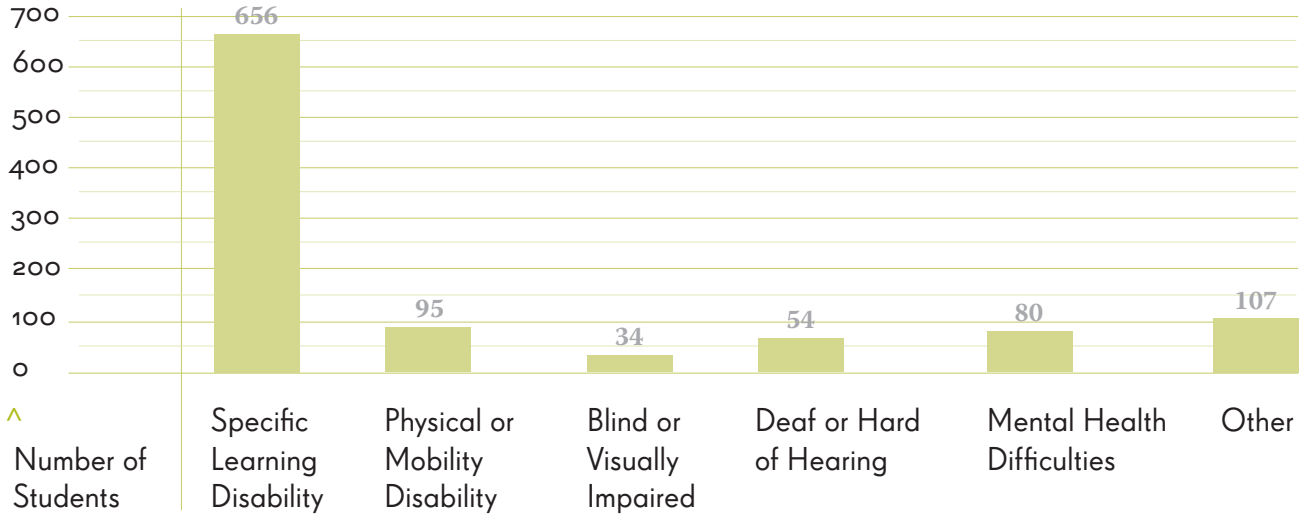
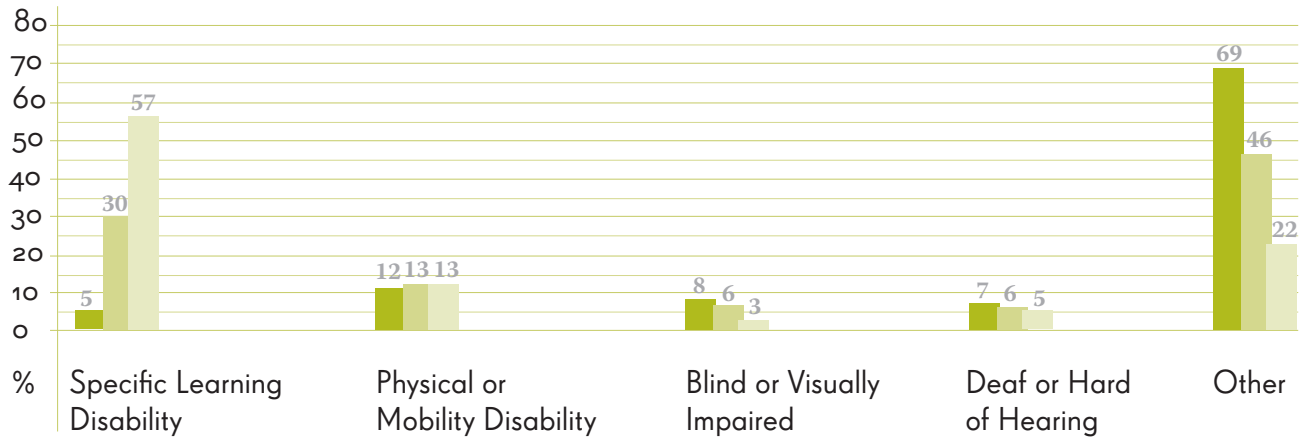


Table 3: AHEAD survey of the participation rates of students with disability, categorised by type of disability, for the academic years, 1993/94 , 1998/99 , 2005/06



Emerging Trends

What is useful is to study the overall trends. In Table 6 below we see that in 2003, in 22 institutes of higher education, there were 1,085 new registrants with a disability. In the same year, 69 students or 6.1 per cent of all new students with a disability were Blind or Vision Impaired. In 2004, as the number of new registrants with a disability rose to 1,226, the number of Blind or VI students dropped to 45 individuals, a proportion of 3.7 per cent. Once more in 2005, there was an increase in the number of registrants with disability, alongside a slight drop in the number of new Blind or VI students, with a consequent drop in the overall percentage since 2003.

Based on figures supplied by 22 participating third level institutions (see Table 4), there was a drop of 2.6 per cent in the proportion of Blind and Vision Impaired registrants between 2003 and 2005. Due to the small number of Blind or Vision Impaired students, the percentage drop should not be over-estimated. However, it should be considered in the context of an increase of 14 per cent in the overall number of students with disability.

This under-representation shows the heritage of past education policies and beliefs when children and students with sensory impairments were not encouraged to attain in education. Table 5 overleaf is taken from the National Census 2006 and shows that of a total of 72,635 people with sensory impairments in 2005 whose full time education had ceased, 19,213 or 26 per cent were under the age of 15 when they finished school. This compares with the wider population whose full-time education had ceased, only 11% per cent of whom finished school aged under 15 years. Almost half (42%) of sensory impaired persons whose full-time education had ceased had no primary education or finished school at primary level. The same was true for only 18 per cent of the wider population. This has implications for the inclusion of adults with sensory disabilities who wish to return to full time education and indicates that this group of adults should be targeted as a group who would benefit from access to life long learning opportunities.

At the other end of the education scale, 11 per cent of persons over 15 years whose full-time education had ceased had completed a third level non-degree course while the same was true for only 5% of sensory impaired persons. (See Table 5 overleaf) Again, of the wider population, 19% per cent had achieved a third level degree or higher while for those with sensory impairment, only 6% had attained that level of education.

4.2 Conclusions

The transition of students who are Blind or Vision Impaired to Second and Third-Level education is impossible to track due to an absence of reliable data. In the first instance, effective tracking of progress is hampered by the practice to aggregate all persons with a sensory disability into a single category. This is no longer appropriate for a comprehensive evaluation of progress.

The Department of Education and Science was unable to provide the study with a breakdown of data relating to the number of Blind and Vision Impaired students attending the Senior cycle in secondary schools or going for the Leaving Certificate in any one year. Without this data it is impossible to establish a base line of participation and educational outcomes of students who are Blind or Vision Impaired and to monitor their progress through mainstream education on an on-going basis.

While 55% of school-leavers enter third level, according to data gathered in Census 2006 only 26% of school-leavers with sensory disabilities enter third level education. These figures indicate a serious under-representation of people with disabilities in formal education, including at third level.

Table 4: Participation of Blind & Visually Impaired Students as a proportion of all students with disabilities in 22 institutes of higher education 2003-2005

Institute	2003		2004		2005	
DCU	44	4	40	0	43	3
NUI Galway	59	2	56	3	49	1
NUI Maynooth	52	0	38	2	45	3
Trinity College	83	3	80	0	60	1
UCC	370	41	418	26	404	17
UCD	91	5	95	3	123	7
Dublin I.T.	81	0	109	2	146	3
Athlone I.T.	32	3	34	2	31	0
Blanch I.T.	N/A	2	7	1	N/A	0
Carlow I.T.	15	1	21	0	17	1
Cork I.T.	N/A	N/A	32	0	40	1
D.L.I.A.T.D	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A	1
Dundalk I.T.	16	0	21	2	31	1
L'kenny I.T.	42	0	50	0	47	1
Sligo I.T.	63	3	97	1	97	0
Tralee I.T.	43	1	64	2	37	0
Waterford I.T.	80	4	37	1	39	0
MaterDei	1	0	1	0	0	0
Mary I	4	0	4	0	7	0
NCAD	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0
NCI	N/A	N/A	11	0	17	2
St Patrick's	9	0	11	0	8	2
Total	**1,085**	**69**	**1,226**	**45**	**1,241**	**44**
Total Percentage	6.1%		3.7%		3.5%	

Source: Ralaheen Ltd, 2007

New registrants with disability

New Blind or VI registrants

Table 5: Persons aged 15 years and over whose full-time education has ceased classified by type of disability, age at which full-time education ceased and highest level of education completed.

Persons	Total whose full-time education ceased	Age at which full-time education ceased	Highest level of Education completed					Total still in full-time education
		< 15yrs	Primary (incl no formal education)	Secondary		Third Level		
				Lower	Upper	Non-degree	Degree or higher	
Total Persons	2,850,333	322,345 (11%)	514,085 (18%)	573,411	803,498 (20%)	301,327 (28%)	527,775 (11%)	(19%)
Blind, Deaf or severe vision or hearing impairment	72,635	19,213 (26%)	30,634 (42%)		12,137 (17%)	11,343 (17%)	3,538 (5%)	5,098 (7%)

Source: Extracted from CSO (2006) , Volume 11, Tables 20A and Table 23

The Department of Education and Science have put significant measures in place over the last five years to support the inclusion of students with disabilities. Above all, it is critical to be able to measure the outcomes of these measures. Reliable and valid data on the numbers of children who are Blind and Vision Impaired participating in secondary level education and participating in state examinations is urgently needed if we are to have any sense of the effectiveness of mainstream education for these children.

Moving students who are Blind and Vision Impaired to mainstream education is relatively new and represents a major change of policy and practice. It is imperative to monitor the progress of these students and to identify issues arising for these students. Tracking and measuring progress over time is a vital tool in being able to identify how effectively the mainstream is addressing the learning needs of these students. We need to be in a position to measure just how well Blind and Vision Impaired children are doing in school and progressing on to higher education in comparison with their non disabled peers.

4.3 Key Recommendations:

- The Department of Education and Science should urgently establish a national system of recording the participation rates of Vision Impaired children in secondary schools and in state examinations.
- The CSO should in future disaggregate the data on sensory disability and ask the question on disability

Chapter 5: Results of the consultative process and issues for consideration

This chapter highlights the views and key issues for Blind and Vision Impaired students and parents on their school experiences and the views of some professionals who are working with school students or young college entrants with Visual Impairments. These views were gathered and formulated from interviews carried out during the second half of 2006.

Overall parents and students expressed the view that mainstream education was preferable to specialised education as students learnt more academic, independent coping and social skills from being in an inclusive learning environment. However they stated that the experience of the student in mainstream school is dependent on the system of supports available from resource teachers and from the visiting teacher service,

> "I personally am very glad that I went to mainstream school all the way through and I think it probably helped my education and I suspect that I would not have got to university the first time without that. So I think it is a great compromise actually having a support unit within a school and not turning something into a special school." Student voice, Report of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2005 pg 98

Despite the advantages of attending mainstream education there are many challenges in moving to a more inclusive learning environment for children who are Blind or Vision Impaired and this chapter includes the views, voices and opinions of the children and parents themselves. Their concerns include the inadequate provision of Braille tuition, the difficulties experienced by children getting alternative entire textbooks in time, difficulties by parents negotiating the complex system of application for supports and equipment vital for learning

5.2 Acquisition of Braille

Braille is a critical tool enabling Blind children to become independent readers and to acquire good literacy skills according to Dexler, Foulke et al as outlined in Chapter 2. Braille is a vital core skill for Blind children in the acquisition of independent learning skills, reading skills and literacy. Given the central role it plays in the learning capacity of Blind children, parents are very concerned about the inadequacy of Braille teaching for Blind children in mainstream schools?

Parents of Vision Impaired and Blind school students described feeling under constant pressure to provide their children with all the moral, social and educational supports to place them on an even footing with other children in their class. They felt that the approach to teaching Braille was under-funded and ad-hoc and depended on the expertise of a particular visiting teacher rather than being available systematically to all Blind and Vision Impaired children. They expressed the view that they felt that the learning of Braille was being discouraged in favour of new technology. In fact, parents felt that both Braille and new technology were vital skills for Blind and Vision Impaired children.

This view would appear to be reflected in the fact that no student requested a Braille paper in the Junior Cert examination in 2007 and the take up in the Leaving Certificate was low, only one student requested Braille papers. This is worrying given that one would expect the student to choose the mode he/she normally uses on a day to day basis. There is a high use of readers and scribes in the Leaving Certificate but there is a low take up of the use of word processors in examinations.

5.3 Access to learning materials

The availability of textbooks for second level students was a particular issue for students and parents alike. Not only do the students have difficulty acquiring Braille, once learnt there are considerable difficulties actually getting Braille textbooks. According to the Braille Production Centre, the list of text books to be used in particular schools is often sent too late to ensure that the books are available at the start of term. As a consequence the first few chapters of a textbook are forwarded to the pupil. However the teacher may decide to start at chapter five or six and so the pupil is without a textbook. This situation clearly discriminates against the children and puts them at a significant disadvantage in examinations with their non-disabled peers. It is unacceptable that acceptable alternative texts are not available. The result is that students get a disordered and fragmented sense of sequence in learning with bits of books.

> "Text books were very slow in coming from the National Braille Production Centre which left my Special Needs Assistant with a lot of work filling the gaps when necessary."
> Transition Year pupil, 2006

Educational institutions, like other service providers, must do all that is reasonable to accommodate students with a disability to attend and participate in normal school activities including learning. Reasonable accommodation according to the Equal Status Act must not place more than a *nominal cost* on the service provider. The case of school children not having access to complete textbooks in order to follow the school curriculum would appear, on the face of it, to constitute direct discrimination.

If students have lower than optimal access to Braille books, one might have expected that new technology would compensate for any deficit. However, more than one Disability or Access Officer noted that Vision Impaired students were coming into University without having been exposed to the latest software technology at school. Disability Officers felt that students should not be trying to learn to use technology when they have just entered University from school. Some felt that a short foundation course would be useful after leaving school:

> "Some students who were not aware of the range of assisting technologies do not see the benefits of them when they come here; we have some students here now, and we are trying to encourage them to make use of these technologies. It would be worth having a summer course for students to bring them

up to speed on technology before the teaching term started."
Institute of Technology
Disability Officer, 2006

John and Laura's daughter is now eighteen and they are not sure if she will ever go to University. Their daughter is completely Blind and has used Braille from an early age. Her visiting teacher had to learn Braille in order to teach her when she started school. This was OK for a few years but when she reached second and third class it became a problem and the Visiting Teacher could not keep up with her and she recommended that Laura attend a special school. St Mary's school in Dublin was no longer taking Boarding Children and St Joseph's did not take girls at that time so she had to attend school in Belfast in Northern Ireland. She was probably very lonely there, as she could not come home at weekends. John and Laura were sent from pillar to post trying to get funding for her education in Northern Ireland. Eventually they got it two months into the school term. They feel that Laura could have managed well in mainstream school if there had been adequate Braille services for her.
Source: Ralaheen interview with parents, Autumn 2006

5.4 Availability of assistive technology and vision aids

At the suggestion of parents, the study examined the system for obtaining assistive technology and vision aids for children attending second level schools.

The types of supports in use by children cover a wide range from the very simple product to up to date software. Examples of the range are provided in Table 6 opposite.

Third Level students in the illustration are using a wider range of aids, ICT and assistive technology than the school students.

Blind and Vision Impaired students need technology to become on screen literate and to access the written word. Technology has an impact on what a student can and cannot do and it can in many cases make the difference between making learning possible or not. Unlike other children who would all undoubtedly benefit from technology, without it Blind children won't learn, can not learn at an equal rate to other children. It is an imperative in todays world where technology has completely changed the face of the workplace, that all Blind and Vision Impaired children must in the future be competent in using technology to have any job prospects. These are powerful reasons to ensure that all teachers are computer literate and that all Blind children are fully competent in ICT skills and have access to the use of technology.

Parents reported a difficulty in accessing information on technology and its application, usefulness etc. and they learn about new technology, software, low vision aids, and new developments primarily from each other. This is documented in the RACE report on the examinations. Parents reported finding it a huge long drawn out *battle* to get simple aids in the classroom like magnifiers, large print handouts, telescopes and other non-technological supports. Homework is a big issue. Many schools do not permit the school laptop to be taken home, blocking children from doing their homework, or obliging them to buy a computer with special software for the house which indicates a lack of understanding of the barriers facing Blind and Vision Impaired students.

System of application for supports
The system and its associated administrative and procedural elements proved to be an extremely complex architecture of validations,

Table 6: Examples of Technology and Aids in Use by Eight Second Level Children and Third Level Students 2006

Pupil	Aids in Use/Not in Use
Pupil aged 17	Telescope and laptop. Would use CDs if they were available
Pupil aged 16	Telescope and magnifier. Large Print not available
Pupil aged 14	CCTU Kursweil and Large Print
Pupil aged 16	Laptop with speech synthesiser
Student aged 22	Large Print, magnifier and monocular
Student aged 20	Tapes, Braille, Lite, Braille Bar, Dictaphone, NCBI IT Training
Student aged 19	Magnifier, Large Print, hend-held magnifier and CCTU (at home)

Source: Ralaheen interviews with parents, members of Féach and students, 2006

confirmations, certifications and approvals. As part of the exercise a flow chart of the process to obtain assistive technology was constructed. There were at least eight or more identifiable procedures, confirmations or validations each with a separate confirmation or attached sheet or form to be completed by a diverse range of education professionals and managers. This was before the request for the technology had reached the Department of Education and Science. Inside the Department or agencies under its auspices, there may well be further steps in the process prior to a decision being made to authorise expenditure on a piece of technology.

The process was not transparent for parents or students. The complexity and opaque nature of the process raises a further question. *At what point do the accumulated procedures in an administrative process constitute such an unreasonable sequence of barriers that the eligibility of children to supports is weakened or effectively, albeit unintentionally, undermined?* The flow chart below illustrates the eight steps to make an application. This system is not working efficiently.

Chart 1 shows eight separate steps and that besides the Principal of the school, an application for assistive technology requires the validation of a professional. This involves validation that, for example, a child Blind from birth, is still Blind. The form to be completed by the School Principal has to demonstrate that the Board of Management of the School has approved the application. Both the Visiting Teacher for the Blind and the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) must endorse the

application. Since the school itself is making the application, the Principal has to coordinate the entire process and is the recipient of any decision which s/he then transmits to teachers, parents and pupil.

The school Principal is at the centre of the entire administrative procedure since the technology needed is a request from the school acting for the child represented by the child's parent. What emerges is that the School Principal is the administrative coordinator of a complex process; the outcome of which is determined elsewhere.

A cleaner and more streamlined system of getting new technologies into classrooms should be possible. The current system appears to contain an underlying rationale that the Principal needs to be watched at every point of expenditure, parents need to prove need at every point and that management of a delivery system should be duplicated as often as possible. Children are entitled to expect that all steps that are reasonable to accommodate them will be undertaken. This need not mean that the desirability of an accommodation should be repeatedly confirmed, validated and proved merely to make an application.

5.6 Expectations of parents, students and professionals

There was considerable agreement from discussions with parents, students and professionals that attitudes towards Blindness and low vision were crucial in motivating and encouraging school students to strive and attain a level of education equivalent to their peers and at the optimum of their capacity. The following are what some of the interviewees had to say about attitudes:

> "I have just finished my Junior Cert. And overall found the experience to be a positive one. This was due to several factors, the first of which was the helpfulness of my school and their acceptance of my Blindness from the very beginning of my time there... my parents were also unintrusive and allowed the school to act as they saw fit, while at the same time being aware of what was going on throughout the year."
> Fourth Year schoolgirl, 2006.

Many parents hoped their children would have the ability to disclose low vision either at the completion of the CAO or on their acceptance into a University, but some did not want to disclose. The issue of disclosure arose also in relation to *annotation* of examination certificates where substitute questions/modified questions or waivers had been provided and this triggered a distinctive mark on the Examination Certificate.

My First Year Adventure in University by a Blind Student

My first year in University has been a learning curve for me as well as for the staff I met. There is a very welcoming atmosphere in Trinity. With the new styles of learning at college and the interesting subjects, came new challenges. This included mobility, transport, making new friends, attempting to understand lectures and prescribed readings and generally getting used to a new life.

I found getting materials a very difficult task, it would have been far too much to ask for all things in Braille, but a little here and there was important, as that is my preferred way. A lot of the time I got my materials sent on line after much pushing from me, my advice to anyone is to keep asking and hold your ground. Because if you let up and stop asking, whoever is meant to look after you will think you are all right, you must shout loud for what you need.

Getting around college was very hard for me, and I was half tempted to give it all up by the third week, as I found the work far too hard. It still seems that way now but if I had given up I would not have the nice friends I have now, we even study in groups to try

and make the readings at least semi understandable.

Transport and independent mobility are my on-going battles; I want transport more accessible for all people with and without disabilities.

I think the lessons for the year are... Always expect the unexpected... And let's get all stations announced on the Dart!

Source: Féach Newsletter, Winter 2006

Chart 1: Eight-Step Procedure for Application for Assistive Technology for Children who are Blind or Vision Impaired

Child who is Blind or Visually Impaired	Class teacher, visiting teacher or other **suggests need** for assistive device	**Principal**	Principal submits application to **SENO** for recommendation	**Department of Education and Science** makes decision

Documentation from relevant **professional** must be included in application

Parental consent to be included on application

Principle must seek support from **School Board of Management** for application

SENO must seek recommendation from **visiting teacher** before submitting it to the Department

5.7 Career guidance for Vision Impaired and Blind teenagers

Career Guidance is a particularly important topic for Vision Impaired teenagers and their parents. Many parents feel at a loss to give good advice. This is partly because the labour market has changed so rapidly in recent years. It may also be due to the fact that parents themselves did not attend a third level institution or did so many decades ago. An additional factor is that parents worry that they will advise their children to pursue studies that will be *hard* and risk introducing *failure* into their children's

lives when up to now they have done so well.

"My career teacher in school [said]... law was a reading based subject therefore I wasn't suited to it due to the nature of my disability. My Mum didn't want me to give up so she brought me to London to the Law Society. I was meant to meet a judge who is totally Blind but he had to go into hospital. However, all was not lost – I got to meet a few Barristers and Solicitors who are totally Blind. I came back to Ireland feeling great. My confidence was on cloud nine because I had chatted to other people who I could relate to and get advice".
Student, 2006.

The choice of subjects in examinations and their final CAO points will influence their eligibility for the studies of their choice. This does not, however, alter the barriers perceived by some Third Level colleges to students exercising that choice for the field of study of their preference.

"Science-based courses... present a certain number of practical difficulties for students for example in terms of navigating their way around a laboratory and completing applied laboratory work. For example students who cannot read labels on bottles of chemicals may present certain dangers for themselves and others. There are also practical learning issues attached to undertaking an applied subject, in that only a certain degree of individual tuition and support can be usefully availed of by a student, that is, there is a point at which they must become hands-on themselves".
Access Officer, 2006.

It is also disappointing for parents to discover that a Third Level college does not want their school-leaver child to enrol. This study was shown correspondence from a college which questioned the value of the course to a Blind student applicant, stating that they had no Disability Officer to support the student and claiming that special facilities would give rise to a prohibitive cost and that their staff had no relevant training.[43] The student was happy to enrol in another college in 2006.

A resource teacher reported considering an Arts Degree as a good choice for Vision Impaired and Blind students because it offers a diverse knowledge base. She noted that more traditional career options are now being expanded to Information and Communications Technology.[44]

Impact of Subject Choice

An institute of higher education currently has 11 students with Visual Impairments enrolled in a range of courses. Unlike school, as soon as they know the student is going to enrol, they try to meet the student and order their equipment straight away during the summer so that it is ready for opening of term. The Disability Officer considers some students have been poorly informed early on in their school life as to choice of subjects. They need to be thinking of the future at Junior Certificate level or before. Mistakes have been made at the institute but there is ongoing appraisal of what works.

Students are taking a range of courses including music, which posed interesting questions in terms of communicating the language of music. Other students are studying Social Care, Business and Nutrition. It may be valuable for some students to take a Foundation Course first to get used to Third Level, to the technology and to learning in a different environment. Different colleges are developing different facilities and students should check out several options.

Source: Ralaheen interview with Disability Officer, 2006

5.7 The payment of social welfare allowances at the age of 16 years

In the course of the study, a number of interviewees mentioned the mixed messages sent out to school students by the eligibility of some for a welfare allowance at the age of 16 years. School students, who satisfy certain conditions, become eligible for Disability Allowance (DA) at the age of 16 years and for a Blind Person's Pension (BPP) at the age of 18 years.

The numbers involved are relatively small. In 2003, there were 1,500 teenagers in receipt of Disability Allowance and who were aged 16 and 17 years. Of these, over 400 had transferred from the Domiciliary Care Allowance, for which their parents had been eligible when the children were between the ages of two years and 16 years. Eligibility for the latter is quite strict and would imply that those 400 teenagers faced considerable difficulties compared with other children. However the majority – 1,100 teenagers -- applied for Disability Allowance at age 16 years without having been in prior receipt of Domiciliary Care allowance.

At the age of 18 years Blind and Vision Impaired students can apply for the Blind Person's Pension. In 2005, there were just 84 claimants of the Blind Pension who were under the age of 25 years.[45] There are several opinions on this topic. The Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities proposed that both Disability Allowance and Blind Pension be available from the age of 16 years. There are a number of features of the Blind Pension, which are more generous than Disability Allowance and which make it an attractive payment. However, other specific categories of people do not have their *own* pension payments. There is, for example, no Deaf Persons Pension. In this regard, the Blind Pension is an anomaly.

Alternatively, the Blind Pension might be regarded as a form of recognition of the costs of disability. In other words it is recognition of the essential, additional and recurring costs of low vision or no vision on the daily life of Vision Impaired persons.

The Blind Pension, for historical reasons, can be claimed along with other social welfare payments. Some parents expressed the view that the provision of a welfare payment at 16 years signalled very early on that a child could rely on state welfare payments without further effort at school or in employment. There is no evidence to this effect, but

43 Documents shown to study authors, 2006.

44 Ralaheen Interview, November 2006.

45 DSFA (2006) *Statistical Report on Social Welfare Services 2005*, Table E9.

there is a perception that welfare payments to school students should be limited.[46] One parent remarked that the arrival of a welfare payment for her son signalled to him that that was all he was good for. For a teenager living at home, the payments can appear relatively generous compared with classmates.

A variant on this theme was that the payment of welfare at the age of 16 years discouraged Blind and Vision Impaired students from seeking or trying to take up small jobs during the summer holidays and earning some pocket money for themselves. This led to Blind and Vision Impaired students being effectively *protected* from the young people's labour market of summer and occasional jobs. It led to some low vision students having little or no work or job experience on their CVs and constituted a general *impoverishment* in their early experiences as teenagers.[47]

5.8 Conclusions:

Overall parents and students expressed a preference for mainstream education however the experience of learning in a mainstream school is dependent on the system of supports available. Parents have a number of concerns the main one being that the support infrastructure is simply not in place.

There is a need for wider understanding of the learning needs of Blind or Vision Impaired students, in particular with reference to the pedagogy and importance of Braille. Where this is lacking, education professionals may inadvertently create barriers through the use of technology to the exclusion of Braille. The teaching of Braille parents believe is inadequate and reliant on visiting teachers who are not all sufficiently skilled in teaching Braille, they feel it is being discouraged in favour of technology, yet children need to learn both.

Blind children need technology to become on-screen literate and to access the written word, technology has a huge impact on the learning capacity of Blind and Vision Impaired children and without it they won't be able to learn at a similar rate to their peers.

Parents have stated that the application system for getting supports in second level is administratively and procedurally complex, lacking in transparency and difficult to negotiate. The complex application process for assistive technology and visual aids at Post Primary level can create unnecessary barriers for students and teachers. The delay in making Braille textbooks available to Blind and Vision Impaired students means that students are attempting to follow a curriculum without the required reading material. The failure to supply students with alternative format reading material may constitute direct discrimination under the Education Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Act, 2001 – 2004.

The availability of alternative materials and textbooks is very limited and there are considerable difficulties getting books on time which creates huge disadvantage to Blind and Vision Impaired children as well as unnecessary anxiety. Furthermore children who do succeed in moving on into third level are trying to learn to use the technology as well as learning to deal with the significant academic demands of a third level course Students who are Blind need to be encouraged by their parents and career guidance professionals to aim high and services such as career guidance are critical to them in making the correct choice of third level course. They will need to be supported in matching the demands of specific third level courses with their abilities and strengths. Subject choice at Junior and Leaving Certificate level is important for students. Students, with the advice of Career Guidance Counsellors, need to carefully consider future matriculation requirements as well as the supports available in schools and at third level to study certain subjects

Key Recommendations:

- The Department of Education should review the application system for supports for children with special needs in secondary education and go back to the drawing board and design a more streamlined and transparent system to access reasonable accommodations.
- The Department of Education should review the system of creating Braille books to ensure that children have books at he same time as other children entering the classroom. This is an equality issue and a system needs to be co-ordinated between publishers, the Braille Production unit and the experts such as the NCBI to ensure that Blind children have easy access to basic textbooks.
- Career guidance counsellors are not sufficiently prepared to provide career guidance to Blind and Vision Impaired children to deal wth the specific barriers these children will meet, they need to be up-skilled to provide services to Blind and Vision Impaired children
- The system of allocating Blind pensions to all sixteen year old Blind people needs to be reviewed.

46 A very useful discussion of Blind Person's Pension and Disability Allowance is contained in Department of Social and Family Affairs (2003) *Report of the Working Group on the Review of Illness and Disability Payment Scheme*, Government of Ireland.

47 Views expressed by interviewee, 2006.

Chapter 6: The Gateways to Third Level

6.1 The State Examinations Commission[48]

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) and the State Examinations Commission for Certificate Examinations, are distinct decision-making or advisory bodies, which determine the form, and content of examinations. They function under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science.

Aiming to take the Junior or Leaving Certificate Examinations is a relatively new experience for many Blind or Vision Impaired students whose predecessors would not have been encouraged to have high expectations.

Since 2003, the State Examinations Commission has developed a complex range of systems and measures to respond to thousands of requests from School Principals for specific *accommodations* for individual students with disabilities sitting State examinations. The State Examinations Commission has a specialised *Accommodations Unit*, which handles the large-scale demand for accommodations.

The provision of reasonable accommodations is based on a Framework of Principles[49] (see Appendix) developed by an Expert Advisory Group on examinations. Each application is dealt with on a one-by-one basis and is submitted by a school Principal. The Framework of Principles includes the aim of removing as far as possible the impact of a disability on a candidate's performance.

The Examinations Commission's work has expanded enormously in recent years, with 32 million A4 pages of print administered in total in 2006 to approximately 5,500 special examination centres and less than 5,000 standard centres.

Table 7 opposite shows that the number of accommodations is rising exponentially. The Examinations Commission received an additional 6,186 requests for accommodations over the short three-year period from 2002 to 2005. While some students obtain more than one accommodation, the rise in demand is nevertheless perplexing. The number of students presenting themselves for the Leaving Certificate is not rising very fast as the younger cohorts of the population shrink. At the same time, the number of early school-leavers is falling.[50]

Table 8 opposite provides an indication of the pattern of some reasonable accommodations likely to be selected by Vision Impaired or Blind Leaving Certificate students, such as word processor, enlarged question papers, Braille question papers, and modified papers (visual). The table shows an increase in the number of individuals granted reasonable accommodations. For instance, in 2001 24 Leaving Certificate students were supplied with a scribe. By 2007, this figure had risen to 204, a dramatic increase. The largest category of all is Spelling and Grammar waiver, which is less likely to be used by Blind and Vision Impaired students.

In the case of Braille and Modified Papers, which are exclusively for students with visual impairment, the numbers are very small. In 2007, just one student completed their Leaving Certificate through the medium of Braille and only 10 students used Modified Papers.

Table 7: Reasonable Accommodations granted by the State Exams Commission, 2002 and 2005

Year	Number Component Exemptions	Number Spelling & Grammar Waivers	Total Number of accommodations
	as % of total accommodations		
2002	39 0.9	1,945 43.8	4,438
2005	687 6.5	4,763 44.8	10,624
Total Increase	**+648**	**+2,818**	**+6,186**

Source: Arranged from DES Press Release, 22.November 2006

48 The views expressed here are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the DES or the State Examinations Commission.

49 State Examinations Commission (2005) Annual Report, pg. 52.

50 CSO (2006) *QNHS Educational Attainment*, Table 9A.

Table 8: Reasonable Accommodations granted by the State Exams Commission, Leaving Certificate 2001 - 2007

Type of Accommodation	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Tape Recorder(Learning)	90	214	146	148	194	181	194
Tape Recorder (Physical)			49	71	52	58	49
Reading Assistance	106	280	353	488	656	736	967
Scribe	24	72	70	105	135	192	204
Word Processor	23	37	45	67	79	86	135
Enlarged Paper Questions	11	48	42	36	43	31	30
Braille Question Papers	2	3	2	4	5	4	1
Exemptions from Aural Tests	1	10	12	15	11	11	12
Exemptions from Oral Tests	4	6	9	23	12	10	16
Exemptions from Practical Tests	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Modified Papers (Visual)	9	11	5	11	13	6	10
Spelling/Grammar Waiver	264	456	684	972	1396	1458	1841
Total	**534**	**1,137**	**1,417**	**1,940**	**2,596**		

Source: Kindly Supplied by the State Exams Commission 2007

The Leaving Certificate – by a Vision Impaired student

Because of my visual impairment, I and others like me may (or may not) require certain concessions when doing our exams. These concessions include a scribe to take down your work for you, enlarged print on the examination papers, extra time and visual aids etc. When doing my Leaving Certificate exams I opted for four of these concessions: an extra fifteen minutes to be added to every hour of exam time, enlarged examination papers and the use of a computer and for my Biology exam, a modified script. On the first day of examinations I was not only nervous but shocked to discover that my first English paper was not enlarged, my shock cannot be compared to that of the Leaving Cert supervisor, upon discovering that not one of my papers was enlarged. On top of this the modified Biology paper had not arrived, instead tucked neatly amongst those seven or so standard scripts was a modified Geography paper: an examination paper for a subject I did not take for my Leaving Cert!

Despite these hiccups, the exams themselves were nothing short of plain sailing. The concessions provided helped me dramatically and I would recommend any Vision Impaired student to apply for such concessions.

My Leaving Certificate for the most part went well, better than I had expected in fact, and I am certainly happy that I took the concessions and used them to my advantage.

Source: Extracted from Féach newsletter, Winter 2006

6.2 The parents' view[51]

From the point of view of parents with Blind or Vision Impaired children, the process of preparing for examinations can begin in the September of the year prior to the June examination year. In the Autumn the parents start trying to understand and advise their children on what accommodations they will need to apply for and to obtain the necessary documentation to enable the school Principal to request the accommodations.

Parents find this period very fraught and even nerve racking as it coincides with the lead-in period to filling out a CAO form for Leaving Certificate students. Parents of Blind and Vision Impaired school students described great worry and anxiety that they would advise their children of the very best way to maximise their performance at examinations and that the whole process would go smoothly.

Parents appear to be satisfied with the range of accommodations that are being made available to children at State examinations and no suggestions were made to us of new or additional categories of accommodations. Their concerns and experiences were related to whether the requested accommodations would be delivered. In 2006, some Vision Impaired students received a large print paper with an enlarged and illegible photograph, the detail of which the students could not discern. The Examinations Commission is aware of this error and reviewing its origin. One parent described a special Examination Paper not being available to her child as it had not been collected in its separate envelope and brought to the Examination Centre. Another parent described a mistake whereby a modified Examination paper did not arrive/ had not been prepared for her child.

Disappointment and exasperation were feelings among some of the parents of Vision Impaired and Blind examination candidates. At least some of the difficulties appeared to have occurred in the transfer and collection of the examination papers to the candidate's school. This is despite the Guidelines prepared

by the State Examinations Commission for all Invigilators and others with responsibilities in the functioning of examinations.

51 Discussion with parents organised by Féach 2006 and Féach Annual General Meeting, Cork 2006.

6.3 Annotations on the Leaving Certificate

The practice of annotating Leaving Certificates where it is considered that students have not been examined on a core element of the curriculum is a contentious one.

The marks on the Leaving Certificate

In 2006 the Equality Tribunal found that the Department of Education and Science had discriminated against two students with Dyslexia when it placed special marks (annotations) on their Leaving Certificates. The marks indicated that the students had not been examined in full or in part in the Grammar elements, punctuation and spelling of English and other language papers. Their case was supported by the Equality Authority. The students argued that the Leaving Certificates, which they received, were different from that of other students and disclosed that they had asked for and got accommodations on the grounds of disability. Having placed them on an even playing field with other students, the Department had reintroduced a discrimination, which invaded their privacy, which the accommodations were designed to remove.

The Department of Education and Science argued that the annotations on the Certificates signalled that the students had not been examined in elements of the curriculum, which other Leaving Certificate students had complied with and that readers of the Certificates were entitled to know this. The Department was ordered to pay each student €6,000, issue them with new Leaving Certificates without any annotations and review their system of accommodations.

The Department of Education and Science is appealing the ruling to the Circuit Court to seek clarity on the far-reaching implications of the Ruling. This landmark decision will be announced on 2 October 2007.

Source: Equality Authority Press Release, 22 November 2006
Department of Education and Science
Press Release, 22 November 2006

The Situation in the UK
In the UK the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act was extended to Certificate examinations in 2005. Following the extension, the use of marks indicating an accommodation on examination certificates appeared to be illegal. In the UK these were called *endorsements* and later called *indications*. Such indications were to be abolished after Summer 2006. However after a lot of confusion and official apologies, the *indications* will remain until Summer 2007. This arose because qualifications bodies planned to remove some of the examination exemptions or waivers to which the indications referred. The removal of waivers and exemptions were resisted strongly by organisations of people with sensory impairments. The issue figures very high on the agenda of organisations representing Deaf people in the UK.

Source: British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (2006) Latest News, December.

6.4 From examination to third level entry

Vision Impaired and Blind students may access third level in three ways:

- Standard Admission
- Non-Standard Admission or Direct Entry
- Mature Student

6.5 Standard Admission

Standard Admission refers to the process of applying for a third level course through the Central Applications Office (CAO) in the anticipation of obtaining the required number of Leaving Certificate points necessary as determined by Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

When applying through the Central Applications Office, Vision Impaired or Blind students are encouraged to indicate their disability on the CAO application form. Disclosure of a Disability or Specific Learning Difficulty on a CAO form is not compulsory however it is recommended that the candidate tick the box for two reasons:[52]

- S/he needs to inform the HEIs of specific supports required in relation to their disability
- S/he wishes to be considered through a supplementary admissions procedure operated by HEIs

Table 9 opposite illustrates the total number of applicants to the CAO for 2003 – 2006 and the number of applicants who disclosed a disability on the CAO application form for each year. The numbers of students disclosing their disability has increased year on year.

Interviews with University Disability Officers exhibited the need for prospective Vision Impaired and Blind students to inform Higher Education Institutions of their disability so that resources may be allocated evenly in advance of term commencement. Failure to do so was considered as detrimental to a student's initial progress in their chosen course due to the lack of preparation of staff to accommodate adequately the student's needs requirements.

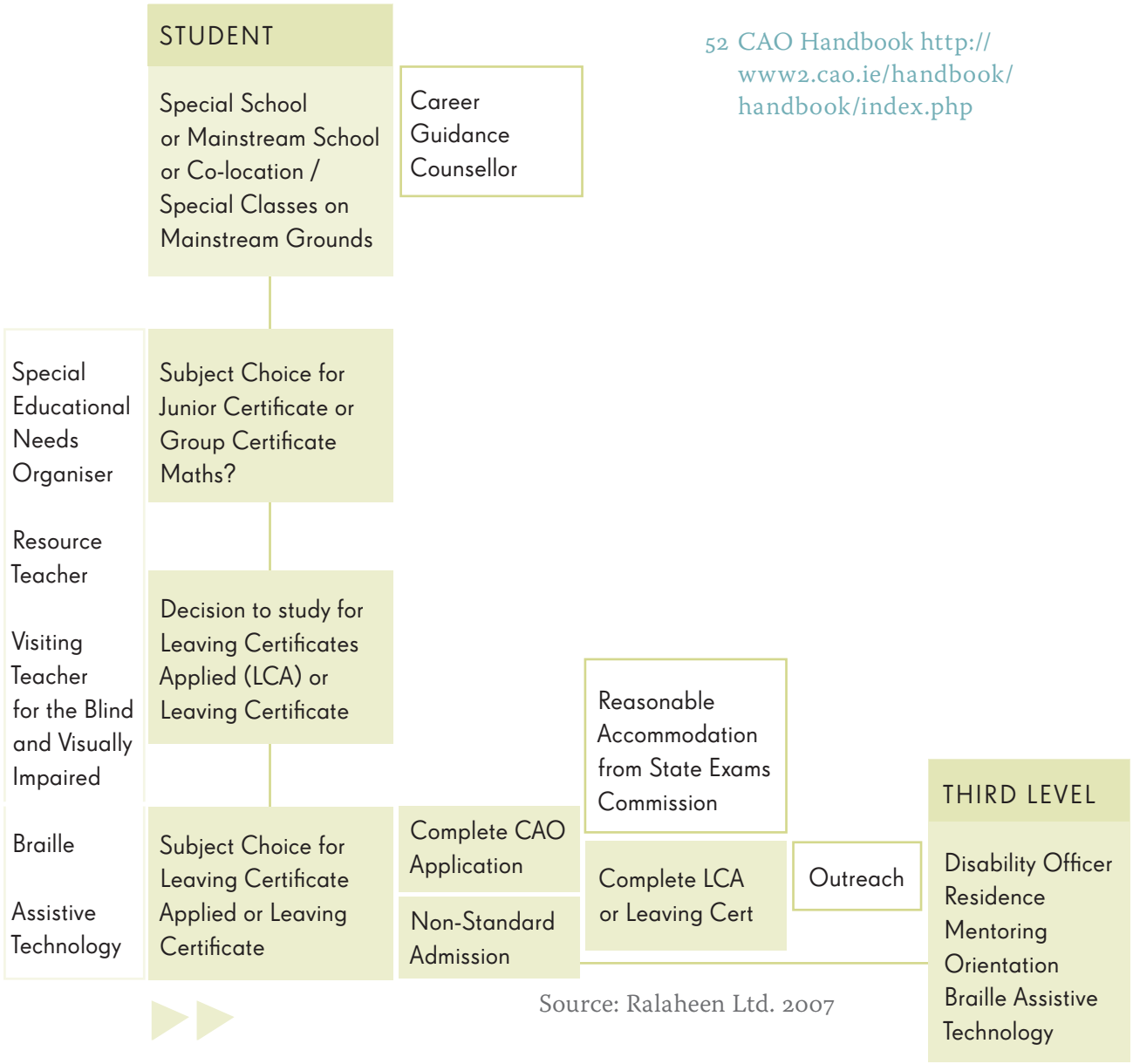
Disclosing at University
A University Access Officer had been in contact with all prospective students coming on to her campus in advance of opening of term in 2006. She had prepared Personal Assistants to be available, and noted who would need assistive technology. She had deployed all her resources between the students. When term opened a Vision Impaired first year student, not on her list, presented himself to her enquiring about supports. She had already allocated all her resources and it was going to take time to mobilise what he needed. In the meantime he would be without help for the opening of college. She was frustrated that this had happened.
Source: Ralaheen interview with Access Officer, 2006

Table 9: Applicants to CAO and disclosure of disability, 2003-2006

Year	Total Number of Applicants	Number who disclosed	% who disclosed
2003	66,222	1,062	1.6
2004	63,695	1,118	1.8
2005	63,704	1,393	2.2
2006	62,778	1,893	3.0

Source: Disability Support Service UCC (2006) *Review of Supplementary Admission Procedures for Students with Disabilities*

Chart 2: Pathways to Third Level



Source: Ralaheen Ltd. 2007

52 CAO Handbook http://www2.cao.ie/handbook/handbook/index.php

6.7 Non-standard admission

"We should not be there to put up obstacles, we should be there to provide bridges; do we have the right to refuse anyone with a disability access to a course, if they have obtained the points required for it?"
Disability Officer, 2006

Non-Standard Admission is an alternative college application procedure with the aim of facilitating access for disabled students to a number of Higher Education Institutes. Non-Standard Admission enables a student with a disability to apply directly to a third level institute on the basis of points achieved in conjunction with evidence that the student's disability has had a direct and substantial adverse effect on their level of education. Non-Standard Admission Routes to participating Higher Education Institutes pertain to students with a disability and/or a belief that due to the impact of their disability on their education they will not meet the competitive CAO points for the course of their choice.[53] The purpose of this route is to further assess a candidate's ability and preparedness to participate fully in a particular course of study based on the Leaving Certificate in conjunction with a 'Supplementary Information Form'.

If an applicant chooses to pursue Non-Standard Admission to a HEI they must disclose their disability on the CAO form by ticking the appropriate box. The CAO will then contact the candidate to obtain further information through a 'Supplementary Information Form'.

Non-Standard Admission at University College Dublin

University College Dublin use the following criteria in assessing non-standard admission applications from students with a disability:

- Overall academic achievement to date, as shown by the Leaving Certificate results
- Academic achievement in key subject areas, as shown by the Leaving Certificate results and any other academic qualifications
- The impact of the disability on academic achievement to date as shown in the personal statement, the consultant's report and the letter from the school principal and key teachers
- The potential of the applicant to successfully participate in the programme chosen, as shown in the applicant's personal statement, the consultant's report and the letter from the principal and key teachers.

Source: www.ucd.ie

Vision Impaired and Blind students may qualify for reduced points entry if the HEI of their choice accepts that a student's disability negatively impacted on performance in the Leaving Certificate.

A report into supplementary admission procedures for students with disabilities showed that four out of ten new entrants with disabilities into HEIs who operate Non-Standard Admissions gained access via these routes.[54] The table overleaf shows the Non-Standard Admissions applications in 2004 and 2005.

National College of Ireland Non-Standard Entry to Full-time Programmes

Students requesting flexibility on entry points for a particular programme are asked to make a direct application to the National College of Ireland. A letter should be addressed to the Admissions Officer which outlines her/his educational history to date. Where appropriate any factors which may have caused an educational disadvantage should be detailed. National College of Ireland requests that all applications for reduced entry points are accompanied by verification of a student's disability, learning or health difficulty and two references, one of which must be an academic reference. Please note that the National College of Ireland will only accept verification from an Educational Psychologist or a Medical Consultant / Specialist. General Practitioner (G.P.) letters are not accepted as suitable medical evidence. Applications from these students will be assessed by a Special Admissions Board and students may be asked to attend for interview. Students must satisfy college authorities that they are academically able for the programme they wish to pursue.

Source: www.ncirl.ie

53 Third Level Education for Students with Disabilities.

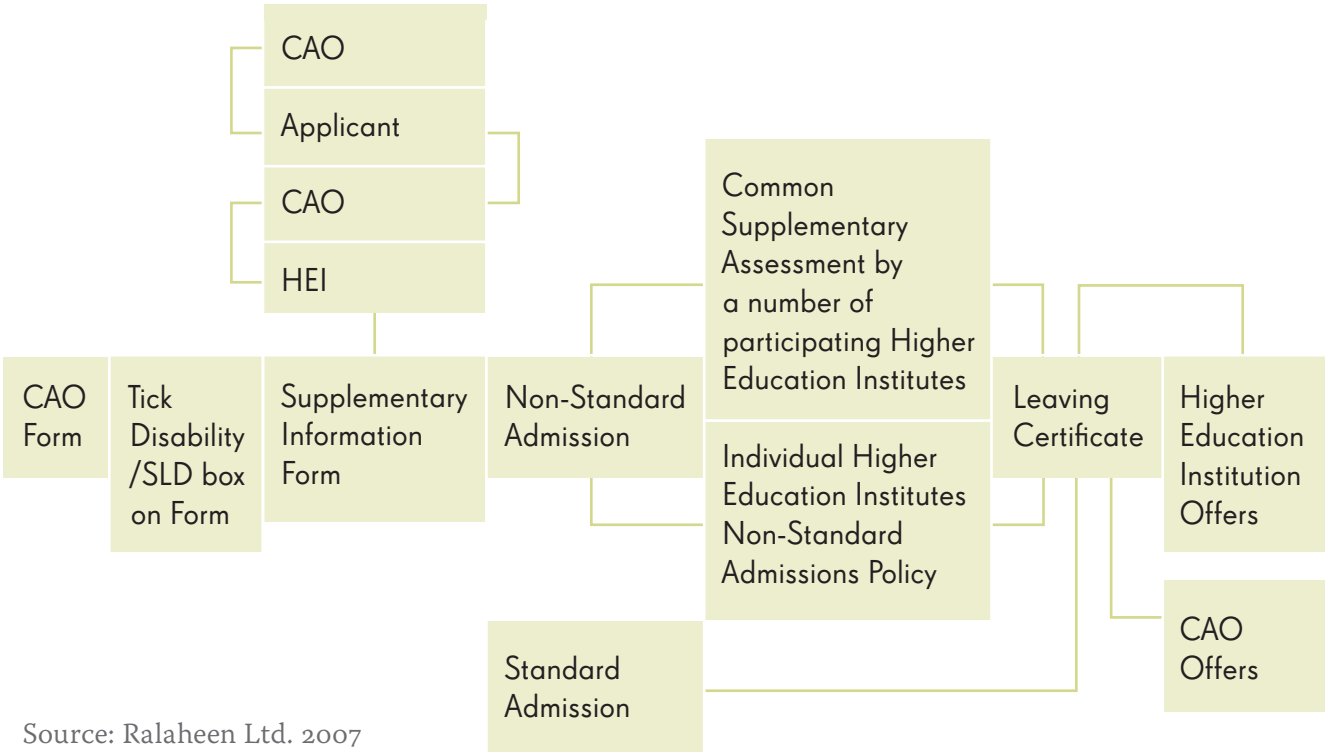
54 Hoey, P. & Traenor, D (2006 *Review of Supplementary Admission procedures for students with disabilities in ten Higher Institutions in Ireland* Commissioned by University College Cork Disability Support Service.

Table 10: Supplementary Admissions, 2004 and 2005

Year	Number who returned Supplementary Info Form	Number Supplementary Accepted Offers	Number Merit Accepted Offers	Number of Accepted Offers (%)
2004	930	265	246	511 (55)
2005	1276	275	297	572 (45)

Source: Hoey, P. and Treanor, D. (2006) *Review of Supplementary Admission procedures for students with disabilities in ten Higher Institutions in Ireland*, UCC Disability Support Service. P.6

Chart 3: Admissions Procedure



Source: Ralaheen Ltd. 2007

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this research was to establish the extent to which students who are Blind or who have visual impairments are under-represented in third level in comparison with other categories of disability and with non-disabled students. It also aimed to identify the factors which influenced the pathway to third level education. Over the last five years as a result of government policy on mainstream education for students with disability, there has been an increase in the numbers of children with disabilities attending mainstream classrooms and accessing third level education which is encouraging.

The research found that children who are Blind or Vision Impaired are 50% less likely to progress from second level education on into third level and are significantly disadvantaged in comparison with their non-disabled classmates. There is a progression rate to higher education for school-leavers with sensory impairments at 26% which is half of the national progression rate at 55% of school-leavers to higher education. The participation rate of this group of students in third level has remained static and has not increased in spite of a rapid increase in numbers generally.

The report also intended to identify the areas of concern for students who are Blind or Vision Impaired and the barriers these children meet in dealing with the demands of second level education.

The research indicates that there are serious systemic problems which create significant and ongoing barriers to learning for students who are Blind and Vision Impaired while attending mainstream second level education. This research suggests that these students are under-represented in third level in comparison with their non-disabled peers and that they face significant barriers at a number of key points in their academic careers.

Many of these barriers result from a curriculum that has been designed around the needs of sighted students in a traditional learning environment and has not been designed to take account of the more diverse learning needs of children who experience sight difficulties. The infrastructure is inadequate to generate sufficient alternative appropriate learning materials to ensure equity of learning experience for students who are Blind or Vision Impaired. The culture of learning within the education system is not inclusive and little consideration has been given to curriculum change. This results in accommodations that are needed by students, such as additional equipment or indeed Braille teaching, are perceived as *add-ons*, bolted on to the present system, rather than being integrated into the system of teaching and learning.

The absence of an inclusive approach to curriculum design for Blind and Vision Impaired children in mainstream schools has resulted in significant skills gaps in their education such as orientation, social skills development, technology and Braille. This has consequences for the independent learning of Blind and Vision Impaired children and their experience of the education system.

The curriculum of mainstream school has not altered to accommodate the different learning styles and requirements of Blind and Vision Impaired children which has the inevitable result of placing the problems with the child rather than the learning environment. This has a knock-on effect on teachers who are

constantly playing catch up making adjustments to what is an unsuitable curriculum in the first place. In addition, teachers and other professionals have low expectations of the achievement and aspirations of Blind students.

This chapter presents the conclusions of the research and an associated recommendation. To facilitate strategic decisions on the part of AHEAD, the recommendations are presented for the short-term; medium-term and longer term.

7.1 Conclusions

This report draws attention to the dearth of data on the participation of students who are Blind and Vision Impaired in secondary education in Ireland.

From the meagre statistical evidence available it would appear that Blind and Vision Impaired school-leavers are under represented by a factor of two in higher education. This means that the Blind or Vision Impaired child is 50% less likely to progress on to third level than their peers. Enrolment numbers returned by Higher Education Institutions indicate that there has been no improvement in the admission rate of Blind and Vision Impaired students to third level over the past five years.

However the numbers are small, we calculate from the CSO 2006 Census that there are no more that 200-300 Blind and Vision Impaired children in the secondary school system, so solutions should be manageable.

On a national level, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) has in 2006 conducted the first Census of people with disabilities in the state. They have however combined data on Blind and Deaf into the one category called *sensory disability* which is not at all useful for tracking progress or analysing data to inform policy on the education of Blind and Vision Impaired children.

Children who are Blind or Vision Impaired encounter a number of serious barriers while in secondary school. These barriers include negative perceptions and low expectations of teachers and other professionals; a lack of training for teachers; a curriculum that takes no account of the distinct needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children, such as Braille, assistive technology and social skills; a highly complex system of getting supports and inadequate provision of basic materials and accessible textbooks. There are widespread and entrenched myths about Blind

and Vision Impaired children, amongst teachers which are pervasive and contribute to a culture within schools which excludes or disadvantages the disabled child, leads to low expectations for the child and negatively affects their ability to learn the core skills outlined in the national curriculum, i.e. literacy.

Blind and Vision Impaired students present challenges for staff and teachers within the school system as their learning needs and styles are different from their non-disabled peers. These children need to be taught by teachers who have a deep understanding of the pedagogy required for the teaching and learning of Blind and Vision Impaired children, an aspect of which is to compensate for absence of a visual relationship with the learning environment.

Literacy is a high priority of the school system and this research makes a link between the acquisition of literacy skills and Braille for Blind children. Yet according to parents, Braille is given a low priority. The approach to teaching Braille is ad-hoc, un-structured and dependent on the skills of individual visiting teachers, not all of whom are trained to teach Braille to the level required by the student. In addition children who use Braille are hugely disadvantaged in comparison with their non-disabled peers as they do not get access to whole textbooks, rather they are offered half or a quarter of a textbook with which to pursue their studies. This results in an inequality of educational conditions for the Braille user and creates a culture of discouragement of Braille and blocks the educational advancement of Blind children. These children have a need to learn subjects core to their needs separately from other students. For example it is essential that all Blind children have the opportunity to learn Braille and assistive technology as essential non-negotiable core skills.

The demand for Braille is falling at examinations and this may be due to difficulties in getting a comprehensive education through Braille at second level and in particular the lack of textbooks.

School students who are Blind or who have low vision need both general careers advice and specialised career advice at an earlier stage than other children to encourage them to have career aspirations and to facilitate them in making informed career choices. They need to be aware of the implications of non-disclosure of disability on the CAO form as if they do not tick the box on the CAO form and disclose their disability they risk having no immediate support service available to them at the start of their first third level term

Many third level institutions are now operating outreach and orientation programmes for potential students with disabilities or specific sensory impairments. Taking the form of on-campus days, orientation programmes, Open Days, these pre-entry initiatives are very important and useful for Blind and Vision Impaired students in crossing the bridge to Third Level bodies.

There are divergent views on the practice of the Department of Social and Family Affairs paying welfare allowances to school children of 16 years. In its current format this scheme could discourage educational progression.

The *Visiting Teacher* has, or can have, an *important role* in meeting the educational needs of Blind or Vision Impaired children. The service needs to examine its role in the changed educational landscape for students with a Visual Impairment or Blindness.

The Further Education sector with its range of FETAC courses and Post-Leaving Certificate studies plays a vital role in creating pathways to either employment or higher education opportunities for Blind and Vision Impaired people. However it currently does not have the infrastructural

and specialised supports required to support the learning of Blind and Vision Impaired students on a systematic basis.

7.2 Recommendations:

In order to address the inequality of entry to third level by students who are Blind or Vision Impaired, the Department of Education and Science could look at addressing a number of issues occurring at second level.

- There is a dearth of data on the participation of Blind and Vision Impaired children in secondary education and there urgently needs to be a national database to track the attendance of these children. Quality data would better inform future policy development in this area. An analysis of such data would greatly advance our understanding of the issues for Blind and Vision Impaired children. It would provide a baseline of data against which to measure attainment and progression to higher and further education.
- Blind and Vision Impaired children require a separate, structured programme of learning in the essential core skills outlined in this report. Without these skills Blind and Vision Impaired children are being severely disadvantaged in second level and are not able to deal with the disadvantages of their disability, in particular communication skills, use of computers and the use of assistive technology, (such as voice synthesisers), and negotiation of the built environment.
- Learning Braille is essential for the acquisition of literacy skills, cognitive development, and the development of an independent learning capacity for blind children. Children who are studying through Braille need to reach a minimum competence in Braille. This requires a structured programme of Braille instruction, identified skill outcomes and appropriate monitoring. Due to the dearth of data, already outlined, we do not have precise numbers of blind children, however the numbers are relatively small as the visiting teachers deal with approximately 226 children in the secondary school system.
- The visiting teaching service provides a good service, but there are disparities in how they address the needs of the child. The service needs a more defined structure, and greater development opportunities to enhance their level of Braille so that it is appropriate to the age of the children. Children who are studying through Braille should have a Visiting Teacher qualified in Braille to second level studies.

- The practice of offering half or a quarter of a textbook in Braille or alternative formats to school students should be discontinued. A coordinated and systematic approach should be taken to recognising the numbers of children likely to require a service and to fund the process appropriately. Currently produced by the Braille Production Unit and funded by the Department of Education and Science, the creation of alternative materials needs a coordinated approach between organisations such as the NCBI and the Braille Production Unit. This would ensure Braille books are produced on time and that school books could be made available in new technology such as Daisy or eBooks.
- This report recommends that the Department of Education and Science opens discussions with publishers of Irish school books to ensure that *ALL school books are sold with a DVD of the book attached.* The Department could consider making approval to publish schoolbooks conditional on attaching a DVD which has minimal cost and would be of benefit to the thousands of disadvantaged children within the school system.
- School children who are Blind or who have visual impairments should be provided with additional careers advice and at an earlier stage than other children to enable them to make more informed career decisions.
- Disability training should be a mandatory part of all *teacher training programmes* and staff development and information should be available to all teachers to reach a deeper understanding of the different learning needs of Blind and Vision Impaired children.
- The administrative system for students to obtain learning supports and assistive technology in schools should be simplified and made more transparent. The subject should be raised with representative bodies of School Principals as well as with the DES and the National Council for Special Educational Needs.
- The Department of Education and Science should produce an information booklet for parents and other stakeholders such as school principals, teachers and others providing them with information on the supports and aids available to Blind and Vision Impaired children in secondary schools.
- The extensive and formal documentation of the State Examinations Commission on its principles of operation, advice to Invigilators, scale and statistics of Reasonable Accommodations and advice to Examination Centres should be *compiled into a Parent and Teacher Oriented Handbook*, which lays out plainly what is being provided.
- There should be funding available, (similar to the previous HEA Strategic Initiative Fund) to fund third level colleges to collectively offer post school students with a disability a summer computers course or orientation or mobility training course. These have proved highly effective in the past but have been discontinued due to lack of funding.
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs should be invited to publish a short *Discussion Paper* on the availability of the Blind Pension or Disability Allowance to teenagers and based primarily on their own data and research on the topic.
- The Department of Education and Science should grant aid *research into the teaching pedagogy of Mathematics* to Blind and Vision Impaired students to ensure that a lack of achievement in Maths does not pose a barrier for Blind and Vision Impaired students wishing to access third level.

Appendix 1

Scheme of Reasonable Accommodations
An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta,
Department of Education and Science,
Brainse na Scrúdaithe, Examinations Branch,
Cor na Madadh, Cornamaddy,
Baile Átha Luain, Athlone,
Co. na hIarmhí. Co. Westmeath.

(0902) 74621 Fax (0902) 74675
S70/00

Information Note regarding the Scheme of Reasonable Accommodations which will apply at the 2001 Certificate Examinations

TO THE AUTHORITIES OF POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Change in terminology
On the advice of the National Disability Authority it is proposed to use the term *reasonable accommodations* to describe the arrangements made at the examinations for candidates with special needs.

Waiver in relation to assessment of spelling/grammar etc. in language subjects
As schools will be aware, following the review of the scheme for special arrangements carried out by the Expert Advisory Group on Certificate Examinations, the Department began the process of implementing the recommendations in February 2000, details of which were outlined in Circular letter S11/2000. Under the principles identified by the Expert Group candidates with specific learning difficulties who are granted the use of a tape-recorder, computer with spell check enabled or the assistance of a scribe effectively are granted a waiver in relation to the assessment of the spelling and grammatical elements in language subjects. From 2001 a candidate whose specific learning difficulty is not severe enough to warrant the granting of such facilities may nonetheless opt for a waiver in relation to assessment of spelling/grammar etc. in language subjects. Decisions on such applications will be determined on the basis of the evidence available in relation to the candidates' special needs.

Where this arrangement is granted the candidate will have his/her grade determined on the balance of the work in the subject and the results will be accompanied by an explanatory note to the effect that all elements of the language subject in question were assessed except the spelling and grammatical elements.

Availability of Braille version of certain question papers in non-Braille format
Certain question papers containing visual or graphics material are adjusted by the Department to facilitate production in Braille format. The adjusted version in non-Braille format will be made available on request to candidates with a severe visual impairment who do not make use of Braille. This improvement should help such candidates to overcome the difficulties presented by visual or graphics material. Application on behalf of Leaving Certificate candidates who wish to avail of the options outlined above may be made using the Application Forms, which were issued to schools in April of this year. These applications and supporting documentation must be returned to the Examinations Special Needs Section, Department of Education and Science, Examinations Branch, Athlone not later than 8th December 2000. Additional copies of these Application Forms may be had by contacting the Examination Special Needs Section at 0902-83839/83840/83841

Junior Certificate 2001
Application Forms regarding arrangements at this examination are currently being printed. It is hoped to issue them to schools shortly. The delay has occurred because we have designed a suite of forms aimed to

Appendix 2

CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR CANDIDATES WITH DISABILITIES

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta,
Department of Education and Science,
Brainse na Scrúdaithe, Examinations Branch,
Cor na Madadh, Cornamaddy,
Baile Átha Luain, Athlone,
Co. na hIarmhí. Co. Westmeath.

(0902) 74621 Fax (0902) 74675
S40/94

To the authorities of post-primary schools

1.

The Department has for many years made special arrangements in the Certificate Examinations for candidates who would have difficulty in communicating what they know to an examiner because of a physical disability, including visual and hearing impairments, or a specific learning difficulty. The special arrangements are intended

(a) to remove, as far as possible, the impact of the disability on the candidate's performance and thus enable the candidate to demonstrate his or her level of attainment and

(b) to ensure that, whilst giving candidates every opportunity to demonstrate their level of attainment, the special arrangements will not give the candidate an unfair advantage over other candidates in the same examination.

Following a review of the existing arrangements, it has been decided that the following revised arrangements will apply for the school year 1994/95 and until further notice.

2. Range of special arrangements

2.1 The means by which a candidate normally studies or communicates will largely determine the special arrangements which will be required. Care should be taken to ensure that the completed application form contains sufficient pertinent information to allow decisions to be made appropriate to the circumstances of the individual candidate. The range of arrangements which may be made is set out in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Written examinations

The range of special arrangements include:

- Arrangements to have question papers read to the candidate. The questions may be read as often as the candidate requires. No elaboration or explanation may be given.
- Modified question papers may be supplied substituting alternative questions for those which refer to visual material such as diagrams, photographs and maps.
- Braille translations of question papers may be provided, following any necessary modification.
- Question papers may be provided in enlarged print.
- Low vision aids may be allowed for reading the questions.
- Candidates may be permitted to record their answers on tape recorder, typewriter or wordprocessor.
- In the case of Technical Drawing or Technical Graphics examinations, candidates may be allowed the use of aids such as drafting machines, drawing boards and smaller drawing sheets.
- Answers may be dictated to a person acting as a scribe rather than to a tape recorder.

- The candidate may be exempt from the prescribed aural examination. In this case the candidate will be required to take a special oral examination which will include his or her responses to questions similar to those posed to other candidates on tape in the aural examination.

3. Application for special arrangements

3.1 Application for special arrangements must be made by the school authorities on the prescribed application form and must be forwarded to the Examinations Branch of the Department with any necessary supporting documentation not later than the closing dates specified below.

3.2 In general terms, applications should be made
In the case of a visual impairment, a hearing impairment or other long-term physical disability, at the outset of second-level education.
In the case of a specific learning difficulty, at the beginning of the school year prior to the year of examination, e.g. at the beginning of the 1995/96 year for the examination expected to be taken at the end of the 1996/97 school year. As this condition may improve over time, it would not be appropriate to make a decision more than two years prior to the examination.
In the case of a visual impairment, a hearing impairment or other long-term physical disability not present at the outset of second-level education, at the beginning of the school year following that in which the disability is discovered.
In order to introduce the above schedule it will be necessary to make a special provisions for the current, 1994/95, school year as set out in 3.3 following.

3.3 The specific closing dates for applications are as follows:
(a) In the case of *all candidates* for examination in 1995, applications much reach the Examinations Branch not later than 30 November 1994.
(b) In the case of *all candidates* for examination in 1996, applications must reach the Examinations Branch not later than 31 December 1994.
(c) In the case of candidates for examination in 1997 and later years who have a *specific learning difficulty*, application must be made not earlier than the beginning of the school year prior to the year of the examination and not later than 31 December of that year, e.g. between September and December 1995 for examination in 1997.
(d) In the case of candidates for examination in 1997 and later years who have a visual impairment, a hearing impairment or other long-term physical disability, application must be made not later than 31 December in their first school year.
(e) Where a disability does not arise or does not come to light until after the closing dates specified above, application should be made without delay. Similarly, where a change in a candidate's condition arises after the closing date, for better or worse, the Department should be notified immediately.
A supply of application forms is enclosed. Additional forms may be obtained from the Examinations Branch on request.

4. Confirming that special arrangements, already approved, will be required

In autumn 1995 and future years, school authorities must notify the Department, when entries are being submitted for the certificate examinations, of the candidates being entered for whom special arrangements have been approved and who still wish and need to avail of them. The date of approval and the

For the majority of candidates whose applications were accepted, the special arrangements involved no more than ensuring that every possible effort would be made to decipher their answers and mark them reliably in accordance with the marking scheme, however difficult it would be to read their work because of misspellings, bad handwriting, poor grammar.

7.3 Where the degree of impairment is severe, further arrangements may be deemed appropriate, as detailed in Part 2. A candidate who is unable to read, or is effectively unable to read, may be allowed the service of a person who will read the questions. A candidate who is unable to write, or is effectively unable to write, may be allowed the service of a scribe or the use of a mechanical aid such as a tape recorder, a typewriter or a word processor.

7.4 It is emphasised that the existence of a specific learning difficulty does not automatically entitle a candidate to special arrangements in examinations. Even though candidates may have a specific difficulty with reading, writing or spelling, they may not require the provision of any special facilities provided that they can read the question papers of the required level and write legibly. Each individual case is considered on its merits.

8. Appeals

8.1 Arrangements will be put in place to have appeals against decisions on applications adjudicated on by a small group. The majority of the members of this group, including the chairperson, will be external to the Department of Education. Detailed arrangements will be notified to schools before the end of January 1995.

9. Conclusion

9.1 The co-operation of school authorities is sought in complying with the schedule outlined and particularly with the closing dates specified in 3.3. The schedule has been drawn up in the best interests of candidates and schools.

Don Thornhill
Secretary
1 November 1994

Appendix 3

State Examinations Commission
List of Accommodations as laid out by the Expert Advisory Group

All applications for reasonable accommodations are considered in light of a published Framework of Principles as set out by the Expert Advisory Group on examinations.

The principles are:

- Reasonable Accommodations should be made for candidates who, because of a temporary, permanent or long-term disability, have special assessment needs in examinations.
- Provision should be made for both physical and learning disabilities.
- Reasonable Accommodations should not put the integrity, status, or reputation of the examination at risk.
- Reasonable Accommodations should be designed to remove as far as possible the impact of a disability on a candidate's performance, so that he or she can demonstrate in the examination his or her level of achievement.
- Reasonable Accommodations are designed to assist a candidate in demonstrating his or her achievements in an examination setting. They are not designed to compensate for a possible lack of achievement arising from a disability.
- Since a core principle of the Certificate examinations is to ensure equitable treatment for all candidates, arrangements should not give the candidate for whom they are made an advantage over other candidates.
- Independent evidence of a disability and support needs should be required before allowing reasonable accommodations.
- The precise arrangements to be made should be determined on the basis of the disability or impairment established in each individual case and of the particular needs of the candidate in each individual subject area. Different subjects and different methods of assessment may make different demands on candidates.
- A candidate's disability may be such that it is not possible for him or her to participate in a particular mode of assessment (an aural examination for a candidate with severe hearing impairment), in which case it should be open to the candidate to apply for exemption from part of the assessment procedure.
- Where it is not possible for a candidate to participate in a particular mode of assessment, an alternative assessment procedure may be specified.
- An alternative procedure is not acceptable where the purpose of an examination would be compromised by its use (e.g., providing a scribe to draw for a candidate in an Art examination).
- When an element or elements of an examination have been waived, so that the purpose of the examination regarding that element or elements has not been met, or the method of examining has been significantly altered, this should be indicated by the presence of an explanatory note on the candidate's certificate of results.
- Circumstances that may affect a candidate's performance (e.g., illness, trauma, bereavement) should, insofar as is possible, be addressed during the examination period.

Appendix 4

- In October 2006, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) submitted a report to the Minister for Education and Science on the implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004. In an appendix to the comprehensive report, the NCSE provided the estimated prevalence of disability according to the Report of the Special Education Review Committee of 1993. At that time, the SERC were unable to provide an estimate of the number of students with visual impairment. This difficulty continues in 2007.
- The Census of 2002 is not entirely helpful, since it amalgamates Deaf, Hearing Loss, Blind and Vision Impaired students together into a single category to represent sensory impairments. The Census 2006 also amalgamated sensory impairments into one category of persons. Volume 10 of Census 2006, which relates to Disability, Caring and Voluntary Activity, also amalgates Deaf and Blind.
- Following Census 2006 the Central Statistics Office (CSO) administered a National Disability Survey to adults according to responses to disability questions in the Census. The questionnaire separates seeing and hearing-related disability. The results will provide specific data on persons with a seeing difficulty including participation in education. The main results of the National Disability Survey are expected to be released at the end of 2007.
- The Department of Education and Science could not provide this study with a figure demonstrating the number of Primary and Post-Primary school-going Blind and Vision Impaired students.
- The Disability or Access Office at Universities and Institutes of Technology gather and maintain data on the number of students who disclose disability, including type of disability. This data is supplied to AHEAD on a regular basis.
- The National Physical and Sensory Disability Database (NPSDD) contains information on the specialised health services currently used or needed by people with physical and sensory disabilities. It does not contain information on educational need or attainment.