

# Visually Impaired Older Learners



## Effective support arrangements: guidelines for course organisers and teaching staff



This is the sixteenth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues.

Also available:

1. A history of the development of NIACE
2. What motivates people to learn
3. Student non-completion (drop out)
4. Who learns - key facts
5. Family learning
6. Lifelong learning - opportunities and initiatives
7. New Deal
8. Learning centres
9. Young adult learners, disaffection and social exclusion
10. Social exclusion
11. Emancipatory learning
12. Fees charged to part-time adult students
13. Learning and Skills Councils and older people
14. Building effective partnerships – lessons from the Adult and Community Learning Fund
15. Briefing 2000 on learning in later life

Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.

Tel. No. 0116 2044 261

E-mail: [information@niace.org.uk](mailto:information@niace.org.uk)

They are also available on the website at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk).

If you require a different format - e.g. a large print version - please let us know.

### Introduction

As many as a million adults in the UK experience a level of sight loss which significantly affects their ability to study<sup>1</sup>. Some 88% of these are aged 60 or over<sup>2</sup> – the majority of whom have become visually impaired in adulthood – and this figure is increasing in line with demographic trends towards a longer life expectancy. There is also a significant incidence of additional impairments among the visually impaired adult population, most notably deafness.

Evidence shows that the needs of this group frequently go unrecognised, and therefore unaddressed. In many cases, sight declines gradually and is perceived as “just part of getting older”, rather than as a disability. Those working with older people should be alert to signs which may indicate a sight problem. Many older adults are reluctant to disclose their visual impairment and, even if they do, are unlikely to have had a full assessment of their needs. How effectively any remaining vision is used, however, depends as much on the opportunity and willingness to learn new skills as on the medical circumstances which prevail.

Visual impairment has a considerable impact on self-image and confidence, and consequently affects both the motivation and the ability to take up or continue learning<sup>3</sup>. This briefing paper outlines some of the implications and offers guidance on how these might be addressed.

## Reaching potential learners

Many visually impaired adults are not aware of the learning opportunities which are available, and publicity needs to take account of the needs of this group. Social services departments hold registers of local blind and partially sighted people and provide a point of personal contact through their Rehabilitation staff. Local voluntary societies for blind people are also willing to distribute publicity among their members.

Many more visually impaired people exist than are known to these agencies, however. For this group, information is likely to be picked up at such places as opticians, GP surgeries, chemists, post offices, community centres and places of worship. Many visually impaired adults listen to local radio stations and talking newspapers, which are generally willing to advertise courses.

## Assessing learning support needs

A comprehensive assessment is unlikely to be within the scope of a single agency. Social Services staff may provide an assessment of **communication** (e.g. large print, tactile or audio) and **mobility** needs, and arrange for training in these areas. Assessment of **low vision** and **lighting** needs is normally through the local Hospital Eye Service following referral from an ophthalmologist or optician. Assessment of **study support** needs may be available through the Learning Support team at a local college. Assessment is particularly important because many who have no previous experience of learning as visually impaired people will be unaware of their own support needs.

## Transport

Many visually impaired adults are unable to take up learning opportunities solely because they cannot get to the venue. Course information should clearly indicate:

- public transport routes and stopping points near to the learning locations
- car parking and dropping-off arrangements for disabled people
- contact numbers for local community transport schemes.

## Training for staff

While staff training to support disabled students is increasingly becoming a requirement, many adult education tutors cannot readily access such opportunities. Distance learning could be one way of obtaining the necessary training - the WEA has recently produced a distance learning pack<sup>4</sup> which is relevant to all tutors of adults; and opportunities for accredited training also exist on the Internet<sup>5</sup>. For customised group training, contact the local voluntary society for the blind, GDBA or RNIB.

## Welcoming environments

Low-cost arrangements which can help to provide a more friendly environment for visually impaired learners include:

- signs in clear, bold print at eye level
- contrasting colours to identify doors, stair edges, light switches, etc
- a good, even level of lighting
- avoidance of light sources which cause glare
- power points available for learners using task lamps, tape recorders, etc
- induction loop available and working
- soft furnishings (e.g. curtains, carpet) to reduce resonance
- extra table space to accommodate large papers, use of low vision aid, etc

Detailed information on environmental access is available from RADAR and RNIB.

## Communicating effectively

Communication can involve any combination of the following:

- standard print
- large print
- audio tape
- Moon
- Braille
- access technology.

**Print** is the preferred medium for more than 6 in 10 visually impaired people. Some can use standard print, either unaided or with a low vision aid. For others, a photocopy enlargement to A3 may be sufficient, or large print may be customised using a computer. All print users will benefit from:

- maximum contrast between text and background
- minimum font size 12 point
- standard type face, e.g. Arial (avoid ribbon scripts and shadow faces)
- use of lower case rather than blocks of capital letters
- concise sentences and short paragraphs
- landscape rather than portrait page format for large print

**Audio tape** is a widely accessible tool but requires particular study skills which cannot be assumed to be in place. Comprehensive guidelines for recording are available from COTIS. RNIB's Cassette Library carries an extensive range of academic titles, so always check before making a recording (especially if there is a copyright implication).

Moon and Braille are tactile codes which are not widely used by people who lose their sight in adulthood, but provide an important means of continuing to interact with the written word for some (especially those who

are deafblind). The National Library for the Blind carries an extensive range of books in Braille and Moon, and titles in Braille are available from RNIB.

It is now relatively easy to produce Braille through a computer, and many colleges and local voluntary societies are able to do this. Alternatively, contact the Inside Out Trust for information about prison transcription services. Opportunities for older adults to acquire tactile skills at a fluent level are limited; for information about local training, contact Social Services and/or the local society for blind people.

*“... where adults are active and ‘engaged’ with life, they live longer and healthier lives – healthier not only in terms of physical well-being but also in terms of their psychological or mental state. This is of especial significance to blind and partially sighted people, particularly those who have experienced the trauma of loss or major diminishment of vision since there is a tendency towards despair and an inevitable reduction in involvement with mainstream activities.”<sup>6</sup>*

**Access technology** has considerable potential in supporting visually impaired learners, and the range is increasing all the time. Computers can be adapted by means of speech packs, text magnification and Braille displays. A vast amount of information can be stored and accessed electronically by means of computer disk and CD-ROM. This is stimulating the development of new, interactive approaches to learning which can be of great benefit to people with disabilities.

Identifying a suitable package can be difficult, however, especially where the visual condition is unstable and needs are likely to change. Visually impaired adults

not in paid employment may find it difficult to obtain assessment, funding and training for this equipment – much of which is expensive and relatively complex. RNIB's *Technology for Learning and Employment (TILE)* can provide general information and advice. The local voluntary society, Social Services department and/or college will give details about local availability.

### References

1. Blind and partially sighted adults in Britain: the RNIB survey (1991) London, HMSO
2. Registered blind and partially sighted people, England (1997) Department of Health
3. Lifelong learning for visually impaired older people: research report (2000) RNIB
4. Working with visually impaired adults: a guide for tutors and trainers (1999) WEA
5. Certificate in Visual Impairment Studies provided by the Royal London Society for the Blind and accredited through the Open College Network (details from [sally.howell@risb.org.uk](mailto:sally.howell@risb.org.uk))
6. Listening to students (1996) RNIB

### Useful contacts

ABAPSTAS (Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students), BM Box 6727, London WC1V 6XX. Tel: 01484 517954.

COTIS (Confederation of Tape Information Services), 67 High Street, Tarporley, Cheshire CW6 0DP. Tel: 01829 733351.

Deafblind UK, 18 Rainbow Court, Paston Ridings, Peterborough PE4 7UP. Tel: 01733 573511.

GDBA (Guide Dogs for the Blind Association), Hillfields, Burghfield, Reading RG7 3YG. Tel: 01734 835555.

Inside Out Trust, 108 High Street, Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex BN6 9PX. Tel: 01273 833050.  
(Moon and Braille transcription services)

National Library for the Blind, Far Cromwell Road, Bredbury, Stockport SK6 2SG. Tel: 0161 355 2000. (Braille and Moon lending library)

Partially Sighted Society, PO Box 322, Doncaster DN1 2NX. Tel: 01302 323132.  
(Advice on low vision aids, lighting, etc)

RADAR (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation), 12 City Forum, 25 City Road, London EC1V 8AF. Tel: 020 7250 3222.

RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind), 224 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6AA. Tel: 020 7388 1266. (Advice on environmental access, study support, etc)

RNIB Customer Services, PO Box 173, Peterborough PE2 6XU. Tel: 0845 7023153.  
(Cassette and Braille lending library; general mail order service of products for visually impaired people)

RNIB Talking Books Service, Mount Pleasant, Wembley HA0 1RR. Tel: 0345 626843.

RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People), 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL. Tel: 0808 808 0123

SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London SE1 3JW. Tel: 020 7450 0620.

Talking Newspaper Association of the UK, National Recording Centre, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 8DB. Tel: 01435 866102.

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.

Registered charity number 1002775  
Company registration number 2603322