



National Seminar Series 2014

Title: “Addressing access challenges for students with visual impairments making transitions to further and higher education”

Theme (refer to the themes outlined on the Forum website): Transition for Students with Disabilities

Date: Thursday 25th September

Host institution(s): Trinity College Dublin’s School of Education and AHEAD

Venue: Trinity College Dublin’s School of Education

Number of participants: 45

Institutions represented: TCD, UL, DCU, CIT, UCC, NCBI, UCD, St. Patrick’s College Drumcondra, Irish Guide Dogs, Visiting teachers association, National braille production centre, Rosmini College, NCSE and senior cycle blind/visually impaired students.

Contact: Dr. Esther Murphy

Link to recording (if applicable): N/A

Key insights from the day (in bullets):

- Listening to the student experience needs to be central for transition planning for higher education
- Staff teaching and working with students with visual impairments should have access to up to date training and resources to support them have most accessible education experience, in particular with regard to technology training and resources.
- Students can bring awareness of solutions, particularly with new technologies
- Mechanisms to facilitate peer support between fellow students and teaching professionals to enhance teaching and learning experience advocated.
- Long term preparation for higher education essential and planning to begin at primary school especially for students with extra needs is strongly advised
- Collaboration and information and skills sharing between all teaching and learning stakeholders integral to students’ successful transition
- Without strong driven parents, students can slip out of education. There is a need to support students with developing advocacy skills and ensure that particularly vulnerable students are fully informed of third level access routes.

Key contributions from the seminar to the broader Forum outlined theme (Max 300 words): (274words)

This seminar was run in the context of the Forum’s theme “Transitions for students with disabilities” and contributes to this theme by identifying the need for stronger collaboration between all stakeholders to share information, resources and expertise to ensure third level teaching and learning environments are as inclusive and accesible as possible. During the seminar, a lack of cross



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sharing of resources and information was highlighted. This seminar raised awareness among teaching and learning professionals and support organizations of existing resources e.g. funding for equipment at college or transition reports from schools, from the wide range of educators and service providers represented on the day.

Participants highlighted the benefit of hearing the students' perspective on aspects of teaching and learning that are challenging for them given their specific needs due to their sight loss. It was recognised that the students' experiences of the best ways to support them must inform how teaching and learning is made as accessible as possible. For example, a 1st year UCC college student when asked could she share three tips for everyone in the room, she replied "would it be ok to give five?"

So briefly here they are:

1. To learn braille and mobility from an early age as later it can cause stigma
2. Increase teachers' use of accessible inclusive teaching format
3. More targeted career advice for visually impaired students to include meeting with peers who had made successful transitions into education and employment
4. Message to other students "know your rights before college, know you can use an advocate"
5. Message to educators and other key workers "listen to the student, all the time!"

What we plan to do in the future building on this event (Max 300 words): 295

Since the seminar, the research team have developed a project proposal for the National Forum's focused research projects programme. The aim of this project will be to extend our active HEA funded pilot study which is profiling VI/blind senior cycle students transition experiences to examine the early transition experiences of a selection of students with disabilities within higher education from two universities with a contrasting demographic intake. Establishing supportive learning environments is a key task for institutions in ensuring successful transitions for disabled students (Jacklin and Robinson, 2007). The research team proposes to explore the transition experiences in depth focusing on whether they are experiencing an inclusive teaching and learning environment. A recent scoping study (Mc Guckin et al., 2013) reported that the significant changes in teaching, learning and assessment in higher education compared to post primary settings posed a significant challenge to all students but particularly those who have disabilities. This proposed research will examine the teaching and learning environment of two contrasting universities from the perspectives of students with disabilities, with a particular focus on accessibility of course materials, evidence of differentiated teaching, quality of assignment feedback, and deployment of a range of appropriate assessment strategies.

This event marked the second in a series of focused meetings, bringing together all key stakeholders working with and supporting VI/blind students in Ireland. These events have the innovative nature of being designed to be driven by the student experience. This is a new model which we have developed to facilitate the student experience leading and informing the discussion, to identify key teaching and learning areas that most urgently need to be addressed to impact practice and policy. Building on the success of this seminar we will be developing more collaborative student centered initiatives to include in our proposed project.