



# A guide for Higher Education Providers

Supporting students with vision  
impairment during Covid-19

September 2020

# Introduction

Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT), Guide Dogs and LOOK UK have worked with vision impairment sector partners, Disability Advisers, Qualified Teacher of children and young people with a Vision Impairment (QTVI), lecturers and other professionals to produce this Covid-19 specific guidance for Higher Education Providers (HEP).

This should be read in conjunction with wider guidance [‘Supporting the achievement of learners with vision impairment in Higher Education’](#)

## Who should read this guidance

This guidance draws on best practice, existing information and resources, to provide tips, advice and links to resources.

It is for those working within Higher Education (HE) either supporting students with vision impairment directly or designing systems and policies that impact on students, including;

- Disability advisers
- Examination teams within Higher Education Providers (HEP) settings
- Student Support Services
- Lecturers
- Library support
- Students with vision impairment and their parents/carers.

We have designed this briefing around four themes – **putting the student at the centre, studying, getting around** and **inclusion**. Each of these sections includes; an overview, a checklist, examples of good practice and links to information, advice and support.

This document is designed to be either read in its entirety or as standalone sections.

# Contents

**Putting the student at the centre .....**

**04**

**Study.....**

**05**

- Accessing information and resources
- Learning platforms
- Exams and assessments

**Getting around.....**

**10**

- Orientation and mobility
- The design of campuses

**Social inclusion .....**

**12**

- Socialising
- Housing and accommodation

**International students .....**

**14**

**Organisations and support.....**

**15**

# Putting the student at the centre

The 2020/21 academic year will look different to any other year, providing fresh and ongoing challenges for new and returning students, and the staff that support them. However, for students with vision impairment (VI) there will be additional barriers, which may include safely navigating campus and local amenities, accessing shared facilities and accessing online learning. It is crucial to provide accessible solutions to these barriers, to avoid additional challenges and negative impact to the wellbeing of students with vision impairment.

Contact should be made with students at the earliest opportunity and a plan of action put in place to identify and address barriers.

Of course, the safety of students should be paramount, and consideration must be given as to how to support students that demonstrate Covid-19 symptoms. Some students with vision impairment may not be able to use testing kits independently and may not be able to travel to a test centre. We recommend that students are directed to contact 119 for advice and guidance on local arrangements.



## Checklist

1. Does the student know who and how to contact staff to discuss their support needs? **Top tip: If possible allocate a named person or a team that the student can contact throughout the year.**
2. Are all staff aware of inclusion policies?
3. Are the student and staff clear of the roles and responsibilities of the support network?
4. Are processes in place to regularly check in with the student to find out how they are doing, and to make sure that they have the resources they need to engage with their study and university life?
5. Is the student aware of emotional support and wellbeing services available to them?

## Example of good practice

University of Birmingham is organising weekly Personal Academic Tutoring sessions for students. This will form a mechanism to ensure each student is settling into university life, and to signpost them to services when required. It provides an ideal opportunity to identify any challenges that students may be facing in relation to their disability.

## Resources

- For a checklist covering aspects of inclusive practice and development of teaching resources visit [www.ccsu.edu/sds/designChecklist.html](http://www.ccsu.edu/sds/designChecklist.html)
- For a reminder of rights and adjustments required visit [www.disabilityrightsuk.org/adjustments-disabled-students](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/adjustments-disabled-students)
- For general information for supporting students in post 16 education visit Thomas Pocklington Trusts - Student Support Service [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/student-support](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/student-support)
- For advice and guidance for supporting vision impaired children and young people in education visit Guide Dogs [www.guidedogs.org.uk/getting-support/information-and-advice/education-support](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/getting-support/information-and-advice/education-support)
- Recording and resources from LOOK's online Q&A for VI students starting the new academic year during Covid-19: [www.look-uk.org/back-to-uni-qa-for-visually-impaired-students/](http://www.look-uk.org/back-to-uni-qa-for-visually-impaired-students/)
- For general advice, visit the VI student's uni handbook [www.look-uk.org/the-students-handbook/](http://www.look-uk.org/the-students-handbook/).

# Study

The way in which students study has changed significantly. These changes have been fast paced and many HEPs have adopted a blended learning approach – using both face to face and online learning.

Blended learning has the potential to significantly benefit students with vision impairment, through ensuring that everyone has access to the same resources and materials. There are some steps that can be taken so that all [information and resources](#), [online platforms](#), and [exams and assessments](#) are truly accessible and **usable** for students with vision impairment.



## Information and resources

There has been a move for all learning resources, lecture notes, papers and other information to be available online. However, simply transferring information online doesn't necessarily make it accessible. PDF documents aren't always compatible with Assistive Technology (AT), and video resources may not be appropriate if they depend on visual references to convey information.



## Checklist

1. Has an audit been conducted to check that all existing and newly uploaded PDFs are formatted as accessible PDFs?
2. Has an audit been conducted to check that all written notes follow a clear heading structure and that screenshots are available in an accessible format?
3. Can the student access all materials; including graphs, tables, equations etc? **Top tip: check that they are produced in a compatible format for the technology the student will be using. Academic staff can do this in consultation with the disability team.**
4. Is the software and assistive technology the student is using compatible with the universities platforms and course materials?
5. Is the student included in all discussions around their support needs? They will be able to help with identifying appropriate solutions that work for them. They are also best placed to test that something is working the way that it should.
6. If studying a practical subject, have steps been taken to ensure that the student can fully engage with any virtual simulations that are in place of lab time or practical learning? These alternative arrangements should not only be accessible, but also usable and compatible with any assistive technology used by the student. **Top tip: specialist guidance may be provided by a Specialist Support Professional for students with Vision Impairment, which is a role funded by Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).**





## Best practice

### Keele University

The library service provides a need-supportive Digitisation Service, that provides support to students who cannot access printed material. The library service meets with the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) to identify which students may need support.

The service tailors their support and approach to meet the individuals support needs, recognising that two students studying the same course will need to receive the same information, but in different formats. They arrange a “Come and Chat” meeting each semester to allow a face to face discussion with the student so that between them they can make sure the service is meeting the student’s needs.

Another university has transitioned to full online learning for its Art Degree. Students will be asked to work with images of art works in electronic textbooks emailed to them by their lecturer or via printed handouts. The course lecturers and disability support team are conscious that for the student with vision impairment starting this academic year, opportunities for them to tactilely explore the artwork will be limited.

The university has worked with the student and charities to explore what provisions need to be put in place to support them. A wide range of potential solutions are being explored ranging from mobile apps and websites to human support.



# Online platforms

As well as ensuring that materials are accessible, it is important that online platforms are accessible and usable.

The online platforms chosen by the HEP may be incompatible with AT or be difficult to learn and navigate without training and practice. Online platforms often rely on visual cues (including 'pop-ups' confirming that an

assignment has been successfully submitted) that AT may not recognise. This can lead to the student being unaware whether they have submitted a piece of work. Whilst it may not be possible to address these accessibility barriers immediately, it is important that potential problems are identified so that adjustments may be put in place.



## Checklist

1. Do the students' support staff have the permissions to access online platforms in order to provide remote support? This is an important step for the student to work effectively with their support staff.
2. Is it understood how the student will access video conferencing facilities such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams? **Top tip: share any slides in advance, set ground rules so that everyone can participate, ask students to say their name before speaking. Check with the student before and after using the platforms for the first time to see what steps can be taken so that they can fully participate.**
3. Is the student able to use and navigate information sharing platforms (i.e. Blackboard)? Some students have reported that they are unable to upload their assignments. If this is the case, ensure that alternative arrangements are in place.
4. Can the student access training and one to one guidance when learning to use new platforms? **Top tip: allow the student time to familiarise themselves with the systems and necessary commands. To minimise delays and disruptions this should be as early as possible and preferably before the course starts.**
5. Is there flexibility? **Top tip: if a platform is inaccessible, contact the creators - they may have guidance on addressing accessibility issues. In the longer term investigate alternative more accessible options.**

# Exams and assessments

Covid-19 has impacted on the way in which students sit exams. Some HEPs have taken the decision to cancel all exams for students, apart from those in their final year. Some have allowed for exams to be sat at home.

Individual institutions will have different arrangements for assessment procedures.

Please see your chosen institutions guidelines for more information.

Communication between all those involved with the design and implementation of examinations and assessments should start at the earliest opportunity and should involve the student.



## Checklist

1. Have the needs of the student been considered when designing assessments? Good planning can minimise the need for adjustments later.  
**Top tip: during Covid-19 it may be that a bespoke solution will be needed for an individual student based on their needs, this should be explored in conjunction with the student.**
2. Has the student been consulted to ensure that the most appropriate anticipatory adjustments are put in place? For example granting an extension may not be in the students best interest, as it may impact on their studies and graduation plans. Discussions must be had with the student to determine whether an extension is the best route, or whether it will place extra burdens and time constraints on them.
3. If a presentation is part of an assessment, has the student been engaged with to ensure that they are confident with using their technology? The student may need guidance on setting up any camera equipment and advice on ensuring that the camera and microphone are correctly positioned.  
**Top tip: prior planning and trial runs beforehand can highlight issues and alleviate worries.**
4. Technology isn't always reliable, is there a back-up plan if the technology fails?  
**Top tip: organise discussions between the student and key staff to identify potential issues and to identify what adjustments or support could be implemented to avoid/overcome them.**
5. Has the student been offered the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the examination platform beforehand and troubleshoot accessibility issues? For example, often screen reading software doesn't pick up graphic information on web pages which can make navigating pages difficult. **Top tip: give students the chance to become familiar with the exam platform before undertaking the exam to address accessibility issues and eliminate this extra pressure.**





## Best practice

The University of Birmingham has developed a system in which each module has several options/formats for completing the necessary assessments. This gives

both lecturers and students choice and flexibility and establishes alternatives well in advance.

An exam board took the decision for all students to sit their exams remotely, at home. The system by the exam board was not accessible for screen-reader users.

As a solution the students with vision impairment were requested to travel to a test centre in London to sit their exams in person. The students didn't feel this was reasonable, as travelling to the capital during COVID-19 would add unnecessary risk and stress that their sighted peers did not have to face.

With support from Thomas Pocklington Trust, the exam board engaged in a solution-based dialogue with the students. The students were able to suggest alternative approaches, which the exam board then explored to find a solution that

didn't compromise the integrity of the exam and was agreeable to all.

An acceptable solution was found. It was agreed that a secure email of a Word document version of the exam paper would be sent to the students, with one to one invigilation at their home.

Subsequently, the exam board, the students and Thomas Pocklington Trust will be working together to look at the issues around accessibility to identify a plan to prevent further instances of this kind.

This example demonstrates how focused discussion can support both students and organisations to address and overcome issues, quickly and constructively.

### Resources

Ability Net; My Study My Way

[www.abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/four-ways-my-study-my-way-can-help-you-university](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/four-ways-my-study-my-way-can-help-you-university)

RNIB

[www.rnib.org.uk/practical-help/technology-hub/technology-support](http://www.rnib.org.uk/practical-help/technology-hub/technology-support)

[www.bookshare.org/cms/](http://www.bookshare.org/cms/)

Vital Tech [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/news/vital-tech-the-new-impartial-guide-to-assistive-technology](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/news/vital-tech-the-new-impartial-guide-to-assistive-technology)

Microsoft Office

[Make your Word documents accessible](#)

[Make your Excel spreadsheets accessible](#)

[Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible](#)

[Make your SharePoint site accessible](#)

[Create accessible Office documents \(Office Support\)](#)

[Create accessible PDFs \(Office Support\)](#)

[Video: creating accessible documents \(Office Support\)](#)

[Video: create more accessible slides \(Office Support\)](#)

Adobe Acrobat Pro

[Create and verify PDF accessibility](#)

[UK Association for Accessible Formats](#)

[Sight Advice FAQ: how do I create accessible documents](#)

UK Government

[Publishing accessible documents - How to publish on GOV.UK](#)

Higher education

[University of Birmingham, Teaching Academy: Creating Accessible Materials](#)

# Getting around

When it comes to getting around university campuses COVID-19 has had profound implications for individuals with vision impairment. Social distancing has meant that in many instances mobility training and guidance has been put on hold. HEPs have had to limit who and the number of students allowed on to campus and have introduced one-way systems and social distancing protocols. It can therefore be difficult or impossible for students with vision impairment to navigate campuses, which can in turn impact their confidence and wellbeing.

## **Orientation and mobility**

In many instances Non-Medical Help and habilitation and rehabilitation providers may not yet be delivering face to face orientation and mobility training (O&M). This training is essential for many VI students to enable them to move safely and independently around university, campus and the wider community.

Some HEPS may also have taken the decision not to provide sighted guides at this time, so O&M training is likely to be more critical if students are to move around safely and with confidence.

New students may require O&M training to familiarise and learn routes on and off campus. Support may be necessary for returning students to familiarise with new one-way systems and changes to environments, such as the introduction of screens and hand sanitising stations, signage and floor markings.

It is strongly advised that contact is made with the local authority for the HEP's locality, to discuss O&M support at the earliest possibility. Guide Dogs may also be able to provide a range of mobility services and support.





## Checklist

1. Has a risk assessment been conducted that looks at what general orientation can be offered to support a student around the campus - for both new and returning students? Think about all of the ways that a student will need to navigate the campus; how will they get to and from key lecture rooms, where are hand sanitiser points located, what one-way systems are in place, what exits/entrances have changed, which routes have been closed off or are no longer accessible, and which communal areas are open.
2. Have changes to routes been communicated to the student? **Top tip: explore safe ways in which this information can be communicated, for example via an audio recording.**
3. Are student support staff allowed on to campus to support students? Is there guidance that these staff and the student need to follow? Some providers will be delivering face to face O&M support from early September and will need access to campus.
4. If there is no support to help the student navigate campus, what alternative support has been put in place? Talk to the student to see if a temporary alternative provision can be agreed.
5. Has an audit been conducted to ensure that tactile markers such as tape, 'out of use' blockers and signs to assist students with vision impairment are used consistently throughout?
6. Is the student aware of the support available to them for accessing O&M?

### Resources

Habilitation VI UK has produced COVID-19 risk assessment guidance for supporting young people with vision impairment [www.habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/](http://www.habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/)

Guide Dogs My Sighted Guide service may be able to support [www.guidedogs.org.uk/getting-support/help-for-adults/my-sighted-guide](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/getting-support/help-for-adults/my-sighted-guide)

# Social inclusion

The shift to online learning and the inability to be on-campus significantly reduces opportunities for students with vision impairments to engage with activities, including forming relationships and building independence. These are key to any students' university experience.

The combination of blended learning, lack of mobility and orientation guiding, changes in the layout of campus and social contact creates a risk that students may feel that they cannot leave their accommodation. This is a serious concern for students' mental health and wellbeing.

An overreliance on technology doesn't provide a fair or equivalent experience. Reasonable adjustments must be fair and not put students with additional needs, or those around them, at a disadvantage.

The importance of being on campus and building relationships with peers shouldn't be underestimated. It is important to be creative and openminded with solutions. Many resolutions employed in a normal year may be unavailable or inappropriate during this period.

**Ali, an international student chose to study online for his undergraduate course, but when it came to his post graduate study he decided to go to a campus instead. Here he reflects on the difference between the two.**

**"I chose to do the BA course online because I could study at home, in my comfort zone, with all of my tools around me. It's good to stay in your comfort zone sometimes, but not for a long time. At university there are lots of opportunities for socialising, being independent. You don't get the same experiences with online learning.**

**It just takes you to another level in terms of maturity. There is a point in everyone's life when you have to step outside, become an independent and mature adult. I think university is a great way to take that step."**







## Checklist

1. Is there a network or support in place to ensure that the student is able to engage with activities? Do they need extra support with shopping, navigation, meeting peers from their 'bubble' and key staff or engaging in extra-curricular activities on offer at the university?
2. Does the student have a list of contacts they can go to for help and advice?
3. Is there a designated member of staff to keep in close contact with the student especially in the first few weeks, checking they have access to everything they need?
4. Are alternative and remote opportunities for socialising inclusive for students with vision impairment?
5. Do risk assessments include the possible impact on a student's mental health due to isolation?
6. Is the student aware of mental health and wellbeing support services available to them, such as counselling?

### Resources

Student Minds has developed some Covid-19 specific resources for student and professionals

[www.studentminds.org.uk/coronavirus.html](http://www.studentminds.org.uk/coronavirus.html)

University of Plymouth has some guidance on inclusive practice

[www.plymouth.ac.uk/about-us/teaching-and-learning/inclusivity/how-can-i-be-more-inclusive](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/about-us/teaching-and-learning/inclusivity/how-can-i-be-more-inclusive)

LOOK UK provide a free bespoke student mentoring service that links a VI student with a graduate for support and advice, sharing experiences and boosting skills:

[www.look-uk.org/student-mentoring/](http://www.look-uk.org/student-mentoring/)

LOOK also offer a free counselling service for VI adults aged 18+, their families and support networks:

[www.look-uk.org/free-counselling-with-look-and-york-college/](http://www.look-uk.org/free-counselling-with-look-and-york-college/)





# International students

As with all students, those travelling to the UK to study should be supported in accessing the information they need, anticipating and finding solutions for potential challenges or issues, and adjusting to their new environment. International students are likely to need a higher level of support due to having a reduced support network and awareness of support services available locally.

## Resources

- The Higher Education Policy Institute has published a blog with advice on supporting international students. [www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/09/looking-after-international-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-and-after/](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/09/looking-after-international-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-and-after/)



## Checklist

If the student with vision impairment is studying on campus, have steps been put place to support with quarantining?. **Top tip: food packages and emotional support delivered remotely are some of the ways universities are helping international students to settle into their new accommodation at this challenging time.**



# Organisations and support

For further information and advice please contact

## **Thomas Pocklington Trust: Student Support Service**

Our service is here to support students with vision impairment to enter in to and get the most out of post 16 education. We provide guidance, information and advice to students, parents/carers and professionals

Email: [Studentsupport@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:Studentsupport@pocklington-trust.org.uk)

[www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/student-support](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/student-support)

## **LOOK UK**

We support VI young people and their families to thrive through a range of free, accessible services. Our peer-mentoring service connects VI students with a VI graduate who can offer advice, support and guidance based on their own experiences. Our topical online and offline events for young people, parent/carers and professionals aim to empower our community with information and connection. Our events include peer-support groups, youth forums and informative webinars. From these events we create a catalogue of resources housed on our website such as podcasts, webinar recordings and accessible documents on a range of topics including assistive tech, remote learning and VI student

Q&A's. [www.look-uk.org](http://www.look-uk.org)

Helpline: 07464351958

Email: [info@look-uk.org](mailto:info@look-uk.org)

## **Guide Dogs**

Our experts can help you find ways to live actively, independently and well with sight loss. From getting around safely to dog care and welfare, education support and opening up the world with technology, our information and advice is here to guide you.

[www.guidedogs.org.uk](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk)

Advice line: 0800 781 1444

## **RNIB**

We're the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), one of the UK's leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people.

[www.rnib.org.uk/](http://www.rnib.org.uk/)

Helpline: 0303 123 9999

## **Snowdon Trust**

Our aim is to help people living with a wide range of disabilities to achieve their goals in further or higher education or vocational training.

[www.snowdontrust.org](http://www.snowdontrust.org)



[www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk)

[www.guidedogs.org.uk](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk)

[www.look-uk.org](http://www.look-uk.org)