



Guidelines for Working and Communicating with Students who are Blind

One of a series of fact sheets for staff

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INTRODUCTION

Access to information is essential for learning in the university environment. Course information, unit outlines, reading materials, lecture notes, teaching instructions, timetables, venue locations and assessment grades must all be accessible to students.

The University's Library, Information Technology Resources and Student Services work together with academic staff to provide access to information for a number of students who are blind.

Problems sometimes occur for students who are blind when the required processes are not in place or people are unaware of their responsibilities. This fact sheet provides guidelines to assist University staff to work and communicate with students who are blind.

PLANNING – CASE MANAGEMENT

It is important for staff to establish a working relationship with the individual student, who, as a general rule, best knows their disability-related requirements. At the beginning of a student's course the Disability Adviser arranges a meeting that includes all major stakeholders who are to be involved in the student's participation at university.

The stakeholders then arrange:

- relevant communication strategies;
- orientation & mobility training;
- teaching & learning strategies;
- accessible format of research and study materials;
- library research procedures;
- access to lecture notes in electronic format;
- provision of technology – assistive computer software; and
- access to the Student Access Study Centre and other UTAS resources.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR STAFF

Oral

Staff should:

- be approachable – encourage communication from the student;
- identify themselves by name whenever engaging the student in oral communication and indicate verbally when leaving their presence;
- when in doubt, ask the student for suggestions to improve communication; and
- exchange direct and/or mobile phone numbers with the student.

Written

Staff should:

- become familiar with the information medium that the student uses – most students who are blind use Braille or speech synthesis computer software (screen readers) to hear electronic text;
- phone or email the student to make an alternative arrangement if it is

not possible to provide information in electronic format, (be aware that sending hardcopy information to a student who is blind is discriminatory); and

- exchange email addresses with the student.

In addition, when emailing messages and attached documents staff should observe some simple rules. Screen reader software reads in linear format and therefore ‘likes’ email, so ensure that:

- wherever possible information is sent within the body of the email;
- email Subject headings accurately reflect the message content;
- document files are accurately named, dated and have a relevant extension, such as .doc; and
- documents contain clear titles and headings.

Lecture and Tutorial Materials

Academic staff providing lecture materials directly to students should ensure that:

- material for class is emailed to the student at least 24 hours before the lecture – this provides time to read the material before attending the lecture;
- when presenting material that has not been provided to the student (e.g. an article from that day’s newspaper), you inform the student prior to class and read the article in its entirety during the lecture; and
- where any part of the material being presented cannot be made accessible to the student (e.g. a cartoon or graph), the student is spoken to directly to have the content explained.