

Good morning and thank you to the committee members for extending the opportunity for NCBI to present to you today on matters pertaining to the education needs of students who are blind or vision impaired.

NCBI is a for purpose organisation working with 18,500 people who are blind or vision impaired across the entire age spectrum and continuum of vision loss. Our mission is to provide a range of supports to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to overcome the barriers that impede their independence and participation in society.

In recent years, NCBI pivoted to a lifecycle model of service delivery and developed a dedicated Children and Young Person's Team to improve outcomes for young people who are blind or vision impaired, whereby low rates of participation in further and higher education and employment continue to be of concern. At present, blind and vision impaired students make up the smallest cohort of all students with disabilities in higher and further education in Ireland in 2023 (AHEAD data).

NCBI believes that students who are blind or vision impaired are transitioning through education without the prerequisite skills, competencies and knowledge required to make a success of this major life transition alongside with their peers. This experience is most likely in line with evidence from the US and the UK showing students take significantly longer than their peers to achieve a third level qualification following graduation from second level education. In lieu, students who are blind or vision impaired are more likely to undertake a degree in Arts/Humanities/Business than the general student population and are half as likely to complete a degree in Science, Tech, Engineering or Maths - the so-called skills of the future.

'Access to Learning' and 'Learning to Access' are the two cornerstones of the successful education experience for students who are blind and vision impaired. However, there are ongoing challenges in the Irish education system impeding such access. In terms of access to learning, the availability of accessible curriculum materials is an ongoing issue for students, where for example, accessing accessible versions of textbooks in the correct format may take up to several months. Access to learning materials in class is additionally frequently cited by students as a major cause of stress throughout their educational experience. As a result,

reduced independent access to materials creates an unnecessary dependency on others to be able to engage in their own education.

Such was NCBI's concern at the lack of timely, accessible curriculum for students who are blind and vision impaired that NCBI sought to develop Bookshare Ireland in late 2019. Today, Bookshare Ireland is now the largest accessible digital Library in Ireland with over 1.1 million titles in a variety of accessible digital formats which are available free of charge to all students with print disabilities, including students who are blind or vision impaired. These titles cover the majority of the schoolbook curriculum in Ireland. Bookshare Ireland is now the "go to" platform where publishers can send their files securely and whereby students with all forms of print disability can access their requested titles instantaneously and without any delay. It is estimated that 1 in 10 students in Ireland have a print disability. It is vital that the Department and the Minister for Education provide recurring annual funding to NCBI to allow Bookshare Ireland to continue to offer instant access to school books in a format that suits the individual student.

'Learning to Access' is equally important as it is the key to independent learning. Successfully accessing learning independently however, is dependent on the availability of the required assistive technology, and development of a skillset to manage learning materials and environment with ease and efficiency. A current lack of focus in this area in education results in students transitioning through education without the foundations of independent learning. And thus, it must be noted that 75% of people who are blind or vision impaired in Ireland are not working – and if young adults are not working by the time they are 30, they are more likely to never work at all. This is too much untapped potential.

Notwithstanding, NCBI are aware of many examples of students with blindness or vision impairment for whom the experience in education was positive, supportive and inclusive. We also know that it is down to the dedication of both teachers and parents that facilitated this positive experience. However, NCBI are also aware that many students find participation in education a difficult and isolating experience. One student articulated her experience so well to NCBI described the *"poor and ill-informed attempts at inclusion excluded me far more than my disability ever did"*.

NCBI fully recognises that blindness and vision impairment is a low incidence, but 'high needs' disability, where students frequently require

an intensive and supplementary vision-specific curriculum. Specialist support not only entails supporting students to access the standard academic curriculum, but also ensuring that students are taught a range of independent learning, mobility, everyday living and social skills, which combined are internationally known as the Expanded Core Curriculum, which Ireland has as yet to formally acknowledge or support.

One of the more positive developments in recent years has been the inclusion of all students with disabilities in accessing the summer provision scheme. Summer provision presents a huge opportunity to spread the additional burden of required learning across the full year allowing time for students to develop the additional compensatory skills necessary. For example, critical learning opportunities to participate in Orientation and Mobility training, and digital skills training in Assistive Technology. However due to the way in which the scheme operates, most students who are blind or vision impaired are unable to avail of the scheme.

Despite the inclusion of a broad independence and quality of life focus and curriculum for children with special educational needs in NCSE and Department of Education policy, NCBI's experience is that, this is not consistently provided to students who are blind or vision impaired. As stated in the UNCRPD, inclusive education is every student's *right* - inclusive education not a privilege. NCBI has a duty of care to represent students who are blind or vision impaired and to share our knowledge gained by experience to ensure appropriate supports are available for students to reach their full potential, as one student in 3rd level stated so succinctly;

"I didn't know what I didn't know until it was too late – I had to take a year out as I was struggling so bad...I just wish I was more prepared".

This cannot continue to be the experience of blind and vision impaired students in Ireland.

Thank you

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