
About the National Council for the Blind of Ireland's National Library Access Service

NCBI, Ireland's national sight loss agency, is a not for profit charitable organisation which provides supports and services nationwide to people experiencing problems with their sight. In 2018, NCBI's National Library Access Service (NLAS) took measured steps to develop and promote access to print materials for students with visual impairment and print disabilities in higher and further education.

NCBI has been compelled to develop its library services in a bid to meet the evolving needs of 921 students with visual impairment and the 1,592 students with dyslexia, or print disabilities across higher education. However, just 1 in 4 students with a print disability have registered support of a Disability or Access Officer. (AHEAD, 2018)

Therefore, NCBI's Library Access Service must work more effectively to support students with visual impairment and print disabilities to access their curriculum.

The Library Access Service currently holds over 21,000 accessible titles (digital, Braille, audio and large print) and has access to over 600,000 accessible digital titles internationally. The Library Access Service are also members of the ABC (Accessible Book Consortium), Bookshare, DAISY (Digital Accessible Information Systems) and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations). Due to NCBI's ongoing investment and commitment to promoting equitable education, students with sight loss and print disabilities can now access their curriculum and reading lists through NCBI's dedicated Library Access Services.

Equitable Access to Print

If colleges can make themselves accessible for wheelchairs, why not for people with print disabilities?

There is a major disconnect. Colleges have a wonderful resource in the NCBI. Look to NCBI for advice, braille production and services, they do it all. Kevin Cave, vision impaired full-time student (2018)

Access to education is a fundamental human right and barriers to education can greatly affect educational and employment opportunities for visually impaired or print disabled students. Worryingly, NCBI had found that just 1 in 4 people of working age with sight loss are actively participating in the labour force in Ireland (Census, 2016). The UNCRPD recognises the right of people with disabilities to education, and that disabled individuals should not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of their disability. (UNCRPD, 2018)

AHEAD figures have shown an increase in the number of individuals with disabilities attending courses at third-level in Ireland with an increase of 4% across the 2015/2016 term. However, there was a 10 % decline in the number of students with vision impairments attending higher education in the same year. Across a five year trend, the number of students with vision impairment in higher education has fallen from 2.4% (2013/2014) to 1.80% in (2016/2017). (AHEAD, 2017)

Three main factors lie behind this decline:

- **access to** academic titles,
- **limited support** across higher education.
- and the fact that **90 % of all publications are simply unavailable** in digital formats (Reid,C. 2017).

Access to higher education curriculum is still one of the main concerns for students with visual impairment or dyslexia.

Going into second year this past September, I was looking forward as I thought it would be easier but I have realised in the past ten weeks that second year is really hard. I am still getting my access supports in place...Some days I have to fight and other days I just think I can't fight anymore but then I realise that I want my degree. Gillian Stafford, vision impaired full-time student (2018)

Currently, students are dependent on the Disability Officer (if they are available) to provide accessible titles. Subsequently, the Officer is dependent on:

- **The publisher's willingness to provide a digital file**
- **The availability of that digital file in a format that the student can access**

The Library Access Service developed from a need in Ireland for an efficient service whereby vision impaired, or print disabled individuals can access national and international digital titles for study, research or leisure in a quick and efficient manner. In 2018, the Library Access Service opened its doors to students with dyslexia, one of the largest disability groups in higher education. At present, students with dyslexia are now able to subscribe and avail of NCBI Library Access Services at no cost to themselves or the third-level Disability Office. This initiative is in keeping with international trends across many international libraries for the blind such as NOTA, the Danish Library for the Blind. The Library Access Service believes that by opening its services to include people with print disabilities will play an important role in ensuring that Ireland continues to build a much more inclusive and equitable society.

National Library Access Service Developments

As an authorised entity and a member of international consortiums, the library service is in a position to access international academic titles in a variety of digital formats. The new Bookshare and ABC platforms allows us to provide access to thousands of international e-books, BRF, MP3 (text to speech or human narration), DAISY (with or without images), Word and PDF publications to our registered vision impaired or print disabled members.

This service is growing on a daily basis and requests from Disability Officers and students are on the increase. The Library Access Service now has two main responsibilities for students and disability officers in higher education:

1. **Sourcing titles in an accessible format**
2. **Retrieving titles and making them available to students with print disabilities**

From a societal perspective, the Library Access Service has been campaigning with the World Intellectual Property Organisation, (WIPO) and The European Blind Union, (EBU) for the transposition of the Marrakesh Treaty into Irish law. The fruits of this campaign have finally been realised, as **[Ireland transposed the Marrakesh Treaty into legislation on the 11th October 2018](#)**. The aim of the Marrakesh Treaty is to end the book famine and to improve the availability and exchange of digital books in accessible formats around the World (Marrakesh Treaty, 2013). The Directive facilitates the accessible production of certain copyright protected works, without the authorisation of the rights holder for the benefit of individuals who are vision impaired, or print disabled. All EU Member States will transpose this Directive into their national copyright law in October 2018.

The Library Access Service will benefit greatly from the Marrakesh Treaty. The transposition of the Treaty will have a positive impact on production schedules, inter-library loans and significantly increase access to international books produced in accessible formats. The Marrakesh Treaty coupled with membership and involvement in international consortiums, will go a long way in facilitating Ireland's National Library Access Service in sustaining equity of access across our education system.

For more information on Academic Services contact Lina Kouzi on Library@ncbi.ie

References

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Lina is the National Library Manager at National Council for the Blind of Ireland. She is a qualified Librarian with over 20 years of experience working in specialist libraries. Lina is heading up the project to develop digital library services for higher education in Ireland. A graduate from The American University of Beirut, Strathclyde University and The University of Sheffield, Lina has experience in working with different collections and library audiences, and has a keen interest in developing accessible curriculum in mainstream education.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
