

## **A Guide to University for the High School Student with Vision Impairment**

This project culminates in an information guide for high school students with vision impairment to learn about participation tailored to their vision for study in Australian universities.

The guide is in PDF form. It can be downloaded and printed or retrieved digitally with student vision access technology and is aimed at late secondary students who have chosen an academic stream to the HSC or equivalent. This is the first stage of the tool development. After dissemination over the first twelve months via the network of NSW vision support teams, I plan to make adaptations and prepare on-line access using a Blog. A Blog, short for Weblog is, 'a personal website or web page on which an individual records opinions, links to other sites, etc. on a regular basis' (Google, 2013). Here I can post updates and enable downloads and discussion sharing among participants. The blog also enables search engines to locate the site so that students making a general search about university life and vision impairment will be directed to the blog.

### **Aims**

1. To provide awareness of university options of study to students with vision impairment in their secondary school years so that they have the knowledge and understanding of broader post school options.
2. To provide a database of access options to university study for students with vision impairments so that they can make informed choices about suitable courses and equal access services.

## Rationale

As a vision support teacher, the overriding goal of service is to support the student to become an independent member of society, who participates in and contributes to society (NSW North Coast Vision Support Team, 2013). Over the student's school lifetime, vision support programs assist the students to access curriculum content and participate with their sighted peers in school activities. Vision support services also have a strong program focus on independent living skills, orientation and mobility training, social competencies and self-advocacy. This is collectively described as the expanded core curriculum (State Vision Resource Centre, 2012) and (South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment, 2004). As a result, the combination of academic skills and expanded core curriculum competencies give the student with vision impairment the ability to function within society.

However, too few vision impaired students successfully enter the labour market or go onto further study in Australia compared to other nations (Meadows, 2009). Winn and Hay (2009) believe the fragmented approach of transition services by Australian providers for students with disabilities is partly to blame, but other compounding factors include a lack of expectation and knowledge about options for the future.

Furthermore, around 6% of university students have a disability that impacts on their study, but their completion rates are much lower than for non-disabled peers (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 2013b). Of added concern is the recent findings released in the COAG Reform Council report: *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance* (COAG Reform Council, 2013) that shows fewer young people are fully engaged in work or study after school, with placements into full-time work decreasing. The COAG report says that; 'full-time participation in education or work after leaving school is an important step in establishing a young person's employment path

through the working years' (2013, p. 50). Within this social climate students with vision impairment are the invisible minority.

## Discussion

A few students with vision impairments who select alternative pathways to tertiary study such as VET (Vocational Education and Training) attend TAFE colleges (Technical and Further Education) to obtain qualifications such as Certificates in Hospitality, Digital Media, or Automotive Mechanics. These lead into work options or further training (Cavallaro, Foley, Saunders, & Bowman, 2005). However, students with vision impairments who select an academic path to the HSC (Higher School Certificate in NSW or parallel in other states of Australia) remain in their high school and follow the same path to further education and employment as their sighted peers, without receiving tailored support.

Australian universities provide disability support programs under the same legislation: The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), as do all other education institutions. Each university promotes their services independently of other universities (Brown, West, & Payne, 2010) and it is up to students to research the services provided and negotiate for their specific needs. Does this mean, however, that access for students with vision impairment in universities is provided equitably?

Ahead of this project I explored the research about the experiences of students with vision impairment at universities in Australia. My research suggested two areas which need redress to successfully engage this cohort of learners in academic study at university.

Firstly, students personally require readiness skills to be self-determining young adults who can negotiate their needs, speak out for themselves and time manage. Dr Karen Wolffe (2013) describes these attributes as 'Transition Competencies'. She affirms through

research of her own in the USA that students who received disability specific training and who developed self-determining qualities were more likely to have successful post school outcomes. Wolffe developed a tool; the Transition Competencies Checklist (2013) and from that I have described these competencies for the student in the first part of my guide.

Secondly, students with vision impairment need to be informed about the existence and variety of support services available to assist them with tertiary study in universities. Information is available to educators but students do not seem to have open access to all information in one place. This hurdle of access to print and digital media for students with vision impairment ranging from low vision to blindness becomes critical for successful emersion and full participation. Currently students with vision impairments often rely on the knowledge of family members and the support staff among their acquaintances to be informed about choices and available life pathways after school.

Making decisions about university study is a multi-layered process, complicated at the best of times for all students. Students with vision impairment must navigate these same layers with an added barrier to print and digital media. Additionally, many high school aged students may not decide on their post school direction until nearing the completion of school. However, for students with vision impairment, preparation mentally and physically for further study needs to occur as early as year nine (Wolffe, 2013) and significant adults in their lives need to help them prepare. All teachers, parents and academics need to be talking up the expectations for students with vision impairments, so that they come to see university study as a viable option (Kohler & Field, 2003), (Winn & Hay, 2009) and (Davies, 2011).

## **Implementation and Application**

To give students pathways to choices for university study, I plan to distribute this guide among schools where students with vision impairment attend and use the network of vision support teachers across NSW and vision education affiliations to promote the information in the first twelve months of implementation. I envisage expanding the resource with a digital version that all students with vision impairments can access using their technology of choice in its second year of dissemination. Further to this, I plan to seek user feedback through the tool SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, 2013). Data will be updated annually to reflect current university offers and government department support networks. As described in the introduction, developing a weblog linked to the digital resource will give students a forum to engage and share information about their university experiences.

## **Expected Outcomes**

This guide will bring about awareness of good practices for disability support for students with vision impairment within Australian universities. University study can be an informed choice and in the forefront of the minds of teachers, parents and students alike.

Donna Linton-Keane (Vision Support Teacher)



# A Guide to University for the High School Student with Vision Impairment

## How to use this guide

There are two parts to this guide.

**Part A** shares skills and attributes you need to exhibit to participate effectively in university courses and gain the visual access you require for achieving academic study.

**Part B** shares the contacts, financial supports, accommodation links and other relevant information to help you negotiate for vision, and physical access to achieve your study whilst at university.



Figure 1: Student with low vision magnifies print and activates VoiceOver on an iPad.  
Source: Author's files 2012.

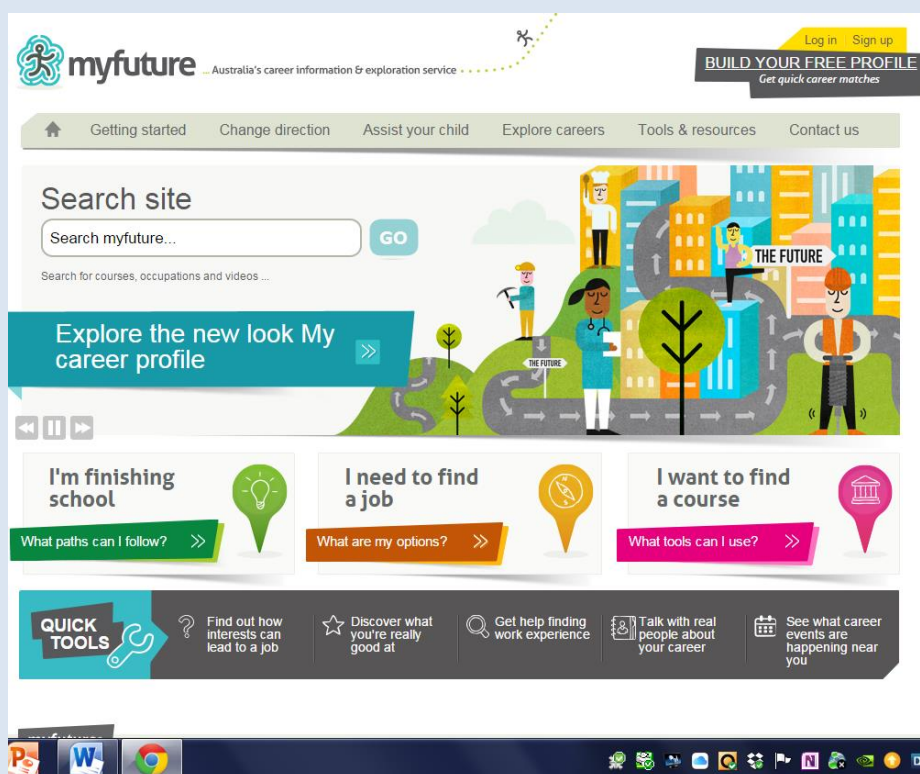


Figure 2: Screen shot of the 'myfuture' website. A tool for exploring tertiary options



## Part A

### Personal Attributes for Successful Study

1. Do you solve problems independently or where you can't, know how to ask for assistance?

This is important for university because understanding your studies will be up to you. Tutors and mentors are available on campus or online for support.



**Figure 3: Students at university have many discussion groups.**  
Source: ClipArt 2013.

2. Do you advocate for yourself? When you have vision related needs do you proactively find solutions and explain your situation?  
This will be pivotal to your success in tutorials and group study, where you will need to let others know what suits you best, and how you can contribute to the group despite your vision impairment.  
When large print, braille or digital access has not been provided in a timely way it will be up to you to request improvements and negotiate for your needs with each lecturer.
3. Study will demand you need to be an expert with your access technology and mobility aids. For instance if you use a cane to navigate your environment you will need to be a confident user. Guidance can be arranged to orient you around the campus but eventually you will need to do this independently to get to the right lecture rooms on time. Also, if you need to use a computer you will have an advantage if you already touch type and know all the commands for your access technology. You are the best expert for you!
4. Do you have a realistic understanding of your academic ability? Can you spell accurately in braille or English; can you construct an essay, edit your work, study for extended periods of time, or know how to research on the internet? Lecturers expect you come to their subject skilled to participate on oral and written literacy. Do not be discouraged however, if you are weak in a certain area. Prepare while still at school or enrol in a pre-vocational course at the university prior to your degree. Many universities offer these courses to teach you how to research effectively, write essays, arguments and critical reviews.
5. Besides all aspects of learning, independent living skills and socialising will mean you truly enjoy your campus life. You may need to live on campus and take care of your daily needs including meals. If you know you need support to do this, be ready to ask about how assistance can be provided.

For instance some campus colleges offer accommodation with meals provided. Making friends will be the most rewarding part of going to university. So be comfortable having conversations and be proactive - don't wait to be spoken to, take the initiative and launch into friendships!

So do you think you can manage these components of university life? Hopefully you are on your way to achieving many of these things. Talk with your vision support teacher or other support staff at your school to help you practice the skills you need.



**Here's some inspiration to fuel your aspirations for university life!**

Please click on this link to read the inspiring article about Nicole and her guide-dog Nev, on their graduation day from the University of the Sunshine Coast Queensland in October 2013.

<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/nev-takes-a-bow-for-degree-in-patience/2041313/>

(Written by John McCutcheon of the Sunshine Coast Daily News.)



## Part B

### In this Part:

- I. Preparing for University
- II. Know Your Vision
- III. Research your Options
- IV. Enrolment at University
- V. On-campus Disability Support Services
- VI. Reasonable Adjustments
- VII. Further Education Support – grants, bursaries and allowances

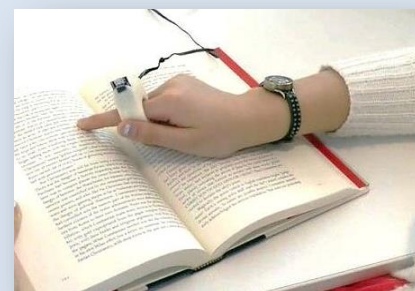


Figure 4: Student reads a textbook with an audio finger reader.

<http://wonderfulengineering.com/new-fingerreader-gadget-enables-blind-to-read-any-book-goodbye-braille/>

### i. Preparing for University

Are you getting the feeling that planning for Uni starts early?

Planning for university needs to start in year 9 or 10. Make decisions about what you are interested in and select your subjects at school to lead you into your post school direction. Having a vision impairment doesn't mean you can't aspire to go to university. It may take more planning and organisation than for sighted peers, but systems are in place to assist you.

Universities offer tertiary experience days to get a taste of university life for students with disabilities. These are offered in addition to orientation days. Your vision support teacher, transition support teacher or careers teacher can advise you about these events. Alternately search university websites for details.

The following YouTube link shows different students with varying disabilities including a student with blindness, sharing their experiences about starting university life.

YouTube clip – Tertiary Education Experience Program

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSr3Cv1A7nU>

### ii. Know Your Vision

Know about your visual acuity, and the characteristics of your vision. Be aware of the adjustments you need to access print, digital media and to move around new environments. Be confident talking about your vision and about yourself in general. As part of your enrolment for course participation you will need to effectively describe your learning needs at interview with a Disability Support Officer.

### iii. Research your Options

There are some general websites that share good tips about life after school to get you thinking about further study and career path. These include concepts about work verses study, taking a gap year (a year off before university), subject selection and what sort of employment leads on from them...and much more. Visit some of the sites listed here.

<http://www.myfuture.edu.au/>

At 'myfuture' you will find career quizzes to uncover careers to match your interests and abilities. This site is built by QUT (Queensland University of Technology) but it is relevant no matter where you live.

<http://pubsites.uws.edu.au/ndco/get-ready%20NDCO/>

Here you find top tips about getting ready for study after finishing year 12. The site is built by the University of Western Sydney.



**Figure 5: Student uses a P.C to research; meanwhile his guide-dog takes a break. Source:** <http://yorktown-somers.patch.com/groups/announcements/p/guiding-eyes-for-the-blind-eyes-on-the-future--an-assistive-technology-showcase>

### iv. Enrolment at a University

1. Universities in Australia use your ATAR (Australian Tertiary Assessment Rating) to offer you a place in their courses. Your ATAR is calculated as a mark out of 100 points from your exam and assessment marks from year 12. Career teachers and year advisors will advise all students in year 12 about the process of using your ATAR to apply for a university place.
2. **Early Entry Scholarships.** A scholarship is a grant of money towards your education. Early entry scholarships are offered to students who have shown a consistent achievement record. Early entry gives you a place in your chosen course before you sit your exams. You must still finish and pass year 12, but you are guaranteed the position so the stress is off! Check the websites for application dates and conditions.

Links about Early Entry Scholarships below:

- 2a) Macquarie University, Sydney NSW

[http://mq.edu.au/future\\_students/undergraduate/how\\_to\\_apply/early\\_offer\\_and\\_entry\\_programs/](http://mq.edu.au/future_students/undergraduate/how_to_apply/early_offer_and_entry_programs/)

- 2b) University of Melbourne, Victoria

<http://futurestudents.unimelb.edu.au/admissions/entry-requirements/early-offers>

- 2c) Griffith University, Queensland

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/business-government/griffith-business-school/high-school-community-programs/early-admission-program>

- 2d) Southern Cross University, Queensland

<http://scu.edu.au/futurestudents/index.php/29/>

### 3. Alternative pathways to enrolment.

Universities have programs specifically designed to assist students with disabilities to enrol and study in their courses. Decide on the university or universities you wish to attend based on the courses they offer and the practicality of attending the locations. Knowing you will need public transport or another person to drive you to university will have a financial, time and organisational impact on your day to day participation in a course. Research the universities and look for their disability support programs. These programs may have different names depending on the university including; Disability Support Centre, Student Equity Services, Wellbeing Unit or Equity and Disability Unit.

- 3a) Macquarie University NSW

[http://students.mq.edu.au/campus\\_life/campus\\_wellbeing\\_support\\_services/disability\\_service/](http://students.mq.edu.au/campus_life/campus_wellbeing_support_services/disability_service/)

- 3b) Australian National University Canberra

<http://disability.anu.edu.au/>

- 3c) University of Newcastle NSW

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/disability/>

- 3d) Australian Catholic University NSW

[http://students.acu.edu.au/office\\_of\\_student\\_success/equity\\_and\\_disability\\_unit\\_edu](http://students.acu.edu.au/office_of_student_success/equity_and_disability_unit_edu)

- 3e) Griffith University QLD

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/student-equity-services/support/students-with-disabilities>

- 3f) Southern Cross University QLD  
<http://scu.edu.au/students/index.php/35>
- 3g) University of Queensland QLD  
<http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/accessibility>
- 3h) University of Melbourne VIC  
<http://services.unimelb.edu.au/disability>
- 3i) Monash University VIC  
<http://monash.edu/equity-diversity/disability/>
- 3j) University of Tasmania  
<http://www.utas.edu.au/students/disability>

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## v. On-campus Disability Support Services

Studying at university and utilising the available support can go a long way toward improving your future employment outcomes and life satisfaction.

The **Higher Education Disability Support Program** is a federal government initiative which provides funding to universities and other higher education institutions to assist them in removing barriers for you, to access programs on the same basis as other students (Australian Government, 2013). Disability Support Services can work in a range of ways to assist your university participation operating under the guidelines of the **National Disability Coordination Officer Program** and its disability supports.

Make contact early with the Disability Support Officer at the university you choose so that arrangements for adjustments to suit your vision can be made.

You will be asked to provide evidence of your vision impairment and any special provisions you require. Therefore arrange for a recent vision report from your optometrist or ophthalmologist, or a functional assessment from Vision Australia and any other medical evidence for other needs.

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## vi. Reasonable Adjustments

**Reasonable Adjustments** are actions taken by all education providers to enable students with disabilities to participate on the same basis as other students. All education facilities including universities must provide reasonable adjustments in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the Disability Education Standards in Australia.

Some of these adjustments might involve:

1. Documents being digitally prepared, enlarged or in braille to suit your level of vision.
2. Permission to record a lecture.
3. Extra time allowed for you to complete an assessment.
4. Loans of equipment and technology.
5. Use of a note-taker.
6. Enrolling part time or over an extended period of time longer than the usual course length.

To learn more about reasonable adjustments at university visit the ADCET website page titled, 'Making Reasonable Adjustments – CATS' at;

[http://www.adcet.edu.au/Cats/Working\\_with\\_Students/Making\\_Reasonable\\_Adjustments.chpx](http://www.adcet.edu.au/Cats/Working_with_Students/Making_Reasonable_Adjustments.chpx)



Figure 6: Illuminated magnifier.  
Source: Vision Australia

## vii. Further Education Support - grants, bursaries and allowances

1. **Vision Australia** offer a bursary (money) to support the purchase of specific access equipment, software programs or technologies which will give you equal access to course materials. You must be enrolled or participating in a tertiary course at Certificate IV level or above including diploma or degree (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 2013a). **You will be booked in for a phone interview with a technology consultant at Vision Australia to decide which technologies suit your study purposes and your vision access requirements best.** This assessment becomes part of your Bursary application.

Go to, Vision Australia further education bursary at;

<http://www.visionaustralia.org/living-with-low-vision/learning-to-live-independently/further-education-support>

Applications for the Vision Australia Further Education Bursary close on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October each year for the following year.

2. **Quantum Print Disability Scholarship and Award Program** offered by Quantum technologies features a range of access technologies. Students are invited to submit an application explaining how having a print disability has impacted their life. Go to; <http://www.quantumrlv.com.au/scholarships/> for the application. Request an information pack online here.

3. The **Mobility Allowance** is paid to students and adults over 16 who have a disability, illness or injury and cannot use public transport without assistance. You could be eligible for this allowance to use towards transport costs to get to university by taxi or to pay fuel costs for someone driving you. You must be participating in study, looking for work, doing paid or voluntary work. The link below goes through eligibility criteria and the application process:  
[http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/mobility-allowance?utm\\_id=7](http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/mobility-allowance?utm_id=7)
4. **Accommodation grants** may be available on some university campuses. Living on campus can be a good solution to transport dilemmas on a daily basis, especially if you live a long distance away from the university and rely on public transport.

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Updates will be made annually to this guide and a weblog is planned for 2016.

Please email any suggestions, criticisms or questions to:

[donna.linton-keane@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:donna.linton-keane@det.nsw.edu.au)

Good luck, and expect to be treated equitably in all interactions!



Figure 7: Shows a well-meaning but misinformed person talking loudly to a student with a guide dog. The student and dog are blown away by the strength of the voice volume! He says to them, "Lovely weather we're having!"

Source: <http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/community/communication/postcards/>

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Note: All internet links were active at the time of production of this guide.

Last accuracy update on 16/12/2014.



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