



**“Improving Access to Post-Secondary Education for
Individuals Living with Vision Loss”**

Submitted to the

Commission on Post-Secondary Education
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Executive Summary

Access to post secondary education and training has been repeatedly correlated with income, economic well being, career advancement, labour market attachment, economic productivity, gross domestic production, etc. For individuals who are visually impaired, blind or deafblind, acquiring a post secondary education is even more critical in the face of staggering unemployment and poverty statistically associated with this population.

This brief is intended to provide a high level summary of the major challenges faced by individuals who are visually impaired, blind and deafblind. Included in this Executive Summary are five key recommendations. Further elaboration is offered throughout the brief.

Key Recommendations:

- Students who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind need access to course materials (ie, text books, technical manuals, reference materials, etc.) in their format of choice at the same time as their sighted counterparts (ie, Braille, etext, large print, audio, etc). Post secondary institutions need to guarantee that this basic level of need is met.
- Students who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind, need greater access to financial resources to offset educational, technical and service supports required to mitigate against the presence of disability in a timely manner (i.e., adaptive technology and training).
- Post secondary institutions need to place greater emphasis on educating faculty and staff about appropriate accommodation and disability awareness.
- Post secondary institutions need to further expand distance education opportunities. Availability of fully accessible, flexible, professional development,

- certificate, degree and upgrading programs would greatly enhance the options available to people who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind for participation at a post secondary level.
- The provincial government and post secondary institutions need to work collaboratively and in partnership with existing disability service stakeholders, consumers and organizations to remove barriers to post secondary education.

CNIB is committed to working toward the full inclusion and participation of individuals who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind in all aspects of our community, economy and society. Access to quality, relevant, competitive and collaborative educational programming is necessary for persons who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind to fully achieve this end and enjoy the spoils of full citizenry.

CNIB hopes that the background information presented in this brief and subsequent recommendations will provide a foundation for collaborative partnership and creative solution building. We invite the Commission to call on us as it moves from information gathering, reporting to implementation of meaningful solutions.

Introduction

CNIB is a nationwide, community-based, registered charity committed to research, public education and vision health for all Canadians. CNIB provides the services and support necessary for people to enjoy a good quality of life while living with vision loss.

CNIB has been making a profound difference in the lives of Canadians with vision loss since 1918. Thanks to the generous support of individuals, corporations, government and other funders, we are able to continue our important work in the areas of rehabilitation services, research, blindness prevention and public education.

At CNIB it is well understood that there are ways to enjoy a good quality of life for any of us experiencing vision loss, and important preventive steps we can all take to maintain vision health.

Our Mission

To be the leader in promoting vision health and enhancing independence for people with vision loss.

Who We Serve

CNIB is a source of support, information, and most importantly, hope, for all Canadians affected by vision loss. Anyone with any degree of vision loss can come to CNIB. CNIB is active in every region of the country, with staff and volunteers working in offices and often traveling to provide support to clients in their homes and in rural communities.

Through CNIB, Canadians have access to vision rehabilitation counseling and training, innovative consumer products, peer support and one of the world's largest libraries for people with print disabilities.

Where We Are

CNIB has been active in promoting changes to policies and programs to maximize education, training and employment opportunities for people living with vision loss throughout its history. The advancement of technology, especially adaptive devices, has opened an endless number of career and educational opportunities to those who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind, as never before.

Individuals with vision loss occupy a growing list of occupations including, but not limited to:

Accountant, Customer Service, Personnel, Purchasing Agent, Tax Specialist, Travel Agent, Clerk/Typist, Data Entry Operator, Medical Transcriptionist, Attorney, Judge, Paralegal, Information Specialist, Librarian, Elementary and Secondary Education Teachers, Administration and Support (K-12), College Teaching in Over, 20 Academic Disciplines, Administration and Support in Higher Education, Special Education & Rehabilitation, Assistive Technology Specialist, Early Childhood Specialist, Rehabilitation Counselor, Teacher of Visually Impaired, Students, Psychologist, Social Worker, Health Aide, Nurse, Physician, Psychiatric Social Worker, Scientists, Biologist, Mathematician, Physicist, Statistician, Engineers, Civil, Electrical, Mechanical, Computer Network Manager, Programmer, Technical Support Specialist, Telephone Operator, Telecommunications Specialist, Journalist, Radio Broadcasting, Television Broadcasting, Writer, Farmer, Cook, Food Services Worker, Musician, Actor, Clergy, Inventor, Business Owner, Factory Worker, Craftsman

There are clear indicators of success attributable to all individuals who wish to obtain and maintain meaningful employment: access to quality education and training, financial resources, and labour market demand. For

individuals who are blind, visually impaired or are deafblind, access to technology, flexible programming, access to information in an accessible format and a strong network of service supports are also critical.

What the Research Tells Us

In a study by CNIB, which is about to be released, "Identifying the Facilitators of Successful Employment for Persons who are living with vision loss: A Critical Analysis and Pathways to Changes in Policy and Practice" employment success has been linked to several factors. Specifically, success was associated with proficiency with technology, availability of support, awareness of one's entitlements as a person with a disability, communication skills, a person's work history, upbringing, and proficiency in a second language. Employment success was also linked to a number of demographic factors including educational level, age of onset, health, and level of vision.

Education was strongly associated with employment success both in terms of labor force status and in terms of interviews and job offers. In the Phase 1 Employment survey, education related items were ranked in the top ten of employment facilitators and 92% of successfully employed consumers surveyed in this survey reported that having a university education had "helped" them or "helped them a lot" to find work. The findings in this study support previous research which indicates that education is a major factor in employment success.

Technological skills and access to technology was also strongly associated with employment success both in terms of labor force status and in terms of interviews and job offers. Technological skills help both in enabling people with vision loss to access job listings and in helping them to meet job requirements. Technology also mitigates against some of the access issues on the job that are brought about by

having a vision loss. Numerous studies have also confirmed the link between technology and academic success.

Instructors or professors may have little experience or training that has specifically prepared them to meet the needs of certain types of disabilities. They must be willing to adapt and to ask for help from the student and other resources on how to be fair in meeting such needs. A study from the University of Hawaii, entitled *Improving Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities: Designing Professional Development for Faculty*, highlights the need for standardized training for faculty and staff at post secondary institutions. Recommendations included delivery of material, accommodations, understanding of adaptive technology, student faculty relationships, appropriate planning, and awareness of services to support students' disability related needs. This need has also been well documented by the National Education Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) in their review of institutions across Canada entitled "Faculty Awareness and Training in the Post-Secondary Community: An Annotated Bibliography."

A recent study, "The Status of Canadian Youth Who are Blind or Visually Impaired: A Study of Lifestyles, Quality of Life, and Employment, 2004" conducted by the CNIB reported that only twenty nine percent of youth surveyed were currently employed, which is highly consistent with the literature indicating that roughly 70% of vision impaired persons in Canada are not gainfully employed (as it also is in the United States). Among the employed participants, those who were partially sighted were more likely than blind participants to have worked for pay and were also more likely to be working for pay presently.

The range of employment related barriers or challenges that participants reported are consistent with those found in previous studies. These include the following: restricted

access to adapted materials and equipment, and to information; negative attitude of employers or potential employers; a need for tolerance of others, public awareness; improved access to transportation; personal problems; and job requirements (i.e., ongoing training, upgrading, etc.).

Another study was conducted by the CNIB National Research Unit in which 352 adult consumers living with vision loss took part - 57% of whom were working age (21–64). This study (*An Unequal Playing Field: Report on the Needs of People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired Living in Canada*) was guided by an 11-member National Advisory Committee comprised of consumers and providers. The following points of interest taken from the study relate to employment and education:

- About 19.5% of working-age consumers had completed one or more university degrees, 17.8% had successfully completed high school, and 14% had achieved a community college diploma.
- The most common barrier encountered in the employment search involved employer attitudes — 27% of working-age participants reported that employers do not see the blind applicant's potential, and another 26% indicated that employers are unwilling to hire someone with a vision impairment.
- The most frequently cited unmet need was transportation (26%), followed by training in adaptive computer equipment, and acquiring adaptive equipment.

About 13% of working-age consumers had attained an undergraduate university degree, while almost 6% had obtained a Master's degree, and 0.5% had a doctoral level degree, thus 19.5% in total had completed one or more university degrees. Another 17.8% had successfully completed high school, and 14% had achieved a community college diploma. The Government of Canada reports that

25% of the general population of adults without disabilities have completed a university degree (Government of Canada 2002).

Systemic Barriers

Inclusive educational environments are those that are designed in such a way so as to provide quality educational opportunities for individuals who represent a diverse range of abilities and who have different ways of learning. The goal of an inclusive educational institution is to provide opportunities for all students to maximize their potential within the context of regular education. (New Brunswick Association for Community Living)

Typically student loan applications are available in late May and the approvals are received in August, making it virtually impossible for a student to receive the recommended assistive technology or any other required supports (support worker, tutor, Braille translation etc.) prior to the beginning of classes in September. This results in students beginning their year with new assistive technology that they do not know how to use, thus they are unable to access the material that the other students can easily use. A student who is visually impaired will need to have certain accommodations in place well in advance of the start of the school year.

Delays in getting funding approved for support services even when funding is available, often creates significant challenges for individuals who are blind, visually impaired or deafblind. Student Loan applications for these individuals should be fast-tracked in order to ensure that the recommended assistive technology will be acquired within the appropriate time frame that would allow for necessary training on the new equipment. TESS (Training and Employment Support Services for Persons with Disabilities) funds from the Department of Post-Secondary Education,

Training and Labour often waits to see if the Study Grant from Student Loan will pay first and vice-versa. This "payer of last resort" syndrome often delays receipt of adaptive devices until well into the academic year, leaving individuals to learn the new technology and play catch-up with their sighted counterparts. This creates not only hardship on the student, but also results in higher long term costs to the taxpayer and higher expenses being incurred by the individual.

Training on the equipment and software is critical and can mean the difference between success and failure for the visually impaired student. This also helps the student maintain positive self-esteem and encourages them to further develop academic and social competence. A model that is being considered at some American universities provides course credit for students who are required to learn new adaptive technology (i.e., software, hardware, etc.). This model enables students to maintain a full course load without the added pressure of having to learn the adaptive technology in addition to the normal curriculum. Additionally, as has been confirmed in recent research, employers are more likely to hire individuals who are technology and computer savvy prior to commencement of employment.

Students with disabilities may not be given adequate encouragement and current information to consider options for post-secondary education. Changes in demographics indicate the opportunity to hire more workers with disabilities if they have marketable skills. Many guidance counselors are not really familiar with the trades and community colleges compared to the programs offered at universities where they were trained. Further, most counselors are not familiar or well versed on the specific limitations arising from the presence of a disability.

Equity and human rights requirements also mean finding ways to provide accommodations so that individuals can meaningfully participate in post secondary education. Reasonable accommodations must be provided to the point of "undue hardship" which must be clearly demonstrated. These include the development of modified, individualized training plans within regular course programs as well as other needed supports such as assistive technology, tutoring, note takers, testing accommodations, etc.

Providing these accommodations means that students with vision loss can more readily participate in post secondary education and develop significant job skills in a variety of career areas. This requires adequate resources to ensure that accommodations and supports are readily available throughout the post secondary education and training system. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Post secondary institutions argue that they do not have the necessary budget to provide these supports and accommodations. When this happens, students with disabilities may be denied access to post secondary education, which is an infringement on an individual's human rights.

Physical access is also an issue that presents significant barriers to individuals who are blind, visually impaired and deafblind. These barriers range from simple tactile and Braille signage, color contrast, accessible pedestrian signals, unobstructed walk/passage ways, etc.

Suggested Solutions and Recommendations

As New Brunswick continues to struggle with a "brain drain," an unsettling net out migration, and an aging population, our economy faces serious threats. This impacts all sectors, including the post secondary institutions, who also face declining enrolment. From a long term perspective, improving the inclusiveness of the post secondary education

system will provide significant benefits to New Brunswick and its citizens. For people living with vision loss, having an equal opportunity to access post secondary education will greatly enhance opportunities for employment and full citizenship and also help reverse declining enrolment.

A less inclusive post secondary system clearly contributes to the above noted economic concerns. Having access to a pool of well trained educated labour force is part of the solution to meeting and overcoming the challenges noted above.

With an estimated 140,000 people in New Brunswick reporting some form of disability, this is a significant number of people which is currently under utilized. This cohort will continue to grow as our population ages. If we continue to under value the contributions that this population can make, we will only exacerbate these undesirable realities.

Creative and solution focused initiatives are needed to ensure that these individuals become part of a comprehensive solution.

Financial stress, unclear labour market predictions, inadequate career counseling, poor coordination of transitional planning, lack of social skills, low expectations, fragmented support services and limited interest from the post-secondary sector are just some of the barriers faced by students with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- Establish a standing committee that would assist the province in strategic planning and work to address barriers to post secondary education faced by individuals with disabilities. Membership should include disability service stakeholders, funding sources and representatives from the post secondary education sector.
- Core institutional funding should clearly identify accessibility and accommodation as a priority to be

- benchmarked and monitored in successive funding arrangements and accreditation.
- Development of a culture that sees inclusion of persons with disabilities as an investment vs. cost should be a priority.
 - It is recommended that the province improve access to adaptive technology and appropriate lead time for training will increase success levels and the return on investment in individuals.
 - Fully utilize and engage existing community based service providers who hold expertise and can provide leadership, training and ongoing support to institutions vs. attempting to duplicate internally what may already be available – i.e. reinventing the wheel.
 - Expanding online, fully accessible professional development and upgrading programs. For example, online courses that are adaptive technology friendly.
 - Conduct a physical accessibility audit of all public and private post-secondary institutions across the province, establishing an annual review and reporting process that clearly articulates substantive and meaningful progress toward barrier free environments.
 - Youth may be ill prepared for the job search process and unaware of what it takes to find a job. Therefore, it is important that they receive extensive vocational counseling, ideally, as early in their lives as possible. It is recommended that the province and post secondary institutions engage community based agencies, such as CNIB, who can help ensure that students at all stages of their academic and career pursuits receive the supports needed for success, ultimately increasing the opportunity for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the labour market, our communities and take their rightful place as full citizens.
 - Institutions need to take a proactive role in promoting the skills and abilities of persons with disabilities as part of their graduate recruitment and placement efforts. This would help remove stigma and negative

- attitudes held by employers about people who are blind and visually impaired and aid them in reaching their full potential.
- The province must take further action to address the lack of accessible, affordable and appropriate transportation supports for persons who are blind, visually impaired, and deafblind.
 - The process of assessing, funding and securing adaptive devices, software and computer equipment needs to be streamlined significantly. This would enable students to receive appropriate training prior to the beginning of their academic studies.
 - Announcement of textbooks and reference materials to be used should be significantly advanced, enabling students to have material ordered or prepared in alternate format. This would enable students to keep pace with their sighted peers and reduce the incidence of "catch-up" throughout their academic careers.
 - Given that there is a significant gap between individuals with disabilities and those without disabilities who hold post secondary credentials, focused and targeted recruitment campaigns, encouraging individuals to pursue post-secondary education, would aid in closing this gap. It is therefore recommended that post secondary institutions undertake such a campaign.
 - Affordable, accessible and proximal housing can be difficult to find. Housing offices and student services should include basic questions on accessibility for landlords listing with them to attract student tenants.
 - Student service offices at all facilities should maintain information on local resources such as accessible transportation, accessible recreation facilities, advocates and service providers etc... who could respond to disability issues. This could be part of orientation packages.
 - Orientation packages should be fully accessible and available in format of choice. Additionally, session leaders, etc. could benefit from sensitivity training and

- full understanding of accessibility policies of the institution.
- Social support programs, such as social assistance and health benefits should be modified to provide easier transition to post secondary education and then to employment. This includes adoption of a cost reduction model vs. the current all or nothing approach to bridged support. For example, individuals who require a health card are deterred from taking a job where the employer may not have a health program and where the wage would not be sufficient enough for the individual to purchase their own plan. Continued provision of a health card where there is a documented pre-existing disability, may encourage participation. Not only does this reduce the over all cost to the tax payer, it also provides the individual with an opportunity to gain enough work experience to advance to better paying positions that would likely have a health program available.
 - Persons with permanent disabilities should not have to get another doctor's note each time they deal with another service provider to state the same information already available. Consumers should be given copies of health professional reports, rehabilitation assessments and educational plans so they can share the material if needed with others who require the same information. This would reduce the burden on the student and on the health system. Many organizations, such as CNIB, provide client identification cards which are widely accepted as proof of vision loss, including the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency.
 - Volunteer, part time and summer employment enhance a student's opportunity to attain employment after graduation from a post secondary institution. Co-op placements are also an important component of their experience building activities. Students may need further accommodation, support and technology in order for them to gather this experience and effectively

compete with their sighted peers. It is therefore recommended that these supports and opportunities be available and promoted to individuals with disabilities.

Additional Resources and Reference Material

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Access to Academic Materials for Print-Disabled Post-Secondary Students - Final Report (May, 2005)

Making Extra-Curricular Activities Inclusive (March 2005)

Access to Success: A Guide for Employers (December, 2003)

Employment Connections: A Transition Tool Kit for Youth with Disabilities (August, 2002)

Faculty Awareness and Training in the Post-Secondary Community: An Annotated Bibliography (March, 2001), ISBN 0-9686659-1-8

National Directory of Financial Assistance Programs For Post-Secondary Students With Disabilities (January, 2000), ISBN 0-9686659-0-X

Working Towards a Coordinated National Approach to Services (July, 1999), ISBN 0-9697716-8-1

Transition From School to Work: Career Choices For Youth With Disabilities -- Resource Package (July, 1997), ISBN 0-9697716-7-3

Employment Opportunities for Post-Secondary Students and Graduates with Disabilities: A National Study (July, 1996), ISBN 0-9697716-5-7

"Study of Financial Assistance Available to Post-Secondary Students With Disabilities: Accommodating Individual Needs for the Future" Final Report (1993), ISBN 0-9697716-0-6

Note: These references were taken from the National Education Association for Disabled Students (NEADS) website at www.neads.ca