ETH

Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

Student Services
Counselling and Coaching Centre

Information sheet, visual impairment

Tips for faculty members and advisors

Students with a disability or chronic illness have special needs which cannot always be recognised and interpreted at first sight. This information sheet is intended to provide you with specialist knowledge for open and sympathetic communication in your dealings with the students concerned, and to contribute towards understanding and improving the situation of students with impairments.

Diagnosis and functional description

The term "visually impaired" covers various categories of impairments ranging from degraded vision to a complete lack of vision (blindness). In addition, there is a clear distinction between the effects of "congenital" visual impairment and a visual impairment "acquired" in the course of life. Every visual impairment and the needs that result from it is different for the individuals concerned. Thus people affected may have scotoma or tunnel vision, have double vision or see flickering lines, their vision may be impaired by flickering areas, flashes or glares, and they may see light dots or veiled, blurred or distorted images.

Effects in the academic environment and on academically relevant activities

- Various aids can be used such as spectacles and magnifying glasses or a telescope down to a computer with zoom or text-to-speech function.

- Visual information that is not barrier-free (printed texts, images, graphs, films) is usually the greatest obstacle for people with visual impairments. As a rule, texts/lecture notes in digital form (format: no scans, avoid PDF, Word preferable) can be read by students with visual impairments with the help of technical aids such as a screen reader. The same applies to images and graphs, if these contain an alternative text.

- Ideally, visual representations and their descriptions are handed out to students with visual impairments in advance. This replaces a detailed description during the course. Please ensure that the format is suitable for the reading technology used by the student (please clarify with the person concerned).

- Please make concrete statements in the course. (Example: "If you compare this example with that on the blackboard…" BETTER: "If you compare this example with the previously described bell curve with the linear regression on the blackboard…"). Also, avoid indicative words that accompany gestures when you are speaking, such as "there," "here" or "so".

- Background noise causes interference (please shut windows, ask people in the room to be quiet, etc.).

- Write with as much contrast as possible and with a slightly bigger size on boards, overhead projectors and PowerPoint presentations.

- If you combine text with a coloured background, please ensure that the contrast is as great as possible.

- Use a simple font (Arial, Calibri) and no fonts with serifs (Times New Roman, Courier, Lucida Bright).

- Use the font colour black for high contrast.

- Emphasise important things in bold or underlined rather than in italics.

Effects on performance assessments

Students who are affected by a visual impairment have the option of submitting an application for special arrangements with regard to **performance assessments** (information at www.ethz.ch/disability).

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the staff at the Counselling and Coaching Centre. Contact persons – student portal I ETH Zurich.