Somerset College: Visually impaired student improves grades with Access Apps

Summary

Somerset College student Laura Kent is studying a First Dip in Travel & Tourism and is making excellent progress and gaining distinctions despite suffering from Blepharitis.

Blepharitis is a condition of the eye and causes many difficulties such as a sensitivity to light, sore and itchy eyes and inflammation and infection, as well as restricted vision. There is no cure for Blepharitis, although Laura has controlling treatment to help her, she does experience a lot of pain and discomfort at times.

It was through the help and support of the College and the Jisc RSC South West that Laura was able to use assistive technology to help her to overcome her difficulties in order to help her succeed.

About Somerset College

For more than 150 years Somerset College has provided the highest standards of education and training using industry-standard facilities and resources. All of its courses are designed to meet employers' needs, and to provide skills and knowledge relevant to work and employment.

The College provides further and higher education courses, as well as a variety of part-time courses for adult learners. Qualifications offered include NVQ, BTEC First Diploma, BTEC National Diploma, GCSE and Foundation Degree. The College is part of The University of Plymouth Colleges network.

It believes it leads the way in developing innovative teaching and learning practices for its students and staff. Its facilities are continually improving and recently it points to Genesis, Hot House, the Somerset Centre for Enterprise and the Francesco’s Graduate Hair Academy as examples of its enterprising and exciting approach to education and training.

The challenge

Laura initially had a lot of difficulties when she first came to the College due to the problems she had with her sight. So she was placed onto a Steps course, which is designed to help students who have found it difficult to progress at School. The course offers additional help and support, focussing on a range of vocational activities and subjects.
Laura completed this course and went on to study a Hairdressing course, but unfortunately had to drop out due to an allergic reaction to the chemicals used in the course.

Laura also found great difficulty in reading the words on the computer screen and on the hand-outs within the classroom. So much so that she had to use her magnifying prism to try and expand the words, something which was very time-consuming and awkward to do, particularly with a computer screen. This was very impractical and as Laura’s eye condition worsened she found that it was getting more and more difficult to complete her work. Laura also has dyslexia, which exacerbates her eye condition and if there are complex words on-screen, it is even more difficult for her to read the words and understand them.

**The activity**

The College sought advice and support when they realised that Laura needed additional support to help her read the classroom materials and view the words on the computer screen. This became more apparent when Laura’s eyesight deteriorated to the point that she was struggling to even read the words through her magnifying prism. The College sought help from the RSC South West and Julia Taylor introduced the College to the Access Apps USB stick and also provided her knowledge and expertise on accessibility to help the College to focus on how they could improve their systems to provide more help for students like Laura.

The college staff have started to print out the work and text onto A3 sized paper with a large enough font so that Laura can read the words, which has helped her greatly and meant that she does not need to use her prism. Laura is also able to use different coloured acetate to help her to read the paper.

For Laura’s Geography lectures the College has enabled a projection of the world atlas onto a big screen, so that Laura can see the names of the countries. As before she was unable to use her prism to view the words, as they were so small.

One of the lecturers adds a lot of visual elements to the PowerPoint presentations within his lectures, which helps Laura as opposed to using just text. This means that it is easier for Laura to identify with the tasks and activities within the lectures. The presentations are then put up on their VLE, which is Scoodle and Laura can access these at home in her own time.

Laura was given the Access Apps USB stick, which has a range of accessible programs embedded onto it, which are designed to help with a range of issues. These include Dspeech, which is a free to download program to enable people to listen to the words pasted into the program.
Laura also likes to use the Virtual Magnifying Glass, which enables her to see text from web pages, so that she can copy and paste into a Microsoft Word document.

Laura also converts materials onto another memory stick, this enables her to transfer work easily from home to College.

“Laura was very happy because she had finished off her assignments today, she has been able to use the technology at home and found that she can do her work with much more ease” – Faith Dethier

The outcomes

One thing Laura struggled with was the fact that when she initially inserted the USB stick into the computer, she was unable to read the contents menu which pops up on screen. In order to try and overcome this Laura tried to use the Magnifier on the USB stick to magnify the contents menu, but she found that the menu would disappear when she tried to hover the magnifier over the menu.
There are many key factors identified that are important considerations and identified to help students with specific learning needs:

- Help and support for students with specific learning needs
- Staff training, so staff are aware of potential issues
- Website/VLE access, with good resources to help provide support for students to access themselves
- Technology enhancements and provision for accessible resources and software
- Assistive technologies to aid students with specific learning needs
- Assistive website technology and compliance with W3C standards
- Awareness of new technologies and applications through support services
- Specialist assessments for students with specific needs

Once Laura had found the relevant programs she needed through help from staff, she found instant success using the tools and resources on the access apps. This enabled her to complete the course work and progress.

“If I did not have the access to the screen reader and magnifier, I don’t know what I would have done because of my vision problems” – Laura

The College have also announced that Laura is to receive an award for her attendance and quality of work, something that would have not seemed possible without the help she has had from the College.

“Laura has had two of her assignments back recently and has got a distinction in both of them. I have liaised with her personal tutor, who is very pleased with her progress” – Faith Dethier

“At one point I came to support Laura and she was surrounded by her class mates who wanted to see what she had done for her assignment work (I had nowhere to sit and was feeling full of joy for her, as she was in a position she had never been in before!” – Faith Dethier

**The impact**

The difference in Laura’s work has been fantastic since she has been using the access apps and through the support of her tutors and teaching staff at the College. Laura has gone from strength to strength and now has ambitions of further study after she completes her course.
“Laura has since been given a place on a level three software course” – Faith Dethier

What the College is proposing to do is if they have a student come to the College who has very specific difficulties, such as Blepharitis then they would conduct a specialist assessment, so that would identify whether the student would need access to specialist equipment or technologies to help them. So the aim is that this will:

- **Help to provide a more inclusive environment**
- **Services would be faster and more responsive**
- **Help the college to develop their materials and resources for specific learning needs**
- **Staff are better equipped to provide assistance**

In order to carry out these plans the College is working with Somerset Site, who are coming to the College to conduct an assessment to find out what technology the College already has for visually impaired students and what they could do to further improve. Somerset Sight are working with Laura to trial a range of equipment to see if there is any additional help they can give to Laura.

The main reason the College wants to develop their accessible resources is so that students can be more independent and utilise the tools themselves, this would save time and enable the student to progress more quickly. Although the college provides help and support for students with difficulties, there may be some students that they are not aware of who are having problems and might not feel confident about seeking help.

The kind of developments the college is looking at is having a set of features such as a detailed help system, which could be presented at each page and indeed when the student first enters the VLE, they would be able to see an option such as “Is there anything that can
help with your learning, or are you having difficulty reading this screen, would you like to access our accessibility resources?"

“What we are hoping to do in the future is develop our virtual learning environment to include a lot more accessibility features” – Pat Griffin

“We have also identified that we need to provide the students with more resources to help them utilise the improved accessibility options within software like Microsoft Word and also the operating system Windows Vista” – Pat Griffin

In fact by using Windows Vista or Windows 7, Microsoft have added extra features to help users with visual difficulties, these include an in-built voice recognition system. This enables users to use their voice to control their computer, without the need for using a mouse.

Older versions of Windows such as Windows XP, will still offer very good tools, such as a screen magnifier and also an interactive keyboard projected onto the screen.

“To have help, such as the access apps because there are so many useful tools on there to help.” – Laura Kent

Laura found it difficult prior to attending the college as she did not feel she had any real support for her difficulties, so she found this very hard.

“If I had been given more help at school, I think I could have done a lot better – especially with the access apps” – Laura Kent

The college has also helped Laura with using some of the programs on the computer, such as Microsoft Word, which has options to change the background colour of the paper on screen, this helps Laura to read the words better on screen.

In conclusion the help and assistance, coupled with assistive technologies has enabled Laura to progress at the College, giving her hope for the future and enabling an inclusive learning experience at Somerset College.

**Useful links**

- [Somerset College](#)
- [Jisc RSC South West](#)
- [Jisc Techdis](#)
- [Eduapps](#)

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