

## Blind People Access Education in Fiji

In many advanced countries, blind and visually impaired students are integrated into schools and institutions of higher education. However, the practice is not as common in poor and developing countries, where education and training institutions lack resources for up-to-date training materials and equipment.

The Fiji Society for the Blind is the only national agency providing education, training, rehabilitation and related services to blind or visually impaired persons in a country of about 800,000 people. The society operates the School for the Blind but also mainstreams many of its students. In 1981, it began its mainstream education programme with help from a Helen Keller International consultant. Since then, more than 50 blind and low-vision students have attended regular primary and secondary classes. More than 50 per cent of those who attended the classes found open employment in fields such as teaching, music, office administration and factory work. One is even a policewoman. According to the available data, students who participate in mainstream education are more likely to find employment than those who completed their education in special schools for the blind. Of the 50 students mainstreamed since 1982, ten received or are currently enrolled in higher education beyond the secondary level.

One such individual is a female student at the University of the Pacific in Suva, Fiji's capital city. She was admitted in the fall of 2001 and is the first blind or visually impaired student to enrol in the university in its 40-year history. To overcome university administrators' apprehensions, the society staff conducted awareness-raising training and meetings to outline the responsibilities and expectations of both the Fiji Society for the Blind and the university.

The university's first blind student is now successfully pursuing her degree in education and language. To accommodate her needs, the university purchased a new computer and adapted speech and scanning software so that the student enjoys the same access to technology as other students. The Fiji Society for the Blind provided advice to the university on computer and software purchases and delivered training in their use. In addition, the society assists the student with counselling and support services. Lecturers and administrators have demonstrated resourcefulness in their efforts to meet the young woman's needs. With the society's help, they record textbooks and resource materials on diskettes, design special testing procedures and translate her Braille materials into written text.

Despite some apprehensions, the Fiji programme has had a remarkable impact thus far. University officials plan to ensure that courses and services are accessible to more blind and visually impaired students in the future. For example, the

university will provide appropriate adaptive technology and make buildings and lecture rooms accessible. It will also formulate policies to ensure the successful placement of blind and visually impaired students in the university system.

The Fiji Society for the Blind recognizes the need for new systems in regular schools to accommodate students with disabilities. To be successful, integration requires collaboration, commitment and understanding among all partners. Not all academic institutions in Fiji are willing to accept the society's mainstreaming initiative. Hesitant officials point to high costs, greater risk in terms of safety and security and the lack of government support. They note that special schools stand ready to teach blind students. Advocates maintain that costs can be shared among the stakeholders. For example, the University of the South Pacific purchased specialized speech and scanning software with a new computer while the Fiji Society for the Blind provided training and support services. In advanced countries, school or government-funded counsellors often provide needed training and support services.

Conditions for replication, explain staff of the Fiji Society for the Blind, require that the organization providing the integrated education programmes command the needed resources and expertise. It should also have capable students who are committed to success and demonstrate good independent living, mobility and communication skills.

According to Setareki Seru Macanawai, principal at the Fiji School for the Blind, "Many smaller island nations and developing countries in the region may find the Fiji Society for the Blind programme appropriate and affordable. It requires the existence of local expertise, basic resources and a strong network of committed organizations."

### **For More Information**

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