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**Special Edition of COVID-19 Report: Impact and Responses
in ICEVI-Europe - Update". This extra Newsletter is
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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has had impacted severely on people with visual impairment across Europe and on the services that seek to support them. The region has been particularly hard hit over the past year and many countries are facing a second or third lockdown as their governments struggle to contain the virus and its new variants.

Despite the success of the immunisation programmes, services concerned with the education, welfare and inclusion of the people with visual impairment continue to face unprecedented challenges that will continue into the months ahead. In our last newsletter we explored the responses to the first wave of the pandemic through a case study focussed on Israel. In this newsletter we will explore the measures taken in ICEVI regions across Europe to combat the effects of the virus on services for people with visual impairment. Our report documents these measures in order to identify best practices in the field. Our thanks to all the contributors for their valuable inputs.

REGIONAL RESPONSES TO THE COVID PANDEMIC

BALTIC AND NORDIC COUNTRIES

DENMARK

Education in Denmark during the Covid pandemic 2020

Dorthe Marie Degn, Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted, Jan. 2021

In Denmark most children and young people with a vision impairment attend mainstream schools and education establishments. The municipalities, schools and families can access assessments of needs and specialized support through the Refsnæs Sight Centre. The Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted (IBOS) offers a range of support to Education centers and to students in further and higher education including assessment and advice on reading and study skills, ICT, counseling etc.

As part of the Covid restrictions, home schooling for children and home working for adults has been extended until March 2021. Although it could be said that Denmark has benefitted in the pandemic from being highly a digitalized society, there are still big challenges to do with accessibility that remain to be solved.

STU – specialised youth education

Both Refsnæs and IBOS also offer a three-year individually specialized education, called STU, for young people aged 16 -26 who have multiple

disabilities (typically cognitive and vision impairments) and who can't benefit sufficiently from mainstream education programmes. As part of the Covid 19 restrictions, special guidelines that are subject to ongoing local adaptations were published regarding children and young people with special needs. During this Spring, youngsters with complex needs were sent home for a shorter period than children in mainstream education and although they had shorter hours of online learning, they received increased calls from their tutor and they returned sooner than others to IBOS. During fall 2020 they remained at IBOS, keeping strictly to hygiene, distance, and other guidelines. Their teachers must wear a mask or visor and be tested each week. Only close staff are allowed into their separate areas, they have an allotted time in the dining hall, etc. As a result of these measures and some good luck, no pupils or teachers at IBOS have tested positive so far.

Mainstream school teaching during Covid

Since March 16th, 2020 a lot of educational activities in mainstream schools changed to online, with children participating from home to minimize Covid infections. Pupils, parents and teachers have faced challenges in learning how to use new media and finding new ways to plan, coordinate and deliver teaching and learning.

The responses have been both positive and negative. For some children support from parents with their home schooling has been positive. Their parents became more aware of how subjects were taught in school and more engaged in their children's homework, etc. Teachers have in general received great praise for their abilities to quickly deliver high quality teaching in new ways, inventing new online pedagogies while teaching. In general, high social morale was maintained during the spring and people worked together to counter anxiety and loneliness, e.g. through the creation of togetherness events online.

During the summer of 2020 when restrictions became fewer, pupils were allowed back to school. Lessons were organized in smaller groups to keep social contact to a minimum and to uphold social distancing. Museums and other institutions opened their facilities for the schools and outdoor classes became popular.

Challenges of online teaching in Denmark

As the Covid-infection rate grew during the fall, morale began to fall as activities and schools were closed, and home schooling became necessary again, The long-term effects of social isolation and online teaching has become worrying, especially for vulnerable families and children with special needs.

The Association of parents of children with vision impairment (LFBS.dk) in their newsletter *Øjensynligt*, July 2020, describes a typical home schooling day: it starts at 9 o'clock with a Teams meeting, but either the invitation can't be found in the pupil's intranet Aula, or Teams can't be accessed through the screen magnifier or Jaws. Math programs are also a challenge for Jaws and other adaptive software, so the pupil needs a sighted support person at their side, usually their parent. The professional ICT-supporters are also working from

home. Some pupils benefit from TeamViewer, that makes it possible to view the users' screen and picture, but it`s not good for communication. So even though European law says that public information and webpages should be accessible and schools, parents and professionals should do their best to solve the problems, there are still a lot of obstacles to overcome that slow down the children's learning progress and possibilities for participation.

Recently the teachers have called attention to the effects on exams, as the pandemic continues in 2021. About 20 % of all children, according to an evaluation of the emergency teaching during spring 2020*, found it difficult to participate in online teaching and learning. Also, for many parents, who at the same time as having to work from home, have to coordinate children's workstations and divide their attention between assisting their children and getting their own work done, this time has proved a major source of stress.

Danes haven't been confined from going outdoors, as in other countries, but winter darkness limits outdoor activities after school. For all generations it's the physical and social limitations that have been hardest to live with, and there is a rising concern about the long term effects on psychological wellbeing and health. We remain, however, hopeful that the vaccines for adults will make it safe to enjoy school life, friends and social activities once again this Spring.

*Evaluation: Quortrup, Ane og Lars, m.fl. (2020) "*Nødundervisning under corona-krisen*" SDU og AUC.

SWEDEN

Information from Resource Centre Vision, The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM):

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole of society, and has impacted on schools, teaching and the children and students we serve. We have continued providing support, but have adapted our methods of working in order to comply with the authorities' recommendations for slowing the spread of infection. Since March 2020, we have been providing courses, counselling and support digitally. Our interdisciplinary assessments, which often involve travelling to preschools and schools, have been forced to be postponed indefinitely. In the meantime, we offer in-depth counselling online.

FINLAND

In Finland, schools were closed from mid-March till mid-May 2020. During lockdown attendance was possible in schools, if pupils were in preschool or in grades 1-3 or in a special support level. Most of the VI pupils in Finland need special support, but still some of them were via distance learning, if care givers were able to support the child at home. The Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting offered support for learning and school attendance to pupils, their families and staff working closely with them. Face to face counselling services

were not possible in spring 2020. Instead, Valteri provided remote counselling services (online via Teams), online courses, phone calls to care givers and teachers.

THE BALKANS

BULGARIA

Both the schools for visually impaired pupils in Sofia and Varna switched quickly to remote and online teaching and managed to maintain the learning processes of children with VI and MDVI very well

The Rehabilitation Center for people with VI in Sofia and Sofia University are working together, exchanging IT knowledge and information in order to support VI university students in their remote and online education.

TURKEY

Covid-19 pandemic has affected Turkey like every country in the world and very significantly in terms of accessibility to education. Children with visual impairment and MDVI and their families face challenges in accessing distance education.

ROMANIA

Schools for pupils with visual impairment in Romania experienced many challenges but educational and rehabilitation activities were able to continue in an online form. Teachers, sometimes with the support of parents, managed to organize activities to develop knowledge and abilities in pupils. Technology and equipment were sent home to enable learning activities to continue.

CENTRAL EUROPE

SLOVENIA

All schools were closed in March and distance learning started almost immediately, with itinerant teachers providing support virtually. Pupils up to the age of 15 returned to school in May 2020 along with the students in their final years of secondary education who were due to take national school leaving exams. In May the support for mainstream schools restarted and our itinerant teachers were able to attend primary schools but not secondary schools.

In September 2020 schools restarted for all children, and the support for children in mainstream schools was performed in the usual way. However in response to the serious health situation in October 2020, firstly secondary schools were

closed and resumed distance learning, and for the primary schools and special schools autumn holidays were extended and then distance schooling started for them as well. As of December 2020, all pupils and students are still working from home. Special schools are closed as well, which has brought many problems for families. All support to mainstream schools is now provided virtually. During the summer holidays and in September special attention was paid to developing ICT skills so that children and their parents are able to use different platforms (Zoom, MS Teams etc). Particularly blind pupils and students needed extra lessons.

However, it is difficult or impossible to realise some parts of extended curriculum e.g. orientation and mobility training, daily living skills training, training of social skills, etc. when distant learning is taken place. A lot of parental support is needed and sometimes it is difficult to provide, especially when parents are working from home as well or when they are not able to stay at home with their children.

The efficiency of distance learning is especially questionable for children with MDVI.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

All services were affected, in the Spring 2020 lock down all schools closed, education moved online and parents had to take care of most education of primary school pupils. Resource centers for the visually impaired supported pupils remotely through phone calls and video conferences, and early intervention services continued their worked from home and the office supporting children and families by phone, video conferencing and online seminars.

In Summer and Autumn schools for children with special needs and kindergartens were open, but then closed for two weeks in November.

Children with visual impairment in mainstream schools had to cope with online education, with less support from classroom assistants. All of them missed contact with their classmates and leisure time activities. Parents were, and still are, overloaded with teaching their children.

Since May, early intervention work has largely remained in online although contacts with client families are conducted in accordance with their wishes, either face-to-face, online, bey phone or through e-mail. There is increasing need for psychological support.

HUNGARY

The School for the Blind: our school used all possible channels to deliver online teaching and support including: FB, Viber, phone calls, messenger calls, chat rooms, Google Teams and Zoom. We also provided materials and textbooks in Braille to children at home. We tried to keep in touch with all of our students,

but their level of access to IT equipment varied greatly according to their social background.

For children in mainstream schools, the ELTE Support Office for students with Special Needs (SHÜTI) made huge efforts effort to teach students how to use Zoom and Google Teams with screen readers and created a Facebook group for supporting students in issues related to online education.

POLAND

The COVID 19 pandemic affected the activities of all government and non-government organizations and institutions. Education moved to online teaching and special schools reported having to discontinue training in the area of mobility and independence skills. Online teaching affected in particular young learners with a visual impairment as not all of them have access to (or the necessary skills to use) specialist equipment.

Parents of a totally blind child in a mainstream school reported difficulties with their child's full participation in online lessons involving graphics (geometry, geography). Online teaching did not have serious negative effect on students with a visual impairment in higher education and practically all universities and colleges have services that provide adaptations of educational materials.

EASTERN EUROPE

ARMENIA

Georgia Armenia and Georgia, as reported by the representatives of these countries, canceled all events in connection with the pandemic

AZERBAIJAN

The celebration of the Day of Disabled People due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been canceled in educational institutions throughout the country.

BELARUS

Throughout 2020, questions about the training and teaching of persons who are visually impaired have been discussed with the leadership of the Belarusian Republican Association of the Visually Impaired.

GEORGIA

Armenia and Georgia, as reported by the representatives of these countries, canceled all events in connection with the pandemic

KAZAKHSTAN

In Kazakhstan, the work of educational institutions, including special schools, is carried out according to a mixed visiting schedule.

RUSSIA

Organizations promoting the development of inclusion have been actively using webinars including webinars on mobility and on information access for pupils and students with visual impairment.

ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRIES

THE UNITED KINGDOM

The effect of Covid on education in the UK has been profound. From March to September 2020, mainstream primary and secondary schools were effectively closed with only a handful of children of key workers and special needs children attending. Special schools have also been severely restricted and most closed their doors to students for health reasons. Although children with visual impairment (like other children) have been sent programmes of work through the internet and have received support through telephone calls, their learning often depends on whether their parents have the knowledge, skills and time to support them at home.

Specialist Further Education Colleges for students with visual impairment closed between March and September and moved their delivery during this period from face to face to online teaching. At Queen Alexandra College this move was very successful and had many positive benefits in terms of increasing staff skills in online teaching, but some students have found the lack of social contact very isolating and require a lot of support from parents to engage with work.

There also have been huge challenges for teachers of the visually impaired in assessing student performance in national examinations, assessing new students for entry to schools and further/higher education and in making arrangements for students who are in transition to new places.

It is generally very hard for students with VI and additional learning difficulties to understand and comply with the rules on social distancing and mask wearing. Social distancing for students who are totally blind is a challenge even if they don't have additional needs.

On the plus side the government guaranteed normal funding for Schools and Colleges, even though most students have not been attending in person.

The impact has also been great on training for teachers of the VI. Birmingham University normally has residential weekends for its distance learning

programme, but these have been moved to online events with video lectures and demonstrations. This has proved popular with students because of the flexibility it gives in timing these studies, but it makes practical sessions such as training in mobility very difficult. The opportunities to work together in groups and to share ideas and learn from other people's experiences is also much reduced. For other teacher training centres that don't already have distance learning delivery models, the situation has been even more difficult to manage.

In September 2020 schools and Colleges reopened in the UK and most managed to operate well within social distancing, study 'bubbles' with the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). Even so, classes and year groups were often sent home to quarantine when cases of Covid occurred. From January 2021, when a new and more infectious variation of Covid emerged, a third lockdown was declared and schools and Colleges were closed until March to all children apart from the children of key workers and those with special needs. Some children and young people were able to attend school but many were educated through distance learning. All schools were reopened in March 2021, and as the vaccination programme continues to be implemented with great speed, the government hopes to lift nearly all Covid restrictions by June 2021.

IRELAND

Childvision, the National Education Centre for Blind Children organised a virtual national summer programme for children with visual impairment to replace of the annual face to face event held at the Centre. A wide range of activities was available including drama sessions, Mindfulness, sports and baking sessions. See more at

[Virtual-Summer-Programme-PDF_opt.pdf \(childvision.ie\)](#)

FRENCH SPEAKING COUNTRIES

FRANCE

In spite of the government help, the first period of lockdown during which schools closed for around 2 months proved very difficult. Children with visual impairment missed the social interactions of school, access to adapted learning materials and support from specialist teachers. In addition, their parents were often working from home parents (teleworking). A lot of districts (both local and national) tried to make available online resources for parents and teachers but only some were usable with students with VI.

<https://eduscol.education.fr/2016/ressources-numeriques-educatives>

<https://www.reseau-canope.fr/actualites/actualite/covid-19-des-ressources-pour-assurer-une-continuite-pedagogique-a-la-maison.html>

For students with visual impairment:

<http://www.ash91.ac-versailles.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2020/03/Podcasts-pour-enfants-DV.pdf>

<https://www.inshea.fr/fr/content/ressources-en-ligne-pour-la-continuité-pédagogique>

<http://gpeaa.fr/continuons-a-partager-nos-experiences/>

Specialist teachers made a lot of use of the telephone, the internet, online platforms, WhatsApp, etc. to keep in touch with students, their regular teachers and parents. When they could, they tried to send documents printed in braille or raised drawings. Depending on teachers', families' and students' situations, the support has been effective or not. Some schools were only open for only a few days of opening before summer, due to the Covid situation.

Public theaters put some accessible plays online and there have been a lot of online concerts too. Public radio played a lot of educational podcasts containing stories which could be for example: <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/les-odyssees>

<https://souffleurs.org/soufflage-a-distance/>

Theaters offered appointments with actors who volunteered to read poetry and parts of plays over the phone and answered questions. These sessions (which were totally accessible) provided a very personal and aesthetic experience for sighted and visually impaired people.

Here is a Zoom concert Bolero of Ravel, audiodescribed!
<https://www.apidv.org/Le-Bolero-de-Ravel-par-l-Orchestre-National-de-France.html>

Some associations provided online physical education sessions (mainly for adults).

An emergency aid platform has been created for parents of children with disabilities: <https://www.grandir-ensemble.com>

A "back to school" after lockdown guide edited by the national association of parents of blind children was also produced.

http://anpea.asso.fr/site/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Retour-école_élèves-DV_Fiche-pratique.pdf

In spite of all those initiatives, the pandemic still poses many difficulties regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities: for example, depending on the stakeholders' interpretation, students who normally attend both a special unit and an inclusive school remain in their special unit to maintain social distancing, and this puts a brake on inclusion. Social distancing or "touch prohibition" is proving particularly difficult rule for students who are blind.

BELGIUM

For further information go to:

<https://www.braille.be/fr/a-propos-de-nous/actualites/2020/04/covid-19-et-handicap-visuel-questions-frequeument-posees>

https://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/detail_les-personnes-aveugles-et-malvoyantes-souffrent-de-mesures-sanitaires-inadaptees?id=10570537

UN award for "Stories on the phone" for Ligue Braille
<https://www.braille.be/fr/a-propos-de-nous/actualites/2020/07/la-ligue-braille-recompensee-par-les-nations-unies-pour-histoires-au-bout-du-fil>

Switzerland:

Recommendations for People with VI in the pandemic:

<https://www.sbv-fsa.ch/fr/prestations/conseils-corona>