# Mainstream teacher training in accessibility

## Key messages

* Learners with print disabilities may encounter many educators who are under-informed about accessibility
* Teachers’ Standards state that teachers must have a clear understanding of the needs of pupils with disabilities, but the content of training courses is left to the discretion of individual institutions
* A video message about accessible resources, delivered directly to convenors of teacher training courses for use with their students, could help meet this training need

## Background

In 2013 to 2014 RNIB carried out desk research to investigate what student teachers in England are currently taught about accessibility, and to identify how to get training on accessible curriculum materials into mainstream teacher training. The eventual goal is to improve the training all teachers receive, and in turn improve the learning experience of many students with print disabilities, including visually impaired and dyslexic learners.

## Method

From September 2013 to January 2014, RNIB searched the following websites for data concerning teacher training content in England:

* gov.uk
* education.gov.uk
* dera.ioe.ac.uk
* bdadyslexia.org.uk
* nationalcollege.org.uk

EBSCOhost was used to conduct a digital search of education journals. The Centre for Accessible Information Library was manually searched for publications, including RNIB’s internal reports, relating to teacher training content.

## Findings

The search identified 203 providers of initial teacher training (ITT) in England, including both universities and schools (Department for Education, 2013a). The total number of new entrant places for 2013/2014 was 38,902 (Department for Education, 2013b).

The current set of Teachers’ Standards, which became effective on 1 September 2012, is used to assess student teachers. Although the standards state that teachers must have a clear understanding of the needs of pupils with disabilities, they do not specify training content. This is left to the discretion of individual institutions (Department for Education, 2012).

Historically, there have been problems and inconsistencies in how well teachers are prepared to teach pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A survey by Ofsted in 2008 found an over-reliance on schools to provide the bulk of training in Special Educational Needs (SEN). Student teachers gained experience in areas of specific concern to the schools where they worked, but did not receive wider coverage of learning difficulties and/or disabilities (Ofsted, 2008). Subsequent attempts to address SEN training needs included a toolkit of 17 optional self study tasks, published in 2009 by the former Training and Development Agency for Schools. Unfortunately, the tasks have not been updated since then, which means they do not refer to newer resources such as Load2Learn.

More recently, in 2013, the lack of mandatory SEN training prompted the British Dyslexia Association to launch an e-petition for a decent level of dyslexia awareness training in all ITT and for all class teachers. The e-petition received more than 10,000 signatures. The Government issued an official response declining to intervene in course content (British Dyslexia Association, 2013). The campaign continues, as a petition that passes the 100,000 threshold will be considered for debate by the Backbench Business Committee.

## Discussion

There are two possible ways of influencing teacher training. One route is to effect a change in national policy by lobbying decision makers at, for instance, the DfE. Alternatively, training providers and/or student teachers can be approached directly.

Changing national policy requires a change in political will. The initial response to the BDA’s e-petition suggests that producing policy change could be a long term project. A direct approach to ITT providers or student teachers might be more appropriate for change in the short term. This could be done relatively easily because there are just 203 training providers in England.

As training is offered in diverse ways in a range of settings, the medium of delivery would need to be flexible enough for use by university lecturers, teachers in schools with responsibility for training, student teachers, and untrained academy/free school teachers. An online video, containing key messages about accessibility, would offer this flexibility. The URL of a video message could be issued to teacher training providers via a letter or email that provides context and encourages use. Direct contact with convenors would allow a reach of up to 38,902 student teachers, bringing positive effects for any learners with print disabilities they go on to support.

## Acknowledgements

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