

NEWS FROM:



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UCT workshop to show power of Braille

6 October, 09h00-14h00, Richard Luyt room – Otto Beit Building, Upper Campus

“Braille is not a language, but the gateway to all languages and knowledge for people who are blind,” says Reinette Popplestone, manager of UCT’s Disability Unit. This is the message she wishes to convey at the Braille Awareness Workshop on Wednesday 6 October at the University of Cape Town. This joint initiative by UCT’s Disability Unit, in partnership with the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) will demonstrate how Braille empowers blind people.

“Braille literacy levels are dropping and the teaching of blind learners is in serious disarray,” says Popplestone. “We agreed to co-host the workshop with PanSALB precisely because levels of Braille literacy are decreasing, which is a reliable indicator that education at schools for the blind is deteriorating.”

For the same reason that someone from the Stone Age would flounder in today’s world - driven by the printed word, electronic chip or the internal combustion engine – so too would the blind flounder if they were not taught to be literate through the medium of Braille when their minds were still malleable and receptive.

The workshop will include discussion and demonstration of Braille as a gateway to education, work and recreation.

Real-life examples

Among the speakers will be Annette Dollman: a blind music teacher who will give a glimpse into how she uses Braille to do her work, earn a living as well as to give her students a lifelong gift of music. Mariann Steyl will discuss how she became a maths teacher to blind learners, while Patricia Preyser will present a parent’s perspective on raising blind children.

In the early days study material that students needed in a hurry was read onto tape. For many reasons this became less feasible as cassette recording technology was becoming

obsolete and the technology to access text scanned into electronic format by Optical Character Recognition (OCR) developed in leaps and bounds.

Popplestone adds that although having access to audio material is wonderful, the blind cannot rely on this as their primary means of literacy; listening cannot teach one to read, and without this ability it is also difficult to learn to write. Braille therefore ensures that one can be fully literate.

The Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, recently stressed that higher education institutions need to do more to support students with disabilities.

Nafisa Mayat, UCT's Disability Advocacy Co-ordinator explains that "while the UCT Disability Service is one of the units that provide support for students with disabilities, there are many disability units that are still struggling to get assistance from the relevant structures to ensure that students with disabilities are receiving adequate support". UCT's Disability Unit has been working for over twenty years to establish a human rights culture at UCT with a special emphasis on disability. Founded in 1988, the unit provides extensive support facilities for blind and visually impaired students. It also has a lab equipped with specialised software and hardware to meet all their communication needs.

The university has policies specifically designed to respond to the needs of staff and students with disabilities. These include, among others, accommodation that suits particular students' needs; a Jammie Shuttle pick-up and drop-off service; as well as access to Jameson Hall during special events, so that students have access to the full university experience.

Volunteers also play an important role; they scan and edit study material for blind and print-handicapped students. Software has been developed to assist students with dyslexia, who also require their reading material in electronic format.

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