On Thursday 25th September, Dr. Esther Murphy with TCD’s School of Education and AHEAD co-ordinated the National forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning funded seminar “Addressing access challenges for students with visual impairments making transition into further and higher education”.

The Head of the School of Education, Dr. Carmel O’Sullivan opened our seminar by warmly welcoming the wide range of participants and highlighting the School’s commitment to expanding the inclusive education research led by Dr. Michael Shevlin and supported by Dr. Esther Murphy, Dr. Patricia McCarthy and other colleagues.

Guest speaker Rachel Hewett presented research from two RNIB supported longitudinal studies in the area of transitions for young people with visual impairments in the UK. Transition in her findings is emphasized as a continuous process which builds on experiences over time, and as such there is an importance to plan ahead by considering the skills that a particular young person will require, so this can be incorporated into their education throughout the duration of their time in school.

Our world café followed with tables expertly hosted by two students, Caoimhe Grogan a 1st year UCC student and Dean Cusack a TY student from Waterford, Feach Chair Eithne Walsh, Visiting teacher Mary Harrisson and TCD researcher Dr. Patricia McCarthy. Lively discussion between all participants including representatives from the National braille production centre, disability officers, NCBI community resource workers and others was skillfully facilitated by AHEAD’s Mary Quirke.

Dr. Mark Magennis Director of NCBI Centre for Inclusive Technology discussed the benefits of mainstream as well as assistive technologies for supporting students with sight loss in education. Mark also introduced DigiPlace4all, the online peer support community to help people with disabilities, educators and employers with digital skills.

The closing words went to Caoimhe who when asked could she share three tips for people in the room, she replied could “would it be ok to give five?”! So briefly here they are:

1. To learn braille and mobility from an early age as later it can cause stigma
2. Increase teachers’ use of accessible inclusive teaching format
3. More targeted career advice for visually impaired students to include meeting with peers who had made successful transitions into education and employment
4. Message to other students “know your rights before college, know you can use an advocate”
5. Message to educators and other key workers “listen to the student, all the time!”

For further information on the seminar, the HEA funded pilot study “Profiles of senior cycle students with visual impairments in Ireland” and DigiPlace4all please contact esther.murphy@ncbi.ie