# International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment

**Latin America Region**

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# Where education is going and how it may affect students with visual impairment during and after the COVID-19 emergency

From ICEVI Latin America, we urge professionals in the field of education for people with visual impairment, families of people with visual impairment, organizations of people with visual impairment, and allied organizations to join our efforts and to advocate before the governments and education ministries for the monitoring, defence and promotion of the right to an inclusive quality education for all.

We know that governments have not made significant investments to guarantee the quality of education for people with visual impairment and that, at the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has unveiled the existing gaps in the digital/virtual education services in Latin America; services that are not inclusive of, or accessible for, people with visual impairment.

In addition, there is a direct relationship between poverty and disability, which affects students with visual impairment in the lack of Internet connectivity, as well as the provision of technological tools that allow students to access digital education without discrimination and with equal opportunities for all. Unluckily, the regional governments have not yet implemented concrete actions and inclusive measures to effectively meet the learning needs of students with visual impairment regarding the virtual modality.

The development of a nation, the quality of the education, and the success of its people (including people with disabilities) depends on timely investment made by the governments, as well as the optimisation of didactic and technological resources, the provision of adapted material and equipment, teacher training, and prioritising leaving no-one behind, preventing school dropout, and bridging the gaps in education provision.

As the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states in Section 4 paragraph 3, governments shall hold consultations with people with disabilities, and the organisations which represent them, regarding the measures that affect them. Thus, we believe that today is the right time for becoming visible and for raising our voices so that governments in Latin America take the technical aspects into account and design the most effective accessible digital education roadmap to follow at short, medium and long term. For this, it is key to have the perspective of all stakeholders in the process of teaching and learning in topics such as:

1. Digital training for regular teachers for preparing digital didactic content that meets the accessibility criteria for people with visual impairment, based on the principle of Universal Design for Learning.
2. The addition of subjects that develop the use and management of technological tools in the professional training curricula for teachers, including tyflo-pedagogic criteria for the digital content.
3. The promotion of training programs for in-service teachers, such as post-graduate courses on informatics for updating content and knowledge in digital education.
4. The promotion of digital literacy of students with visual impairment, taking into account variables such as:
	* Age;
	* Visual diagnosis;
	* Knowledge and use of software and digital interaction apps;
	* Equipment owned by the student; and
	* Use of educative platforms by the student.

 This is a complex task, because it is necessary to advocate for the teaching of the usage of software and devices such as computers, smart phones, apps, scanners, and digital recorders in schools and resource centres. It is also necessary to boost management and support action in collaboration with universities, so that students who are doing their apprenticeships can promote the design and elaboration of accessible apps or virtual learning environments for educative institutions as well as ministries of education, while meeting the international standards and the W3C standards for their accessibility and use.

 Taking into account that the greater difficulties are found in the economic possibilities of students with visual impairment for obtaining their own devices at home for doing their homework or receiving virtual education, it is necessary to promote specific social protection programmes, scholarships, or licensing of equipment and programmes conducted by the government or the social security services. This can include legal dispositions so that students can have devices with appropriate characteristics for interacting with a screen reader, such as the devices which include Windows 10 or Android 8.0, or superior operative systems.

1. Access to connectivity for students with visual impairment in rural or urban areas.

 It is well-known that access to internet, especially in rural areas, is limited and expensive. This is why we must advocate before the education ministries for the investment in equipment and internet access for every student, before thinking about turning to virtual education. A possible solution is collaboration between governments and internet companies, so that companies can provide their services prioritizing students with visual impairment in poor suburbs and rural areas, where connectivity is lacking.

1. An appropriate and timely provision of adapted Braille and embossed accessible materials, to meet the needs of the students, especially those with visual impairment, and to meet the accomplishment indicators.

 In Latin America, where we are lacking cutting-edge technology, it is not possible for a visually impaired student in elementary school or pre-school to have access to a refreshable Braille device for their literacy, as they are very expensive. That is why, the child shall develop literacy skills with a slate and stylus or Braille machine that allows for writing in Braille. Braille is the quintessential reading and writing system for blind children, and it cannot be replaced as a means of accessing written knowledge. Likewise, the use of specific material and embossed sheets allows for creating mental schemes for problem solving. In elementary and high school, Braille and scientific signography (study of graphic signs) allow for acquiring more complex concepts. Furthermore, with the habit of continued and varied reading, the person with visual impairment obtains spelling and wording criteria in a direct way, instead of only by theory. In addition, through embossed sheets, the schemes and graphics used in class for understanding mathematic or scientific concepts can be analysed.

 Even though education is being conducted virtually, we cannot leave behind the use of Braille and embossed materials to achieve educational success. Thus, we must advocate before the education ministries for the creation of an adapted curricular materials bank, elaborated before the school year starts, so that curricular materials are available for the students in a timely manner.

1. For the rehabilitation process, which because the COVID-19 emergency is being conducted at home, the approach has changed and the following elements shall be considered:

A) To know the interests and motivation of the participants, their feelings, fears and expectations. The psycho-social services can conduct calls or video calls for continued follow-up. This makes the participants and their families feel accompanied and encourages them to become involved in the functional rehabilitation process.

B) To recognise that families play a central role in the rehabilitation process. This is why it is so important for the performance of the rehabilitation professionals to talk to their families.

C) To coordinate actions with governments, ministries and other public and private institutions, so that radio and/or television are used as information channels, reaching the participants who live in rural areas or who cannot access the information through a computer, tablet or mobile phone. The educative programmes shall promote functional techniques in daily life skills, visual rehabilitation advise, academic and artistic education, etc.

 The rehabilitation professionals can conduct virtual accompaniment through audio or video approaches, with relevant information related to: physical exercises, feeding techniques, mobility, safety at home, finances, etc.

All the above suggestions are aimed at promoting the human right to education and rehabilitation during this time of suspension of face-to-face classes due to the emergency that arose from the COVID-19.

We shall overcome all these barriers together so we can reach a truly quality inclusive education, as stated in Objective 4 of the OAS Action Plan, Section 24 of the CRPD, and SDG 4 (in its targets and indicators).

We know it is not an easy road, but we know we have high quality committed professionals in our region, as well as families and civil society organisations willing to get involved. We therefore encourage you to join our efforts and build a united front, together with the delegates of ICEVI Latin America in each country in our region. The ICEVI delegate contact information is as follows:

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