

## GOING ENGLISH: EQUALITY AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Until recently, state social policy in Ukraine had been focused mainly on the segregation and isolation of disabled people. Nowadays adopted are the legislative acts of Ukraine that advocate the rights of the disabled for education, integration into society, and professional development, ensuring a barrier-free learning, social and professional environment. Thus, blind and visually impaired people are gradually becoming an integral part of the Ukrainian society. However, they often have fewer opportunities than other disabled people – whether they are deaf or those who lack mobility. The blind must develop perception through hearing, touch or other methods of representation. For example, the most efficient method to enable reading for the blind is through Braille Code (Braille is a system of reading and writing for people with visual impairment that uses dots to represent the letters of the alphabet, punctuation marks and numbers).

In order to meet their unique needs, people with visual impairments must be supplied with appropriate services and support, specialized books, equipment and technology to ensure equal opportunities to participate in higher education and social life. The civic organization “All-Ukrainian Parliament of Working-age Disabled People” strives to provide the independence, equality of opportunity, and quality of life for people with visual impairments in Ukraine. To support people who are irreversibly blind or visually impaired to live independently, the project “Equal opportunities” has been initiated. Within this project, writing an English textbook for students and transcribing it in Braille is currently being planned. We strongly believe that blind students need to have Braille versions of any textbook that is used in the classroom – English textbooks are not an exception.

Knowing the English language is vital to a successful education, career, and quality of life in modern society. Learning English (and other languages) is also defined as a national policy priority in the strategic documents of the European Union and Ukraine. That is why Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said that 2016 would be declared the year of the English language in Ukraine. What is more, the National Foreign Language Learning and Promotion Initiative “Go Global”, officially launched in September 2015, is aimed at “galvanizing national commitment to foreign languages learning in Ukraine and improving foreign language qualification through educational programs and training.” Unfortunately, there aren’t any English textbooks and materials in Braille to meet the educational needs of blind students in Ukraine and there are no organization wishing to transcribe such textbooks. The reasons underlying this situation are as follows: each Braille book is very thick because of the amount of paper used in publishing Braille symbols, and the thickness of the book represents its high price. Furthermore, converting English texts into Braille is a time consuming process that requires special printers and software.

No doubt, there are many other types of the media to provide an accessible educational experience for blind and visually impaired students, such as English websites, ebooks and audio books. Nevertheless, Braille books are still considered to be the best medium for the blind to explore the world of knowledge. Thus, transcribing English texts into Braille has become a necessity for the Ukrainian society to enable students with visual impairments to most effectively compete with their peers and ultimately in the globalized society.

We hope that our little efforts will help to reduce barriers to social inclusion for the blind and visually impaired in Ukraine, with a particular focus on learning English as a route to greater equality and opportunities.

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