Students and …

Visual Sensitivity

(Scotopic Sensitivity or Irlen's Syndrome)

…notes for university staff

You may have noticed that some students

- wear glasses with colour-tinted lenses
- prefer handouts on coloured paper
- use coloured plastic overlays for reading
- change the screen background colour when working on computers

This use of colour reduces the effect of problems of visual perception which may affect around 10% of people. There may be no problems with their eyes but the processing of the visual information causes visual disturbance and discomfort.
Bright light (fluorescent or sunlight) or high contrasts such as black print on white paper, whiteboards, OHP or PowerPoint presentations can cause visual distortions, eye strain and headaches; some students experience severe effects, others only mild disturbance.
Reading can be difficult because print may blur, disappear or seem to move; it may look blurred or swirly; the white spaces between words may stand out as glaring rivers. Words may be misread or missed out. **So reading is a strain on energy and concentration**, and thus tiring. Even good readers have to work much harder to perceive and make sense of print, so can't sustain reading for long periods. Reading rows of figures, statistical tables and the like can also be problematic.

Not only reading: for some people, depth perception and ability to judge spatial relationships is affected so badly that ball sports and driving are difficult, as are using stairs, escalators or revolving doors.

Such perceptual problems are sometimes – NOT ALWAYS – associated with other specific differences – particularly dyslexia, but also dyspraxia, AD(H)D and Asperger Syndrome. Alone, or as part of a wider pattern of difficulties, they create barriers for the student in certain contexts. These barriers may be eliminated by anticipating the difficulties and putting in place reasonable adjustments:

- use cream, grey, or beige paper for any handouts distributed. If this is not available, recycled paper is better than white.
- be aware that indirect natural lighting or incandescent lighting are better than fluorescent lights. Dim lighting may be more comfortable than bright.
- the intense lighting of OHP presentations may cause discomfort: reduce brightness by partially covering or placing a filter over the lens.
- if whiteboard work is needed, write in columns rather than across the board, using different colours to help with tracking.
- PowerPoint presentations: avoid high contrast black/white. Use a neutral especially green and red/pink (difficult for anyone who is colour-blind).

There is support at Bangor for students who experience visual sensitivity.

If a student has disclosed these difficulties, a Personal Learning Support Plan is sent to the Disability Contact in each school, indicating particular adjustments needed for that individual. However, there may be others who do not consider that their difficulties warrant formal disclosure, so inclusive anticipatory adjustments are particularly enabling.