

# Succeeding in Senior School

*By mum, Danielle Gulliford*



Benj is 18 and doing his HSC this year with vision somewhere around the 6/60 mark (sometimes a little better in just the right lighting) and he used to have work enlarged to N36 if that helps you understand his functional vision a little better. He is supported by the RIDBC at school, has done some mobility work with Guide Dogs and is involved in their Youth programs. Benj uses Vision Australia's audio library and has also linked in with someone there who does transitional work with older teens, which has been great.

Going into Yr 7, the main thing for us was getting all the textbooks nice and early and in PDF format. A lot of the textbooks now come with a code you can put in to access an electronic copy. Some of these rely on wifi connection so we have applied for PDFs from publishers instead so that he can have them loaded into Voice Dream, which really is his app of choice! He accesses his textbooks and most other documents through Voice Dream, which will bring text up enlarged (and wrapped around) and also read it to you. He now listens to text at a speed of about 350 words per minute so it is quite time effective. Would definitely recommend looking into Voice Dream if you haven't already and get kids used to audio learning. You also need to make sure that teachers email any handouts to your child so they can access them electronically. Benj uses no paper at all now!



In junior School he used a 17" touchscreen, but Benj now uses a 15" touchscreen laptop (Surfacebook Pro). We did worry about losing those 2 inches, but he has been fine and loves the Surfacebook! He now has his textbooks loaded onto his iPad Pro, leaving his PC free to view a CCTV image of the board and teacher or to make notes/write essays etc. We would strongly recommend the Surfacebook Pro. We are an Apple family...but the Read It works best on a PC, so that's how we landed there. We would also really recommend the large iPad Pro - that was a real game changer for Benj. The Read It has been fabulous, and not sure how he would have gotten through high school without it...but it is a lot of money and I feel that someone will surely bring out something cheaper and even more portable soon!

Benj puts all his documents into something called One Drive, which means he can access them from his PC, his iPad etc and any updates are saved to a central copy. Our teachers are pretty good now with emailing Benj with forms or handouts. The RIDBC reformat these for Benj if they get them early enough, but if not, Benj can just magnify them himself as long as the quality is ok. If caught out, he can use his iPad to take a photo and then drop it into Voice Dream etc to access. He also has Adobe Acrobat DC which enables him to access docs on his PC and also to write into them and underline/circle which is handy for tasks where other students are circling correct answers etc.

We have recently added top of the line blue tooth headphones (ear pieces) which means he can study quietly and have text read to him and just tap his ear to pause and restart and doesn't have chords everywhere. Not a huge fan of Bluetooth right near the head as a rule but these have been game changes for him. He even studies by listening to text as he works out!

Benj does quite high level Maths (Advanced and Extension) and is the first student I believe who is going to do Maths electronically in the HSC! He uses Equation Editor (build into Word) for Maths and is now pretty fast at producing all the key strikes needed for that sort of maths and it comes out looking like the rest of the class and easy for the teacher to see. I would suggest getting used to that early in high school if you are going down that path so that by the time things get full on, it is second nature to them. Benj has a scientific calculator app on his iPad Pro as he obviously can't see the standard issue calculators. All of this had to be approved by NESAs - quite a process....but with Benj going before you, will hopefully be easier now!

With English (Benj does Advanced) Benj can usually find most of the novels in the Vision Australia library as an audiobook. If not, then we purchase through iTunes. We also get him an eBook version so that he can refer back to that for quotes etc and use during class discussions.

Science prac lessons were a little challenging in some areas but they usually work in a team and Benj's mates just told him what temperature something was, what measurement etc and then he could join in the discussions from there and record his own results on iPad.

At home (and just recently at school in a designated space for exams) Benj has a large touch screen monitor that he plugs his PC into and uses a separate keyboard when he doesn't need to be on the hop from class to class. That too has worked really well and at home it is so big that Benj can comfortably work on a split screen with research and note taking. He also has the iPhone X which he uses a lot out and about, but not so much at school. If he isn't bothering to use his Read It (some classes rarely use the board) and the teacher puts something on the board, he will use his phone to take a photo and zoom in.

Benj doesn't let his vision stop him in any regard. He signs up to EVERYTHING! He has completed Bronze, Silver and now Gold Duke of Ed Awards. He competes in both the school and club systems as a para athlete and is the NSW U20s Mens Para Shot Put Champion! He has gone to SCIVIS Space Camp in the USA with the RIDBC, competed interstate at Athletics Nationals travelling independently with the NSW team, attended the school's mission trip in Yarrabah (QLD) twice as well as being in school musicals, and doing public speaking etc.

He has been invited to do some work experience in NSW Parliament House when things settle down which he's looking forward to and plans to go to Uni but may defer a year to travel and get some life experience before he decides which degree he will do.

The one thing that has kind of thrown him a little is driving. A bit challenging with all his friends getting their licenses etc, but he is really proficient at using Plan My Trip and Trip View and negotiating his way around on public transport! If you haven't already, get some mobility training with Guide Dogs. We were also able to get a travel allowance through NDIS for him to use Uber where public transport won't cut it!

