

## PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY: EDUCATION OF LEARNERS WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES AND DEAFBLINDNESS

Deborah Gleason

*Perkins School for the Blind, Perkins International, Director Asia/Pacific Region*

**Deborah.Gleason@perkins.org**

**Abstract:** *This presentation will address the worldwide challenges in assuring that children with multiple disabilities and deafblindness have access to quality educational services. It will look at the mandate put forth to countries worldwide to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on the implications of Goal 4. Every student with multiple disabilities and vision impairment (MDVI) presents a unique educational challenge. Teachers need specialized training and skills to understand the needs of the students and adaptations to enhance their learning. Perkins International has consolidated 95 years of global teacher training expertise into its first Perkins International Academy courses. This professional training program aims to improve the lives of children who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities by training their teachers and related professionals on the best educational practices. The Perkins International Academy is based upon a set of standard teacher competencies for teachers of learners who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities. This population includes children with visual impairment and additional disabilities- including intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, hearing impairment, cerebral palsy, autism, behavioural challenges, complex health challenges and those with deafblindness. These children are among the most vulnerable in the world. There are currently two courses available through Perkins International Academy:*

*Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness-Foundations Level*

*Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness-Advanced Level*

*The presenter will describe Perkins International Academy, a model that Perkins International is using to successfully meet the challenge of building a highly qualified workforce to serve this population of children and young adults throughout a variety of educational and care settings. The description of the Perkins International Academy will be put into the context of the overarching program of any country's development efforts to assure sustainable systems of services for students with multiple disabilities, .*

**Keywords:** Teacher training, multiple disabilities, deafblindness

### INTRODUCTION

Every student with multiple disabilities and vision impairment (MDVI) presents a unique educational challenge. Today's teachers must develop specialized training and skills to understand the needs of the students and adaptations to enhance their learning. Perkins International has consolidated over 95 years of global teacher training learnings and expertise into its first set of Perkins International Academy courses. This professional training program aims to improve the lives of children with multiple disabilities and deafblindness by training their teachers and related professionals on the best educational practices.

### WHAT IS PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY?

Perkins International Academy is a new global teacher training initiative of Perkins International/ Perkins School for the Blind. Perkins International is helping equip government ministries with a sustainable, measurable system for training special educators, building educational capacity, and achieving measurable progress toward Goal 4 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

- Education for all:

Global leaders have committed to providing a quality education for all children – including those with disabilities – by the year 2030. This commitment is outlined under Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals. To achieve

this milestone, the U.N. is calling for a substantial increase in the supply of qualified teachers. By teaming with Perkins International Academy, global leaders can help their respective government ministries meet this commitment.

- A human right:  
The U.N. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities declared in September 2016 that inclusive education is a human right for all individuals, including those with disabilities. The committee specifically identifies individuals with multiple disabilities and deafblindness among those most at risk of exclusion. Perkins International Academy can help ensure educators have the special knowledge and skills required to include these students in the educational system.
- The global standard:  
Perkins International has consolidated over 95 years of global teacher training expertise into its first of several Perkins International Academy courses, *Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness – Foundations Level*. This initial course establishes the first-ever international competency standard for teachers working with children with multiple disabilities. This population includes children with visual impairment and additional disabilities – including intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, autism, behavioral challenges, complex health challenges and those with deafblindness. As documented by the UN backed initiative and agreement these children are among the most neglected, unprotected, and vulnerable in the world.
- Certified by Perkins  
Perkins International Academy training is backed by Perkins School for the Blind, the global leader in the education of children with multiple disabilities and visual impairment. Participants who successfully complete Perkins International Academy courses will earn certificates demonstrating their competency in the knowledge and skills required to deliver quality special education services and have access to continuing education and practices. For government ministries, these Perkins certificates can also be cobranded with government endorsement to help a country achieve measurable progress toward Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals – all while laying the

groundwork for sustainable improvements to their own special education programs.

### **WHAT IS THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE ADDRESSED BY PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY?**

There are 12 million children and young adults (age birth-24) around the world who are visually impaired and in need of special education. It is estimated that half of these individuals have one or more additional disabilities (SEELS 2007). Therefore the projected global population of children and young adults with multiple disabilities and visual impairment is estimated to be at least 6 million. The majority of this population lives in developing countries, where a lack of resources and cultural stigma of disability may prevent them from readily accessing the appropriate education they need to help reach their full potential. Children with multiple disabilities and deafblindness are among the world's most unprotected and vulnerable and as a result the least likely to receive an education.

- In some of the world's poorest countries, where resources are scarce, educational programs for children with visual impairment and multiple disabilities are all too often inadequate or nonexistent. Many of the programs that do exist for these children are hindered by unmanageably large classes, inappropriate curricula, and/or insufficient classroom materials, all of which can negatively impact student progress.
- Inadequate or incomplete teacher training is a fundamental challenge. Without specialized and focused training, teachers of children who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities, including children with deafblindness, often struggle to address the unique needs of their students.
- Many children with visual impairment and multiple disabilities are excluded from the education system and have limited or non-existent options for learning. All too often, they are left at home or in the care of orphanages and children's homes, where they may have access to nurses and therapists, often with the best of intentions, but with little to no interaction with appropriately trained educators.

- Identification of children with visual impairment and multiple disabilities (MDVI) remains a fundamental challenge in many countries. Early identification of children with MDVI is essential to supporting every child's development and learning. Yet all too often, the complexities of recognizing and diagnosing visual impairment in a child with additional disabilities limit early and appropriate identification of children.

### HOW CAN PERKINS INTERNATIONAL HELP MINISTERS OF EDUCATION?

- **Train more Teachers**  
As the global leader in the education of children with multiple disabilities, Perkins International can help ministries train more teachers. Perkins International Academy training courses will equip educators with the knowledge and skills they need to educate the world's most vulnerable children.
- **A Measurable Solution**  
Perkins International Academy is a sustainable, continually measurable solution to the global shortage of qualified special educators. Participants who successfully complete Perkins International Academy courses will earn certificates demonstrating their competency, allowing ministries to track the number of educators trained to teach children with multiple disabilities. Perkins International will collaborate with ministries to support the efforts of ministries to provide a quality education for all children and achieve the ambitious targets outlined under Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### WHAT COURSES ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY TODAY?

The first series of Perkins International Academy courses is comprised of a sequence of three courses, designed to build ever-increasing levels of knowledge and skills among course participants:

- Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness-Foundations Level
- Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness-Advanced Level
- Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness- Trainer Level (*under development*)

### WHAT ARE THE DETAILS OF THE FOUNDATIONS LEVEL COURSE?

*Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness – Foundations Level* is the first Perkins International Academy course. It establishes the first-ever international competency standard for teachers working with children with multiple disabilities. The curriculum can be adapted for in-person training, online learning, or combined for an in-person/online hybrid training model. The course will be delivered by certified Perkins Trainers in a way that is most effective within each country and/or regional context. The course is broken down into four modules, each lasting between 10 and 20 hours.

- *Module 1: Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Visual Impairment/Deafblindness*  
Participants will learn about the diversity and life experiences of people with multiple disabilities and visual impairment, including deafblindness. They will also learn about accommodations and strategies that will enable students to have the maximum access to learning. Participants will learn about vision, hearing, touch, motor skills and sensory functioning.
- *Module 2: Communication and Language Development*  
Participants will gain an understanding that all children, even those with the most significant disabilities, are communicating with us every day. They will learn about the forms, functions, content and context of communication and the strategies for creating communication-rich environments that build relationships and become the foundation for all learning. Participants will develop the knowledge and skills to develop a basic communication system for learners who do not have any formal communication or language system.
- *Module 3: Assessment and Individualized Education Programs*  
This module will provide an overview of the critical considerations in the assessment of learners with multiple disabilities and deafblindness. The module will focus on the importance of observational assessment and the link between assessment and the development of individualized education programs.
- *Module 4: Curriculum and Teaching Strategies*  
Participants will learn about the important considerations in developing curriculum for learners who have multiple disabilities or

deafblindness. They will learn the characteristics of meaningful curriculum. The module will reinforce that all learning should be founded in social communication.

### **Results of pilots of Perkins International Academy training courses:**

The *Education of Learners with Multiple Disabilities and Deafblindness Foundations Level* course was piloted in Córdoba, Argentina, and Mumbai, India. The pilot in Argentina emphasized online training. The India pilot emphasized in-person training. Both pilots, which included extensive participant and instructor evaluations, successfully concluded in December 2016. Results of the participant and instructor evaluations were carefully analyzed, and incorporated into the initial revisions of the Foundations Level course, and will be pivotal in the development of the Advanced Course.

### **The development of “certified” Perkins International Academy Trainers:**

In order to build national and local capacity to serve children with MDVI in the public education and social services system, there must be a core group of Perkins International Academy Trainers with sufficient expertise in educating children with MDVI and who are able to implement the Perkins International Academy courses in pre-service and in-service environments. Perkins International Academy has an established training curriculum and mentoring system for these Trainers.

### **WHAT IS PERKINS’ TRACK RECORD WITH TEACHING TRAINING?**

- First school in the U.S.  
Perkins School for the Blind’s tradition of excellence began nearly two centuries ago. As the first school for the blind in the United States, the first school in the world to educate a person who is deafblind, and a leader in developing international programs for children with visual impairment, Perkins has served as an unrivaled innovator of blindness education since 1829.
- Perkins International  
Perkins International was established in 1989 by Perkins School for the Blind to support the development of high-quality education programs for children and young adults with visual impairment and multiple disabilities around the world. Today Perkins International is considered a global leader in the education of children with multiple disabilities, including deafblindness. Our mission is to ensure that all underserved children and young

adults with visual impairment receive a high-quality education that enriches their lives and prepares them for an active role in their families, schools and communities.

- Educational Leadership Program  
Prior to the formal establishment of Perkins International, Perkins began training international educators in 1921. The Teacher Training Program was the first ever formal training initiative in the United States for teachers of the blind. Over seven decades the program has produced approximately 1,300 graduates from around the world before it was renamed the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) – which today serves as Perkins International’s flagship teacher training initiative. Today there are more than 300 ELP graduates, many of whom are currently working around the world to enact major improvements to services for children and young adults with multiple disabilities and visual impairment.

### **HOW DOES PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY CONTRIBUTE TO DEVELOPEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN A COUNTRY?**

Perkins International recognizes that training teachers is one component of the overarching program and country development efforts required to assure sustainable systems of service for children with MDVI in a country. Thus, implementation of Perkins International Academy courses is supplemented with development and technical support of model classrooms and model programs, coaching and mentoring for Perkins Academy graduates, need-based training, and a robust online networking community to help ensure that continuing education thrives.

#### ***Model Classrooms and Model Programs***

Model Programs are educational programs for children with MDVI including schools, classrooms, early intervention centers and community-based rehabilitation programs that provide quality services to children with MDVI and are able to serve as demonstration and learning sites for other educators. These demonstration classrooms provide a model of effective teaching methods and serve as a training ground for teacher development. They are staffed by skilled educators of children with MDVI. The purpose of developing model programs is to build institutional knowledge and contribute to sustainability within local communities, developing programs that are able to be replicated in other areas.

Model Programs may include those programs that currently exist and will rely on Perkins' technical

expertise and training to build their capacity to serve as demonstration sites. These programs will depend on skilled educators, including Perkins International Academy graduates, to provide strong local leadership along with Perkins' technical assistance and consultation to support the ongoing development of the teachers and the program. In areas in which services for children with MDVI are limited or non-existent, Perkins will support the development of emerging educational programs to serve children with MDVI in their communities. Typically, these are existing programs that expand their capacity to include children with MDVI through technical assistance and training from Perkins International.

**Model classrooms typically demonstrate the following characteristics:**

- implementation of effective teaching practices for learners with MDVI as described in the Perkins International *Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Students who are Blind and Visually Impaired with Additional Disabilities or Deafblindness* (Riggio et al., 2010)
- teacher(s) committed to the education of learners with MDVI, willing to explore new ideas and to implement student-centered teaching approaches
- appropriate student: teacher ratio to meet the needs of students
- a commitment of program administration and teacher(s) for teachers to continue in MDVI class
- a willingness of each teacher to share effective strategies for the education of children with MDVI through offering practicum opportunities, mentoring, coaching and technical assistance.

**A model program demonstrates the following additional characteristics:**

- a program-wide implementation of quality indicators, as described in the Perkins International *Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Students who are Blind and Visually Impaired with Additional Disabilities or Deafblindness* (Riggio et al., 2010), in the following areas: assessment, program planning and classroom organization, environment, communication and social relationships, curriculum, family support, administration and support, and governmental collaborations
- a commitment of program administration and staff to share effective strategies for education of children with MDVI through offering practicum opportunities, mentoring, coaching

and technical assistance; commitment of program administration and staff to engage in continued learning and program development.

These model classrooms and model programs will be used as training sites for new teachers and related professionals in the communities in which they are housed. Following a period of technical assistance and training the model programs will serve as a resource for the development of additional services throughout their region/community.

***Technical Assistance, Training, and Mentoring***

Perkins International and our partners will support schools, universities, government agencies and families through on-site consultation, technical assistance and on-going teacher mentorship. Service providers (including special educators, family members, caregivers, early childhood educators, community based rehabilitation workers, teachers in inclusive education) will receive need based training and technical assistance which will enable them to implement best practices in their classrooms and programs.

Examples of this support include:

- Customized training on specific topics related to vision impairment and multiple disabilities.
- On-site mentoring and coaching for educators and service providers
- Consultation to government ministries and agencies related to policies and procedures.
- Educational Program Assessments utilizing Perkins International *Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Students who are Blind and Visually Impaired with Additional Disabilities or Deafblindness* (Riggio et al., 2010), as well as program specific indicators
- Training and support relating to early intervention, transition to adult life, and specific identified areas of need.

In addition to developing a national cadre of skilled teachers, a complementary network of professionals and paraprofessionals in the Community Development, Health, and Education sectors directly and indirectly support children with MDVI and their families. These overlapping and interconnected areas include professionals, each with their own unique roles and areas of expertise, who each play a critical role in increasing access to education for children with MDVI.

Together, these workers and their host organizations comprise the education ecosystem for children with MDVI in many countries. Perkins International will work across all three of these sectors (education, community development, health) in order to expand the local reach to children with MDVI across each country.

**Online Networking Community:**

The Perkins International Academy web portal will serve to connect Academy graduates throughout the world for continuing education experiences, networking and sharing of resources. This vibrant online community will provide educators with additional information and resources they need to educate and support children with MDVI/DB.

**Universities and National Teacher Training Programs:**

Perkins International may also develop partnerships at the national level with universities and national training institutes for implementation of Perkins International Academy course(s) in order to support development of sustainable teacher training systems for educators of learners with MDVI. Initially, Perkins faculty may co-teach Perkins International Academy courses with university faculty and national teacher training institute faculty. As faculty develop comprehensive and in-depth knowledge and skills in education of children with MDVI/DB, National Training Institutes and Universities may incorporate Perkins International Academy course(s) into their curriculum, and their faculty may implement the course(s).

**HOW CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT PERKINS INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY?**

To learn more about Perkins International Academy, visit [Perkins.org/Academy](http://Perkins.org/Academy) or email Deborah Gleason, Perkins International Director Asia/Pacific Region, at [Deborah.Gleason@Perkins.org](mailto:Deborah.Gleason@Perkins.org).

**REFERENCES**

Riggio, M., Ferioli, G., Gleason, D., Horton, K., Jacob, N., Perreault, S., Soza, A., Webson, A., Zoppi, B. (2010). *Quality Indicators for Programs Serving Students who are Blind and Visually Impaired with Additional Disabilities or Deafblindness*. Watertown: Perkins School for the Blind.

Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS). (2007). *What Makes A Difference? Influences on Outcomes for Students with Disabilities*. Retrieved from: [http://www.seels.net/info\\_reports/what\\_makes\\_difference.htm](http://www.seels.net/info_reports/what_makes_difference.htm)

UNESCO. (2016). *Leaving no one behind: How far on the way to universal primary and secondary education?*. Retrieved from

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002452/245238E.pdf>

UNICEF. (2013). *Children and Young People with Disabilities Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from: [https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Factsheet\\_A5\\_Web\\_NEW.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Factsheet_A5_Web_NEW.pdf)

UNICEF. (2015). *Navigating the landscape of child disability measure: A review of available data collection instruments*. Retrieved from [http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Navigating-the-landscape-of-child-disability-measurement\\_247-1.pdf](http://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Navigating-the-landscape-of-child-disability-measurement_247-1.pdf)

WHO. (2014). *Visual impairment and blindness Fact Sheet No. 282*. Retrieved from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs282/en/>