

# Where can I go after my GCSEs?

A new research project is following a group of 80 blind and partially sighted young people as they move on from compulsory education. It's still early days but the project is already revealing how the students see their lives and what could be done differently to help them. Rachel Hewett and Graeme Douglas of VICTAR bring us up to date

## Project background and structure

The “RNIB Transitions Project” is a longitudinal study following the experiences of around 80 blind and partially sighted young people as they complete their compulsory education and move onto further and higher education, training and employment. The study aims to help us understand how services and eventual employment outcomes might be improved for these young people.

The research is being conducted by researchers based at Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham, and is funded by RNIB.

The phased project recruited 80 blind and partially sighted young people from across

England Midlands and Wales. The students were in school year 9 and 11 (aged about 14 and 16) at the start of the project and so far they have taken part in four surveys of their progress and experiences in 2010 and 2011. The study aims to carry on until 2014.

## Who are the participants?

The sample of young people is about evenly split between girls and boys, and includes representation from different ethnic and language groups. Participants also came from a range of educational settings: mainstream schools, resource bases attached to mainstream schools and special schools. Those recruited into the project could all independently complete a questionnaire – this means that young people with more complex needs are not included in the research at this stage.

Transition is something which every young person goes through. As they move from compulsory education they must choose what courses or training to do next, whether they want to go to university, and ultimately what job they would like to do. This short overview offers an account of young people's experience of some of these transitions. Overall, it feels positive.

As everyone knows, the current economic situation has resulted in young people facing more challenges as they leave school. Our

research looks at the transitional journey of young people with sight problems, and the particular issues they face. This article is about our Year 11 cohort of 47 students, who have all completed their GCSEs and moved onto the next stage in education.

## Exam success

The Year 11 group received their GCSE results in Summer 2010. The students appeared to be a relatively high achieving group, with 61 per cent of respondents achieving five

grades A\*–C including Maths and English – higher than the national average. The majority (86 per cent) were positive about the access arrangements made for them for their examinations. However some familiar problems persist; mainly relating to mistakes in modified papers, struggling with the size of enlarged papers and understanding their extra time entitlement.

“I needed access to ICT, enlarged print and time. These were OK apart from the extra time issue where they would only give me 25 per cent extra time, but I never finished my mock exams due to lack of time... I then had to fight to get 50 per cent for the paper exams... and now I find out I could have had more according to what staff say at [the new school]”

## Deciding to stay in education

After year 11, the young people have continued onto sixth form (either at a school or a FE college) and in one case to an apprenticeship. The courses chosen by the young people are quite mixed, with 20 going for traditional A-levels, while a group of 27 have chosen more vocational subjects such as BTEC and National Diplomas (some of which incorporate work placements). Courses in Health and Social Care are particularly popular, along with more “creative” courses like Performing Arts and Music Technology.

Most had found the transition experience positive, although some have identified potential improvements. Examples given include the wish for: “having better career guidance from the school and connexions”, “knowing more about the course” and “[being] prepared enough”.

There were also some examples of ways in which schools and colleges have helped the young people with their transition experience.

One person benefited by “important information being passed onto the college, such as the need for extra time, enlarged papers, writing in black pen on the whiteboard” whilst another found “transitions days and ice breakers” helpful.

## Concerns about transition planning

There was evidence of a lack of engagement in the statutory support process of annual reviews and written transition plans. Whilst the majority had attended a transition review, only half were positive about the transition support that they had received. Although some felt the support had helped them find focus and plan for the future, some could not see how see how it was relevant to them.

“Now I have got an idea about what want to do. Exceptionally helpful in thinking about what I might want to do, but may change in the future.”

“My transition support has been alright, except in life I don’t think they can really help me.”





## Support at school or college

The vast majority of the young people surveyed were positive about the current services and support that they received in relation to their visual impairment, with 38 of 45 saying that overall they did not think an improvement could be made. Several were particularly enthusiastic about the opportunity they had to be more independent now they have left compulsory education – for example, having responsibility for requesting support, and accessing electronic curriculum materials themselves from the college intranet.

There were good examples of the young people being given a chance to learn to support themselves and developing self-advocacy skills.

**“It’s really different at college, they treat you like an adult. At school they always asked if you wanted help but I prefer to ask for help myself.”**

## Who gives the best advice?

The young people reported receiving guidance from a number of sources in planning for their future but were most positive about the personal advice they had received, mainly from their parents and teachers who they felt understood them the best.

Work experience was also particularly appreciated by many, demonstrating the

importance of personally experiencing the different discipline of employment. Almost two thirds of the Year 11 cohort currently plan to go to university, with others saying they are considering options such as getting a job. The overall impression from those surveyed was that they are optimistic for their future.

## Future plans for the project

Most of the young people feel supported in the current educational context and felt well prepared for the changes they have gone through so far.

Even so, there were aspects of the findings which offer some causes for concern, and potential hints of some of the challenges that may lie ahead. For example, many of the young people seemed unclear about the relevance (or even if they had been involved in) a transitions review and plan while in compulsory education. This is a concern as these procedures are specifically designed to support young people like them.

As with all young people, some key challenges lie ahead for this group of young visually impaired people. There are indications that they are developing some of the important independence skills to take on these challenges (eg a high proportion travel independently to school and college), and certainly the research team feel there is an optimism amongst the group.

Tracking them through this next period of their lives will give us an enormous insight into the challenges and barriers they face and how they, their family and supporting professionals are able to overcome them.

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