Assistive Technology and Employment Transitions

Written evidence submitted by:

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# Executive Summary

Evidence centers on the use of assistive technology by people with vision impairment and draws upon an ongoing longitudinal study into the post-16 transition experiences of young people with vision impairment. The 10-year study has followed the transition experiences of a group of 80 young people as they have left school and pursued various pathways, including further education, higher education, apprenticeships, and employment.

While only approximately 0.3% of the working-age population have a vision impairment that effects them in the workplace (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-february-2015.doc>), low employment rates means that it is important to understand the unique challenges faced by this minority group who are greatly supported by assistive technology.

The use of technology, such as screen-readers as used by individuals with severe vision impairment, requires an extensive period of training and consolidation for the person to be able to develop strategies to use it effectively in the workplace. Individuals should be trained to develop these skills to enable them to be competitive in the labour market and to advocate for the adjustments which they require.

Young adults with vision impairment have limited opportunities to access work experience opportunities to develop their CV when younger and instead often look to voluntary opportunities to bridge this gap in their CVs. Finding appropriate voluntary opportunities can be further complicated by a lack of access to appropriate assistive technology.

Delays in processing of Access to Work can form a barrier to young people with vision impairment when they start new jobs. Not all assessors have the specialist knowledge required to identify appropriate equipment as part of the Access to Work assessments for individuals with severe vision impairment.

# Evidence for consideration

## What digital accessibility barriers do disabled people face transitioning from education (university, apprenticeships, supported internships) to employment, and how might we remove these barriers and enable education leavers with assistive and accessible technology?

1. Assistive technology can be essential for people with vision impairment to be able to access information and to perform tasks required in many aspects of employment. However, it is important to note that the use of assistive technology is a skill that must be learnt, and it takes time to develop strategies to use it effectively, beyond simply the remit of workplace based technical training. For example, some participants in our longitudinal study found it challenging using new technology that they required for higher education, having not had the opportunity to use it previously when in school (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-into-higher-education-2015.doc>). VICTAR has argued that educators need to consciously adopt a dual model of access which (i) ensures that the child’s environment is structured to promote learning through their education (‘access to learning’) and (ii) supports the child to learn distinctive skills in order to afford more independent learning (‘learning to access’): <https://viewweb.org.uk/wp-content/public-files/Specialist%20Curriculum%20discussion%20paper%20for%20VIEW%20FINAL.docx>.

2. It is vital that young people with vision impairment have the opportunity to develop skills for using assistive technology during school (e.g. Sapp and Hatlen, 2010 <https://www.afb.org/afbpress/newpubjvib.asp?DocID=jvib040604>). This includes having access to equipment as part of their access to the curriculum and staff resource to teach them how to use it most effectively. Anecdotal evidence suggests that due to funding challenges local authorities are not providing for students the specialist equipment that they may need, and due to restructuring of departments, there are less specialist staff available who can provide vital training in the use of assistive technology. Likewise, it is important that working-age individuals who experience sight loss later in life have access to opportunities to learn to use assistive technology as part of a rehabilitation process to provide them with the vital skills required to work independently in the workplace. We have concerns about the limited opportunities available to people with vision impairment to learn access skills outside of education settings, and whilst we recognise that training is available through Access to Work, we would argue that earlier intervention is needed, in order for the individual to be competitive in the labour market. Particular consideration is needed for those who might have progressive conditions, meaning that the technology that they use will likely need to change over time in response to their changing needs.

3. The ability to self-advocate in the workplace has been identified as an important indicator for positive transitions for young people with vision impairment into the workplace. This could include explaining what adjustments the individual requires, such as the assistive technology that they would use and how it works. Our longitudinal study has identified various enablers which the participants have felt have enabled them to be more prepared to self-advocate for adjustments, with a key enabler being the ability to draw on previous experience (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/the-importance-of-self-advocacy-skills.pdf>**).**

4. Participants in the longitudinal study have highlighted how beneficial it was to them to undertake work experience placements as part of the school curriculum. In addition to being able to experience what it is like in the work place, the participants were able to obtain other important experiences such as learning how to apply their use of assistive technology to the workplace and explaining to others how their assistive technology works (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/projects/reflections-of-transition-experiences.doc>). Given work experience is no longer compulsory in schools, opportunities to develop these skills are further limited. Limited access to assistive technology can form a barrier for young people with vision impairment as they seek work experience opportunities. Challenges observed include employers being unwilling to have unfamiliar technology installed on their IT systems and the young people’s equipment only being insured for use in their educational setting. Our recent research into Careers Education Information and Guidance for young people with vision impairment highlighted how important work experience placements are for this population, and concerns were expressed by professionals at how little priority work experience is given in schools, and noted that this is particularly the case for students where placements may be difficult to arrange.

5. Once in employment, people with vision impairment face a range of barriers, due to (i) inaccessible systems, (ii) not having access to assistive technology in a timely banner (e.g. due to delays in Access to Work), (iii) a reluctance of employers for access technology to be installed on their IT systems, (iv) a reluctance of the employee to disclose their disability or raise access problems.

## What digital accessibility barriers do unemployed disabled people face that affect their ability to find employment, and how might we remove these barriers and enable jobseekers with assistive and accessible technology?

1. Evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study demonstrates how often young people with vision impairment who are NEET have limited assistive technology skills, thus restricting them from being competitive in the labour market. Of particular concern are those who, if they were to receive appropriate training in the use of assistive technology would likely be able to work, but are being categorised by Job Centres as unfit for work, and therefore not signposted to specialist support to enable them to gain the skills and experiences to enable them to move closer to the labour market. Positive interventions are required to help these young people to achieve their long term potential. Specialist assessment processes to identify gap in skills and experiences are helpful here, such as the ENABLER toolkit which was developed by Action for Blind People, RNIB and VICTAR <https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Enabler%20toolkit_v4.pdf>.

2. Our research has highlighted evidence of inaccessible application processes. Several of the participants, and in particular those with severe vision impairment who use screen readers, faced barriers during the job application process due to the inaccessibility of the systems used. This was often the case for those applying for graduate jobs which required a series of online tests, which were either not compatible with assistive technology or extremely visual. Whilst many of the companies put adjustments in place when asked, the quality of these varied, and in some cases led to the applicants failing to complete the application process. We received positive accounts from participants who were able to access one-to-one support to help them apply for jobs, although often this was to help them overcome barriers which could have been addressed through producing accessible application documents and webpages.

## What challenges do disabled people and their employers face in terms of ensuring digital accessibility and implementing assistive technology in their workplace?

1. A primary concern is ensuring that assistive technology is in place in a timely manner, in order for the individual to start work. For those with a severe vision impairment, not having appropriate assistive technology in place often means they will be unable to do any work at all. The most positive accounts from participants in our study have come from those who bypassed Access to Work and had equipment purchased for them by their employer. In contrast, many who applied to Access to Work faced long delays in receiving their equipment. One young person who had successfully secured an apprenticeship described how she faced increasing pressure from her employer because of how slowly she was working whilst waiting for her equipment to be delivered, and eventually she lost the job. Other participants expressed frustration that their Access to Work assessor did not have sufficient understanding of vision impairment to be able to identify appropriate solutions for them. This mirrors our findings for Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) where students were allocated equipment which did not meet their needs, and some expressed a reluctance to apply for Access to Work, due to poor experiences with DSA.

2. Our evidence shows that company systems are often not accessible to a person with a vision impairment. Examples observed include electronic documentation not being produced using style sheets and computer systems not being compatible with assistive technology. Often the main challenge faced by the participants was a lack of understanding from other colleagues of how they needed information to be presented. Positive accounts came from those who had clear company policies on how information should be presented – for example, standard style sheets that should be used when producing documentation, minimum font size when sending emails and policies to provide information electronically rather than in paper format. Of particular concern, several of the young people in the longitudinal study identified ways in which they were struggling to access information at work, but were reluctant to raise this with their employer. There were particular concerns from the young people about their employer being asked to contribute financially to mechanisms for improving access.

## What challenges and opportunities does the Covid-19 pandemic present for disabled people seeking employment?

We have not collected evidence yet specifically in relation to Covid-19.

# Our Recommendations

In order to facilitate people with vision impairment for the workplace they should be given opportunity to develop the skills required for using assistive technology before entering the labour market. For young people with vision impairment in school this should be facilitated through local authority specialist sensory support services who need to be resourced appropriately to deliver these services. Individuals who experience sight loss in later life should have access to training in the use of assistive technology as part of rehabilitation services. We would recommend a review into the services available and how the government can facilitate an extended offer of these services.

The government should reinstate work experience as part of the national curriculum; something which has been requested by other groups (e.g. <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/make-work-experience-compulsory-again-say-most-business-leaders>). Access to work experience should form part of the content of EHC Plans and SEN support plans. Local authorities should be appropriately resourced to facilitate work experience placements for students with SEN and disabilities.

Systems should be developed to enable individuals with disabilities to access the assistive technology that they require to undertake voluntary placements with the view of obtaining the necessary work experience to enable them to be competitive in the labour market and to have a better understanding to be able to advocate for their support needs in the workplace.

A review should be conducted into the quality of Access to Work assessments to ensure that they are being undertaken by assessors with sufficient knowledge and expertise to provide advice to individuals with complex access requirements.

# The Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR)

VICTAR is a Research Centre based in the School of Education’s Department of Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs, at the University of Birmingham: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/index.aspx>

VICTAR has a long record of leading innovative and influential UK and international research. Of particular relevance to this consultation is our ongoing longitudinal study into the transition experiences of young people with vision impairment from compulsory education through to the labour market: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/index.aspx>.

Since 2010 the study has tracked a group of 80 young people with vision impairment as they have left school and pursued a variety of pathways including further education, higher education, apprenticeships, employment and voluntary work.

VICTAR are also responsible for the delivery of the Mandatory Qualification for Teachers of Children and Young People with Vision Impairments programme. This course is undertaken by teachers who train to become Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired children (QTVIs): providing specialist support and guidance for students with vision impairment across educational settings. As well as facilitating students to be able to access the curriculum, QTVIs have a broader responsibility of ensuring that students with vision impairment leave compulsory education with key skills in place such as skills to access information independently, travel independently, and self-advocate. This forms part of what is termed in the UK as the ‘additional curriculum’, or known in other countries such as the United States at the ‘expanded core curriculum’.

Our response draws upon both our research into the transition outcomes of young people with vision impairment and our professional experience in working with specialist educational services and voluntary sector organisations. Whilst our response to the consultation has a relatively narrow focus we would argue that it is important to give special attention to minority groups whose unique challenges may otherwise not be represented in a broader investigation. Further, these points have applicability to other groups (e.g. dyslexia). Our secondary data analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-february-2015.doc>) estimates that 42.8% of young people with vision impairment aged 16-24 are NEET, in comparison to 21.7% of young people in the general population. More broadly, recent research by RNIB (<http://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/My%20Voice%202015%20-%20Full%20report%20-%20Accessible%20PDF_0.pdf>) estimates that only 26% of people with a vision impairment in the UK are in paid employment.

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