Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry on the Disability employment gap.

Written evidence submitted by Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR),

Department of Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs,

University of Birmingham

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# Introduction

The University of Birmingham’s Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research ([VICTAR](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/victar/index.aspx)) was founded to undertake social and educational research in the area of vision impairment, offer training in the area of vision impairment and education and disseminate research to ensure it has a positive impact on real lives. VICTAR has a long record of leading innovative and influential UK and international research

Of particular relevance to our evidence submission is our ongoing [longitudinal study into the transition experiences of young people with vision impairment](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/index.aspx) from compulsory education through to the labour market. 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.

This response was prepared by Dr Rachel Hewett.

# Executive Summary

* Our evidence centres on the employment outcomes of young people with vision impairment and draws upon an ongoing longitudinal study into the post-16 transition experiences of young people with vision impairment.
* While [our secondary data analysis shows that](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/victar/research/secondary-analysis-of-the-labour-force-survey.aspx) only approximately 0.3% of the working-age population have a vision impairment that effects them in the workplace, persistently low employment rates in comparison to other disability groups means that it is important to understand the unique challenges faced by this population.
* Findings from our Longitudinal Transitions Study show that young people with vision impairment are extremely vulnerable to becoming long-term NEET (not in education, employment or training); particularly if they do not continue onto higher education. Once in this position, these young people often become economically inactive, not engaging in any activities which might help them move closer to the labour market. These problems are exacerbated by services such as JobCentre Plus directing them towards benefits intended for individuals unable to work, rather than towards services which might help them develop the skills, experience and confidence to participate in the labour market.
* The findings also highlight the importance of preparation through the education system to ensure that young people with vision impairment are able to develop the specialist skills which they will require to work and live as an independent adult. However, recent research evidence into [Careers Education Information and Guidance](https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/news/careers-information-failing-young-people-with-vision-impairment/) and [habilitation support](https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/what-we-do/children-young-people-families/advice-and-resources/making-childhood-equal/?fbclid=IwAR3Bt9DdmlpTyln5wVpSJv-UkmdMYJJ0rLNFJ1f2oi12BxQkrVAWUk2v71w) has found that children and young people with vision impairment are often not receiving this support; particularly if they do not have an Education Health and Care Plan.

# Evidence for consideration

## Progress so far and impact

1. **What progress has been made, especially since 2015, on closing the disability employment gap for individuals with vision impairment? How has this progress been made?**

To the best of my knowledge there has not been a large study into the employment outcomes of individuals with vision impairment since 2015. However, in 2015 [RNIB reported a decrease](https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/My%20Voice%202015%20-%20Full%20report%20-%20Accessible%20PDF_0.pdf) in the proportion of people with vision impairment in employment. Of particular concern for this population [are the high proportions who are economically inactive and therefore choosing not to pursue employment](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-february-2015.docx). As we will explore later, the evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study shows that often services which should be helping support this population towards the labour market instead push them towards long-term benefits.

The Longitudinal Transitions Study provides specific evidence of the employment outcomes of young people with vision impairment. Our most recent survey of the participants in the Longitudinal Transitions Study took place when the participants were aged 22-25. At this point, almost a half of the participants were engaged in full time employment, while 23% met the classification for being NEET. Of those who had been in paid employment, 17% were in casual employment/zero-hours contracts.

Only 30% of the participants who were NEET had been actively seeking employment. The most common reasons given for not seeking employment were:

* Not having relevant qualifications
* Not having any work experience
* Not being any jobs available that prepared to do
* Not being able to work because of a health condition or disability

Despite not actively looking for work, 60% of these participants expressed that they would like a regular paid job, and 80% said that having a job or career in the future was important to them. 80% of these participants had been NEET for over one-year, with some of the participants having been NEET since leaving FE college over five years ago.

1. **What is the economic impact of low employment and high economic inactivity rates for disabled people? Are some disabled people more at risk of unemployment or economic activity than others?**

Findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study show that young people with vision impairment who leave school or college with lower qualifications are extremely vulnerable to becoming long-term NEET, with several of those who left college in 2012 still never having had any form of paid employment. Lower qualification outcomes can be linked to there being insufficient support available to help young people access their courses, particularly within FE settings.

| **Case study**: |
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| “Andrea” is severely sight impaired and accesses information using either speech software on a computer or braille. She planned to study a course in Further Education which would enable her to go to university to study a vocational course and a clear pathway to employment. She engaged with the college several months ahead of starting, but there was a delay in processing her application. When she did start on the course they did not have the necessary technology in place. This meant that she was not able to participate fully in lessons and complete her assignments, meaning she found that she was getting further and further behind. After a period of advocating for the support she needed, she decided to withdraw from the course. Since then she has become long-term NEET and is not engaged in any activities which will help her move closer to the labour market. |

Several of the participants in the study have been able to access housing benefits in order to enable them to move into their own homes and live independently. Whilst this is extremely positive as a key aspiration for young people with disabilities that they might be able to live independently in adulthood, this has also created a form of benefit trap, where the individual becomes reluctant to find employment, due to concerns that their plans may not work out and they may be unable to fund their homes.

## Providing support

1. **What is the right balance between in and out of work support, and is DWP getting the balance right? What more should the Department look to provide?**

The Access to Work scheme should broaden to include the provision of support to help (re)habilitate individuals with disabilities to help them progress closer to the labour market. It should be recognised that often individuals with disabilities require assistance to develop the skills and experiences that they will need in order to be able to be competitive in the labour market. For example, in the case with an individual with a vision impairment, they may require assistance to develop the technology skills that they need to function in the workplace and also require opportunities to develop these skills in a workplace setting. The Longitudinal Transitions Study has repeatedly identified examples of where young people with vision impairment do not have the skills and experiences that they need to be considered ‘work ready’. This includes:

* At ages 21-24, a large proportion (just under 50%) who had never had any experience of paid employment.
* Just under 50% who believed that they needed to learn additional computer skills to use a computer effectively within a work based context.
* Over 40% of participants who believed they needed additional training for independent travel.

1. **What improvements should DWP make to the support it offers to unemployed disabled people via Jobcentre Plus?**

Twenty of the participants in the Longitudinal Transitions Study have attended Job Centres in the past, although only ten recalled declaring their vision impairment, highlighting that disabilities are not always identified by Job Centre staff. Seven of the participants were subsequently referred to specialist support in relation to their disability. Several highlighted negative experiences at Job Centres including:

* Participants who were advised that the Job Centre were unable to help them as a person with a VI.

**Case study quote:** “They told me there’s not much they can do for me which didn’t help me at all. Do you see why it’s become hard for me? They didn’t know what to do because of my visual impairment. I got there and they were like ‘we don’t know what we can offer you’. They are alright working with people with autism and that because they have got the eyes to do it.”

* Participants who were advised when they inquired about support for work that this was unnecessary as they did not need to work.

**Case study quote:** “He turned round and was like ‘what you are doing is great, you don’t have to look for work with the benefits you are on’…. I wasn’t really happy because I have heard it before. It’s not what I was there to achieve.”

* Inaccessible systems and processes.

**Case study quote:** “The whole system is really inaccessible. Even if you sit down with someone with you, with your adviser or you get family or friends involved.”

| Case study: Accessing support for employment as someone who is long-term NEET |
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| “Eva” studied a vocational course in college, but since leaving and trying to find a job in that field has been advised by employers that she would not be suitable, due to the health and safety implications of her vision impairment. Since leaving college over 6 years ago, she has consistently kept applying for job opportunities, and has been successful in getting interviews, and even job offers, but these offers have later been retracted due to reasons associated with her vision impairment.  “I have been for a couple of interviews…I got to one of them and they actually sent me away again because I was VI. They said that there wouldn’t be anything they could do for me, yet they didn’t even let me try. And I also started another job which they also sent me away from.”  Over the past 6 years, she has expressed her frustration at the limitations to both the financial and practical support that she can access. In the most recent interviews, she reported how whenever she has tried to access support from the Job Centre, they have indicated that there is nothing that they can do to help her. Similarly, she has sought to access specialist services and she reports that they have not identified any steps that can be put in place to help her move closer to the labour market.  “They didn’t know what to do with me because I didn’t have the eyesight, they were just like ‘we don’t know’. And this is a disabled place, they were like ‘we’re not sure’, and it’s like putting me down, it’s like great, if you can’t help me..?”  “I went to this one group and [I said to the lady] ‘have you got any ideas from VI people about getting jobs’. And she said ‘I have sort of drawn a line for VI people getting jobs, I think it’s impossible’. I was like ‘oh ok – thanks’”.  When discussing barriers to her finding employment, the principle barrier she identified was the attitudes of employers in understanding that she can work, in spite of having a vision impairment. She also highlighted as a barrier the expectation of employers that you will start a new role quickly, and how that was a challenge due to the length of time that would be required to arrange for Access to Work. |

## Enforcement and next steps

1. **What would you hope to see in the Government’s National Strategy for Disabled People?**

Findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study show the significance of specialist educational support received by children and young people with vision impairment to help them to develop the skills which will be required to work independently in the workplace. It is therefore vital that the National Strategy for Disabled People incorporates the educational support received by children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, recognising that the support received during childhood will likely have a lasting implications on a person’s life. In a recent investigation into the experiences of students with vision impairment in accessing Careers Education Information and Guidance we noted evidence of poorer outcomes for those who do not have Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) along with a general concern that those without EHCPs are not being able to access the vital specialist services they require. Therefore it is important that the National Strategy recognises [the needs of children and young people with disabilities irrespective of whether they have an EHCP](https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/news/careers-information-failing-young-people-with-vision-impairment/).

# Our Recommendations

1. When reviewing policies for reducing the disability employment gap, this should be done in conjunction with reviewing policies relating to the support of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in educational settings. This will ensure that such policies support the development of the range of skills and experiences needed for this group to be prepared for working as independent adults. This development of policy should be supported through the National Disability Strategy.
2. New strategies are needed to ensure that young people with disabilities do not become long-term NEET once they leave education. This should include targeting Job Centre Plus staff to develop their knowledge and understanding that young people with disabilities are often capable of paid employment, provided they have access to the correct support.
3. The remit of Access to Work should broaden to become a scheme which helps support individuals with disabilities into employment, as well as providing the support that is required once they have secured a role. In the case of vision impairment, this could include access to training to develop key technology skills and rehabilitation support to help the development of mobility and orientation skills and independent living skills.
4. The government should reinstate work experience as part of the national curriculum; [something which has been requested by other groups](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.

# 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. As well as undertaking social and educational research in the area of vision impairment, 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 inquiry 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/research/victar/research/secondary-analysis-of-the-labour-force-survey.aspx) 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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