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The Transition Experiences of Young People with Visual Impairments aged 17-21

Technical report of findings to February 2015

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The Nuffield Foundation

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Glossary

DfE	Department for Education
DSA	Disabled Students' Allowance
ESA	Employment and support allowance
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
ICT	Information and communications technology
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
QTVI	Qualified teacher of visually impaired children
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People
SEN	Special Educational Needs
Statement	Statement of Special Educational Needs
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VI	Visual Impairment
VICTAR	Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research
VTS	Visiting Teacher Service
Year 11 cohort	Participants were in school Year 11, aged 15-16 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 10 cohort	Participants were in school Year 10, aged 14-15 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 9 cohort	Participants were in school Year 9, aged 13-14 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the research project: “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. The project has surveyed a sample of young people about their circumstances and views since 2010 when they were aged between 14 and 16 years old.

This report particularly draws upon interviews with 61 young people. The interviews took place in autumn 2014 / spring 2015 when the young people were aged between 19 and 21 years old. The nature of this report (focussing upon the transitions the young people have made) means that we also draw upon data collected in previous rounds of interviews, therefore exploiting the longitudinal nature of the project. This report also presents some detailed context and comparison data which are taken from our analysis of the literature and secondary data sources.

The data presented here relates to these young people’s experiences of transition; that is, the educational and employment pathways their lives have taken. Specifically, the report presents findings in relation to:

- Context and comparison data;
- Current setting and plans for the future;
- Individual transition pathways:
 - a) Sixth form / FE
 - b) Employment
 - c) Higher Education (HE)
 - d) Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)
 - e) ‘Gap years’
 - f) Future projections

Context and comparison data

Data on young people with visual impairment in education

Based on the WHO international classification of childhood visual impairment, studies estimate the UK population of children and young people (up to age 25) to be 0.2%. This estimate does however exclude children with ‘mild’ visual impairment who also require support in education. It is estimated that there are approximately 20,010 young people aged 19-25 in the UK with a visual impairment.

In 2014, few visiting teacher services’ (VTS) in England were providing specialist services for young people with visual impairment once they had left compulsory education (based upon data gathered from a freedom of information request by RNIB). Nevertheless it was found that

these services were considering how to change the services offered in response to the new Code of Practice, which has extended entitlement to support young people with SEND in education (excluding HE) and training until the age of 25.

Based upon DfE administrative records:

- Of the students in England in Further Education and skills training, 0.54% under 19 and 0.46% of those aged 19-24 were identified as having a visual impairment. This relatively high figure is in keeping with findings from the transitions study which suggests that young people with visual impairment stay in education longer (taking longer to complete their qualifications, and staying on in FE to take additional courses at the same level).
- The proportion of young people with visual impairments in apprenticeships was lower, with 0.35% of students who were taking apprenticeships being identified as having a visual impairment.
- Completion rates of apprenticeships for students with visual impairment were lower than for the general population, and in particular for those aged 19-24 where only 65.9% successfully completed, compared to 72.5% of all apprentices of that age range.

Secondary data relating to employment and apprenticeships

A secondary data analysis of UK Labour Force Survey was conducted to extract data available on the employment statistics of people with visual impairment:

- Young people who describe themselves as long term disabled with a seeing difficulty aged 16-25 were less likely than the rest of the population of the same age to be in education or employment (57.2% compared to 78.2%). This suggests that 42.8% of young people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty aged 16-25 were not in employment, education or training (NEET) compared to 21.7% of 16-25 year olds in the general population.
- The higher qualified a person is, the more likely it is that they will be in employment. However, this is particularly true for those with seeing difficulties in the working age population: 72.2% of those with a degree or above were in employment, in comparison to 18.2% with no qualification (this compares to 85.6% and 41.9% respectively in the general population). These statistics demonstrate how important qualifications are for young people

with visual impairments in successfully making the transition from education and into employment.

- We observe a consistent and significant gap in employment levels between the general working population and those with a seeing difficulty.

Current settings and plans for the future

Many participants had progressed in ways in which they had planned (which included continued employment and studying at FE or HE, as well as starting new degree programmes at university). About a quarter of the participants had not followed their plans from the previous year. Sadly, for many this had not been a positive change of direction. Of particular note was that the transition to university had been unsuccessful for some, and also ten young people who had hoped to enter employment or an apprenticeship had not succeeded in doing so.

Individual transition pathways

Participants in Further Education

Over the course of the research we have identified evidence of 'churning', particularly amongst participants in the FE sector. Churning is characterised by the young people repeating years in college, or repeatedly taken courses at the same level (or even lower levels) and appearing not to make a positive progression. In this round of interviews we noted churning again in the experiences of four participants.

Participants in Employment and Apprenticeships

At this point about a third of participants (21) were in some form employment, although only eight of these would describe themselves as being exclusively in work (and just five of these holding permanent long-term positions). The majority held part-time temporary positions often before or during their educational studying (and in some cases these were voluntary posts). It is noticeable that those successfully engaged in employment at this stage tended to have less severe visual impairments. There was a little knowledge of, or engagement with, Access to Work.

The transition to entering the labour market

Of the 14 participants who could be described as moving into the labour market in the previous year (i.e. they were engaged in job search activities to some extent), only four were aware of Access to Work.

Participants who have been in apprenticeships

Two participants had been involved in apprenticeships during this year. Both spoke positively about their apprenticeship: one now held a related temporary employment post, while for the other the apprenticeship had not led to the permanent position she had hoped for. Six others were considering apprenticeships. Access to Work is available to those one apprenticeships yet the level of understanding and engagement with this scheme again was low. There was also evidence that professionals were offering incorrect advice about this.

Participants in Higher Education

At this point about a third of participants (21) were engaged in higher education. A detailed analysis of this pathway is presented in a separate report but three points are drawn out in relation to the process of transition here. Firstly, while most succeed and thrive at university, some young people with visual impairment found the transition difficult. In one case the barriers faced, including apparent lack of adjustments made by the university to enable him to access the course, led to him to start and leave the university twice. Secondly, there is some evidence that a number of students with visual impairments enter university later than would be usual (at the age of 18) because they spend additional time in previous phases of their education. Thirdly, when at university many students supplement their income and enhance their CV by engaging in employment and voluntary work. There is evidence that students with more severe visual impairments are less likely to do this.

Participants who were Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

Ten of the 61 participants who took part in the autumn 2014 interviews had been NEET at some stage of the previous year. The majority of these participants are those who were in the year 11 cohort (i.e. aged 19-21). Six participants had been NEET for 6 months or less, whilst 4 participants had been NEET for over a year. Of concern, particularly given their young age, the four who were more long-term NEET appeared to be more resigned to not finding an employment, training or education pathway. They also tended to have more severe visual impairments. Very few of the young people who were NEET recalled receiving careers advice in the previous year.

Participants on Gap years

By the time of the autumn 2014 interviews, 8 participants had made the decision to take a 'gap years' prior to going into higher education, or before plans to enter employment. Some of the participants with the most severe visual impairments were able to engage in gap years, with four participants who are registered blind choosing this pathway. All the participants who made this decision described their experiences positively.

Future projections for the longitudinal research

Projections based on the young people's long term plans indicate that almost all (90%) of the participants are expected to have entered the labour market by summer 2018. It should be noted that the majority of young people who have more severe visual impairments have chosen to go to university, and therefore we are likely to have limited evidence of the participants experience of entering the labour market and use of Access to Work until these participants graduate in 2016 and onwards.

1 Introduction

The research project is entitled “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. This project was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham in response to the research brief prepared by RNIB.

The key objectives of the project were:

- To track the process of transition for blind and partially sighted young people from age 14 for [initially] five years;
- To identify the roles of professionals involved;
- To identify the factors that improve or reduce a young person’s chance of gaining employment.

Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of an original sample of approximately 80 young people to the longitudinal study and carrying out several surveys of their views and circumstances. This took place between autumn 2009 – March 2012 and was funded by RNIB. The phase of research resulted in a number of reports (e.g. Hewett and Douglas, 2011a; Hewett and Douglas, 2011b, Hewett, Douglas, Ramli, and Keil, 2012).

Phase 2 of the study has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and centred on follow-up surveys of the sample of young people with visual impairment. By autumn 2014/spring 2015 there were 73 participants actively involved in the research, 61 of whom were available for interviews which are presented in this report.

This report focuses upon data collected between October 2014 and February 2015 through semi-structured telephone interviews (“autumn 2014 interviews”). A more comprehensive overview of the data collection of the study as a whole is presented in an accompanying report “Longitudinal Transitions Study of Young People with Visual Impairments: Methodology Summary, June 2015” (Hewett et al, 2015a). This wave of interviews aimed to: explore the concept of wellbeing; look at the young people’s friendship networks; investigate the young people’s perceptions of how well prepared they consider themselves to be for independent living; and ask some more questions around support for and information about their eye condition. The findings from these interviews are presented in a series of accompanying themed reports:

- Longitudinal transitions study of young people with visual impairments: methodology summary (Hewett et al, 2015a)

- The transition experiences of young people with visual impairments aged 17-21 (this report)
- Wellbeing of young people with visual impairments (Hewett et al, 2015c)
- Support and information received by young people with visual impairments (Hewett et al, 2015d)
- Young people with visual impairments transitioning into independent living (Hewett et al, 2015e)

These reports are part of a series of technical reports which present all findings in the project since 2010.

The nature of this report (focussing upon the transitions the young people have made) means that we draw upon data collected in previous rounds of interviews, therefore exploiting the longitudinal nature of the project. This report also presents some detailed context and comparison data which are taken from our analysis of the literature and secondary data sources.

SECTION A: CONTEXT AND COMPARISON DATA

2 Data on Young people with visual impairment in education

In this section we explore data which is available on young people with visual impairment, and in particular those who are in Further Education. One challenge of obtaining data on young people with visual impairment is the proportion who have additional learning difficulties (it is estimated that 5.6% of children and young people who have learning difficulties also have a visual impairment (Vision 2020, 2015)). Therefore data sources often fail to identify some children and young people with visual impairment as they identify only the young person's primary disability.

2.1 Number of children and young people with visual impairment

Studies estimate the UK population of children and young people (up to age 25) to be 0.2% (two in every 1,000) based on the WHO international classification of childhood visual impairment. This definition excludes children who have 'mild' visual impairment, whose visual acuity is above the WHO definition (Vision 2020, 2015), and therefore if we were to include this additional group of young people, the estimated percentage would be higher.

It is important to note that these figures include children and young people with more complex needs. Within this Longitudinal Transition study, however, we specifically recruited those participants without significant additional learning disabilities, and therefore this study focuses on a specific group of young people within that 0.2% estimate. In Hewett et al (2011) we reported that at least 61% of the participants achieved GCSE A*-C including Maths and English, which meant that our sample performed better than the national average (53.1% for that academic year). Therefore, when analysing the transition pathways of the participants it is important to consider that they are a relatively high achieving group.

Vision 2020 (2015) give estimated figures of children and young people of children and young people with visual impairment in the UK and England, as presented in the table below:

Table 1: Estimated number of children and young people in England/UK with visual impairment in 2013

Age range	UK	England
0-16	Ages 0-16: 25,660	Ages 0-16: 21,710
0-18	Ages 0-18: 28,760	Ages 0-18: 24,310
0-25	Ages 0-25: 40,770	Ages 0-25: 34,360

Based on these figures we estimate:

- approximately 20,010 young people aged 19-25 in the UK have a visual impairment
- approximately 10,050 young people aged 19-25 in England have a visual impairment

2.2 Young people with visual impairment in Further education, further skills training and apprenticeships

A freedom of information request by RNIB found that in England there are more than 25,000 children and young people being supported by local authority Visual Impairment specialist education services for their visual impairment (Keil, 2015), including 1,853 young people aged 17-25. Few services provided support for young people with visual impairment once they leave compulsory education, although the research found that these services were considering how to change the services offered, in response to the new Code of Practice, which has extended entitlement to support young people with SEND in education (excluding HE) and training until the age of 25 (DfE and DfH, 2015)

Several tables showing destinations and outcomes for students with visual impairment in FE and skills training based in England were obtained from Skills Funding Agency. These allow comparison with other students with disabilities and also comparison against the general population.

Table 2: FE and Skills Participation by Age and Disability (England) (2012/13)

Disability	Under 19 (%)	19-24 (%)	25+ (%)	Adult (19+) (%)	All age (N)	All age (%)
Visual impairment	0.54%	0.46%	0.60%	0.50%	23,550	0.50%
Hearing impairment	0.47%	0.42%	0.80%	0.70%	29,220	0.70%
Disability affecting mobility	0.23%	0.33%	1.10%	0.90%	31,840	0.70%
Other physical disability	0.27%	0.26%	0.50%	0.47%	18,050	0.42%
Other medical condition	3.28%	1.94%	2.00%	1.90%	97,950	2.30%
Emotional/ Behavioural difficulties	1.27%	0.53%	0.23%	0.30%	23,100	0.50%
Mental health difficulty	0.58%	0.83%	1.40%	1.20%	46,960	1.10%
Temporary disability after illness	0.05%	0.03%	0.09%	0.07%	2,970	0.07%
Profound complex difficulties	0.03%	0.06%	0.04%	0.04%	1,700	0.04%
Asperger's syndrome	0.58%	0.43%	0.09%	0.17%	11,690	0.27%
Multiple disabilities	0.50%	0.79%	1.00%	0.90%	35,650	0.80%
Other	2.00%	1.48%	1.40%	1.40%	66,890	1.50%
No disability	77.23%	82.00%	81.70%	81.70%	3,484,440	80.70%
Not known/ Information not provided	13.04%	10.42%	9.20%	9.50%	446,250	10.30%
Total	1,039,600	803,900	2,476,700	3,280,600	4,320,300	4,320,300

The table above presents an overview of students in Further Education and skills training in England, by age and disability. We observe that 0.54% of the students under 19 and 0.46% of those aged 19-24 were identified as having a visual impairment. We note the follow points:

- As previously mentioned the WHO definitely identifies 0.2% of young people as having a visual impairment, although as this definition is based on visual acuity it does exclude some young people whose visual impairment affects their access to learning.
- However, as the figure of 0.54% is over twice the WHO-based estimate, it does substantiate research evidence that suggests young people with visual impairment stay in education longer. In the longitudinal study we have gathered evidence of young people with visual impairment taking longer to complete their qualifications, and staying on in FE to take additional courses at the same level they have already achieved.

Table 3: FE and skills training participation rates in English and Maths (previously Skills for Life) (2012/13)

Age	Number VI	All students/ trainees	VI as % of total
Under 19	2,760	413,200	0.7%
19-24	1,600	308,100	0.5%
Total	4,360	721,300	0.6%

The table above shows the number of students with visual impairment who were in FE specifically having skills training for English and Maths (previously called Skills for Life, the training is designed to give people the reading, writing, maths and communication skills they need in everyday life, to operate effectively in work and to help them succeed on other training courses). We note that 0.6% of all students had a visual impairment.

Table 4: Apprenticeship participation rates (defined as: paid jobs that incorporate on- and off-the-job training leading to nationally recognised qualifications) (2012/13)

Age	Number VI	All apprentices	VI as % of total
Under 19	650	181,300	0.36%
19-24	1,020	294,500	0.35%
Total	1,670	475,800	0.35%

The proportion of young people with visual impairment in apprenticeships was lower, with 0.35% of students who were taking apprenticeships being identified as having a visual impairment. In our transition study sample we have observed several of the participants going on to take apprenticeships, however we have also observed several of the participants looking for apprenticeships, but either unable to find opportunities which were suitable for them, or being unsuccessful in their applications. In total, 1,670 young people with visual impairment were recorded as being in apprenticeships.

Table 5: Apprenticeship success rates (2012/13)

Age:	VI	No disability	All apprentices
Under 19	67.2%	72.1%	71.5%
19-24	65.9%	73.0%	72.55

National completion rates of apprenticeships for students with visual impairment were lower than the general population, in particular for those aged 19-24 where only 65.9% successfully completed, compared to 72.5% of all apprentices of that age range. None of the participants in our transition study sample failed to complete their apprenticeship.

Table 6: Education and training success rates (2012/13)

Age	VI	No disability	All learners
Under 19	85.0%	85.3%	85.3%
19-24	88.1%	84.6%	85.1%

2.3 Post-16 Destinations (after Key Stage 4)

Statistics from Department for Education showed that 92% of all young people went into sustained education, employment or training destinations after key stage 4 (age 16) in the academic year 2013/14 (DfE, 2015).

Table 7: Destinations after Key Stage 4

Destination	All students (2013/14)	Students with Statements of Special Educational Needs (2013/14)	Longitudinal Transitions Study Participants (N) (2010/11 – 2012/13)	Longitudinal Transitions Study Participants (%) (2010/11 – 2012/13)
Sixth form/FE	86%	88%	67	89%
Apprenticeships	5%	-	3	4%
Other sustained employment or training	2%	-	2	3%
Not in sustained destinations	7%	-	3	4%
No recorded activity	1%	-	0	0%
Total	561,110	11,590	75	75

Eighty-six percent of all students went into Sixth Form/FE following completion of Key Stage 4. The most common option was school sixth form (39%), whilst 34% went into FE college and 13% into sixth-form colleges.

Of those students with statement of Special Educational Needs, a slightly higher proportion of 88% continued in Sixth form/FE and 2% in apprenticeships or other sustained employment or training, whilst 85% of students on 'school action/school action plus' continued into sustained education, employment or training. The most common destination for students with a statement of SEN was a further education college (56%).

Whilst considering the small sample size and that the data was collected over the course of three academic years, we observe that the destinations of the Longitudinal Transition Study Participants were very similar. In particular, we see that 89% of the participants went into Sixth Form/FE which is very close to the 86% of all students, and 88% of students with Statements of Special Educational Needs.

2.4 Post-18 Destinations (after Key Stage 5)

Table 8: Destinations after Key Stage 5

Destination	All students (2013/14)	All students (where outcome known) (2013/14)	Longitudinal Transitions Study Participants (N)	Longitudinal Transitions Study Participants since 2012/13 (%)
Higher Education	48%	57%	33	45%
Sixth Form/ FE college	17%	20%	14	19%
Apprenticeship	5%	6%	3	4%
Employment/ Training	3%	4%	8	11%
Not in sustained destinations	11%	13%	12	16%
Destination unknown	15%	-	3	4%
Total (N)	358,970		73	100%

The table above compared the destinations of all students to the research participants, following Key Stage 5 (generally aged 18). When comparing these figures, the high proportion of students whose destination was unknown should be observed (15%).

Very similar proportions went into Higher Education, continued in Sixth Form/FE College and went into Apprenticeships. One notable difference is the higher proportion of the research participants went into employment/training when compared to the all students. On initial inspection, this is somewhat surprising considering the low levels of young people with visual impairment in employment. There are a number of possible explanations for this:

- Firstly, it should be noted that this is a very small sample size, and therefore each individual response has a large weighting on the overall percentages
- The majority of those participants who went into employment/training following Key Stage 5 were those who were

the least affected by their visual impairment (i.e. required the least support in school)

- We have observed in previous reports that our participants largely have very supportive families, which is likely to have had some impact on their success in finding employment/training schemes
- The high percentage figure for 'destination unknown' in the DfE data is significant here. From our original transitions project sample of 86 participants, we had lost touch with 11 of the participants for the purposes of this analysis (who could therefore be categorised as 'destination unknown'). Just making this small adjustment would make the figures more in line with the DfE percentage breakdowns.

Nevertheless, this is something which is worthy of further investigation as we look further at the longitudinal data collected on these individuals. We also observe that a slightly higher proportion of the participants were not in sustained destinations, when compared to all students.

3 Secondary data relating to employment and apprenticeships

The Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research in conjunction with RNIB have published a series of reports which present a secondary data analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey, with a focus on the data which is available on the employment outcome of blind and partially sighted people (e.g. Hewett, 2014; 2015). The approach to analysis used was based on a method devised by Meager and Carta (2008), as well as following guidance provided by the Office of National Statistics (Sly, 1998). For a comprehensive overview of the methodology used, please refer to Hewett (2015).

In this analysis people with a visual impairment are identified through them self-reporting that they have a 'health problem or disability that they expect to last more than a year', and that their main health problem is 'seeing difficulties (while wearing spectacles or contact lenses)'. One limitation of this approach is we are likely to be missing respondents who have more than one health problem including their vision, but would not classify their vision as the main difficulty. Once respondents with seeing difficulties are identified, this population is divided into two further groups:

- People who through self-report are defined as long term disabled with a seeing difficulty. Included in this population are people with the

most severe sight loss (i.e. the same population as in Network 1000, e.g. see Douglas et al, 2006) and in addition, those who may not be eligible for registration but their sight loss still impacts on their ability to work or the job they can do

- People who through self-report are defined as not disabled, but who have a seeing difficulty. These people state that their sight loss does not affect the type of work they can do or the number of hours they can work. We would not expect anybody in this group to be eligible for registration.

The reports referenced provide a thorough overview of the findings made, but presented below is a summary of the findings that are of particular relevance in the context of the transitions research. For the purpose of this report we have combined the responses of both groups (i.e. long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and not disabled, but with a seeing difficulty), as for the purposes of comparison this is likely to be a better representation of our transitions research sample as we have both some participants whose vision limits their ability to work, and some participants with less severe visual impairments who have reported not being eligible for registration, and not having any challenges in the workplace.

Table 9 Economic activity of those of a working age, aged 16 - 25 aggregated over 12 most recent quarters from October 2011 to September 2014

Activity	Long-term disabled with seeing difficulty (%)	All people with a seeing difficulty (%)	Other long-term disabled (%)	Not disabled and without a seeing difficulty (%)	Total (%)
Employed	27.8%	34.2%	36.4%	54.9%	52.8%
ILO unemployed	*	17.1%	15.1%	12.0%	12.4%
Student	29.4%	31.0%	21.1%	25.9%	25.4%
Long term sick or disabled	*	*	15.4%	0.05%	1.7%
Other	*	*	12.0%	7.1%	7.6%
Total (N) (Weighted)	14,576	24,899	870,763	7,160,913	8,056,575

* = not sufficiently high for publication (less than 3,000)

Young people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty aged 16-25 were less likely than the rest of the population of the same age to be in education or employment: 57.2% compared to 78.2% (for all people with a seeing difficulty 65.2% were in education or employment). This suggests that 42.8% of young people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty aged 16-25 were NEET (not in employment, education or training), compared to 21.7% of 16-25 year olds in the general population. This estimate of 42.8% includes young people ILO unemployed, long term sick or disabled, and categorised as 'other' which in some cases could mean that they were in training. The proportion in the general population who were 'other' was 7.6%. In our transitions research sample only 13.1% of the participants would be classified as NEET. There are a number of possible explanations for this apparent large difference in percentage:

- The oldest participants in the study at the time of this interview were 21 and many were still continuing in education, meaning unfortunately it is possible that more will become NEET as they leave their current courses and try to enter the job market
- As is typical with this type of research, in general our participants have been shown to be well supported in their education and by family members as they have looked for employment opportunities. Unfortunately this will not be the case for all young people with visual impairments.

Table 10 Economic Activity of all people with a seeing difficulty (by education) – Aggregated over 12 most recent quarters from October 2011 to September 2014

	Degree or above (%)	A-level and below degree level (%)	GCSE level and other (%)	No qualification	Total weighted (%)
Employed	72.2%	68.9%	54.4%	18.2%	55.0%
Unemployed	7.0%	6.3%	8.7%	8.2%	8.1%
Something else	20.9%	24.7%	36.9%	73.6%	36.9%
N (weighted)	38,052	12,610	97,226	20,758	168,646

* = not sufficiently high for publication (less than 3,000)

Table 11 Economic Activity of whole population (by education) – Aggregated over 12 most recent quarters from October 2011 to September 2014

Economic activity status	Degree or above (%)	A-level and below degree level (%)	GCSE level and other (%)	No qualification %	Total weighted (%)
Employed	85.6%	82.2%	70.0%	41.9%	72.8%
Unemployed	3.5%	3.8%	7.3%	9.2%	6.1%
Something else	10.9%	14.0%	22.7%	48.9%	21.1%
N (weighted)	10,160,005	3,348,334	21,189,500	3,319,035	38,016,874

* = not sufficiently high for publication (less than 3,000)

The two tables above present the economic activity of those with seeing difficulties and the economic activity of the general population, compared against highest education level obtained. As would be expected, the higher qualified a person is, the more likely it is that they will be in employment. However, this is particularly true for those with seeing difficulties where 72.2% of those with a degree or above were in employment, in comparison to 18.2% with no qualification (this compares to 85.6% and 41.9% in the general population). These statistics demonstrate how important qualifications are for young people with visual impairments in looking to successfully make the transition from education into employment.

Figure 1 Comparison of Employment Rates over the 12 most recent quarters for those who describe themselves as having a seeing difficulty and ALL working age population

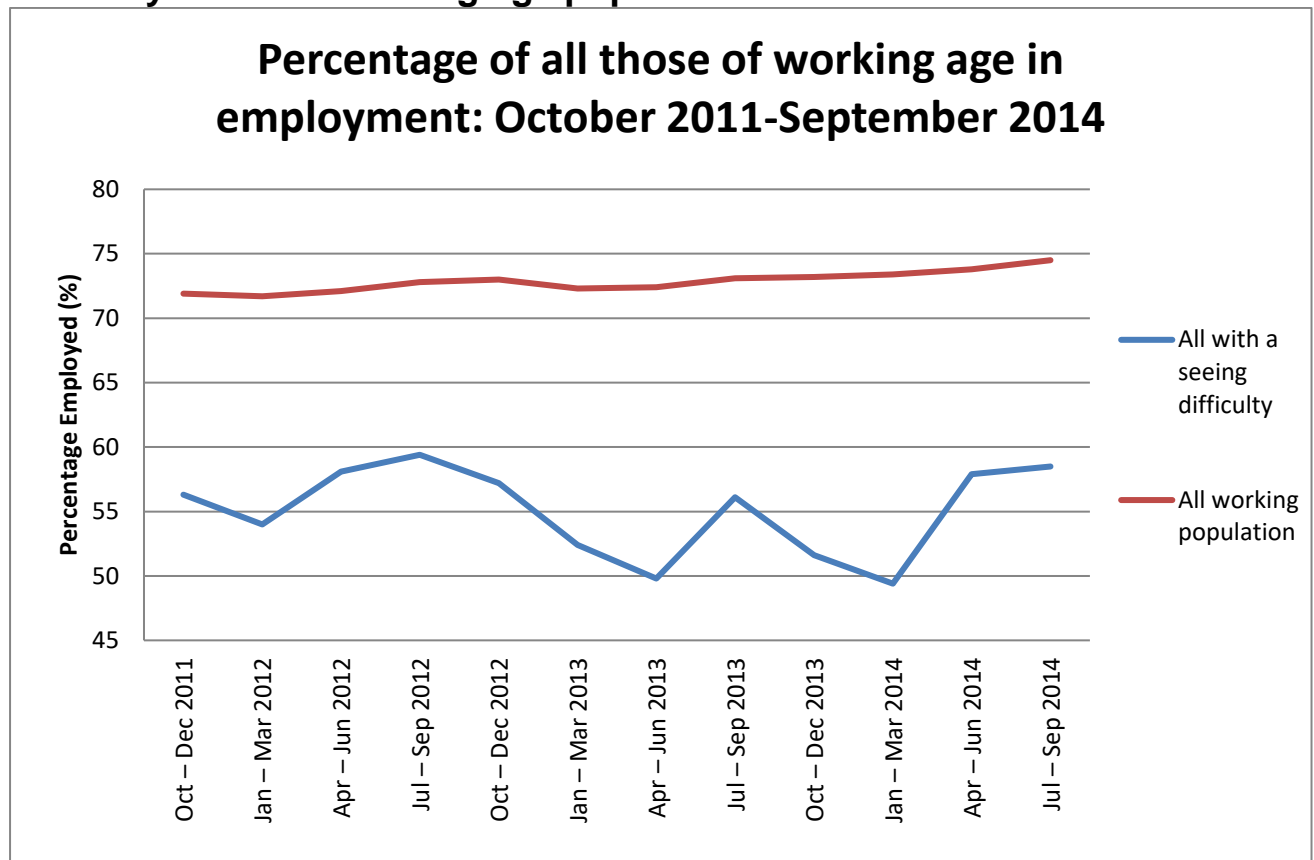


Figure 1 presents estimates over the 12 quarters between October 2011 and September 2014 and shows the percentage of those surveyed through the Labour Force Survey who reported that they were in employment. Whilst there is greater fluctuation amongst those with a seeing difficulty, it should be remembered that due to lower sample sizes such fluctuations would be anticipated. However, what it does demonstrate is a consistent and significant gap in employment levels between the general working population and those with a seeing difficulty.

SECTION B: PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – CURRENT SETTINGS

4 Current setting and plans for the future

Section 1 presents an overview of the pathways that our sixty one participants are following. It provides an overview of:

- What the participants were doing at the time of the previous interviews in autumn 2013
- What the participants were doing in autumn 2014
- What transitions have been made since autumn 2013
- What deviations have been made from their intended plans as reported in autumn 2013
- What the participants hope to do next

A more thorough overview of their experiences will be provided in Section 2 “Individual transition pathways”.

4.1 What were the participants doing in autumn 2013?

Table 12 Setting of participants in Autumn 2013

Setting	Total (N)	Total (%)
FE/Sixth Form	24	39.3%
University/Higher Education	21	34.4%
Employment	5	8.2%
Gap year	3	4.9%
Apprenticeship	2	3.3%
NEET	2	3.3%
Voluntary work	2	3.3%
Employment (temporary position)	1	1.6%
Stay at home mum	1	1.6%
Total	61	100.0%

The table above presents a summary of what the 61 participants interviewed had been doing the previous time that we had spoken with them (in Autumn 2013). The majority were still in education and either in FE/Sixth form or University/HE (73.8%). Several had made the transition into employment or apprenticeships, with one of those in employment in a temporary position. Of the two participants in voluntary work, one was hoping to secure employment as a result of this experience, whilst the

other was satisfied doing voluntary work, and intended to continue following that pathway for at least another year. Three of the participants had taken gap years – two working/travelling abroad and one involved in various activities to enhance his CV prior to applying to a specialist music college. Two participants were NEET – one since finishing his college course the previous year and another since dropping out from university in December 2012.

4.2 What are the participants doing one year later?

Table 13 Setting of participants: Autumn 2014

Setting	Total (N)	Total (%)
University/higher education	28	45.9%
FE/Sixth form	11	17.2%
Permanent employment	5	8.2%
NEET	5	8.2%
Gap year	4	6.6%
Temporary employment	3	4.9%
Voluntary work	2	3.3%
Apprenticeship	1	1.6%
Stay at home mum	1	1.6%
Year in industry	1	1.6%
Total	61	100.0%

The table above looks at the reported setting of the 61 participants at the time of the autumn 2014 interviews:

- Almost half were in university or higher education, and at various stages of their degree courses (ranging from first to final year). One participant during the time period the interviews covered dropped out of university and moved into taking a gap year. They have applied and been accepted to a different university for the next academic year
- Eleven of the participants were still in FE/Sixth form, having either taken longer to complete their courses than would be standard, or having taken more than one course since completing their GCSE examinations.
- Five participants were in permanent employment, and three in temporary employment (with others in part time roles alongside their studies or working as part of gap years)
- Five participant were NEET
- Four participants were on ‘positive’ gap years – i.e. they have actively made the decision to take a gap year to experience

something new, as opposed to taking a gap year because their initial plans had not worked out.

- Two participants were in long-term voluntary work. One of these young people is very content doing this and has no clear plan for moving from voluntary work and towards further training, education or employment
- One participant was on maternity leave. She would like to have returned to employment, but was facing challenges due to childcare.
- One participant was on a year in industry as part of their university studies acting as a full-time employee of a company, carrying out tasks which relate to his degree of choice, and also completing some assignments for submission for his studies.

Table 14 Setting of Welsh participants: Autumn 2014

Setting	Total (N)	Total (%) for whole sample
Higher education	2	45.9%
FE/Sixth form	2	17.2%
NEET	2	8.2%
Voluntary work	2	3.3%
Other	0	25.4%
Total	8	100.0%

The table above looks specifically at the current settings of participants from Wales (NB one of the participants was recruited in England, but their home address is in Wales and they were educated in Wales until aged 16). Whilst it should be remembered that we have a small sample size for Welsh participants, there are indications of poorer outcomes for participants living in Wales:

- Two participants are in higher education. (However, it should be noted that one of these participants took their A-level studies over four years before getting the grades for university)
- Two participants (25%) are still in further education – in one case the participant had whilst taking a level 2 course had experienced health problems, therefore this delay was unavoidable. The other participant has started on a new level 3 course having recently completed A-levels

- Two participants are NEET – one had been in employment for a short time, whilst the other has been NEET since leaving college in summer 2013
- Two participants are in voluntary work – one spoke of his intention to complete a one year voluntary placement before considering other options, whilst the other participant hopes to continue where they are

Some general observations have been made about the participants in Wales (again, it should be remembered that we have a small sample size on which to base these observations and they cannot be generalised to all young people with VI in Wales. However we feel that they are worthy of note because to correlate with anecdotal evidence from those working alongside young people with visual impairments in Wales):

- There is an indication of lower expectations amongst the Welsh participants, in comparison to the rest of the sample (based in England). This is evidenced particularly in the participants who are in long term voluntary work and long term unemployment. For example of the four young people in Wales could be considered 'NEET', two were in voluntary work, with no immediate plans to look for work, and one was immediately placed on Employment and Support Allowance and for the 18 months since leaving college had not been looking for employment. Many of the participants have spoken of a lack of suitable opportunities available to them, with more an attitude of "if" I get a job, rather than "when". In contrast, all of the participants who have been NEET and based in England have been very proactive in looking for employment.
- There is evidence of less of a drive from job centre staff in pushing the young people towards the labour market. For example, it was recommended to one participant that he sign on for ESA which is a benefit available for people who are considered to be unable to work. Since then he reports that he has not been encouraged to attend any form of work programme that could help prepare him for work. Whilst ESA is an important benefit that is available to those who would have difficulty in working, the young man in question would certainly consider himself as being able to work.
- There is evidence of limitations due to public transport for the participants in Wales, with poor public transportation provision combined with the fact that they are unable to drive themselves being seen as a barrier in finding suitable employment

4.3 What transitions have the young people made?

Table 15 Transitions that the young people have made: Autumn 2014

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Transitions (N=32)		
Completed course in FE/Sixth form and moved to new course	7	21.9%
FE/Sixth form to University/HE	7	21.9%
FE/Sixth form to Gap year	4	13.0%
Changed employment (permanent roles)	2	6.3%
Gap year to University	2	6.3%
Apprenticeship to Employment	1	3.1%
Apprenticeship (Level 2) to Apprenticeship (Level 3)	1	3.1%
Changed employment (temporary roles)	1	3.1%
FE/Sixth form to Employment	1	3.1%
FE/Sixth form to NEET	1	3.1%
FE/Sixth form to volunteering	1	3.1%
Gap year to NEET	1	3.1%
University/HE to FE/Sixth form	1	3.1%
University/HE to Year in Industry	1	3.1%
Volunteering to NEET	1	3.1%
Total	32	100.0%
No Transition (N=29)		
No transition – continuing on University/HE course	19	65.5%
No transition – continued on same course in FE/Sixth form	3	10.3%
No transition – continuing in same employment	3	10.3%
No transition – still NEET	2	6.9%
No transition – continuing in voluntary work	1	3.4%
No transition – still stay at home Mum	1	3.4%
Total	29	100.0%

The table above provides an overview of the movements which have been made by the young people since the time of the autumn 2013 interviews. Thirty two of the 61 participants interviewed have made some form of transition, whilst 29 have continued with what they were doing the previous year. The most common transitions involved moving from one course in FE college/sixth form to another (not necessarily as the

same institution) or to have moved from FE college/sixth form into higher education. Of particular note:

- One participant has made the transition from an apprenticeship into employment
- One participant has left FE college/sixth form and is now NEET
- One participant was studying at university but has now left this course and gone back to FE college/sixth form

Nineteen of the participants have remained in university/higher education, whilst three remain in FE/sixth form, three are continuing with the same employer, two are still NEET, one is continuing in voluntary work, and one is still a stay at home mum.

4.4 What deviations have the participants made from their intended plans

Seventeen of the participants experienced some form of deviation from their intended pathway as reported in autumn 2013. In some cases this was the result of their own decision, but in other cases it was due to external factors. A description of these deviations is as follows:

4.4.1 University

- One participant who had intended to transition from FE/Sixth form into University/HE was initially successful in doing so, but then dropped out during the first semester as he was having difficulties in accessing the course (his course fees and accommodation costs are due to be refunded)
- One participant who had experienced difficulties in their first year of university, again upon repeating the first year had similar difficulties. This meant she did not achieve sufficient credits to continue into the second year. Instead she had enrolled on a course in Sixth Form/HE, and had applied for different courses in higher education for the 2015-2016 academic year (the potential refund of tuition fees was still being negotiated)
- One participant had intended to go to university/HE, but changed her mind on what course she wanted to do, and instead decided to take an education-based gap year to prepare for university in the 2015-2016 academic year
- One participant who had completed A-levels hoped to go to university/HE. Instead he had returned to FE/Sixth Form to take a BTEC.
- One participant had taken an extra year to complete A-levels before going to university/HE in the 2015-2016 academic year

4.4.2 Gap year

- One participant had intended to take a gap year, but this had to be cut short due to health problems

4.4.3 Employment

- One participant who had moved into temporary work following redundancy hoped to secure a permanent job, but instead had been moving between temporary posts, as offered by employment agencies
- One participant had intended to make the transition into employment, but remained NEET
- One participant had hoped to secure either employment or an apprenticeship, but had done neither so remained NEET
- One participant had hoped to secure employment through one of the two places they were undertaking voluntary work, but they were unsuccessful. Instead they had left their voluntary positions and became NEET
- One participant had hoped to move from FE/Sixth form into employment or an apprenticeship, but discovered that they were not qualified for the roles they were interested in, and instead enrolled on a different course (at a lower level) in FE/Sixth form
- One participant who had completed A-levels in FE/Sixth Form had hoped to either enter employment or do an apprenticeship. They could not find any suitable positions, and instead applied for a vocational Level 3 course in FE/Sixth Form
- One participant who had completed an apprenticeship hoped to secure a permanent job. Following a brief period of being NEET they were offered temporary work
- One participant who is taking an apprenticeship hoped to secure employment with the company she is working with. At the time of interview she was facing a redundancy situation, and was looking for employment outside of the organisation
- One participant hoped to secure a role within the armed forces. He had gone through the recruitment process, passed one medical test (including an assessment on his visual impairment which he had disclosed), but at the final medical test he was informed that he could not do the role because of his eye condition. During this process the participant in question has had a variety of temporary roles
- One participant was hoping to go back into employment, but was having difficulties in affordable childcare.

4.4.4 FE/Sixth form

- One participant would have liked to have progressed from the Level 2 qualification they had obtained, onto the Level 3 qualification, but they were unable to find a suitable work placement. Instead they were NEET (following a brief period in employment)

4.5 What do the participants hope to do next?

Table 16: What transitions do the participants intend to make next?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Continue in employment	8	13.1%
Enter employment	15	24.6%
Complete degree and then decide	12	19.7%
Enter university/HE	10	16.4%
Start a Masters level degree	6	9.8%
Still undecided	3	4.9%
Take a gap year	2	3.3%
Start an apprenticeship	1	1.6%
Transfer universities/HE (first year)	1	1.6%
Start a PGCE	1	1.6%
Continue in voluntary work	1	1.6%
Start a year in industry as part of university course	1	1.6%
Total	61	100.0%

The table above gives an overview of what transitions the participants intend to make over the next academic year.

- Twenty three of the participants hope to either continue in employment or enter employment. For those already in employment, there are examples of 'movement' as they look to further their roles. For example, one participant is training to take on a supervisory role, one participant is planning to take a part time degree alongside their job (to help further themselves in that particular career area) and one participant is hoping to progress from a short term role into something more permanent.
- Twelve of the participants intend to complete their degree and then decide. Those who are finishing university in the 2014-15 academic year have spoken of a variety of options, such as moving on to take a postgraduate qualification, taking a gap year, or looking for employment

- Ten of the participants are looking to enter university/higher education and at the time of interview had either completed their UCAS application forms or were going to do so shortly
- Seven of the participants who are graduating from university this year are looking to apply for a postgraduate course (six at Masters level, and one a postgraduate certificate in education)
- Three of the participants are still undecided about what they want to do next
- Two of the participants are looking to take gap years. One wishes to travel after completing university and the other wishes to get some work experience before going back to take a Masters
- One of the participants is looking to continue in the voluntary work they are already involved in
- One participant who has gone back to college to take a vocational course is hoping to move into an apprenticeship linked to this course
- One participant has been accepted by a new university, having left their original university due to experiencing substantial difficulties in accessing the course
- One participant is planning to do a year in industry as part of their university course, before going back to complete the final year of their course

SECTION C: PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION PATHWAYS

At the start of each interview participants were asked to provide an overview of what they had done since the previous round of interviews in autumn 2013. During this dialogue the researcher identified which components of Section 1 of the interview schedule were relevant to that young person and worked through each of these in turn. Their responses to these questions are presented in Sections 2 to 7. It should be noted that in some cases the participants were asked questions from more than one segment, having pursued more than one pathway during that previous year.

5 A Case Study: Making the Transition from Sixth Form

As part of our case study programme we followed the transition experience of “Rebekah” as she prepared to leave sixth form/FE college and followed the progress she made throughout her final year – both in terms of what she did, and also the advice which she received. Her experiences demonstrate the complexity of transition, and the need for transition planning to be flexible. It also highlights some concerns in the quality of advice and guidance which is made available to young people such as Rebekah.

5.1 Rebekah’s Transition into Further Education

This case study follows the transition experience of “Rebekah” as she completed her A-level studies and prepared to make her next transition. It follows her initial plans as she hoped to move into either employment or an apprenticeship, and then looks at her experiences once these options were not available to her. In particular, it investigates the support and guidance that she received during this time. The full case study is presented in the Appendix.

In summary, we learn that Rebekah had a mixed experience in her transition after completing her A-levels at school. Initially she had some support from a Connexions advisor, although from her reported experience she does seem to have had some questionable advice in being recommended to look at a Level 2 qualification, when considering that she was studying for A-levels at the time which are a Level 3 qualification. It would have been interesting to hear the perspective of the Connexions advisor as to why they considered this

a good option, but this was not possible. The participant had clear ideas about what she wanted to do next, but after waiting for apprenticeship and employment opportunities to be publicised, discovered that there was nothing suitable for her. Of particular concern is that as her plans deviated in response to this, she did not receive any further support or follow up to establish what she was intending to do the following year.

The participant's transition to college was a positive one - from her QTVI support teacher meeting with the college to discuss support arrangements, to the college consistently providing the support that she needed. Her new college also reacted well as her support needs changed. For example, it was not anticipated before attending that she would need taxi provision, but once it became apparent she would struggle with the journey home in the dark due to lessons finishing later in the afternoon, taxi provision was quickly put in place. However, it is also worth considering whether in doing this the college was limiting her independence. It is possible that with specialist support she could have received mobility and orientation training which would have allowed her to make this journey independently – even during the darker winter months. The fact that she was able to make the journey on her own at the start of the year serves as some indication that this could have been a possibility.

Other participants in the project have reported similar experiences of intending to pursue an apprenticeship, and of being disappointed at the time the apprenticeship opportunities were released by not being able to identify anything suitable. It is not clear whether this was because they were not well informed of where to look for opportunities, or whether it was because the roles simply did not exist. Whilst the experiences of other participants have demonstrated that apprenticeships can be very positive experiences, it is important that no assumption is made that the young person will get an apprenticeship or into employment, and contingency plans are made. Similarly, a common theme throughout the course of the longitudinal study has been a sense of dissatisfaction by the participants towards the specialist careers advice they received. There have been indications that whilst they have received the careers advice that students with special educational needs would typically be given, the advisors have given quite generic advice, and often advice that would be directed at young people with less qualifications than this relatively high achieving group.

6 Further Education

6.1 Participants who have been in Sixth Form/FE

6.1.1 What courses were the participants taking?

Table 17: What type of courses were the participants taking in 2013-14?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
A-levels	11	45.8%
Level 3	6	25.0%
Level 2	4	16.7%
A-levels and Level 3	2	8.3%
Short courses	1	4.2%
Total	24	100.0%

The table above shows the type of courses that the participants had been taking in the 2013-14 academic year. Almost half (45.8% or 11) were studying A-levels, a further 6 (25.0%) were taking more vocational level 3 courses such as BTECs and two were taking a combination of A-levels and Level 3 courses. Four participants were taking Level 2 qualifications and one participant was taking short courses at college which are normally targeted at casual adult learners (such as flower arranging).

6.1.2 Grades achieved by participants

All but one of the participants reported obtaining the grades that they needed to make their next transition. One participant was unable to make the transition to university and had gone back to sixth form/FE college to take an additional Level 3 course. Whilst the other participants who wanted to go to university have obtained the grades to do so, some spoke of getting grades below their predicted grades, and in one case below the entry requirements for their course.

6.1.3 What have the participants gone on to do next?

Table 18: What have the participants gone on to do next?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Continuing in FE	3	12.5%
FE – Level 1	1	4.2%
FE – Level 2	1	4.2%
FE – Level 3	5	20.8%
University/Higher Education	5	20.8%
University/Higher Education – Foundation	2	8.3%
Gap year	4	16.7%
NEET	1	4.2%
Employment	1	4.2%
Volunteering	1	4.2%
Total	24	100.0%

The table above looks at what the participants have gone on to do in the 2014-15 academic year:

- Three have continued on in further education as they were part way through their courses
- One participant has transitioned onto a level 1 course. They had previously completed a level 3 course (achieving a distinction). Their original plan was to move into either an apprenticeship or employment. However, in exploring this option further they discovered that to be eligible they should have taken a particular level 1 course. As they are very keen to pursue this career path they made the decision to go back to college to obtain this qualification
- One participant has moved onto a level 2 course. Before the current academic year they had been taking short courses at college
- Five participants have transitioned onto level 3 courses. Three of these participants had completed level 2 the previous academic year and had moved up to the next qualification level. Two of the participants had just successfully completed level 3 courses and decided to go back to study a new course at the same level
- Seven participants have continued onto university/higher education (one of these has since left the course having had difficulties in accessing the course). Two of these participants are taking foundation year courses
- Four participants were taking/planning on taking gap years. One was hoping to gain some relevant work experience prior to going

to university. The other three were all either working or studying abroad, and had secured places at university for the next academic year

- One participant was NEET having completed a Level 3 course in the last academic year. They did have a short term job after completing their course, but this had ended and they were looking for permanent employment
- One participant moved into employment. They were self-employed (as is typical to the field which they are working in), but they reporting having regular work from a number of sources
- One participant had moved into voluntary work. They were helping out at the school where they had previously studied. Ideally they would like a part time job to go alongside this, but despite looking had not managed to find anything at the time of interview.

6.1.4 Participants who were planning to take further courses

As indicated in the previous section, eight participants had started new courses in further education. Seven of these had made the transition having completed FE courses the previous academic year, whilst one participant had gone back to take a FE course after withdrawing from higher education.

- Three participants progressed from level 2 courses onto level 3 courses
- Two participants completed level 3 courses and transitioned to a different level 3 course
- One participant completed a level 3 course and started on a vocational level 1 course
- One participant who was taking short courses moved onto a level 2 course
- One participant who was in higher education but did not successfully complete the first year returned to FE to take a level 3 course

6.1.5 Courses participants are studying

The participants are studying a wide range of courses. These include:

- Travel and Tourism (x2) Level 3
- Health and Social care Level 3
- Forensic Science Level 3
- Mechanics Level 1
- Art and Design Level 2

- Access to Higher Education Diploma
- ICT

The Access to Higher Education Diploma is a course which is “a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university” (QAA, 2015)

6.1.6 Support and access arrangements

Table 19: Have participants moved to a new FE college/Sixth form

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	4	50.0%
No	4	50.0%
Total	8	100.0%

Four of the participants had transferred to new FE colleges/Sixth forms, and therefore it was particularly important that colleges put in place access arrangements for the courses that the students would be taking. However, consideration would also need to be given for the arrangements which would need to be put in place for the students as they moved within their existing institution onto different courses, and particularly where work placements were involved. Ordinarily documentation would be provided to new FE colleges by their previous education provider or VI service on the student’s behalf to detail the support that they had previously received. However, we were also interested in the students’ knowledge of any discussions that had taken place in relation to their support needs. This was investigated through the following question:

“Has there been any discussion regarding support in relation to your visual impairment? Prompts: Who has conducted this? Who with? What has been decided? Happy with this?”

6.1.6.1 Participants who have moved to a new college

All four participants who have moved to a new college reported being happy with the support that they were receiving.

One participant had started on the course late as he only was able to get a place due to the withdrawal of another student. This meant that at the time of our interview he had not yet been able to have a meeting with the disability support worker. Despite that he was positive about support that had been put in place for him by the lecturers who were aware of his (quite complex) condition.

“It’s the first place I have ever been to where they have put the support in properly. Saying that they haven’t officially, but the teachers have done everything that they can... There hasn’t been anything official just yet, it’s just been my teachers who have been really supportive. I take in a laptop in and type everything. I hope everything official gets sorted in time as well. Because I have exams at the end of the year. But luckily a lot of the course is assessed with essays. You just write essays and hand them in, but there’s only a few exams at the end of the year.”

At the time of the next interview we will follow up on whether these support arrangements were put in place in time.

The other three participants had opportunities to meet with support coordinators in advance to discuss the support that they would require:

“On the open evening, I talked to the support team there and they explained that they'd put a support teacher in the class. If I need anything else I just ask them and they put those thing into place.”

One of the participants also said that the college had indicated that they would be making contact with their previous school to find out details of previous arrangements for examinations.

6.1.6.2 Participants who have started new courses in the same institution

One participant who was continuing at the same FE college at the previous academic year reported having significant difficulties due to the fact that her visual impairment had changed, meaning that she had lost a considerable amount of vision in a short space of time. Whilst she had been well supported in the previous year, college staff were unsure of how to best to adapt the course to meet her needs. Part of the problem was likely to be due to the fact that she would not have the skills in place to accommodate for such a severe change in her level of vision. However, she reports some confusion from the college in terms of who they should be approaching to get expert advice in terms of developing a support plan.

“I think at the moment the college are trying to do it off their own back. Obviously they have assistants which are the people who are put the support in place, so they are working alongside them at the moment as well as me, but we need RNIB really.”

One participant who had moved to a different subject area from his previous Level 3 course reported having a series of meetings to discuss the access arrangements which would be put in place:

“I have had five meetings on this, yes I have...It’s mostly been from the college, I have had someone there from the RNIB. I have people at the college who are aware of the problems of my visual impairment.”

The other two participants had progressed from Level 2 to Level 3 in the same subject, and had smooth transitions between the two.

6.1.7 Guidance received and motivations for taking the course

We were also interested in the guidance that the students had received, and the motivations behind taking the courses. This was particularly the case for students who had started new courses, but at the same level or lower than the course that they had previously successfully completed. This was investigated further in the following question:

“Did you receive any guidance in deciding which course you wanted to take? What prompted you to choose this particular course, and at that particular school/college?”

The participants received guidance in making decisions regarding FE courses from a variety of sources:

- One participant spoke with teachers at his sixth form
- One participant had met with Connexions to discuss his career objectives. He had initially planned to take an apprenticeship but found that he was unable to do so because he did not have a basic qualification in the area of interest. Independently he researched courses in college and enrolled on a level 1 course
- One participant attended open evenings and took the opportunity to speak with staff, before going home to continue her own research
- One participant received advice from ‘mentors’. He shared with them his intention to enrol on the course, and they agreed with him that it was the best option available
- One participant initially received advice from Connexions on what to do following her level 3 course. Her experiences are explored in the case study at the start of this section.

For three participants it was simply a case of progression as they completed their level 2 qualifications, and then continued onto level 3 of the same subject area. The other five participants who transitioned into different courses spoke of various motives for doing so:

- Two participants were looking to gain additional qualifications before applying to higher education
- Two participants were hoping to pursue specific careers as a result of the qualification
- One participant had decided on the course after attending an open day and liking the look of the course

6.2 Churning

In previous reports we have spoken of apparent 'churning' by the participants as they have repeated years, repeatedly taken courses at the same level (or even lower levels) and not made a positive progression. Similar findings were noted in a study by researchers at Manchester University who were following the transition experience of deaf young people (see Young et al, 2015). We have noted churning again in these most recent interviews in four of the participants.

- One participant who was at university but had significant difficulties (many of which he attributed to poor access arrangements being put in place at the university), had gone back to complete a one year course at college, before hopefully going on to a different higher education institution
- Two participants who had completed level 3 courses, had gone back to take additional level 3 courses. In one case this was because the student could not find any suitable jobs or apprenticeships in the sector she was interested in working in, and so she had decided to take a related course instead. In the other case it was not clear, despite probing, why the student made the decision to take another level 3 course, but ultimately he was still hoping to apply for university (which had been his original intention)
- Finally one participant had gone back to take a level 1 entry level course having already successfully completed a level 3 course. He was interested in working in a particular sector, but in looking at apprenticeship roles discovered that he needed to have this particular entry level qualification first. He made the decision to go back to college to take this course and reapply for opportunities the following year.

6.3 Case study of a participant who has been ‘churning’

In early 2014 we conducted case study interviews with a selection of participants who had had less favourable experiences since leaving compulsory education. The purpose of these interviews was to get a broader overview of the participants’ experiences to date, and try and gain a better understanding of why they had found themselves in more vulnerable positions compared with other participants in the sample. In the appendix we present the case study of “Toby” whose experiences illustrate this concept of ‘churning’.

6.3.1 Toby’s experiences in Further Education

“Toby” is registered as partially sighted. He speaks of an overwhelming desire to be as independent as possible, and to be “normal”. Since completing GCSEs he has explored a variety of options, enrolling on three different types of course, and leaving two of them prematurely. In his efforts to be the same as his peers he resisted support which would make him look different to others, such as by straining to read small text. There are hints that this impacted on his decision to drop out in the second year of two of the qualifications he was taking, when the courses became more theoretical, and text based. Toby was looking at very vocational courses which would direct him down a particular career path. However, he reflects back that at 16 he did not feel prepared to make such decisions about his future. Most recently after receiving advice (something which he had not drawn on previously) he had identified a potential career which he believes he would have enjoyed. Unfortunately at this point he had been in education for too long and he reports finding that there was no available funding for him to take the next level of the qualification which he would need.

It is clear that many of the difficulties that were faced by Toby are ones that could have been experienced by the average teenager in college. However, there are some indications that he has been affected by his visual impairment and his overwhelming desire to act independently - partly through resisting asking for modified materials when he really needed them (with some underlying indication that this could have been why he lost interest when two of the courses became more theoretical), and partly through his reluctance to seek advice on which options to pursue.

Secondary data analysis of the Labour Force Survey (see Section 5.6) demonstrates the importance of people with visual impairments

achieving qualifications to help them obtain employment, with very poor employment levels for those with lower qualifications in comparison to the general population. Therefore whilst this young mans' experiences may in some ways be considered typical, it could be argued that he is likely to be impacted more in finding employment as he moves into adulthood than a young person without special educational needs. This also illustrates how beneficial the new Educational Health and Care Plans could potentially be, as they ensure support for young people with more severe/complex special educational needs until they are 25.

7 Employment and Apprenticeships

7.1 Participants who have been in some form of employment or voluntary work

7.1.1 Overview of the types of role that the participants are in

Over the course of the research, describing the participants' employment status has become increasingly more complex. At the time of interview there were eight participants who would describe themselves as being exclusively being in work (five in long term positions and three who had been in short term roles). However, there were others who had part time work (particularly those in higher education and those who had taken gap years) and therefore any considerations related to adjustments in the workplace and declaration of their visual impairment are of relevance to them also. Additionally, there were two participants who were in voluntary work, but still gaining work experience in the process. Therefore the analysis below relates to any of the participants who have been in employment or a workplace environment at any point since the autumn 2013 interviews.

Table 20: Type of position that the participants are/were in

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Long term employment	5	23.8%
Temporary work (looking for permanent roles)	3	14.3%
Part time work alongside university	4	19.0%
Working as part of gap year	7	33.3%
Voluntary work	2	9.5%
Total	21	100.0%

The table above presents an overview of the type of position that the participants were in.

- Five participants were in long term employment, that being their main occupation
- Three participants were in temporary work with it being their main occupation, but were looking for permanent roles
- Four participants were working part time alongside their university studies (additionally three other participants spoke of having had short term employment, e.g. during the summer holidays)
- Seven participants were working as part of a gap year
- Two participants were in long term voluntary work

7.1.2 Participants in long term employment

Eight participants described themselves as being exclusively in employment – five of whom had long term roles, and three had short term roles (2 through agencies and 1 as part of a short term contract with the company where she had previously undertaken an apprenticeship).

Table 21: Characteristics of participants who were exclusively in employment (N=8)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	4
Female	4
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	3
Year 10	0
Year 11	5
Registration type	
Registered blind	0
Registered partially sighted	2
Not registered/unsure	6
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	0
Large print user (point 16+)	1
Standard print user	7

The table above shows some key characteristics of the participants. What is particularly noticeable is that within our group of participants who have transitioned into employment during the course of the research, there is a bias towards those who have less severe visual impairments, with only one participant who requires large print, and no participants who would require braille or electronic material.

The participants were asked a series of questions in relation to their employment experiences. The response given to each question is presented separately, but each participant has been given a case study ID number which is used throughout so the reader can cross reference.

7.1.3 Roles and responsibilities

The participants were asked: “Would you be able to tell me a bit more about your role and the type of responsibilities that you have/had?” The responses from the participants indicated that they were working in a wide range of jobs, ranging from entry level administrative jobs to (for those who have been in employment for some time) skilled jobs with some supervisory elements. An overview of each participant and their roles and responsibilities is presented below:

Table 22: Overview of participants in employment and their role and responsibilities (Autumn 2014)

Case study no.	Reg. type	Preferred format for reading (without low vision aids)	Roles and responsibilities	Length of time in employment
1	None	14-16	Works in Horticulture/Labourer (building work/tiling) He is self-employed, finding some work independently and linking with other tradesmen for casual work. All work to date has been word of mouth, so he has never needed to complete a formal application.	Since Summer 2014 (although ran his own business doing casual work for the previous two years)
2	None	12-14	Works as Accountant preparing accounts and conducting audits. Uses a computer throughout the day. As is typical for accountancy, still undertaking some training.	Since Autumn 2013 (started initial apprenticeship in Autumn 2010)
3	None	12	Works in Childcare Looks after children throughout the day, and completes the necessary paperwork that goes alongside that	Since Autumn 2012
4	Partially sighted	12-14	Works as Trainee Supervisor in Retail Training to run store, supervising four or five members of staff as their team leader, and taking responsibility for payroll, holiday forms, and the overall running of the store	Since Autumn 2012
5	None (believes would be eligible)	24-26	Works in IT Software engineer, takes responsibility for managing projects.	Since Autumn 2013 (started initial apprenticeship in Autumn 2012)

6	Partially sighted	14-16	Works in administration Has had a range of temporary jobs, predominately in data entry. At the time of interview he had just learned that he had been offered a new job (short term contract). He believed the main responsibilities would be transferring data on an old system to a new one.	Since Autumn 2012 (started initial apprenticeship in Autumn 2010)
7	None	12	Works in administration Working through a recruitment agency on short term assignments. Role at time of interview involved working with spreadsheets, checking contents and re-editing them. Previously had worked in customer service but left as needed better hours.	Since Autumn 2014
8	None	14	Works in retail, in a shop in a temporary role having previously completed an apprenticeship in the same store. Responsibilities include banking, till work, and coordinating other members of staff,	Since Spring 2014 (started initial apprenticeship in Autumn 2012)

7.1.4 Travel to the workplace

Table 23: How the participants travel to work

Case study no.	How they travel to the workplace
1	Private car
2	Private car
3	Walks – no mobility aids needed
4	Private car
5	Bus then walks from bus stop – no mobility aids needed, but chooses route which avoids areas with lots of people
6	Private car
7	Bus – no mobility aids needed
8	Walks – no mobility aids needed

Only one of the participants indicated that they would sometimes have difficulties with getting to and from work. He spoke of how he would choose to take an alternative route to the workplace to avoid crowded areas in the town centre, as he could navigate this better.

7.1.5 Challenges faced in their role in relation to visual impairment

We were interested in any challenges that the participants may experience as a result of their visual impairment, and how they had overcome these. The participants were asked:

“Did/do you face any challenges in your role in relation to your visual impairment? How did/would you overcome these?” Prompts: adjustments by employer; adjustments by them; Access to Work.

Table 24: Challenges the participants face in relation to their visual impairment

Case study no.	Challenges they face
1	None – no adjustments made
2	Felt they were straining their ‘good eye’ a lot of the time. They were not aware of any adjustments that could be made to ease this, but following discussions in the interview were considering contacting Access to Work for advice – no adjustments made
3	Headaches as a result of reading for a long period of time “I think that’s quite a normal thing which happens”. No adjustments made
4	No challenges, but enlarges material on a computer to make it easier to read
5	No challenges – uses magnification software on computer, and specifically organises computer to make it easier for him to locate the icons and folders that he needs
6	Had not started role
7	None – had not been in role long to consider adjustments
8	None – if something was too small for her to read, would ask for help from someone else

- One participant reported experiencing no challenges, and that he would not need to make any adjustments
- Two of the participants had only just started at their roles, so it was difficult for them to answer this question
- Two of the participants reported having no challenges, but spoke of adjustments that they make to ensure that their work was more accessible to them
- One participant reported that she had no challenges, but then shared that on occasions she had print that was too small for her and she would ask for help from another person to read it – it would be interesting to know whether she would have been able to read this independently if she had an appropriate magnifier
- Two participants reported have difficulties relating to their visual impairment – both due to looking at written material for long periods of time. In one case they were considering whether any adjustments could be made to reduce the eyestrain (and they were already considering that they may not be able to remain in employment through to normal retirement age due to their visual

impairment) whilst in the other they considered it to be “normal” and did not think it necessary to look into possible accommodations.

7.1.6 Access to Work Scheme

In light of any challenges that they may have faced with their visual impairment, we were also interested whether the participants had considered drawing on Access to Work. The participants were asked:

“Did you make contact with Access to Work at any point with regards to any assistance that you could receive in the workplace?” Prompts: if not reasons for this; application process; support received; overall experience

Table 25: Have the participants made contact with Access to Work?

Case study no.	Considered contacting Access to Work?
1	No
2	Yes – prompted by interview
3	No
4	No
5	Yes – prompted by interview
6	No
7	No
8	No

None of the participants had made contact with Access to Work for a workplace based assessment, and in the majority of cases it has not been something that they have seriously considered or were particularly aware of (despite it having been highlighted in previous interviews). Participant 5 and the project researcher had previously had a discussion about Access to Work and he had indicated that it was something that he was going to investigate further, but had not done this (“I didn’t, but I will do that I think, that’s just reminded me that I didn’t, I will look into that.”). Participant 2 who was having difficulties with eyestrain when looking at the computer following a short discussion in the interview indicated that Access to Work was something that she would look into further.

7.1.7 Progression within organisation

Finally, as some of the participants had been in their roles for some time we were interested in finding out whether the participants had looked at progressing in their role. We asked:

Have you look at the possibility of promotion within your current company? Could you tell me more about this?"

Table 26: Is there any possibility of the participants being promoted?

Case study no.	Possibility of promotion
1	N/A as self employed
2	Has changed job twice now, moving to higher positions each time
3	No possibilities within current organisation, but since being there has gained additional qualifications – considering changing sector
4	Progressed to trainee supervisor and hoping to be promoted to supervisor soon
5	Progressed from apprentice to employee and now has team leader responsibilities
6	N/A – only just started with company and short term contract
7	N/A – only just started with company and short term contract
8	N/A – short term contract which was due to end shortly after the time of interview

Of the five participants who are in long-term positions

- three participants have progressed in their roles
- one participant is self-employed so this is not applicable
- one participant felt there weren't any opportunities to progress, at least in the short term, but noted that they had had the opportunity to take a further qualification since being with their employer

The other three participants in short term positions had either only just started working there, or knew that their contract was due to end, and therefore this question was not of relevance to them.

7.1.8 Participants working alongside university course

Four of the participants who are in higher education spoke of how they have regular part time work alongside their full time courses. The table below provides more details of these young people:

Table 27: Characteristics of participants in higher education who have regular part time jobs (N=4)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	1
Female	3
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	0
Year 10	1
Year 11	3
Registration type	
Registered blind	0
Registered partially sighted	2
Not registered/unsure	2
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	0
Large print user (point 16+)	1
Standard print user	3

The participants described being employed in a variety of jobs:

- Private music tuition
- Sales and demonstrations in a department store
- Student ambassador on campus (e.g. conducting campus tours at open days) (x 2)

7.1.9 Participants working as part of gap years

During the academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15, seven participants have worked during gap years, which gave them the opportunity to get some valuable work experience. An overview of the experiences of all participants who have taken gap years is provided in Section 7, but a short summary specific to the employment aspect of their gap years is provided in the table below.

Table 28: Overview of participants working as part of a gap year

Case study no.	Reg. type	Preferred format for reading (without low vision aids)	Background to gap year and type of work	Accommodations, etc
1	Partially sighted	Pt 20	Gap year as part of university course – he independently found the post by sending out speculative applications. Responsibilities included developing the company’s website, designing flyers, and sales.	To get to work each day he would receive a lift from a family member. He felt that he did not have any real difficulties to overcome, other than reading a few small labels. He was unaware of Access to Work, but once informed of the scheme felt that he wouldn’t need an assessment
2	Unknown	14 (although eye condition was fluctuating)	Gap year spent working abroad for five months Had two roles – one working in a bar/waitressing and one working in a clothing shop	One job would get there using a bus, the other using a train – found it ‘easy’ Did not need to make any adjustments other than using reading glasses at times.
3	Unknown	16-20	Gap year working abroad in the tourism sector. Responsibilities included cooking and cleaning	Applied for positions online, and was able to enlarge the application forms. Main component of the job was cooking, but she felt well prepared having taken a cookery course, and knowing that she would be able to use her own enlarged recipes
4	Blind	Braille	Gap year teaching English in a specialist school abroad. Responsibilities would include	Arrangements were still being made at the time of interview. One consideration was the

			helping students with their English, being in classes, giving private lessons where needed	provision of adapted accommodation and this was something she was still negotiating
5	Not registered	16	Gap year working before going to university. At the time of interview had part time work in the catering industry, but was hoping to get a one year apprenticeship in a relevant job (sciences) and was waiting to attend two interviews	She felt that she might need some adjustments with work that involved computers or any type of print, but had not heard of Access to Work prior to the interview
6	Blind	Braille	Gap year spent doing two voluntary placements abroad. One was spent in an animal refuge looking after the animals (cleaning their enclosures, preparing food), and the other working in a school for children with learning difficulties	Had a positive experience. Whilst she found the journey to work to be quite long, once she had learned the route it was 'ok'. Particularly enjoyed having the independence.
7	Partially sighted	18	Gap year doing two voluntary placements – one working as a receptionist in a field related to her degree and the other working as a sales assistant. She hoped that the sales assistant role would help her get a part time job at university, and the receptionist role would link in with her degree course. She also wanted to eliminate gaps in her CV	She had made some adjustments to the receptionist role to make it more accessible to her, such as instead of asking people to complete forms independently and then having to decipher what they have written, going through the forms with them. To travel there she would use the bus network on routes she was already familiar with.

7.1.10 Participants in voluntary work

Two participants were in long term voluntary work. Whilst others who have been taking gap years were also involved in voluntary work, the distinction has been made here because for those on a gap year they had a definite plan of what they are going to do next (either continuing on their courses, or they have places at different higher education institutes). However those who have been categorised as being in 'voluntary work', did not have any clear plan of what they are going to do after the voluntary work, and to some extent did not have any aspirations to leave their voluntary positions. Both of these participants were volunteering at local schools – in one case at a primary school local to them, and in the other, at the secondary school they had recently left.

7.1.10.1 Voluntary work – Case study one

“Martha” is registered as partially sighted, and uses point 20 font. She had been volunteering at the local primary school since Autumn 2013. She described her responsibilities as follows:

“I go in, watch the children playing, like supervise them, and make sure that they aren't up to mischief, as it would be. I work one to one most mornings with a little girl, building up her language skills, and teaching her how to pronounce words properly. I do key stage words with her, and try to build her up on those. Occasionally I will be the tea lady, because apparently I make good tea and coffee, so I make those. I will be doing the milk and fruit for the children. I will be outside with, you know, two or three other people that work at the school supervising the children, or when we do forest school we will be about there, teaching them how to explore, and explaining to them what things are. Basically you do everything!”

To get to work each day she uses the local bus service. This is something which she had found difficult in the past:

“It is still a bit difficult, I am going to admit, but I am coping with it really well, because I have been up here for so long now...I know where the bus is going from, and what time it is going.”

The school had made a number of adjustments for her to the school environment, and to help her in the role. At the time of interview she did not have any plans to look for something alternative which may

lead to employment (or even to take qualifications to become a qualified teaching assistant), and was satisfied with volunteering.

7.1.10.2 Voluntary work – Case study two

“Simon” is registered as having a visual impairment, but does not know which category. To read he would require a point 14-16 font. He had been volunteering at his local secondary school two days a week since completing a level 3 course in summer 2014. He takes responsibility for any adjustments which need to be made:

“Yeah, I know my way around here, so it’s easy like that. If I need anything enlarged, I know how to do that and everything. So I do all my own stuff if I need anything done.”

He would like to find part time paid employment alongside the voluntary work, but had not found many opportunities to apply for, and subsequently anticipated being in the voluntary placement for a while:

Researcher: “Have you thought any further than beyond this year, and you volunteering?” Participant: “Not really, like I have applied for a job, and stuff like that, but I haven’t really thought... I am just taking it slow at the moment, I am going to sit down and have a good think after the end of this year, to think about what I want to do, and take it a bit further maybe..”

When asked whether he had received any careers guidance to help him consider what he might like to do next, he spoke negatively about careers guidance that he had received in the past:

Researcher: “Have you had any careers advice from anyone?” Participant: “Yeah, a few people. But that didn’t go very well.” Researcher: “Oh no! What happened with that?” Participant: “There’s one nut who I had, who was an idiot basically. She said ‘oh yeah, you could work in a kitchen!’ Course I am half blind, so that’s not going to work very well, I would probably end up killing myself. Or she said I could do driving, well no, I’m not allowed to drive! So, yeah, not very good... I only saw her once, I refused to see her again.”

In both cases these young people do not appear to have any clear direction for moving into paid employment. In Martha’s case she seems to be content to stay in voluntary work, and does not have any aspirations to progress from where she currently is. Simon would ideally

like to find at least part time employment, but does had struggled to find suitable opportunities, and does not have any clear plans formulated. He is resistant to careers guidance following previous bad experiences.

7.2 The transition to entering the labour market

Table 29: Characteristics of participants who had been looking for employment opportunities since autumn 2013 (N=14)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	7
Female	7
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	6
Year 10	0
Year 11	8
Registration type	
Registered blind	2
Registered partially sighted	3
Registered – category unknown	1
Not registered/unsure	8
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	0
Large print user (point 16+)	10
Standard print user	4

Fourteen of the participants had either moved into the labour market since the time of the last interview or were considering either making this transition or changing their current job. For some, employment was one of a number of options which they were considering.

7.2.1 Type of job

Thirteen of the fourteen participants reported that they had decided what type of job they would like to work in. Examples included:

- Childcare
- Business Administration
- Retail
- Data entry

- Catering
- Computing
- Engineer
- Customer service
- Horticulture
- Building work

One participant who had been NEET for a while spoke of the complexities of looking for opportunities in the area in which he lived:

“I suppose I am finding a bit of difficulty finding certain types of things, these are the two I am interested in, but like I said, I want to broaden the horizon a bit to look at other things. When I have gone on the internet and just looked at jobs in my area, or whatever, they come up with a lot of things that I can’t do, or a lot of things I am not qualified for, or don’t have the skills...the nearest city is Cardiff which isn’t too far away, it’s about 40-45 minutes on the train. But no there’s not many jobs around this area. I suppose that’s what makes it harder as well.”

Another participant, also in Wales echoed this by describing applying for a job, simply because it the only suitable opportunity he could find:

Researcher: So had you been looking, or did it just catch your eye that particular job?” Participant: “No, well it was the only job I could find to be honest, so I thought I might as well try, it’s good experience to have an interview and all that”.

It is worth noting that neither of these participants were receiving support from the job centre in looking for work, and it would be interesting to know if they would have identified more possible jobs to apply for in that way.

One participant just expressed a desire for paid employment:

“Any that pay money and hire me”

Another participant spoke about keeping his options open:

“Yeah, I am just going through the process, and also applying for the apprenticeship thing in case it falls through”.

7.2.2 The job search

All 14 of the participants had been looking for employment opportunities by the time of interview.

7.2.2.1 Motivations

One participant was in the difficult position of having to apply for her own job, as her apprenticeship was due to finish in the next few months. Unfortunately she had not been successful at interview, but she was viewing it as a positive experience:

“I have applied for my own job, that sounds silly, but the job I am doing now but not an apprentice...I have interviewed for that one, unfortunately I was unsuccessful, but you know, I have got back up again and onto the next one...I have been given feedback for all of them, so you know, I am currently improving on the feedback they have given me before the next one”

There were a number of responses from participants demonstrating that they simply wanted ‘a job’ rather than a particular job. One participant spoke of making a few applications, but not hearing anything in response. His comments indicated that his job search has not been very targeted, rather reacting to the opportunities that became available:

“I’ve applied for a few but nothing has come back really...There’s really weird ones, there’s these welder ones, engineering, and then there’s a random one, what was it, it was like a secretary or fancy word for secretary”

Similarly another participant spoke of applying for anything that met his very broad criteria:

“Anything that I could travel to. As long as the money was ok, in that I would be able to pay for the petrol to get there, and I would have more...applying for anything and everything that I found. To put it bluntly”.

Part of the necessity came from the fact that as the participants are now moving into the adulthood, they have now more responsibility to be self-reliant.

“On the internet and applying for anything and everything that I found...because job seekers is rubbish pay”

“You know that allowance you get, £70 a week, I can’t get that because I am in college full time, so that’s why I have been looking for jobs”.

7.2.2.2 Experiences of job searching

The overall picture that has been painted by the participants in searching for work is rather a frustrating one, with limited opportunities to apply for, and a lack of response for applications made.

Researcher: “Have you found anything to apply for at all?”

Participant: “No, I’ve not, no. I have had difficulties”

“I did apply for some jobs, but usually they don’t even give me any interviews, so I am still looking”

“I have applied for loads, but I haven’t had that many interviews, even though I have got Cs and that in my CV”

Two participants felt they were limited in what they could apply for due to their visual impairment and associated transportation restrictions:

“There are jobs that are around, but they are not suitable either in travel or type”

7.2.2.3 Sources of opportunities

The majority of participants spoke of looking for opportunities on the internet, on specific recruitment sites such as “indeed.co.uk” and by attending their job centre. The participants have benefited from being able to make applications online as they are able to make basic adjustments to ensure the websites are accessible to them, e.g.

“Yeah fine, because it’s all online. So I could enlarge any online application forms and things”

One participant felt that they wanted support in searching for opportunities, but had difficulties initially in getting advice through the job centre as she was not eligible to receive benefits. Another participant made the decision to go self-employed and therefore generated his own business.

7.2.2.4 Complexities due to eye condition

For one participant searching for possible jobs was more complex as she was potentially going to have to receive treatment relating to her eye condition. She was concerned about starting a job, and then having to shortly after take time off for surgery and recovery.

“It’s awkward with the eye issues, because I know that if I had to have surgery, then if I got a job now, I would have to have time off of work”

7.2.3 Support once in employment

Only four participants reported being aware of support which they could draw upon once in the workplace. To some extent these responses are strange as Access to Work is something which has been regularly discussed in the research interviews. However, it demonstrates further a lack of engagement with the scheme, as has been already been observed amongst those in employment.

Researcher: “Are you familiar with the Access to Work scheme?”
Participant: “What sorry?” Researcher: [Explains Access to Work].
Participant: “Oh right...I think I have heard of it before, but I don’t think about it, or anything.”

In previous reports we have observed a lack of understanding and ownership of their visual impairment amongst some of the young people. This was emphasised in the response of one participant:

“I’m not too sure, Mum probably knows, so.”

However, one participant had made contact with Access to Work, and this was something which they were still pursuing, whilst another participant who is registered blind reported that he would definitely make contact with them if he were to find employment:

“I was talking to someone from Access to Work, they got in touch, so I will see where that goes”

“Yeah, I would definitely because obviously if there was travelling involved I would use that. I know there is public transport and I would be fine, but if it was, for either reason, if it was too far, or whatever, I would consider that. Oh yeah and I would consider them as well if there were any adaptations that needed to be made.”

Two participants spoke of taking responsibility for any required adjustments themselves:

“If I see the system and think “oh, I can’t really see this properly” I would probably just, I will either use the tools that are on the computer, or if there isn’t anything, I would ask them if I could put something on...I would just download a magnifier, or a page zoomer”

“I don’t think my visual impairment is severe, if any changes need to be made, I will change them off my own back”

As other participants with more severe visual impairments start looking to enter the labour market, we will be able to start collecting evidence on their experiences of drawing on the Access to Work scheme.

Interestingly the participant who has been receiving support through Work Choice reported that the advisors had not discussed Access to Work with her. This seems surprising as one of her main concerns was around the support that she may need to function in the workplace.

7.2.4 Support received in looking for employment

The participants have received support in their job search from a variety of places, including:

- Professional advice as part of an employability course
- Dedicated support person as part of an extensive application process
- Family
- Boyfriend/Girlfriend
- Connexions
- Job coach at job centre
- Social worker
- Work choice advisor

Some participants reported that they hadn’t received any support, in one case because they felt they hadn’t needed it, and in other cases because they hadn’t made any applications. As has been demonstrated throughout the course of the research, in general the participants are a well-supported group, and it’s important to remember that not all young people in their position would be receiving the same level of family support.

One participant felt that they needed professional support in making job applications, but they were initially unable to get this support through the job centre as she was not on benefits due to her partner earning too much money. With the help of a social worker she had been referred to Work Choice who since then had been acting as an advocate for her in talking with perspective employers about what she would be able to offer them.

7.3 Participants who have been in apprenticeships

In the autumn 2013-autumn 2014 academic year two participants had been taking apprenticeships. One of these was taking a 12 month placement in customer service and the other an 18 month placement in retail. The participant who was taking an 18 month placement completed the apprenticeship in December 2013 and had spent a brief period of time unemployed before obtaining a temporary job in retail. The participant who was taking the apprenticeship in customer service was shortly due to complete that, and was looking for a permanent role. She had hoped to continue in her current position, but had been unsuccessful at interview. It should be noted that both participants have fairly mild visual impairments, and therefore would not need as many accommodations as some of the other participants in the project. Their experiences are presented as short case studies below:

7.3.1.1 Apprenticeship 1

The first participant in an apprenticeship had taken an apprenticeship in retail which lasted for 18 months in total. She was originally made aware of the role by Connexions who supported them in applying for the position. The apprenticeship enabled her to gain various qualifications including a NVQ certificate in retail, Technical certificate in retail, Functional skills in English and Maths and Employees Rights and Responsibilities qualification. Her responsibilities in the role included banking, working on the till and supervising volunteers. To get to work involved a short walk, and one that she was already familiar with. She did not need any mobility aids to enable her to do this, and did not need any initial orientation. She reported not having had any difficulties in relation to her visual impairment, although did say that in the event of having difficulties in reading something she would ask someone else for help. She did not make contact with Access to Work to find out about any assistance that she could receive in the workplace. When asked whether she had investigated Access to Work she responded: "No I don't think so, everything was alright. If I couldn't see something or whatever, I would ask for help, but usually I was

alright, it wasn't much." Whilst the apprenticeship was linked to a college, all learning was self-taught, with supervision by a tutor who would visit the young person in their workplace. The course material received was accessible to her. At the time of interview she was in temporary work at the same place she had originally worked for the apprenticeship (although she was unemployed for a short time before securing this role). At the time of interview she was starting to consider applying for other jobs as her temporary role was due to end.

7.3.1.2 Apprenticeship 2

The second participant was taking a level 3 apprenticeship in customer service which was due to last 12 months. She had previously taken a level 2 apprenticeship at the same organisation. Her responsibilities were working on reception and being first point of contact for visitors and working on the switchboard. To get to work each day she would either get a lift with family members, or travel independently on the bus/train. She reported being confident in using public transport, not requiring any mobility aids and not requiring any orientation training. By adapting her way of working she had not faced any difficulties in relation to her visual impairment: "No I haven't, no. As I have said before, I adapt my working ways to my... say if I am having a problem with the font on my computer, then I copy and paste and enlarge it myself on Microsoft Word or something like that. So I take it on myself to adapt if I need to." She had not made contact with Access to Work to investigate any adjustments that they could make for her in the workplace. The qualification aspect of the apprenticeship was taken through a local college, but learning was conducted independently, and an assessor would visit her in the workplace. The course material was made available in Microsoft Word, and therefore she was able to make adjustments to the font size to make it more accessible to her: "Yep, the material that I have been sent from my assessor is on Microsoft Word, so when it's sent to me I can always enlarge and adapt it to my needs. But a lot of the work I type it up myself, so that means I can choose the font size and the style as well." Her current role was due to end in Spring 2015 and she was looking to apply for alternative roles – primarily within the organisation, but also externally.

Table 30: Do you think the apprenticeship you completed has enabled you to do any of the following things? (N=2)

	Yes (N)
Get a better paid job	2
Get paid more in your current job	1
Get a promotion	2
Start a new career	1

The two participants who had taken apprenticeships were asked to evaluate them. They both felt their apprenticeships would enable them to get a better paid job and to get promotion. One felt that it helped her get paid more in her current job and the other felt that it helped her start a new career.

7.4 Participants who have/are looking to make the transition into apprenticeships

Six of the participants at the time of interview were considering apprenticeships. All of them had decided the type of apprenticeship which they were interested in and had investigated possible options. In some cases they were deciding between either an apprenticeship or employment.

The table below summarises some of the main characteristics of the participants looking for apprenticeships:

Table 31: Characteristics of participants who were looking for apprenticeships (N=6)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	4
Female	2
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	4
Year 10	0
Year 11	2
Registration type	
Registered blind	1
Registered partially sighted	1
Not registered/unsure	4

Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	0
Large print user (point 16+)	5
Standard print user	1

7.4.1 Type of apprenticeship

Three participants were confident of the type of apprenticeship opportunities they were looking for. These included:

- Mechanics
- Engineering
- Pharmacist technician or dental nurse

The other three participants had less developed ideas, and intended to instead see what type of opportunities were available. One participant who had already completed an apprenticeship in retail, noted that she would look for an apprenticeship in a different area.

Despite one of these participants not having a strong idea of what type of apprenticeship he would be interested in, he had clear thoughts on the advantage of taking an apprenticeship:

“they are really good at getting you into employment, you can get into employment if you get into one of them. Obviously you get qualifications and skills at the same time. I still think yeah they are really good.”

7.4.2 Search for apprenticeships

Two of the participants spoke of having applied for apprenticeships. In one case this was through a Connexions worker, and they had arranged an interview for him. Unfortunately this turned out to be a negative experience as when he got to the interview it transpired that they were looking for someone with previous experience (e.g. through a relevant college course), which he did not have. The other participant had had a more positive experience, although she did have to wait some time to hear back from her applications before being invited to interview. At the time that she was interviewed for this research project she was waiting to have a second interview for a position.

In both cases they applied for the apprenticeships online, and found the forms to be accessible to them:

“Yeah they were online, they were pretty easy to fill out”

“I could read, they were on the computer, and I just applied from there”

Whilst there was the opportunity to declare their visual impairment on the application form, one participant spoke of being unsure whether to complete this section or not:

“No, I wasn’t sure whether to put that, usually I don’t fill that out”

Two of the participants noted having to wait for apprenticeship opportunities to become available:

“Yeah, I am going to try actually, January time, because I forgot the beginning of this year, January next year...”

“I have looked a bit, but they don’t start until June

7.4.3 Support once in an apprenticeship

One participant was aware of support that would be available to them once in an apprenticeship through Access to Work, as already noted in the previous section on employment:

“I would definitely because obviously if there was travelling involved...oh yeah and I would consider them as well if there were any adaptations that needed to be made”

Another participant noted that some adaptations may need to be made:

“Maybe work that involves computers or different types of prints, I might need help with.”

As part of our case study work we spoke with a careers and guidance officer who was responsible for supporting students leaving Sixth Form. It was interesting to note that he did not consider it appropriate to discuss Access to Work with one young person he was working alongside. The explanation he gave for this was that the participant was looking for an apprenticeship rather than employment, and he did not believe that Access to Work covered apprenticeships. This is not accurate, but does lead to some confusion (e.g. see RNIB, 2015). Additionally the research to date has shown the need for proactive transition planning for young people, and not to simply assume that the young people being supported will follow their preferred pathway.

7.5 Case study of a participant in employment: “Jack”

In the appendix we present a case study of one of the participants “Jack” and his experiences of securing an apprenticeship, and eventual permanent employment as a computer programmer. We see through this case study that Jack benefited in being able to self-advocate for himself, and to be able to clearly explain the ways in which his visual impairment affected him, and to suggest ways in overcoming this. He has been able to negotiate the support arrangements needed to enable him to work independently in the workplace, and to draw upon the skills he had developed for being able to independently access information. The fact that his role involves working primarily with computers has proved advantages to him, as he is able to make modifications to the material he receives, in order to make it accessible to him. He has also benefited from the flexibility of his employer in providing him with specialist software, and being prepared to let him work flexible hours during the darker winter months. He expresses some disappointment at the lack of specific support in relation to his visual impairment which was available to him from his college and sensory support service.

We note however that he did not apply for an Access to Work assessment, either when starting the apprenticeship, or at the point at which he was offered permanent employment. Whilst it appears he has navigated the access arrangements needed both through his self-advocacy skills and the flexibility of the employer, if his employer had not proved so accommodating, this could have been problematic. Instead he could have drawn upon Access to Work to provide the specialist equipment he needed (including some form of low vision aid in the event of him receiving written material in too small a font size for him to access, as had happened in the past) and to provide mobility support to enable him to develop the confidence to be able to get to and from work independently, even in the dark.

8 Higher education

8.1 Participants who have continued in higher education

Twenty one participants who had previously been in higher education completed this years’ interview. The table below shows their current stage in their studies.

Table 32: Planned date of graduation

	Total (N)	Total (%)
2015	12	57.1%
2016	6	28.6%
2017	2	9.5%
N/A - left course	1	4.8%
Total	21	100.0%

Twelve of the participants are scheduled to graduate in 2015, six in 2016 and two in 2017. One participant did not complete their course but left during the first academic year. The majority of the participants are taking three year courses, but three participants will be taking their courses over four years. In one case this is because it's a four year course leading to a MSci and in the other two cases it is because they are/will be taking a work placement year as part of the course.

8.1.1 Higher education withdrawals

As previously noted, one participant had left university part way through the first year of his course. This was the second time that he had taken the first year of this particularly course, and the second time that he has had to leave the course during the first year. The previous year he had been unable to complete the year having experienced difficulties related to accessing disabled student allowance and also in receiving the support he was hoping for from the university – for example, not receiving course material in a format that was accessible to him. The previous year (2013/14) DSA support had been put in place shortly after him starting, and initially he felt he was doing much better overall. However the person who had been providing one on one support for him subsequently left the role, and he was not given a replacement. The course which he was studying was largely practical, and he did not feel that he had sufficient support to be able to participate in this:

“Yeah, well a lot happened! I started the year, and there wasn't all that much in place as far as support was concerned, but then there was, they got a women in to help, and that was going really well. Then she left, she had got things going on in her own life. After that things weren't all that good. I mean the written work was actually quite good I think, because I was getting very high marks for it, but that wasn't much of the overall course. There was practical work...that was really where it all went wrong...I hadn't really been shown how to use it properly. I certainly felt rushed and

we were shown in groups so I didn't really understand what to do, so I ended up having to improvise"

In the end he completed the course assessments, but did not achieve sufficient credits to move into the second year. Instead he decided to return to Further Education to take an additional qualification and reapply to university for the next academic year. There was some uncertainty around the fees that he had already paid in the previous years and who would be responsible for meeting that cost, as he asserts that he had not received the necessary support to be able to access the course. The young man in question has since been referred by the project research team for specialist support and guidance.

8.1.2 Plans for after completing higher education

The participants who were still at university were asked what their plans were for once they had completed the course. The table below provides a summary of their responses. It should be remembered when looking at this table that the participants were at different stages, with some scheduled to graduate at the end of the current academic year, whilst others still had one or two years of their courses remaining.

Table 33: Plans for after completing university

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Postgraduate course	6	30.0%
Graduate job linked to course	3	15.0%
Graduate job	3	15.0%
Role linked to course but not graduate level	3	15.0%
Gap year	2	10.0%
Undecided	2	10.0%
Self employed	1	5.0%
Total	20	100.0%

The young people had a range of plans for what they were hoping to do after completing their courses. Six of the participants were hoping to take postgraduate courses, and in three of these cases they were linked to a specific career route they hoped to take. Three were looking to apply for graduate jobs which were directly linked to the undergraduate courses that they had taken, three were looking for graduate jobs not linked to their course and three were looking for jobs linked to their course, but not necessarily at graduate level. Two of the young people were hoping to take gap years (one to travel and the other to get some relevant experience before going back to take a Master's degree). One

participant was intending to go into self-employment, and finally two of the participants were still undecided about what they were going to do.

8.1.3 Contact with careers service

The participants were asked whether they had made contact with the careers service at their university/institution, and also if they knew whether the career service offered any guidance specifically for students with disabilities.

Table 34: Have you made contact with the careers service yet?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	8	40.0%
No	10	50.0%
Not applicable – institution does not have a dedicated careers service	2	10.0%
Total	20	100.0%

Eight of the participants reported that they had been in contact with the careers service. They gave the following examples of reasons for attending:

- Visiting the careers service for advice in preparing a CV in advance of a short placement
- Seeking specialist careers advice specific to the careers they were interested in pursuing
- Taking part in group events which had been arranged by the careers service

The extent to which the participants had had contact with the careers service varied, ranging from simply having set up a single appointment to having visited throughout their time at university.

“I have been to them most years, I haven’t been this year though, I think I went first and second year to them.”

“...there’s been a couple of group consultations and things that I have gone to, but a one-on-one meeting I haven’t done so much yet. I have spoken to my personal tutor, who provided some information.”

Ten of the participants reported that they had not engaged with the careers service yet. Some saw it as too early to have approached the

careers service, but something which they were intending to do, whilst others were less keen.

“No, I keep meaning to! And I am just like... I don't know. I really need to. I am too stubborn, I prefer to do it myself.”

“I haven't yet, I am planning to go sometime between now and when I leave.”

“No I haven't, that will be something that they really push next year.”

Two of the participants were at specialist institutions which due to their size did not have dedicated careers services. In these cases the participants spoke of receiving advice from their tutors instead.

Researcher: “Do you have any careers advisors there?”

Participant: “Not necessarily. The teachers know a lot about the industry as they are from the industry... So we don't really have a careers advisor as such, but most people on the faculty know a lot about industry anyway.”

Two of the participants had drawn on disability specific careers advice available to them through their university.

“Last time I had a conversation with someone about my disability, I was talking to someone and asking what I should do in terms of applications and what I should say... She was saying to pop it on, and it won't do any, obviously it won't go against you, it would actually in fairness go in favour at interview, to address it. Because mine, it's quite manageable my eye condition. It's the same, I did it all through school, if I needed extra-large writing or a print out, if I had to print it, print it out in a bigger font, or photocopy it to enlarge it. She was just saying that you would say it wouldn't be a concern to the company, I could manage it myself, that sort of thing. It was good. I am often like “do I put it on, do I not”

“I don't know if the actual uni do, but I know the uni works closely with the RNIB... I know they quite often hold employability workshops and stuff like that... to be honest I really can't remember, but all about employability, CVs, stuff like that.”

One participant in their second year had a meeting set up with the careers service and was intending to find out at that meeting more about any disability specific advice that was available.

Researcher: “Did they mention if they provide any guidance for students specifically with disabilities.” Participant: “I am going to talk to them more about it next week when I go.”

Two participants thought that the careers service most likely would offer specialist advice, but had not investigated further. In one case they were unsure of what the benefits of this would be:

Researcher: “Do you know if they offer any guidance specially for students with disabilities?” Participant: “Not that I know of. But I think from experience that it is generally best to speak with a company directly on the matter of accessibility. I think if you ask for ones that are suited to someone who is blind, then that immediately narrows down your list. Whereas if you look at a company and speak to them and say ‘will you be able to’, they will generally be accommodating. But I do have limited experience, so what do I know, but from what experience I have, that seems to be the best course.”

One participant had spoken with the careers service for advice, but they felt that his tutors were better placed as he was looking to work in a specialised field:

“The careers advisor who I have got is great, she helped me with my CV and everything, but she couldn’t offer more than she already has done...They do have a careers advisor who specialises in disabled students, but because of my field being so specialist, they advised me to keep working with my tutors.”

Other participants who hadn’t inquired about disability related advice demonstrated that it was something that they hadn’t really looked into.

“I’ve been to the office a few times, yeah, but no, I haven’t really asked for help or anything like that, I guess I really haven’t thought that much about it.”

8.1.4 Applications for graduate roles

Those participants who were looking to graduate in the current academic year were asked whether they had applied for or looked into any possible graduate employment roles.

Only two of the participants who were due to graduate in 2015 had started applying for jobs. One of those participants was still unsure about what they wanted to do, but had applied for lots of graduate roles – particularly in sales.

Researcher: “Have you any thoughts on what you might want to do next?” Participant: “I haven’t got a clue. I’ve applied to loads of grad jobs and just hope that I get something...I applied to mainly sales based roles because I have got a job at uni which is sort of based on that.”

Whilst he had made a number of applications, at the time of interview none of these had been successful. We also investigated how accessible he had found the various application forms that he had completed:

Researcher: How did you find the application forms in terms of accessibility? Participant: Yeah most of them were fine. There were some which were difficult, but the majority were fine.
Researcher: The ones that were difficult, what kind of format were they? Participant: They were just really small, you know, not very easy to enlarge, not the best colour schemes either. Researcher: Were they online. Participant: Yeah. Researcher: Were they all online the ones that you did? Participant: Yeah.

The accessibility of application forms is something which we will continue to investigate as more participants look to apply for jobs, and in particular whether the young people request accessible applicant forms.

The other participant who had applied for work was looking for a graduate role within a company where she already had a part time job. This application was more of an informal process, and involved submitting an expression of interest:

“I have emailed. As I say, it’s not an official... they take on interns who they know of, but you don’t physically apply, but I have emailed to the right people and I am waiting for a response, and I will take it from their hopefully.”

Those participants who have not applied for work yet, but are graduating this year gave various explanations for this. One participant had been busy with other things and had not started the process yet:

“I honestly haven’t, I had a lot on before Christmas, and I have just switched off.”

Another participant was also busy with their course, but had a clear plan of when he would start doing looking into possible roles:

“I haven’t yet, but it is something I plan on doing. Because I am obviously going into my last semester now, trying to take notice of everything they put on, to go and see people about what I want to do afterwards, yeah”

A further participant reported that he was unable to apply for the vocational course which he needed to do to pursue his career choice until later in the academic year:

“No, no, in terms of graduate [courses]? You can’t apply until you get a fixed mark. That’s the only problem, I have to literally wait until May/June time when I get my results. I don’t know if the places are limited, or you have to apply early. So that’s the only problem I have.”

And similarly a participant who had been taking a course which does lead to typical graduate roles (i.e. large intake timetabled to coincide with the end of academic year) was unable to apply for jobs until nearer the end of her course:

The participant who was applying for a graduate internship reflected on what a pressurised time it was for final year students as they balanced the demands of the course and applying for jobs.

“A lot of my friends are still going down that route, but they are literally spending the whole... they spent the whole Christmas doing applications and they are still doing them now. And we had so many essays to do up until last week, we had hundreds, thousands of words to hand in. I didn’t really want to be spending my time doing something when I had other important, university qualifications, essays to hand in. I do feel... it is horrible though,

because I think the application process is a bit vile. You do well getting one, it's as I say, whether it's what you want to do.”

Due to the access challenges that they have, students with visual impairments can often take longer in performing tasks than their fully sighted peers. Therefore it is likely that in the final year of their course when having lots of deadlines to meet that they will feel unable to commit to applying for graduate jobs in the same way that their sighted peers would. This could be a barrier in successfully obtaining a job if they were to miss out on the opportunity of applying for possible roles at this time – it is not uncommon for final year students to have secured a graduate role by the first semester of their final year. Again this is something which we will continue to monitor as more of the participants in higher education look to enter the labour market.

8.1.5 Activities to enhance CV

The participants were also asked about “any opportunities that they had had to enhance their CV since being at university”, with prompts of internships, paid work, voluntary work or work experience. A wide range of examples of activities were discussed, including placements as part of their course, part time work (either alongside their course or summer jobs), work experience and voluntary work. Each of these is explored in turn.

8.1.5.1 Work placements as part of course

Four participants said they had done work placements as part of their course (2), or said that they would soon be taking up this opportunity (2).

One of these participants had taken a placement for one semester as part of the second year of his course. It had been necessary for him to find his own placement, and he had struggled in finding something he was really interested in:

“It wasn't as insightful as it could have been, because like, I was more or less doing the admin work, yeah more or less. So it was not really a useful placement to do, but I had no choice, because it was really hard to find somewhere. It was ok, but I wouldn't go back. But the options available for what I am doing is very limited, and it's really hard to get information on it.”

He travelled to the placement by bus, and assessed the journey as “really easy”. However, he did have some difficulties in terms of the accessibility of the placement.

Participant: “It was actually a bit difficult, because the writing was a bit too small on the screen, and because I use a certain software, Zoomtext. I don’t use that all the time, but I use that quite frequently, and because they don’t have that type of software it was really hard to read off the screen. But I didn’t really want to say, so I just continued, just in the best I could.” Researcher: “Did you mention to them that you had a visual impairment?” Participant: “Yeah, yeah, I did mention to them.” Researcher: “Did they realise that you were having trouble?” Participant: “They were really supportive, the management. They were really supportive. But because they don’t have the software available, it was really hard for them to accommodate that for me.”

The participant in question had not engaged with the disability support office at his university in order for them to have helped in any discussions about adjustments that the placement providers may have been able to make. This also suggests that he was not prepared to make suggestions to employers about how they could make the workplace more accessible for him, and also to self-advocate when things are not working.

A second participant at the time of interview was in the midst of a one year work placement as part of a four year sandwich degree. Similarly he had found the placement himself, but with more ease than the previous participant:

“You are left to it. I got this one through just a speculative email. I mean the uni will provide help if it’s getting towards the end of the deadline and you haven’t got anywhere. But I was sorted fairly early. I sent a load of Emails out and went for an interview.”

He received a lift to the placement each day from a family member. He had not encountered many challenges in the role in relation to his visual impairment, and reports not having to make any adjustments:

Participant: “No, nothing at all really. You know, besides things that you come across in the day to day, a few small labels, but nothing at all really.” Researcher: “Have you made any adjustments just to

make it easier for you? Maybe just with the computer or something?” Participant: “No. I haven’t had a need to really.”

As the role was salaried and the participant was scheduled to work there for a year, we also asked whether he had contacted Access to Work:

Researcher: “Did you think about making contact with Access to Work?” Participant: “I don’t know what that is.” Researcher: “So they are the organisation, Government scheme, I think I have mentioned it in the past, and they come and make work based assessments and see if there are any adjustments that can be made for you.” Participant: “Oh right. There’s no need really, I don’t have any problems.”

Access to Work is something that has been discussed in previous interviews with this young person. As previously identified, to date none of the participants have applied for an Access to Work assessment, instead preferring to make their own adjustments, or to look to their employer to pay for specialist equipment.

Two other participants said they would take scheduled work placements as part of their course. One participant was due to take this in the second semester of her second year, and had been starting to work with the careers centre at her university to put together a CV. She has been linked with a disability officer to help her consider her options from a disability perspective:

“Well, we have got to do a work based learning module for my course after Easter, so I have got to go on a work placement for five weeks, so I am on the process of trying to work out where to go for that. I am thinking of going to something to do with Marketing or PR, so I want to go into a communications department somewhere. So I am in the process, I have got to write a CV first, and then I have got to start asking around for placements and things. I am going to start asking local charities, and maybe the local council and stuff. That’s the line I am going down at the minute. I had a meeting with, the work based learning department have a specific disability officer, so I met up with her and she said that they sort of encourage us to get off campus if we can, they try and make it as realistic a work experience as possible, so she said to look around first, but bear in mind that there is one on campus.”

The other participant was due to take a year-long placement the following year, in what would be the third of four years of the course. This is something which was discussed in an earlier interview:

“Well, so for part of my degree, I am doing a year in industry, so that kind of, that... but I have got to get a 2:1 in this year to get onto that course, but if I get onto that, but that’s my aim, to get onto the year in industry course, and get a year, have a year of industry based experience.”

Of particular concern to her was how she would get to the placement as companies in the sector she hoped to work in would typically be based in out of town industrial sites. In future interviews we will investigate their experiences in these placements, and whether, for example, she looks to Access to Work for support in travelling to and from work.

8.1.5.2 Part time work

Several of the participants had had part time work. This tended to be either alongside their studies, or a summer job. Examples of part time jobs the students had include:

- Working as a nursery assistant
- Working in sales in a department store
- Summer job doing admin work
- Private music tuition
- Theatre performances
- Working in a shop
- Working as a waiter/waitress
- Working as a student ambassador at university

8.1.5.3 Work experience

Several of the participants reported having had work experience since they had been at university. This included:

- A placement with a large multinational company, helping advise them on the accessibility of their website
- Several work experience placements with law companies as this was a sector the participant was interested in pursuing
- Working on the university’s newspaper, as a route into journalism
- Working in theatre productions, as a route into the performing arts
- Shadowing an employee in a very specialised role in a hospital
- Working in a primary school to get experience to apply for a teaching course

“Ever since last year I have been volunteering in the local primary school. I have been doing that Friday mornings over there, just to get experience, to familiarise myself to national curriculum and teaching really.”

Those participants who had had work experience appeared to value the opportunity. The participant who had worked with the multinational company spoke of looking to arrange more opportunities:

“Yes, yes planning to do more work experience, but I do need to start sending emails out to get in contact with them.”

“It was really useful, the people told me what they recommend, a portfolio, and what they look for.”

8.1.5.4 Voluntary work

Similarly, several of the participants spoke of doing some form of voluntary work with charities and other organisations to boost their CV. Whilst there are strong similarities between ‘work experience’ and ‘voluntary work’ the distinction here has been drawn by classifying voluntary work as roles where the organisations regularly look for volunteers to work with them. Examples include:

- Conservation work
- Youth representative for charities such as Guide Dogs and RNIB
- Youth work
- Charity fundraising
- Member of disabled students network committee

8.1.5.5 No activities to enhance CV

It is interesting to note that none of the participants who are registered as blind have had paid employment since being at university. They were more likely to have had voluntary work (in particular) or work experience opportunities. This lack of paid work opportunities could be a potential barrier as they start to apply for jobs following graduation, and need to find ways to distinguish themselves from other job seekers.

It was also noted that two participants who are blind have not taken the opportunity to enhance their CV in this way at all. Of particular note is one participant who has never had any form of work experience as even when at school, the school was apparently unable to find a suitable placement for him.

8.1.6 Experiences in higher education over previous year

To conclude the section on higher education, the participants were asked the following question:

we have spoken previously at length about your experiences as a young person with visual impairments in higher education. Is there anything that you would like to add based on your experiences last year? [Prompts: access to lecture material; access to learning material; online resources; access to exams; social side of university]

Overall the experiences of the participants had been positive in the past academic year. Those who had difficulties in the first year reported improvements, both in terms of their studies and also socially, with illustrations of how both they and those involved in supporting them had learned from the experiences of the previous year. Various topics were explored through the discussions, and a brief overview of some emerging themes which are specific to the second and third year are presented below. A more comprehensive analysis of the participants' experiences of university will be presented in a stand-alone report.

8.1.6.1 Accessing the course

As will be presented in the forthcoming report, several of the participants in higher education have had difficulties (although to varying degrees) in accessing their courses. In particular there have been difficulties in getting accessible copies of textbooks, and whilst the students did eventually get these it could be a number of weeks after the other students got their copies. There was evidence of better experiences as the participants moved into the second year as both they and the universities in question had learned from what had happened in the previous year:

“It’s going a lot better this year, thank you. In terms of my academic side, things are running a lot more smoothly, the library started making textbooks for me during the summer, so we are just trying to keep ahead of the schedule now, instead of sort of being behind like we were last year. So at the minute it’s going alright. I have got all new tutors this year, but this year I did something I didn’t do last year, I went to see all of them before the lectures started, I went and had meetings before Fresher’s week, and we had a chat about my accessibility needs. They all get sent my inclusion plan, but I found last year that most of them didn’t really

know... it was just better to talk face to face anyway, so I started a relationship with all my tutors. So that's turning out to be a lot better, they are a lot more helpful. It's really useful if I have got any questions. In terms of mobility, all my lectures are in new buildings this year, so all the routes I learned last year, all my seminars and stuff are all in different buildings, so I have had to learn new routes, but I started doing that during the summer, so that's helped a lot. I started in August, I did a few sessions in August, just to get the sort of idea, and we did an intensive during Freshers week, so that's worked out really well. I am in new halls this year, I am in self-catered accommodation, and I am much preferring that, I am feeling a lot more independent, not having to go to the canteen."

In reviewing the positive reflections of this student it is also important to note that in the previous year she came very close to withdrawing from the course due to the difficulties that she was having. Due to external support, including drawing on a counselling service, she was able to persevere. Unfortunately it is likely that not all students in a similar position would have the same resilience to "battle through". The contrast in experience between the first and second years of her course indicates that the problems she encountered could largely have been avoided. The arrangements that have been put in place in the second year are simply based around early preparation and better communication.

It is also interesting to note that this participant who had had particular difficulties in getting accessible copies of material in the first year, which resulted in her spending a significant part of the year playing "catch up", is now participating a lot more in social activities across the university. This is of significance to her as previously she was feeling quite isolated on campus. Whilst somewhat speculative as there are likely to have been other factors involved, it could be suggested that as a result of having better course access arrangements in place she is now in a better position to be able to engage in the social side of university.

8.1.6.2 Social

In previous interviews, a number of the participants had reported finding it difficult to socialise and get to know other students at their university. This was particularly the case for students with more severe visual impairments. They were particularly restricted in large lecture room environments where it was hard to build up relationships as there would be no continuity in terms of where people sat.

As the students have settled into university, several of them have taken the opportunity to get involved in societies, and on the whole seem more positive about the social side of higher education. Two of the participants have drawn on student support services to help facilitate them socialising with others through societies.

“Social wise I have joined a few new clubs and societies and I have got a buddy, they have set up a new scheme, like a peer mentioning scheme, so I have got a buddy to come with me to one of the societies...”

8.2 Participants who transitioned into higher education in 2014-2015 academic year

Nine participants had made the transition into higher education for the 2014-2015 academic year, whilst a further three made applications but had subsequently decided to defer their places until the next academic year.

Some characteristics of these participants are presented in the tables below:

Table 35: Characteristics of participants who have transitioned into university during the academic year 2014-2015 (N=9)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	5
Female	4
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	5
Year 10	1
Year 11	3
Registration type	
Registered blind	4
Registered partially sighted	5
Not registered/unsure	0
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	2
Large print user (point 16+)	5
Standard print user	2

Table 36: Characteristics of participants who have applied for university but deferred their place (N=3)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	0
Female	3
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	2
Year 10	0
Year 11	1
Registration type	
Registered blind	2
Registered partially sighted	0
Not registered/unsure	1
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	2
Large print user (point 16+)	0
Standard print user	1

As shown in the tables above, several of the participants in our sample with more severe visual impairments applied for/made the transition into university during the past year. These participants came from across the three cohorts. If they had been following the natural progression through the school years, those in Year 10 would have applied the previous year, and those in Year 11 two years previously. These delays in reaching higher education can be explained as follows:

- The participant in the Year 10 cohort applied for university in the previous academic year, and had taken a gap year
- Three of the participants in the Year 11 cohort had taken their A-level courses over four years (in two cases partly due to some indecision about what they wanted to study in higher education) and one participant had intended to go to university the previous year but had not achieved the necessary grades, and so had reapplied for different courses the following academic year.

The participants were applying for a wide range of courses, ranging traditional ones such as Maths to a performance based Music degree. They applied to universities across the United Kingdom, and in all cases

their choices mean that it would be necessary for them to live away from home. All of the participants declared their visual impairment when applying to university through UCAS.

Those participants who had deferred their entry to university this year were all on gap years. Two were working/planning to work abroad (one voluntary and one paid) and the other was studying at a language school. A more thorough analysis of the participants' experiences will be presented in a forthcoming report which will combine the responses given by those participants who have transitioned to university during the 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic years. For an overview of the questions asked, please refer to the interview schedule in the appendix.

9 Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

Ten of the 61 participants who took part in the autumn 2014 interviews have been NEET at some stage of the last academic year.

9.1 Individual case studies of participants who have been NEET

Individual case studies are presented for two of the participants (“Mary” and “Mark”) who have been long term NEET. These may be found in the appendix. In summary we see that the case studies of Mary and Mark provide a striking contrast. Despite both being NEET, they have very differing accounts of how they have reached that position. Mary reports having not received the support that she wanted, being limited in her independence and having not received the guidance she would have liked to find the career she desires. She had worked hard volunteering regularly, but still saw no pathway for her to get into employment. In contrast, Mark reported having received positive support in education, achieving the necessary grades to go to university, and described having received specialist advice in the past. There are indications of some lack of independence, for example in that he wanted to go to university along with friends as they could offer him support if needed, and the fact that he does not often leave the house.

9.2 Overview of the participants who have been NEET

Table 37: Characteristics of participants who have been NEET (N=10)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	6
Female	4
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	3
Year 10	0
Year 11	7
Registration type	
Registered blind	3
Registered partially sighted	2
Registered – type unknown	1
Not registered/unsure	4
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	0
Large print user (point 16+)	8
Standard print user	2

The table above presents some key characteristics of the participants who have been NEET since the previous interviews in autumn 2013. The majority of these participants are those who were in the year 11 cohort – this is what we would expect as following the natural progression, as those in year 9 have only just completed FE. Six of the ten participants reported being registered as having a visual impairment. This is fairly comparable to the overall sample of participants who took part in this round of interviews (70.5%).

9.2.1 Length of time participants have been NEET

The participants were asked the approximate length of time that they had not been working, in education or training (or if they were now in employment, how long they were NEET for). This information is important as it could be anticipated that many young people would be NEET after completing their courses and before finding their first job simply due to how long the application process can take, and therefore

the key question is how this translates into the length of time that they have remained NEET. Their responses are presented in the table below.

Table 38: Length of time participant has been/was NEET

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Less than 3 months	4	40.0%
3-6 months	2	20.0%
6-12 months	0	0.0%
Over 1 year	4	40.0%
Total	10	100.0%

Six participants had been NEET for six months or less. The summary below provides an overview of their experiences, and aims to give an explanation and context of how they found themselves in the position where they could be classified as 'NEET':

Table 39: Overview of participants who have been NEET for 6 months or less

	Registration type	Preferred format	Details
1	Not registered	Pt 16	This participant was NEET for a short time following completion of an apprenticeship. After a few weeks she was offered a short term contract with the company who had originally provided her apprenticeship
2	Registered – type unknown	Pt 16	This participant completed a BTEC. Before completing the course he made the decision that he would like to do voluntary work at the school which he was attending in the next academic year. At the time of interview he had been in voluntary work for a month (two days a week), but it was his intention to remain there for at least that academic year
3	Not registered	Pt 16	This participant was going through the application process to join one of the armed forces. He had gone through a number of stages of this, including passing an early medical examination. Unfortunately when he attended the final medical screening he was assessed as unsuitable due to his visual impairment (despite it being declared at an earlier medical assessment). Inevitably this has caused some delay in him finding employment. However he has had various part time jobs and work through employment agencies, and so any time spent NEET has been minimal.
4	Partially sighted	18	This participant had recently completed a qualification in a vocational course. He would have liked to have found work in a related area, but would have needed an additional qualification. He reported that it was not possible for him to take the next level of the course in FE as he was now 21 and the funding therefore was not available. He was in employment for a few months after completing the course, but at time of interview was NEET. He had actively made the decision not to apply for jobs over the Christmas period and instead spent time with friends and family. At the time of interview he was starting to look for employment possibilities again.

5	Partially sighted	12-14	This participant took an apprenticeship, before being offered a job at the same company, and then later being made redundant. Since then he has had a number of short term positions through an agency (sometimes with short breaks of a month or two between each one). Whilst he had been NEET for a few weeks in autumn 2014, he received confirmation just before the interview took place that he had been offered another position (but again on a temporary contract)
6	Unknown	12 since having an operation, although at time of interview she was starting to have problems again	This participant had been NEET for a short period at the time of interview. This was because she had just returned home from a gap year working abroad. She was looking for possible employment opportunities, but was unsure whether or not to apply for jobs as she was awaiting further investigation of her eyes, having started to experience problems with them. She had previously had an operation which had restored a lot of her vision, and she was concerned that this operation may need to be repeated, which could potentially mean a number of weeks recovery (which she considered to be difficult to manage if she had just started a new job).

With the exception of participant 2 who had actively made the decision to look primarily for voluntary work, rather than find employment, the participants who had been NEET for less than 6 months appear to have been well positioned for re-entering the labour market, having all had previous paid employment (and indeed some had already done so). It is striking however how many of the young people are relying on short term contracts.

In contrast, the four participants who had been unemployed for one year or more appeared to be a lot further from the labour market. Their individual experiences are summarised below:

Table 40: Overview of participants who have been NEET for one year or more

	Registration type	Preferred format	Details
1	Blind	Pt 28	This participant went to university in autumn 2012, but left during the first semester. He had been NEET since then, although he had not actively been looking for ways to return into further education, training or employment. At the time of last interview he was considering applying for some work experience.
2	Blind	Pt 36	This participant completed a FE course in summer 2013, and had been NEET since then. He had hoped to apply for an apprenticeship but missed the deadline for doing so. He had recently moved home and was living independently which had delayed him in looking for employment opportunities. He reported that where he lived there were few jobs which he would have the relevant skills or qualifications for, which was restricting his job search
3	Blind	Pt 48	This participant left a FE course prematurely in 2012 having had problems in accessing it. She spent some time volunteering with a charity, hoping that it would lead to employment, but unfortunately the only work she was offered was on a zero-hours contract, which led to very minimal work. She had been actively looking for employment opportunities but had struggled. She had to draw on the support of her social worker to be able to access Work Choice to be provided mentoring support to help her into employment. At the time of interview she was still meeting with Work Choice, and had not found suitable employment.
4	Partially sighted	Pt 20	This participant left school in autumn 2012. She spent a year NEET whilst arranging for a voluntary placement at a local school. She has been volunteering at this school since autumn 2013, and has indicated that she is happy continuing with volunteering, and had no current plans to look for paid employment.

What is particularly noticeable with this second group of young people is that they have on average more severe visual impairments than the first group who had been NEET for six months or less. Amongst participants 1, 2 and 3 there is a sense of contentment in what they are doing, and an acceptance that they may not work. In Section 6 we look in more detail at the experiences of two of these participants through case study summaries to seek to understand this further.

9.2.2 Activities whilst NEET

The participants were also asked how they had spent their time whilst they were NEET. Typical responses included looking for jobs, spending time with friends, doing voluntary work and hobbies and relaxation:

“Well housework, I get out shopping every now and again. Get on with a few hobbies in the meantime. Apart from that, just having a relax to be honest”

“Job searching and chilling”

One participant had courses arranged for her by her Connexions advisor in Psychology and Employability skills at a college.

Researcher: “And particularly in terms of the employability skills, did you learn much with that?” Participant: “Yes, but basically everything that was in my course on employability skills I did in my retail course, my retail apprenticeship, so basically I was just refreshing my information and everything.” Researcher: “Do you think it was still worth going?” Participant: “Yes, yes.”

9.2.3 Careers guidance

We were also interested in any careers guidance that these young people had received whilst they were NEET, and also if they had received any advice which was specific to them as young people with a visual impairment.

Only one participant reported that they had received any advice in the past year. This was the participant who has petitioned through her social worker to be allowed to join a work choice programme. One participant spoke of how he actively avoided careers advice following previous bad experiences:

Researcher: Was it just that one person that you had who gave careers advice? Participant: No, I have had a few people over the years, but it's just been garbage like normal. So I just said in the end, they said "oh [name removed] we have brought in another person to see you", and I said "there's no point, I am not going to bother".

9.2.4 Support received through local job centre

The participants were also asked whether they had registered with their local job centre. Those who had were asked if they had declared their visual impairment, and if they had received any support/advice that was specific to their visual impairment. Only half of the participants had registered with their local job centre when NEET. Those who had done so, in general spoke quite negatively about their experiences, although in one case the participant had not declare his visual impairment to staff, so they would be unaware that he may need additional support:

Participant: "I went into the job centre, and they were like "go online" So I was like thanks, bye!" Researcher: "How have you found the job centre so far?" Participant: "Rubbish! They said there are so many websites, just go online." Researcher: "Are they aware that you have got a visual impairment?" Participant: "No, I just went in for a preliminary check sort of thing

"Well, I've not really had much details, I am on employment support allowance, and yeah, I am on with that, and obviously that is linked to the job centre and that, but I have not really had many dealings with the job centre at all." Researcher: "Related to that, have you had any support in terms of thinking about getting into employment? I know they have things like work programmes to help rehabilitating into work." Participant: "No I had no... well obviously I had an idea, but no, no one has told me nothing about anything like that."

9.2.5 Participants unemployed for over three months

Those participants who had been unemployed for 3 months or more were asked some additional questions. The questions were taken from the Network 1000 project, and focused on:

- What they thought would help them get a job
- What they think stops them getting a job
- How likely they think it is that they will get a job in the next 12 months

Possible responses were provided for coding purposes for the researcher, but their responses were unprompted. These questions were posed to three participants who had been unemployed for over 3 months, and had been seeking work.

9.2.5.1 What would help you to get a job>

- All three spoke of how not having a visual impairment would help them get a job
- One participant also felt that there was a lack of jobs relevant to his skills and visual impairment.
- One participant felt they would be better placed if employers had different attitudes to visual impairment.
- One participant felt he needed support
- One participant felt he just needed “to put my mind to it”

9.2.5.2 What stops you getting a job?

- All three participants felt their visual impairment prevented them from getting a job
- Two participants felt limited by their general health
- Two participants felt limited by their travel options
- One participant felt limited by the attitudes of employers

“Obviously my restrictions, being blind, well in one eye. Getting tired constantly, not being able to get in a car and just drive somewhere, it’s got to be walkable from the bus stop or whatever.”

“Yeah, obviously my eyesight, yeah obviously I find that, that’s obviously the main big thingy. Obviously I am limited to certain things. I know some jobs, being able to drive, obviously I can’t drive no matter what, I am not allowed for health and safety reasons [to do] some things. Say for instance, if I need to lift heavy things, I can’t due to my glaucoma, yeah just my eyesight really.”

“I think it would be understanding again, to be honest, because if they took time to actually sit down and think about it, you know. Being able to move people around a bit, so they could say ‘right, you can’t do this, but we could get you to do that’”

9.2.5.3 How likely do you think it is that you will be in paid work in the next twelve months?

The participants were asked to judge on a four point scale from ‘very likely’ to ‘very unlikely’ how likely they felt it was that they would be in paid work in the next twelve months:

- One participant felt that it was likely
- The other two participants felt that it was unlikely

“In the next twelve... I am hoping it’s likely, I will say likely...yeah be positive.”

9.3 Overview of themes identified in case studies with participants considered to be in a vulnerable or challenging position

Five case studies explored the views of 5 young people who had experienced challenges during their respective transition journeys from compulsory education into further education, training, employment and unemployment. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who have taken part in the Transitions Project from its inception. Semi structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio recorded and transcribed. The transcription of the interviews and analysis of the data using interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed findings of interest, and a number of themes were identified.

Table 41: Superordinate themes identified with their related sub-themes

Superordinate theme	Sub-theme
1. Spectrum of reported experience ranging between dependence and independence	1a Levels of support and the nature of that support in educational and training contexts 1b Resilience 1c Problem solving 1d Orientation, mobility and other independent living skills
2. Personal and study-based challenges and responses to these	2a Self-advocacy 2b Assertiveness 2c Solution focussed approaches 2d Taking responsibility
3. The availability and influence of support systems	3a Family involvement and guidance in decision making 3b Peer group influence

	3c Presence of specialist advice regarding study and career choice 3d Guidance and mentoring
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At the time of interview, 3 of the participants were in some form of further education, one was engaged in voluntary work and seeking paid employment and one was long term unemployed.

The themes and sub-themes identified (as presented in the table above) are reflected in much of the literature that has been considered and variety is evident in the perceptions each young person has of their own levels of independence, for example, and how this has been fostered or otherwise prior to and during transition from compulsory education. As might have been expected the influence of parents and family is shown to be fundamental to the development of independence and identity, reflecting sub-themes such as personal resilience, the ability to be an effective self-advocate in problem solving and seeking to take responsibility for one's own progress and choices. We explore each of the identified themes in turn:

9.3.1 Superordinate Theme 1: Spectrum of reported experience ranging between dependence and independence

A significant theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the way in which the participants tried to make sense of the degree to which they felt either dependent on, or independent of, professionals, family and friends during the process of transition and how they conceptualised their experiences. This broad superordinate theme was identified as it emerged across each of the data sets, although each participant approached the issue from differing perspectives, something which is reflected in the related sub-themes of levels of support and the nature of that support in educational and training contexts, resilience, problem solving and orientation, mobility and other independent living skills.

9.3.1.1 1a Sub-Theme: Levels of support and the nature of that support in educational and training contexts

The sub-theme of levels of support and the nature of that support in educational and training contexts emerged in the transcripts of all five participants (Participants 1 to 5). Variable support in secondary school was reported by participants when discussing their experience in secondary school, 6th Form College and FE College. The participants varied experiences in terms of the levels of support and the nature of that support in secondary school contexts emerged in their use of

language that reflects their satisfaction in some cases and their frustration in others.

Previous research has signified independence as a key factor in a student's personal progress, more explicitly amongst young people with visual impairment (Morris et al., 2008; Keil, 2008). Wong (2004) contended a desire for greater independence in adolescence is of considerable importance to visually impaired young people, with any potential threats to their independence during their transition from education to employment potentially having detrimental consequences on the overall transition process. However, the transition process for visually impaired young people is likely to be more challenging due to their additional needs, in terms of specialist equipment and transportation, which could ultimately hamper their independence and choices they make during their transitions.

9.3.1.2 1b Sub-Theme: Resilience

The participants gave varied responses to perceived periods of adversity experienced during the process of transition. The accounts from the participants noted within this sub-theme highlight the differences in attitudes to challenge and adversity and suggests that levels of resilience are highly variable, with the apparently more resilient participants suggesting greater determination to "bounce back" from challenges often thrown up by the practical obstacles created by their visual impairment in differing contexts.

9.3.1.3 1c Sub-Theme: Problem Solving

Interviews revealed that some participants have developed and implemented effective problem-solving approaches when faced with transition related challenges, whereas others have struggled in this respect. Of particular concern is some evidence that some participants were rather stuck in a rut and not demonstrating significant problem solving to address the danger of becoming NEET.

9.3.1.4 1d Sub-Theme: Orientation, mobility and other independent living skills

Having access to, receiving and utilising orientation, mobility and other independent living skills was discussed by all participants, with the relative importance of these judged differently by participants in terms of their contribution to reducing dependence and increasing independence during transition points.

9.3.2 Superordinate Theme 2: Personal and study-based challenges and responses to these

A second theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the way in which the participants conceptualised the personal and study-based challenges they faced and their responses to these. This superordinate theme is broad in nature and was identified as it emerged across the data sets and captures the sub-themes of self-advocacy, assertiveness, adopting solution-focussed approaches and taking responsibility to address personal and study-based challenges. A range of differing perceptions emerged about these factors and responses to them, from both a positive and negative perspective.

9.3.2.1 2a Sub-Theme: Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy skills have been shown to have a significant relationship with employment (McDonnal & Crudden, 2009). McDonnal and Crudden (2009) identified that visually impaired young people who had gained employment, believed they had more control over their destinations and were less likely to feel that powerful others had control over their lives. In addition, McDonnal and Crudden (2009) emphasised the importance of a young person's views relating to self-determination, self-advocacy and independence, allowing them to become independent, self-determined and decisive, all of which are positive indicators of enhanced employability. Both parents and professionals are a vital part of this process, actively encouraging people with visual impairments to make their own decisions in order for them to develop independence and control (Nagle, 2001). From this current research, it is evident that the young people involved have varied abilities in terms of being effective self-advocates and in their own levels of independence, which ultimately influenced transitional experiences, decisions and outcomes.

9.3.2.2 2b Sub-Theme: Assertiveness

Previous literature has revealed that individuals with visual disabilities have similar aspirations for their future to their sighted peers (Shaw et al., 2007), however research has shown that for visually impaired young people, employment outcomes are different from those without disabilities (Nagle, 2001).

Participant 1's account of the transition to further education suggests a reduced level of assertiveness:

Participant 1: “Originally I wanted to go to [name of college] because I was going to go with my friend but my mom didn’t want me to go that far.”

9.3.2.3 2c Sub-Theme: Solution focussed approaches

Participant 1 provides a somewhat non-committal response to decision making and adopting solution focussed approaches during transition in the context of considering the extent to which the participants are able/ and/ or willing to take responsibility for their own decision making:

Participant 1: “I think in that case it would be your, you could ask everyone; like your family, your friends and the support teachers or teachers or careers advisors. Just, there’s no harm in going to everyone and asking, so.”

Participant 2, in being critical of support structures in 6th Form, noted receiving very focused-based support:

Participant 2: “Very little. I received enlarged items and that was it. That was all I received. I, apart from exams where I had my extra time. ...That was all the help I had.”

9.3.2.4 2d Sub-Theme: Taking responsibility

Research conducted by O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007) has underlined the need for young people to take responsibility in their problem solving and decision making prior to and during the transition period. They suggested that young people must be provided with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in order to make mistakes and learn from their own experiences. Young people should be actively involved in their own transition experiences, with the emphasis on support but not direct teaching from others.

Participant 4 comments broadly on his experiences of being given increasing degrees of responsibility:

Participant 4: “It was they give you kind of more responsibility on yourself and you kind of put more responsibility into your work. When you tried and use as much words as you can yourself but in, when you know there’s a little bit of help needed then you do ask for it.”

Participant 4 demonstrates in the passage below that he is willing to take responsibility for the decisions that he makes:

Participant 4: “Sometimes it’s a good idea to take the opportunity when it’s there, and if it’s not the opportunity you’re expecting at least you’ve took it and you’ve tried it. If you don’t try you don’t know where it will take you.”

9.3.3 Superordinate Theme 3: The availability and influence of support systems

A third theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the way in which the participants conceptualised the availability and influence of support systems that they experienced and their responses to these. This superordinate theme is varied in nature and encompasses more formal institutional structures, family, friendship and peer groups and was identified as it emerged across the data sets and captures the sub-themes of family involvement and guidance in decision making, peer and friendship group influence and the availability and effectiveness of specialist advice regarding study and career choices. Participant 3 recounted the importance of family support and understanding during his transition process, which enabled him to become independent. The relationship between young people and their families is acknowledged as a fundamentally important aspect of the young person’s career planning process (Nagle, 2001).

9.3.3.1 3a Sub-Theme: Family involvement and guidance in decision making

The young people spoke of the contribution that their family had made as they sought to navigate their various transitions. Family involvement in the process of transition beyond compulsory educational provision is directly addressed by The SEN Code of Practice (2014), in which it states that “Local authorities, education providers and their parents should work together to help young people to realise their ambitions in relation to; higher education and/or employment, independent living and participating in society (Code of Practice, 2014/DfE, 2014, p.122). This view is supported by Burchinal et al. (2002) in considering the role of family involvement during the decision making process as arguably the most significant factor for positive transitions to occur.

9.3.3.2 3b Sub-Theme: Peer and friendship group influence

Similarly, some of the participants spoke of the influence that their friends had made as they made decisions for their future. Wenger’s

(1998) concept of the Communities of Practice emphasises the process of developing a sense of identity through interacting with members of a shared community, all of whom share similar interests, knowledge and goals. Students with visual impairments may or may not build interactions and friendships with other visually impaired pupils and form a small community of practice of their own. Contradictory evidence is available from the data gathered during this research study. It is, however, to be expected that young people with visual impairments will be influenced by their peers with regards to their decision making process surrounding further education.

Research has found that friendships which are formed through compulsory education can be lost during the transition to further education or employment, and this is likely to have an adverse effect upon the individual; Transitions can 'rupture' due to a change in relationships or interactions. Meeting new people involves an adjustment to self-identity, with regards to how the self is reflected through interactions with others (Zittoun, 2006).

9.3.3.3 3c Sub-Theme: Presence of specialist advice regarding study and career choice

A further theme was that of receiving specialist advice with regards to their future plans:

Participant 1 "And a few of them (teachers) then were truthful and said this isn't really good for you (due to visual impairment). There was media studies and they said that there was a lot of visual stuff involved in that, so that was, one day take that. So I chose, in the end I chose history, music, business studies and graphic design."

Bouck (2012) found that young people with special educational needs and disabilities felt they faced additional challenges during their transitions which included gaining encouragement to enter pathways into training/employment.

9.3.3.4 3d Sub-theme: Guidance and Mentoring

Transitions which occur within educationally-based activities, such as from education to employment, are otherwise known as mediational transitions (Beach, 1999). Mediational transitions include career advice, lessons on applying for jobs and exploring opportunities to gain work experience whilst still at school. Due to low employment rates amongst young people with visual impairments, researchers and practitioners

have begun implementing interventions to enhance employability (Keil, 2008). These interventions include: career awareness and job-seeking skills, independent living skills, parenting involvement, work experience, social skills and self-concept, however there is yet to be a systematic review of their success (Cavanaugh & Geisen, 2012).

10 Gap years

A number of the participants have made the decision to take gap years prior to going into higher education, or before entering employment. All of the participants who have made this decision have described their experiences positively. This section provides an overview of the gap years which the participants have undertaken throughout the course of this longitudinal study.

10.1.1 Overview of participants

By the time of the autumn 2014 interviews, eight participants in the project were either in the midst of, or had taken some form of gap year. The table below presents an overview of some characteristics of these young people:

Table 42: Characteristics of participants who have taken a gap year during the course of the longitudinal study (N=8)

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	1
Female	7
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	3
Year 10	1
Year 11	4
Registration type	
Registered blind	4
Registered partially sighted	1
Not registered/unsure	3
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	4
Large print user (point 16+)	3
Standard print user	1

10.1.2 Overview of gap year activities

The participants had chosen a variety of options for their gap years. These include:

- Year abroad at a language school before going to university (place confirmed)

- Five months abroad working in a seasonal tourist job before returning and going university (place confirmed)
- Six months voluntary work abroad helping in a specialist school for children with visual impairments before returning and going to university (place confirmed).
- One year working abroad and travelling. Whilst away worked in two different jobs – one in retail and one in a bar. Had to return earlier than intended as she was ill (unrelated to visual impairment)
- Gap year in between completing A-levels and going to university. This participant did not achieve the grades that he had needed for university, and made the decision to reapply to other courses for the following academic year, and spend that year getting some relevant experience for the course. Has since gone to university
- Nine months work experience after withdrawing from her studies at university, having experienced difficulties in accessing the course. This participant planned to return to a different university the following year (place confirmed) and had decided to get some work experience in an area relevant to her course
- One year volunteering abroad in two countries prior to going to university. In one country she helped at a school for children with special educational needs and at the other she helped at a wildlife refuge. Has since returned and was at university.
- One year work experience/apprenticeship prior to going to university (place unconfirmed). This participant was still having interviews for possible apprenticeships in an area relevant to their degree choice at the time of interview, and also applying for university courses. She also had a part time job they planned to keep until securing an apprenticeship.

10.1.3 Reflections on their gap year experiences

The two participants who had completed their gap years spoke about them positively, whilst those who were in the midst of their gap year were confident that they had made the right decision.

“...had a fantastic, fantastic gap year. I had three jobs at the end of it practically. Non-paid, all voluntary and all music related and enjoyable, and it was the best decision I ever made”

11 Future projections for the longitudinal research

Table 43: Projected entry date into the labour market

Date expected to enter labour market	Total (N)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Already in employment	13	17.8%
Ready to enter labour market (NEET)	5	24.6%
2015	13	42.4%
2016	15	62.9%
2017	7	72.5%
2018	13	90.3%
2019	1	91.7%
2020	1	93.1%
Unknown at present	5	100.0%
Total	73	

The table above shows our projections, based on the young people's long terms plans, for when the participants who remain in the transitions study (i.e. have not withdrawn) are likely to look to (exclusively) enter the labour market. Almost all (90%) are expected to have entered the labour market by summer 2018. It should be noted that the majority of young people who have more severe visual impairments have chosen to go to university, and therefore we are likely to have limited evidence of participant experience of entering the labour market (and use of Access to Work) until these participants graduate in 2016 and onwards.

12 Conclusions

Secondary data analysis indicates that the young people in our Longitudinal Transitions Study at present are following very similar pathways to other young people their age (18-21 at the time of interview). We do note, however, that statistics from the Labour Force Survey estimate the proportion of young people with visual impairments aged 16-25 who are NEET to be 42.8%, compared to 21.7% of the 16-25 year olds in the general population which would suggest that unfortunately over the next few years we can anticipate more of our participants facing challenges as they enter the labour market after leaving current education pathways.

A large proportion of the participants had made transitions over the previous 12 months, and others are planned for the year ahead. This serves as a reminder of what a significant time of change these young people are going through.

We have also observed that several of the participants deviated from their planned pathway – sometimes this was their own decision, and in other cases not. This highlights how important it is that transition planning remains flexible and that support remains in place throughout.

As has been mentioned into previous reports, we have noted churning amongst many of the participants. Whilst we note that it is relatively common for all young people at the end of Key Stage 5 to continue onto further college courses, we do have some particular concerns for visually impaired young people. For example, within our cohort there are students who started off in one education setting, but concluded they were not being supported adequately and instead changed to a different setting. Additionally we note students who achieved highly in their Level 3 courses, but choosing to stay on to take additional courses at the same level. They were seemingly concerned about making the next transition. We also have observed students taking Level 3 courses, but then returning to take courses at lower levels (or at least being advised to do so).

A large number of the participants have transitioned into the labour market, and there are positive outcomes for many. These have tended to be the participants who have the least severe visual impairments. Additionally, whilst many are in employment, in several cases they were on short term/temporary contracts.

None of the participants to date have applied for the Access to Work scheme. In very few cases had these participants in employment/apprenticeships felt they required support like this, and those who did had instead arranged adjustments with their employer. A large number of the participants with more severe visual impairments are currently in HE, and therefore it will be very interesting to see whether they draw on Access to Work or not (and if they do, what their experiences are).

There are a small group of participants who have become long term NEET. In the case of two participants based in Wales, there appears to have been little drive from their local Job Centres in encouraging them into employment. Only one of the young people who was NEET has been able to engage in disability specific employment services, and in her case, this was something which she had to fight to access. There seems to have been very limited support accessed by those who were NEET, and this is something which we will investigate further in future interviews.

More positively, several of the participants have been able to take 'gap years', and they have all spoken positively about the experience. In particular we have noted that some of the students with the most severe visual impairments have been able to follow this pathway, including on gap years abroad.

13 Future Plans

This publication is part of a series of reports from the Longitudinal Transitions Study, which is following the transition experiences of over 80 young people with visual impairments. The project commenced in autumn 2009, and we have been working alongside the young people since 2010. Funding has been received in two phases:

- Phase 1: 2009-2011 - Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Phase 2: 2012-2015 the Nuffield Foundation

We are pleased to report that funding has been secured through Thomas Pocklington Trust to continue the research into a third phase. This comes about as the participants continue their transitions into adulthood and employment, and look to start living more independent lives. Thomas Pocklington Trust's interest in the research came about following their own scoping study (Blood, 2015) which found that the likelihood of success for a young person with visual impairment making a positive transition into living independently was strongly linked to their employment status - thus concluding that a key way to help young people with visual impairments to be able to start living independently is to help equip them for work. Such findings also serve as a reminder that in looking to support a young person with visual impairment into employment, we need to think simply beyond the skills that they need in education, and instead look to the broader skills that they are going to need to live independently.

As the project continues, we intend to keep speaking to the participants at regular intervals to continue tracking their transition experiences and in particular their experiences as they try to enter the labour market. It is of particular note that none of the participants to date have drawn upon the government funded scheme "Access to Work" to assist them in the workplace. All those we have spoken to have said that they have been able to make their own adaptations to be able to function in the workplace. As the majority of those who have entered work do not have severe visual impairments, this is plausible. One participant who does require more specialist adaptations in the workplace was provided with specialist software by his employer, and Access to Work funding was not applied for. Many of our participants who are in university/higher education have more severe visual impairments, meaning they will likely be reliant on the Access to Work scheme once they do transition into employment unless their employers also pay for necessary adaptations. Therefore as we continue with this research, we will get our first

evidence of how well Access to Work helps facilitate young people with visual impairments in employment.

Additionally we are starting to see the first of the participants looking to move into independent living. This will be an interesting time as they start moving to unfamiliar towns and cities for work, have to learn to navigate new transport systems, and look to draw on services for mobility support and in adapting their new homes.

Our overall findings have particular relevance as local authorities start to look to develop their provision of support for those aged 16-25 as is required by new SEND reforms (and operationalised in the 2014 SEND Code of Practice). In 2014 RNIB conducted a Freedom of Information Request to local authorities in England to establish what they were doing to prepare for these reforms, as well as looking at the implications of any funding cut backs on their services (see Keil, 2015).

As has been previously mentioned, as well as continuing with our series of technical reports, we intend to produce research briefings which will focus on particular topics within the findings, and also we will publish in peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, we plan to take some of our key findings and translate these into resources which can be used by both the young people as they go through various transitions (e.g. transition into sixth form/FE, transition into university) as well as producing resources for those who are involved in supporting them (e.g. parents/carers, disability support officers).

Just as in previous years, we remain positive about the commitment of the participants to the research. Their continued involvement highlights the importance that they place on improving the transition experiences of young people with visual impairments.

14 Appendices

14.1 Case study of participant making the transition from further education: “Rebekah”

This case study follows the transition experience of “Rebekah” as she has completed her A-level studies and looked to move into employment or an apprenticeship, and how she navigated the transition into further education when these options were not available to her. It investigates the support and guidance that she received over a 15 month period.

14.1.1 Background to young person

“Rebekah” has been educated at a mainstream school. She is registered as blind (severely sight impaired) and struggles particularly with her night time vision. She reads using very large print and accesses a computer by making some basic adjustments.

14.1.2 Interview 1: 10th December 2013

At the time of the first interview Rebekah was hoping to apply for an apprenticeship or a trainee role in a career area she had been interested in pursuing for a while. She had identified a company she was interested in applying to, and a website which she believed would list apprenticeship opportunities. As the application opportunities for apprenticeships and trainee jobs weren’t available at that time, her Connexions advisor also suggested looking into a related level 2 college course. At the time she was studying for A-levels and projected to get good grades, so was not sure about this advice:

“The level 2 is equivalent to GCSE, so I don’t think it would push me enough.”

Besides advice from Connexions, she had also been receiving support and guidance from her mother and from the careers and guidance manager at school:

“Well, my Mum is encouraging me to find a job or an apprenticeship. She thinks that that would be the best way for me to learn.”

“As a year group, she’s been getting us to do personal statements and things. She has been encouraging me to do volunteer work

and charity fundraising, and things like that. She's working up my CV for me."

Rebekah had also carried out her own research and made preparations for this next stage:

Researcher: "And what kind of, I think you have already mentioned a bit about this, but what kind of research have you been doing yourself, and preparation yourself?" Participant: "I signed up to an apprenticeship website, I have researched into the [name removed] campus college for the Level 2 course, and I have saved the website onto my favourites, so I have got it in January when things are refreshed."

We were also interested in what advice the young person had received relating to her visual impairment and specifically in terms of the services that she might expect to draw upon and in disclosing her visual impairment.

Researcher: "And has anyone talked to you at all, about Access to Work?" Participant: "No." Researcher: "So I think I mentioned that to you in the past, do you recall what I mean by that organisation?" Participant: "Yeah, but school haven't spoken to me about that, or anything." Researcher: "Is it something that you have had a chance to look into yet?" Participant: "No, not yet." Researcher: "But you know of it anyway?" Participant: "Yeah." Researcher: "Have you had any advice at all on things like thinking about how you might disclose your visual impairment, and talk about how you can basically use your equipment, and you would be able to get by in the workplace?" Participant: "No, no one has spoken to me about that either." Researcher: "Do you think that's something that you would need?" Participant: "Yeah."

Finally we investigated if she had received any advice on what adjustments would be needed for her follow her intended career path would be realistic in terms of her visual impairment:

Researcher: "And have you spoken to Connexions or anyone at all, about how your visual impairment might affect that?" Participant: "Er, yeah. She's told me that because I learn routes quickly, I should be ok, but try not to dwell on it too much, because things can be done to help me." Researcher: "And who said that?" Participant: "My connexions lady."

14.1.3 Interview 2: 7th March 2014

In March we conducted another interview to find out how Rebekah had been in looking for apprenticeships and employment opportunities. Unfortunately she had not been able to find any suitable positions:

“I have kept looking, but none have come available that I wanted to do. So I haven’t been able to apply yet and things like that. So I have applied for a level 3 college course in [named removed]. I applied for that yesterday I think it was, there’s an open day this week.”

Rebekah had not received any contact from the Connexions advisor to know whether it was normal for the apprenticeship opportunities not to have been listed at this stage. Applications had opened for the job which she was interested in, but she discovered that she did not meet the eligibility criteria. Instead she had taken the initiative and looked for a level 3 course in the career area she was hoping to pursue (this was the same course that the Connexions advisor had suggested, but at level 3 rather than level 2).

“Well I am going to see what happens with the college course, and see about the interview, and see about what support I can get there, because I spoke to one lady the other day, and she was telling me about the support that I can get. I am going to see what happens with that. The course sounds great, I just don’t know whether I want to be stuck in a classroom for another two years. But then again, there’s one day of work experience.”

During this time Rebekah reported that she had not received any support from staff within the college in guiding her in what to do next, after her initial plans had fallen through.

14.1.4 Interview 3: 5th August 2014

The next interview with the participant was shortly prior to her receiving her A-level results. She had not had any further contact from Connexions. However, she had already confirmed a place at college for the level 3 course she had identified. Her experience with the college to date had been a positive one:

“Yeah. I went for an interview. They asked me to go in, and just talked about what equipment I needed, and laptops, and how they

can best help me. Somebody who is the support worker at the college, they got her to come in and show me around, because she also has the eye condition I have got, and she was showing me the dark bits, to avoid her, the best crossings, the crowded places in the building to avoid these, where the lifts and stairs were. It was really helpful. She even drew me a map really big so I could see it as well.”

A teacher from her school did go to the college to discuss support arrangements with them, although this was after her own meeting with the college.

At the time of interview she was planning to catch the bus to college each day. As this was an unfamiliar route she had made her own arrangements for support to be able to use it:

Researcher: “How’s it going to work in terms of getting there?”

Participant: “I am going to get the bus.” Researcher: Is that a route that you know? Participant: “No, but I am going to learn it next week I think. I am going to go with one of my friends, and they are going to come with me, and we are going to do it.”

14.1.5 Interview 4: 14th October 2014

The next interview with Rebekah took place after she had been on the course for approximately six weeks. She was feeling very positive about the support and adjustments that had been put in place for her:

Participant: “I was given a support worker who showed me around the campus, and showed me where the dark spots were so I could avoid them because I don’t see very well in those parts, and she, the first couple of days she stayed with me at break and made sure that I knew where was going, and then over time I don’t need her anymore, so we have discussed that. I can have support, but she is not in class anymore. And they have given me a laptop and if we are doing map work they do maps on different colour paper so it’s easier for me to see. They have ordered Ebooks for me and they have sent me Ebooks for my laptop. They also gave me a Dictaphone so if I can’t take notes, or look at the board quick enough, I can record it and listen to it later.” Researcher: “And how’s all that going?” Participant: “Yeah, it’s going really good.”

Whilst it was initially intended that she would get the bus to and from college, she was finding it difficult as on some days they did not finish until 5pm, and therefore she would be travelling home in the dark:

“The first few weeks I was walking to town in the morning and then getting the bus to college, but because it’s getting darker in the mornings I can’t do it. And because I finish at 5 o’clock on a Thursday it’s dark in the winter, so they have given me free taxis, to and from college, so that’s alright!”

14.1.6 Interview 5: 28th March 2015

A short follow up interview was conducted in March 2015 after she had been on the course for 6 months to find out about the participant’s experience on placement and whether her experience at college was still a positive one. She reported that the college were continuing to make adjustments for her, including making PowerPoint presentations available to her on her laptop, printing out materials on coloured paper and writing descriptions of images that she may struggle to see. She was continuing to use a taxi to get to and from college, and that was an arrangement that was to continue into the summer term.

The college identified a placement on her behalf (as they would do for other students). They identified a suitable company a mile from her house. The college arranged for her to have a pre-placement meeting with the company so she could go in and discuss potential adjustments that they could make for her. She reported being nervous before going in case she had difficulties in carrying out the necessary tasks, but overall had a positive experience.

“The college had told them about my eyesight. They told me to let the [name removed] know that I was going in, and they came and met me at door, and showed me around before I started. And then when I actually went and started they showed me all the steps up to canteen, steps down to the toilet, and where everything was. They even, we used a pin[code] to get out into the backroom. They even put my hand on the pinboard and showed me where numbers were on my first day. I had to use the computers there and on the first day they realised that I was struggling to use the computers, so they phoned IT and get them to enlarge the screen for a week whilst I was there. It was all great...I think I was worrying a lot about it, and every problem I thought would happen just got fixed.”

Part of the role involved looking at printed materials, and because they were official documents it was not possible to enlarge them, and so instead it was necessary for a member of staff to sit beside her to read them.

Researcher: “You know you were saying that you had issues, with the [materials], so they had someone who sat with you. Can you think of any way you would have been able to work around that if you had had a bit more time so you could have done it on your own?” Participant: “Yeah, I suppose. I could have got a magnifier from the pound shop or something and I could have used that. We didn’t have a lot of notice before I started, I think we had two weeks before, so I didn’t really know what I was doing when I was there. They didn’t know either, I think I was the first work experience placement there.”

It is interesting that her solution to performing this task would be to get a magnifier, as in the past this participant has been very dismissive of using magnifiers. It is also notable that she spoke of purchasing a generic (and likely to be poor quality) one rather than visiting a low vision specialist service. We have previously noted in these technical reports that whilst many of the participants have rejected the use of more specialist equipment as in an educational setting they have been able to make adaptations by modifying electronic information using mainstream technology instead, it is possible that once in the workplace they will discover limitations to this approach, and for some tasks need to return to more these more specialist devices and software.

14.2 Case study with a participant who has been in employment: Jack

“Jack” is unsure of his registration status, but confident that he would be eligible to have some form of registration for his visual impairment. He uses a large font size (typically around pt 24) and uses magnification to access a computer. He has been working as a computer programmer for the same employer since 2012, following completion of a Level 3 course at college. He initially joined the organisation on an apprenticeship, and after successfully completing this programme was offered permanent employment. He was offered the apprenticeship after submitting a speculative application and going through a series of interviews.

He describes having received little support from either his college or visiting teacher service prior to making the transition into employment, to help him prepare for making the transition to the workplace as a young person with a visual impairment. On reflection Jack feels that he would have benefited from receiving some additional support:

“I would have hoped for, definitely. I remember that the support when I was into school was fantastic, and when I moved to college it became less and less frequent. I found as soon as I turned 18 that was it, I never really heard from it again. It was a shame really...I would have benefited from a bit of support I think, definitely...I think when I left college it would have been nice to say that this is how things are going to go from your side now, we can give you this support, but nothing really happened. I think I saw someone not long before I left college, and I did mention that I was leaving college... I did mention to her that I was looking for a job, and she mentioned it to the services, but nothing ever came of it unfortunately.”

Jack felt well prepared for self-advocating for himself when in the workplace, and partly attributes that confidence to having had opportunities to speak up for himself when in education:

“I remember at school it being quite difficult to go and talk to people about it. I think it was Year 10 or 11 that I was ok with it. There was a situation in school around Year 10, or it might have been Year 11 where I really struggled with the PE stuff. We were doing sport and I just could not get on with it, and so I ended up having to go and speak to someone, and I am really glad that I did

that. And I think that's helped, I think confident wise it opened a door, and I am fine with it now."

Jack has not drawn on Access to Work, instead choosing to negotiate some adjustments with his employer instead, such as a larger monitor, magnification software and flexible working arrangements so that in the winter he can leave earlier in the day to be able to get home in lighter conditions:

"Yeah, my condition is very bad in the low light conditions... So what I tend to do is come home a little earlier in the light if needs be and just work from home for a couple of hours, which is usually quite good."

To get to and from work Jack catches the bus from his house to the town centre where his company is located and then walks a short distance to the office. He deliberately chooses a less congested route to make it easier for him to walk there independently.

The fact that the majority of his work is conducted electronically is advantageous to Jack. He can put into practice methods which he had in place when in education, such as using an enlarged font, zooming in on web browsers, and using specialist magnification software where needed. He has found his company systems to be in general very accessible, and other colleagues to be accommodating of his visual impairment. On a few occasions he has been given printed documents in meetings which he has struggled to read, but this has not proved to be particularly problematic as it is so infrequent:

"I have got quite a nice workstation. I got a nice monitor, and a nice keyboard, and I sit in a very nice, light room. I can't think what else really. Everything is very accessible. I have people around me who know about my eyesight as well. I do tend to get things sent to me in a nice bold font for example."

14.3 Case study with a participant who has been 'churning': Toby

"Toby" is registered as partially sighted, and requires a font size of at least pt 18 to read. He was educated in a mainstream setting. After attending a local primary school he was sent to a school with a specialist resource base. Whilst he was not happy at the time as it meant leaving his friends behind, he saw it to be a positive decision:

"Cause all of, everyone was going from primary to the local comp, I knew everyone, but I went up there and it was like, I didn't know anyone...but it was ok...the support I received was second to none like, it was great"

He made the decision to move to college, and whilst there strove to be as independent as possible. This appears to have led to him struggling in classes:

Participant: "I don't like being different. I like being independent. It's terrible". Researcher: "Why's it terrible?" Participant: "Cause I struggle until I have to... and then eventually I'll just give up and be like, can I have it enlarged!"

He spoke of a desire to appear the same as everyone else – something which he mentioned throughout the interview:

"I don't like being different... I like being independent and there you go, the same as everyone like"

He initially went to college to study take a course he hoped would lead to an apprenticeship. When he started there he resisted the support, and at times struggled:

Participant: "It was a wake up, 'cause I think I could've had the option to have had help...I didn't, like I said, I didn't want to be different...I found it hard. The first year I found it hard, but I got used to it, sort of thing"... Researcher: "Right and what levels of support did you get at college?" Participant: "I didn't ask, I didn't opt for any. I got offered it but I thought no I'm grown up now, in the real world I'm not going to have anything so I'll do it myself"

However, when asked if he would have benefited from more support he spoke adamantly that he would not have done, and that in being so independent it has shaped his personality and identity, for example:

“I’d be more of a recluse and be, I think I’d be socially more awkward”

He completed the first year, but “didn’t pass it greatly”. The idea of the course he took was that it would act as a bridge to an apprenticeship, so at the end he applied for a related position. Unfortunately it was a very competitive process and whilst he had an interview, he was not offered a position. Instead he returned to college to study the next level of the qualification, but found that he did not enjoy it as much as there was more theory involved, leading him to lose interest in it. Interestingly, later on in the interview he spoke of ‘losing interest’ in work if it became a struggle for him to access, although he never directly attributed his decision to leaving the course prematurely to this:

Participant: “If I can’t read something or if I find it difficult to read something then I just don’t bother, I turn off of it”

After finishing this course he looked at possible employment opportunities, but despite what he describes to be an extensive search, he was unsuccessful. Instead he decided to return to college against, but “didn’t know what to do”.

Researcher: “And did you seek any advice at that point..?”

Participant: “I probably should have but I didn’t. I asked my parents but they were like just go to college sort of thing. Like my parents have always been really firm with my education; you got to do this, got to do that, got to attend every class...I just thought I got to do something, one of my lecturers, I’ll always remember him. He always said if you don’t enjoy something, go do something you enjoy...”

Despite the next course he chose being quite visual, he reported that he not finding this to be a struggle “the computer programmes were so advanced anyway they zoom in, they spin the stuff”. In the second year he encountered the same problem as with the previous course in that it became a lot more theoretical, with more written work than he had anticipated, and so despite continuing with the classes he did not complete the course.

Follow this course he received some advice from a close friend to consider a career which was closely aligned to a hobby he particularly enjoyed. This was not something he had considered previously as it did not fit in the normal 9 to 5 model:

Participant: "I wanted to be...But I didn't listen to it, I always thought you've got to do a 9 to 5 job, you've got to be sensible with it, you've got to earn money. But I started this course and I really want to be..." Researcher: "Do you think if somebody had suggested it you might've gone for it earlier? If maybe one of your careers...?" Participant: "Maybe yeah."

This led to him returning to college to take a Level 2 qualification, which he successfully completed and continued to enjoy throughout. During the most recent follow up interviews he explained that he would like to continue in that career area, but unfortunately he needed to take a Level 3 qualification to do so, and due to his age and the lack of availability of suitable placements, he was unable to do so. Instead he had found a short term position in catering, before leaving a few weeks later and at the time of the most recent interviews he was NEET.

Many of the challenges that this participant has faced are ones which are typical for any teenager, and it is important not to attribute every difficulty face to his visual impairment. However, there are some indications that he has potentially been self-restricted through his desire to be as independent as possible. He also acknowledged he found the transition experience to be more of a challenge as a result of his disability:

Researcher: Do you think transition has been more difficult for you because of your eyesight problems? Participant: "I wouldn't say more difficult, I'd say slower...Because if there's a new thing I need to do it, say someone needs to do something 100 times for it to become natural I need to do it 150 times...most people need to do some stuff 100 times, I need to do it 150 so I think I needed the extra year in college...Getting me to get used to the, get used to the, I don't know the hands off climate, like. Getting used to being alone. Researcher: "To not having so much support?" Participant: "Yeah".

He also spoke of the general challenges that are faced by 16 year olds as they make decisions regarding their future, sharing that he did not feel old enough to make such decisions:

“I think that 16’s too young to decide what you want to do with the rest of your life”

However, over time he has identified that you do not have to lose your independence by receiving advice from another person:

“someone guiding you is different to being independent basically. So, do something you enjoy, don’t let people tell you what you can and can’t do, decide that for yourself”

14.4 Case studies of participants who have been NEET

14.4.1 Case study 1: “Mary”

Mary is registered blind, and has a condition which means that her eyesight is gradually deteriorating over time. She first learned of her condition when she started to lose her sight during primary school. Prior to this she felt that she was doing well in education, but afterwards found that she and her educators struggled to find the balance between taking on board the challenges associated with her change in vision, but still pushing herself with her studies. At the time of her GCSE examinations she had a further diagnosis related to her health and as a result struggled during this time. She reports being disappointed in the grades she obtained, and that she feels she was not pushed enough in education and they were too lenient on her because of her visual impairment. Once in college and studying a Level 3 course she did not receive the support she would have hoped for, and so left before completing the qualification, having decided she would rather get a job.

Until recently she had struggled with independence, and particularly in terms of travelling on her own:

“I’ll admit my mom and dad were very protective of me but seen as I’ve got with guide dogs and I’m with them, they’ve taught me the routes, I’m now independent and I’m travelling into [nearby city] on my own”

One of the most positive things she highlighted in the interview was the support of guide dogs, and going through their preparatory training to receive a guide dog.

Researcher: “And tell me about how that training from guide dogs, that mobility training from guide dogs for the blind, how that has helped you.” Participant: “Well it’s changed my life really. ‘Cause before my dad would take me to [nearby city], now I’m going up to the train on my own”

At this point in time she had still not been matched up with a guide dog, but the mobility training itself had given her the confidence to get about independently, to the point as quoted above it changed her life. The investment by guide dogs in her mobility skills in turn gave her the confidence needed to commit to voluntary work in a nearby city – she would have been unable to travel there independently before. This was

something which she very committed to. Unfortunately despite having an interview she was unsuccessful in getting a paid position:

Mary: “Yeah, I got an interview, just ‘case someone dropped out so I got it because I didn’t have enough retail experience. How do I do that if no one...”

She particularly highlighted the advice that she had received in the past, reporting that she would have liked to have received more specialist advice related to her visual impairment, but found that it was not there:

“I didn’t have a set ‘you can either do this or that’, you know. If you’d said you know, if there was a job specifically for blind or partially sighted people, or if you wanted to be a receptionist there’s that job; or if you want to be an assistant for a school you can go there definitely, you know”

“I was going to the Connexions saying do you know anything about blind and visual impairment, what I can do? ‘No, you’re going to have to look on the internet’. I was like I’ve been trying to do that.”

When asked about the careers services that she had experienced, she felt that they did not know how to support her as a person with a visual impairment:

“Well they’re meant to get you somewhere, meant to help you get somewhere. And I’ve failed to see them try really hard...They don’t know how to, they don’t know what to do with visually impaired people”.

At the time of interview she felt a lack of direction and knowing where she was going in life, particularly in terms of finding employment:

“Cause erm, I don’t know where I am going I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know how to do it if that makes sense? And I used to be this girl like, if you wanted something you go for it; now I’m like uh, what’ll happen will happen...”

When asked what she felt might have helped her have a more positive transition experience, she shared that she felt she would have benefited from having a form of mentor who could draw on their own personal experience as a person with a visual impairment to advise her:

Researcher: "What support would have helped you looking back...?" Mary: "Maybe having a blind person say 'if you want to get into my job then this is how you do it. You know?'" Researcher: You mean somebody kind of mentor or something who's got your...? Mary: Yeah who is visually impaired, yeah. So they understand the difficulties yet they've got it."

Her confidence and belief that she would be able to find employment was also knocked by being told that she wouldn't be able to work at various places because of visual impairment:

"And I enjoyed that, got talking to customers, you know. But then they you said 'you won't be able to get a job here' and I was like, ok."

"You can't volunteer here you're a health and safety hazard"

Setbacks such as these have really knocked Mary's confidence to the point that she reported feeling like she won't get be able to get a job.

"I just feel like I'm getting nowhere because I'm not entirely sure if there's going to be a job for me"

14.4.2 Case study 2: “Mark”

Mark is also registered blind. He attended a mainstream school for his education and spoke positively of the support that he received, both from the school and the visiting teacher service who would come in to provide support and guidance to him and the teaching staff. In the interview he highlighted how important it was to him to have the freedom to be independent:

“They were very good in giving me the freedom to be independent and say what I needed, and so as long as I was clear then they knew what they needed to do”.

Once he completed his GCSE examinations he looked to go to college and had two possible choices of where to go. He reports that his Mum was concerned about his initial first choice of college, and preferred for him to go to a closer college where transport was provided. However, he felt that if he had been determined to go to the other college he would have been able to negotiate this. He did lose some independence in going to college as to get there it was necessary for him to take a taxi. Once at college he discussed the possible courses that he could take, and was advised that some would not be suitable for him with his visual impairment:

“And a few of them then were truthful and said this isn’t really good for you. There was media studies and they said that there was a lot of visual stuff involved in that, so that was, I didn’t take that”

After college he spoke of taking the natural progression in going to university, and decided on a relatively local university which a number of his friends also planned to attend. One attraction of this was the fact that if he had any difficulties he could look to his friends:

“It was more comforting because I knew that because my friend who was also going to be studying the same thing, I knew that if I needed help then he would be there, so it was reassuring to have him there”

Once at university he decided not to ask for any support as he found the set up at the university to be inclusive to his needs, and he had a friend on the course who he could look to:

“I don’t think it had any because the way that the course was set up, everything was electronic anyway

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