UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Summary Report: Experiences of blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition into Higher Education

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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 focuses on data collected between spring 2012 and summer 2015 from participants who had completed the application process to Higher Education (HE) institutions and made the transition into HE. Interviews were conducted at various stages:

- prior to starting in HE
- following completion of the first year of their course
- as part of regular longitudinal interviews in parallel with the whole cohort of participants
- as part of summer 2015 follow up interviews to specifically investigate emerging findings those with participants in HE

Interviews prior to the young people starting in HE focused on their plans following completion of their current courses at sixth form/college. The interviews focused on their chosen institutions and courses, and any preparations that they had made for moving into HE in relation to their visual impairment.

The report presents findings in relation to:

1. Preparing to go into Higher Education
2. Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)
3. Developing support plans
4. Accessing learning materials
5. Accessing examinations and assessments
6. Mobility training and orientation
7. Living independently in Higher Education
8. General life in Higher Education
9. Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in Higher Education

1 Preparing to go into Higher Education

1.1 Overview

The young people applied to study at a variety of universities and their reasons were in line with most young people (e.g. location and choice of course), but also included reasons specific to their visual impairment (e.g. good reputation for supporting students with disabilities). Of concern, about a third had problems accessing the UCAS application form (including six who could not complete it independently). Most recalled declaring their visual impairment on the UCAS form, and encouragingly many (over a half) reported communicating with department and/or disability support officers about their visual impairment during the process of application.

A good proportion of our participants were successful in achieving the qualifications required to get into HE. Only one participant did not achieve the grades to get into her first choice institution. All the participants who completed the first year of their course were at least “quite happy” with their plans to continue in higher education.

Twenty-eight of the participants (out of 33) successfully completed the first year of their courses the first time of asking and progressed into the second year. However, of real concern was that four participants failed to complete their first year because of access issues linked to their visual impairment. Similarly, a further seven had to delay the completion of their assessments, having experienced barriers linked to their visual impairment throughout the year.

1.2 Participants who applied for and entered into HE

By summer 2014, 38 of the participants had applied for Higher Education across a variety of courses and a range of institutions including pre-1992 and post-1992 universities and specialist institutions. They were attracted to their respective institutions and courses for a variety of reasons, including reasons specific to their visual impairment (e.g. good reputation for supporting students with disabilities).

Thirty-three of the participants had eventually made the transition into Higher Education by the academic year 2014-15.

- four participants decided not to go into HE after all and pursued other pathways
- one participant decided to take a gap year and had not started HE by the time of this report

- one participant decided to withdraw from HE very early in the first semester (for reasons not related to their visual impairment) and did not take part in further HE related interviews.

The majority of the report is therefore based on the reported experiences of 32 participants.

1.3 Experiences of applying for HE courses

When applying through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 13 of the participants had problems with the accessibility of the form – six were unable to complete the form independently, and two were delayed in completing the application because of it being inaccessible. Those who struggled with the accessibility of the application tended to be the participants who are registered as bind and using specialist accessibility software.

All but three of the participants were confident that they had declared their visual impairment on the application form. In 2010 UCAS changed their definition of visual impairment from “blind/partially sighted” to “blind or serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses”, with statistics from UCAS indicating that this has meant that fewer students are identifying themselves as having a visual impairment on their application forms.

Two thirds of the participants reported that they had received special provisions for their visual impairment during the application and visiting process. Examples included an individual tour, opportunities to meet with the Disability Support office, and being provided with an accessible copy of the course prospectus.

Just over half (22) of the participants communicated with their target department about their visual impairment at the application stage, in order to discuss matters such as the adjustments which could be put in place, and relevant services that the institution offered.

Thirty of the participants communicated with the Disability Support office about their visual impairment and the support that would be available to them. These discussions covered matters such as:

- adjustments to the learning environment
- adjustments to learning material
- examination arrangements
- Disability Support office-run induction programmes
- non-medical support

1.4 HE applications: perspectives of parents

Interviews were conducted with the parents of 5 participants who had transitioned into HE as part of the case study work. They had differing experiences with regards to the amount of guidance that they received as parents supporting their son/daughter during the application process. The level of guidance received by each parent varied from 'extensive and repetitive' to 'minimal'. One of the parent's identified challenges in finding the information needed and highlighted the fact that there did not seem to be a single central location to find all the information required.

Two of the parents of students attending specialist schools identified specialist support that their son/daughter received that they considered particularly helpful. Parents of two students at mainstream schools reported, however, that their son/daughter did not receive any guidance from a QTVI at any stage of their application process for HE.

One participant's parent was concerned that his son had not previously had a Statement of Special Educational Needs ('Statement'), as they felt the HE institution he was hoping to attend would judge the level of support required based upon this. We have previously found that Local Authority Sensory Support Service practice in relation to Statements varies greatly across the country (Hewett et al, 2010).

The parents spoke of various ways in which they supported their son/daughter, such as:

- carrying out initial research on the support systems in Higher Education
- making contact with potential HE institutions
- accompanying their son/daughter on open days

They found this process to be very valuable in helping to ascertain which institutions could realistically provide the necessary support.

2 Disabled Student Allowance

2.1 Overview

Most of the participants applied for DSA and all of these were successful in their application. Nevertheless, we concluded that at least two participants were misadvised that they should not apply for DSA. Those participants who received support through DSA found it to be invaluable, with several of the students describing themselves reliant on the funding

available through DSA to be able to take their courses. This re-emphasises the importance of this scheme and demonstrates just how valuable it is to these young people.

Most participants found the application forms accessible, but surprisingly three participants were sent the wrong (inaccessible) versions of the forms.

DSA involves a needs assessment meeting. The amount of preparation and advice received prior to this meeting varied considerably. Related, DSA assessors did not always have the specialist knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of visually impaired students. Unsurprisingly then, several participants wished they had been more prepared for this assessment and were disappointed with the outcomes, particularly with hindsight.

DSA offers three categories of support: specialist equipment, non-medical help, and general. Each category is allocated a maximum level of financial support over the period of the student's course. There was evidence that some allocated equipment was poor quality, and this may have been because the limited budget was being stretched too far. Also of great concern was the delay in processing the DSA at the beginning of some participant's studies which meant that there were delays in receiving crucial services, training and equipment.

2.2 Applications for Disabled Student Allowance

All participants who applied for Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) were eligible for it (29).

Four participants decided against applying for DSA. They gave differing explanations for this, including two participants who were advised by HE staff that they were unlikely to be eligible. Over time it became apparent that there were ways in which DSA could have been helpful to at least two of these participants.

Whilst the majority of applicants for DSA found it to be accessible, three participants who are braille/screen-reader users were unable to access the application forms having been sent paper copies. It is unclear why these participants were sent paper copies as in their initial application they had indicated that they had a visual impairment, and other participants were given the option to complete the form online.

2.3 Preparations for the Disabled Student Allowance Needs Assessment

Of the participants, 11 recalled receiving advice prior to attending their DSA needs assessment meeting. Sources of advice included:

- specialist teachers
- friends who had previously attended DSA assessment of needs meetings
- DSOs from their chosen institution

We have noted that only those students attending specialist schools/colleges recalled having advice from a specialist teacher.

Several participants reported carrying out their own independent research prior to the assessment meeting, such as: attending 'Sight Village' (a UK-based exhibition which showcases technology for people with visual impairment). When evaluating their experience, others wished that they had spent more time conducting their own research in advance.

Seven participants said they drew on their previous educational experiences to help them consider how they would approach learning once in HE and consequently what support they would request as part of their DSA assessment.

Four participants said they did not make any preparations as they wanted to have an open mind and listen to the suggestions the assessor made.

Several of the participants felt they had a gap in their knowledge prior to attending the assessment – particularly in terms of the range of equipment available. In some cases the final outcome appeared positive as the participants were surprised by the existence of equipment that they had previously been unaware of.
The participants chose their assessors through a variety of methods, including:

- looking online for their nearest assessment centre (the DSA website provides a search facility)
- receiving recommendations from friends and professionals
- looking for the centre offering the earliest available appointment (in this case the participants DSA application had been heavily delayed)

2.4 Needs Assessment Meeting

A recurring theme in the young people's reflections on their experience of the DSA assessment meeting was with regards to the knowledge and understanding of their assessor and the ability of that assessor to provide appropriate advice in relation to visual impairment. The response towards the DSA assessors was quite mixed: some participants speaking very positively and having confidence in their assessors knowledge; others felt that the assessor was reliant on the students own knowledge.

A notable difference between the participants' accounts of their assessment meetings was in relation to the dynamics of the meeting. The majority of participants spoke of the assessment meeting being a discussion between themselves and the assessor, with typically either the young person describing the challenges they may experience in relation to their visual impairment and the assessor suggesting solutions, or the assessor suggesting possible support options, and the young person determining whether or not it would be helpful to them. Other participants described less evenly directed assessment meetings, with either the assessor taking the lead, or alternatively the assessor looking to the young person to take the role of 'expert' and provide direction for their support.

Six participants spoke positively of having the opportunity to review equipment as part of the assessment process and being given the opportunity to decide whether the equipment the assessor had recommended to them would be of benefit or not.

2.5 DSA Support Allocations

DSA offers three categories of support: specialist equipment, non-medical help, and general. Each category is allocated a maximum level of financial support over the period of the student's course.

Participants with more severe visual impairments typically were recommended multiple items of equipment as part of their DSA allocation such as a laptop with screen reader software, braille device, optical recognition scanning equipment and a Dictaphone. A challenge for these participants was the cost of the range of equipment that they needed had to be purchased from the limited equipment component of DSA support budget which was available.

The most common type of non-medical support allocated to the participants was note-taker support. It is worth noting, however, that there were several participants who felt that they could access their courses just through the equipment they had been given and the adjustments that the institution would (or should) make. This demonstrates the importance of specialist equipment for students with visual impairment in order to be able to access their HE courses.

Participants with more severe visual impairments were also commonly allocated a library/research assistant and/or a learning assistant. This was largely due to anticipated challenges in independently accessing learning material such as textbooks and other reference material in the library.

Young people with more severe visual impairments who were using non-sighted means of accessing information were less likely to draw on the general support budget, whilst they would often maximise their budget for equipment and in some cases non-medical support.

Participants with more severe visual impairment were often limited by the budget caps of DSA. Of 20 participants who had previously received support through DSA, 50% reported reaching the maximum amount of funding available in at least one of the three categories of support, whilst another two were unsure. For some this meant compromising on the range of equipment that they were allocated, or the quality / specification of the equipment they were given.

A final limitation identified in the DSA funding structure relates to the young person's support needs developing over time. DSA is designed so that participants choose all of their equipment prior to starting and this proved to be a challenge to several of the participants who identified additional requirements as their course progressed, or alternatively became aware of new technology that had become available since their initial assessment which would have been very helpful to them.

Seven of the participants reported that their institution assisted by supplementing the budget available – in particular in the case of non-medical support. In some cases, however, this was not a straightforward process, and the participants had the burden of completing official documents to apply for this funding.

2.6 Suppliers, training, and equipment quality

The participants had varying quality of experience in dealing with the suppliers of their DSA equipment.

The level of communication experienced differed considerably. Some participants had very good contact with their supplier throughout the process with several of the participants saying how helpful it was to have the suppliers set up their equipment and ensure that it was functioning correctly. Two of the participants also found it beneficial that the suppliers explained how to make contact with them in the event of problems.

In contrast, other participants were unsure at first of who to contact in the event of problems. A small number of participants experienced delays in the delivery of the equipment once it had been approved meaning that they started their courses without the necessary equipment in place.
Several of the participants were allocated training through DSA to help them to learn to use their equipment, although the presence of this allocation was not always communicated clearly. Those who received training had mixed experiences:

- One participant spoke extremely positively of the training she received. Previously she had used a screen reader at school but had not received any formal training in using it. Despite thinking that she was able to use her software competently, once she had the training she discovered that there were significant gaps in her knowledge, which positively the training was able to fill
- One participant was frustrated as despite receiving his equipment in good time, there was a delay in his training, and therefore he could not use it. In contrast another participant was unaware that she could have received training having not been offered this by her assessor.
- One participant had added complications as her training was provided by a different company to the one who delivered her equipment. Having a separate trainer added on an additional layer of bureaucracy which has to be navigated when technical problems were identified during training.

The participants also had problems with the reliability of the equipment they received. Of the 21 participants, 9 reported having to have faults repaired on their devices. For those participants who were reliant on these laptops to be able to access all components of their course, this

caused considerable difficulties. Their experiences also demonstrated there being little in place in terms of contingency in the event of the participants not having access to a computer.

Several participants highlighted problems with the performance of their laptop, particularly in the case of students who were using their laptops in conjunction with specialist software. Some participants 'gave up' on using their DSA funded laptops concluding that they were not fit for purpose. Other participants reported additional pieces of equipment that they had been given through DSA not to have been working correctly including braille displays, scanners, dongles with specialist software installed on them and monitors.

2.7 Drawing on non-medical support

Several of the young people spoke of the administrative responsibilities that were placed on them to be able to draw on the DSA funded non-medical support. These tasks proved time consuming to these students, who were already feeling the strain of their course workload. Task included:

- contacting note-takers to arrange meeting them for assistance to get to lectures
- informing note-takers of changes in timetable
- arranging appointments with library assistants
- signing off timesheets for those who had provided their support

Some of the participants experienced difficulties with how well the non-medical support was coordinated and the quality of the staff provided. Examples include note-takers who did not have sufficient subject-related understanding to take accurate notes of their lectures and there not being sufficient available note-takers to meet demand.

Whilst there were many challenges faced by the participants in accessing their non-medical support, there were examples of participants who were very satisfied. Of particular note were two participants who had note-taker support from older students who were specialists in their subject. Importantly, these note-takers were initially identified through the participants' department.

Four participants described how they found the note-taker support important because otherwise they would struggle to keep up with the pace of the lecture, or would worry about missing something important. It's interesting that sometimes the importance of note-takers was not

always realised until later in the student's studies. One participant who had recently completed his course turned down the offer of note-taker support at his DSA needs assessment meeting, but towards the end of his course decided it would have been of benefit. Three participants found that without the note-taker beside them for assistance they would have found the content of the lectures to be inaccessible. One of these participants decided to try and get by without note-taker support for one module, but later regretted this decision as he found it very difficult to access the notes that he was given directly from the lecturer.

2.8 Restrictions on the funding of non-specialist equipment

During the course of the research, several of the participants have spoken of how they have benefited in using non-specialist equipment which has inbuilt accessibility options. However, they also described how they have been restricted in not being able to get this equipment through DSA.

An example of this is related to DSA funding of Apple computers. Current Apple computers can be particularly attractive to people with visual impairment as they come with high quality magnification and screen reader software built into the operating system. Several participants requested an Apple computer as part of their assessment of needs, but had different outcomes:

- Two participants were able to argue that an Apple would be the most appropriate piece of equipment for them as they were used to using Apple products and therefore would not want to switch to Windows based systems and have to learn to use a new screen reader.
- Two participants were allocated Apple computers, but only because they paid a top-up fee.
- Several participants requested Apple computers and were either informed by the assessor that there was no point in applying as it would not be approved, or once they had applied, it was rejected.

Similarly, another type of equipment which is proving popular amongst people with visual impairments is tablet computers. Throughout the study many participants have spoken of how they were using them because of the benefits of accessibility options. However, none of the participants were given a tablet computer through DSA. Whilst many of the young people were able to fund tablet computers themselves, the fact that DSA assessments do not cover tablet computers could prove a

barrier to some, both in the case of those who cannot afford to purchase a device and in the case of those who are unaware of the benefits.

2.9 Reflections on DSA by the participants

The participants reflected on the appropriateness of DSA to them as a student with a visual impairment. A wide range of issues were identified, including:

- frustrations that the process is not more student centred
- too many 'levels' involved in the process from initial assessment to delivery of support
- problems with the quality of suppliers
- a need for better quality DSA needs assessments
- a need for greater clarity on how the process works and how to make claims (e.g. in claiming back for ink and paper)
- a need for greater flexibility with the different budget components (including being able to access an equipment budget throughout the course)
- insufficient funding for equipment
- a need for specific funding pot for mobility
- a need for flexibility in the funding of non-specialist equipment which has potential benefits for students with visual impairment

2.10 Reflections on DSA by Disability Support Officers (DSOs)

Interviews were conducted with six DSOs at different universities as part of the case study work. All of the DSOs emphasised in their responses the importance of the students applying for DSA. They described how they would inform applicants with visual impairments at the first opportunity of DSA and how important it is to apply for it.

All of the officers we spoke to advised that the DSA needs assessment would form the basis of the student's support plan, thus emphasising the need for appropriate DSA needs assessments:

- Four of the DSOs referred to the quality of the DSA assessments, and emphasised the importance of the student having a good assessor. One DSO spoke of how they preferred to work with a particular assessor they had confidence in and would tend to steer their potential students towards them.
- One DSO, who was disappointed with the content of the DSA needs assessment she received for the participant she was working with, expressed how important it is that students with more

severe visual impairments are assessed by an assessor who has a good knowledge of visual impairment and the range of support options available.

The DSOs described contrasting ways in which their institutions would respond to the budget restrictions of DSA. One described how their institution requested the DSA assessor to assess the student according to need and offered top-up funding as required. In contrast, another described how their institution did not offer top-up funding and asked the DSA assessor to specify support packages within the boundary of the DSA funding available.

Two of the DSOs had concerns regarding the quality of some suppliers who provided the equipment for the students. For example:

- problems with the suppliers not having specialist equipment in stock which would then cause a delay in the student getting their allocation;
- varying levels in the quality of training provided by suppliers;
- potential problems with warranties running out for equipment as the students approached the end of their course.

On the whole the DSOs spoke positively about working with external suppliers of non-medical support. They highlighted how beneficial it is to have agencies who can take responsibility for the recruitment, training and management of these staff.

The DSOs spoke of the necessity for them to work alongside the DSA assessors and Student Finance in ensuring the best quality of support for their students. This would include:

- the assessor forwarding the assessment of needs report to the institution so they could start making preparations
- communicating with assessors to ensure that the needs assessments were appropriate to their institutions support structure
- working with Student Finance to deal with issues more efficiently.

3 Developing support plans

3.1 Overview

The development of a support plan is a key approach to ensuring that appropriate and timely support is in place for young people with disabilities at university. University disability support services, and

specifically Disability Support Officers (DSOs), are important in this process.

The participant's support plans contained a range of important information (with links to the DSA), e.g. note taker support, mobility support, library support, special arrangements for exams, and transcription of text books. For some DSO and participants it was difficult to develop support plans in the tight timescales (often in the few weeks between the young people accepting a place and the start of the academic year).

Some participants reported that some DSOs lacked of specialist knowledge (although many had significant expertise). Also the young people themselves were quite passive on occasions and in some cases they did not know the content of their support plans. Nevertheless, independence was a key priority for the majority of the young people – ideally preferring adjustments and accessible learning materials which minimised the additional human help needed.

3.2 Initial contact with Disability Support (DS) services

Support plans at HE institutions are generally developed by an disability support officer (DSO) based within a disability support (DS) 'office' or 'service'. The participants made their initial contact with DS at various stages of the transition into HE. Some of the participants contacted their DS service very early on during the application process, even prior to accepting a place on the course. Similarly, some met DSOs at open days and used this informal meeting as an opportunity to discuss the support available at the institution – these meetings at open days also allowed for continued dialogue between the student and the service. Others chose not to meet with the DSO until they started on their course.

The DSOs tended to be proactive in sending communication to the students once they became aware of them, normally through their declaration of having a disability made on the UCAS application form. They arranged to meet with the student either shortly in advance of them starting, or shortly after starting their course of study. In some cases they sent out questionnaires to the students to investigate their support needs further.

For some students, accepting their place on the course was a trigger for the DS to make contact. However, for students with more severe visual

impairments, the communication tended to start at an earlier point, often prompted by the student themselves.

Some DSOs interviewed as part of the case study work spoke of their university's reluctance to work with students prior to them accepting their firm offer (i.e. after having their grades and place confirmed on the course) due to the volume of work that it can involve. This can make time very tight between firm offer and the student starting.

Two participants received invitations to meet with the DS service, but declined to do so. Others met with them at the start of the year, but did not have much communication after this. One of the participants who did not make contact with the service also had made the decision not to apply for DSA. During the final year he experienced some difficulties linked to his visual impairment, due to the amount of reading that was required and getting eye fatigue.

One participant reported not having received any communication from the DS service prior to starting, despite having declared her visual impairment beforehand on the UCAS form, and also having applied for DSA. Instead she was directed to the DSO by another member of staff after informing them she was having difficulties in getting around the campus independently.

3.3 Disability support officer understanding of visual impairment

Ten of the participants spoke positively of the DSOs' ability to understand their visual impairment and their general support needs:

- One participant highlighted the fact that his DSO had a visual impairment themselves, which he felt aided their understanding, whilst another participant felt the DSO benefited from having worked with students with visual impairment previously.
- One participant found it beneficial that his DSO had studied a similar course, so therefore had a good understanding of the course content.

In contrast, six of the participants spoke negatively about the DSOs' understanding of their support:

- Two of these participants had support needs beyond their visual impairment, and in their analysis of their interaction with their DSO concluded that the DSO was unable to deal with the complexity of their support needs. One of these participants also felt that that

whilst the DSO was able to deal with issues specific to learning, they were unable to facilitate their needs beyond the course, for example, in relation to accommodation.
- Two participants spoke of having positive experiences at first, but as time progressed and they faced more significant challenges, these problems were not addressed.
- Two participants felt that the DSO officers did not understand that there is a spectrum of visual impairments, which require different levels and types of adjustment.

These six participants were amongst those who had the most challenging transition into HE, including participants who retook the year, retook modules and changed institution. Whilst these findings are based on relatively small sample sizes, the richness of the qualitative data suggests the vital importance of:

- the DSO's ability to understand the student's visual impairment;
- the student's ability to explain their visual impairment to the DSO; and
- the DSO's ability to be able to advocate on behalf of the student to their department.

3.4 Support agreements

Typically the participants met with a DSO at the start of their academic year to develop a support plan, although some of those with more severe visual impairments were invited to speak with them earlier. One participant was frustrated that his department and DSO met to develop his support plan after he had experienced problems on the course, but excluded him from the meeting. Eight participants indicated that despite having worked with the DSO to develop a support plan, they were not sure of what the content of these were. Some of these participants had severe visual impairments, and therefore it is of concern that these students had not engaged sufficiently with what their institution had proposed to put in place for them. We also note that two of six participants who particularly struggled in accessing the first year of their courses did not knowing the content of their support plans.

Various types of support were detailed in the participant's support plans, including:

- exam facilitation
- modified lecture material
- note-taker support
- mobility support

- transcription of textbooks and other learning material
- library support.

3.5 Participants' understanding of reasonable adjustments

Fifteen of the participants were aware of the Equality Act and the requirement for educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments, whilst five were previously unaware.

When asked what they considered to be the reasonable adjustments that HE institutions should be making to accommodate students with visual impairment, the participants gave a range of responses, including:

- accessible course materials
- exam adjustments
- accessible textbooks and other learning materials
- accessible virtual learning environments
- availability of lecture notes in advance of lectures.

The majority of the suggested reasonable adjustments referred to adjustments which would enable the young person to work independently, rather than providing them additional personal (human) support. This re-emphasises the importance that the participants place on being facilitated to work independently.

Eight participants felt that their institutions had made the necessary reasonable adjustments, whilst seven felt they had not. There does not appear to be any link between the response and the student's level of visual impairment.

3.6 Role of Disability Support Officers (DSOs)

Six DSOs were interviewed as part of the case study work. They were asked to describe their role within the DS service. Their responses can be summarised into three categories:

- providing advice (e.g. advising students of the importance of applying for DSA; advising students of the type of support available at the institution)
- working with disabled students (e.g. establishing contact; developing support plans; coordinating support; helping the student navigate the transition into HE)
- acting as advocates (e.g. working with the student's departments to help improve the student's experience;

helping educate staff on the student's disability and support needs; and advising accommodation staff on necessary adjustments and helping these staff understand how the student can be facilitated to live independently)

The DSO described how in the case of students who require higher levels of support they would prefer to work closely with the student's department to determine the support that a student might need, and to put this into place.

In the case of students with less severe visual impairments who could access their courses with basic reasonable adjustments, the DSO would tend not to meet with the student's department. Instead, a copy of the student's support agreement would be sent to a dedicated member of staff within the relevant department who had responsibility for ensuring reasonable adjustments were met for all students.

Three of the DSOs spoke of how they like to work collaboratively with both the student and their department, to ensure that the student was at the centre of discussions. However, one DSO also described the challenge in that some departments could be resistant to this.

3.7 The transition experience of visually impaired students into HE: the perspective of Disability Support Officers

All six DSOs spoke of the importance of early preparation in working with the student, and in the case of students with more severe visual impairments, also their departments. Linked to this is that they emphasised the importance of students declaring their visual impairment when applying to the institution, as this enables the service to identify them.

DSOs spoke of the importance of students being independent learners, and having the skills to self-advocate. Without these skills in place the DSO would firstly have difficulties in knowing what support to put in place, and secondly, would not know if and when the student was facing difficulties.

Five of the DSOs discussed the importance of the students having independence skills in place prior to coming to HE. The skills they referred to are in line with the additional curriculum literature, and

include mobility skills, independent living skills, self-advocacy skills, and skills to be able to access information independently.

Several challenges were identified by the DSO officers, both in terms of working with the students, and in working with other staff across the institution:

- Challenges in working with students included: the student not responding to contact made by the DSO in advance of them starting in HE; unhelpful attitudes from the students towards independence and responsibility; the student not understanding what life in HE is really like; the student not being prepared for the social aspect of HE; and unavoidable additional demands being placed on the student.
- Challenges in working with staff included: departments not meeting the terms of the student support agreement; unhelpful attitudes from staff towards making reasonable adjustments; and lack of understanding from university staff on how the student could work and live independently
- Broader challenges identified included resource challenges (e.g. lack of staff with expertise to give advice on the use of assistive technology, and lecturers having the willingness to make reasonable adjustments but not having the time to do so).

4 Accessing learning materials

4.1 Overview

Access to learning material is an important part of university life. Many challenges faced by visually impaired students can be overcome by following well-established inclusive teaching practice (e.g. making teaching material available electronically and in advance; ensuring the institution virtual learning environment is accessible for screen reader users) and making anticipatory adjustments (e.g. ensuring accessible versions of key texts are available in advance). Some adjustments must be done in response to a given situation, and may require human support (e.g. readers and note-takers).

A range of positive practice was identified in which many participants described how they had worked with their lecturers and libraries to successfully access the learning material. However, there were consistent challenges experienced by many participants in all aspects of accessing learning materials – delayed availability to reference materials, inaccessible VLEs, unhelpful lecturers, difficulty accessing the library. As a specific example, there is persistent evidence that staff do

not consistently format electronic files so that they can be accessed using screen reading technology.

4.2 Experiences of accessing information in lectures and seminars

Participants identified two types of adjustments that were implemented to support their access to course learning material: adjustments made by members of staff, and adjustments they made themselves.

- Adjustments by staff included: adjustments to lecture material to ensure it was accessible; making an adjustment to their normal lecture procedures to help facilitate the student's access (e.g. meeting the student before or after lectures to discuss the lecture content, allowing the use of Dictaphones, and providing verbal clues during the lecture to help the student follow the lecture more easily).
- Adjustments by the students included: accessing copies of the lecture notes and bringing them along to the lecture; reviewing notes prior to the lecture; explaining their needs to lecturers and other staff in the context of individual modules; sitting near the front of lecture rooms; and asking for help from friends.

Eighteen of the participants felt that overall their lecturers responded positively to the adjustments that needed to be made. They described how lecturers would make adjustments without protest or hesitation. The fact that so many of the participants spoke positively about their lecturers indicates that on the whole, the lecturers understood the need and recognised their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments, where required.

However, five had more negative experiences. Several problems were experienced by the participants in accessing lecture and seminar material. These included:

- learning material not being provided in an accessible format
- visual elements to the course
- not being able to access material on the virtual learning environment
- delays in receiving learning material
- not being able to follow practical sessions
- the large number of lecturers they were taught by
- being based in more than one department
- the pace of lectures.

4.3 The use of electronic material and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)

A recurring message from the HE participants was how they have used electronic material to be able to access lecture notes. Typically if these notes are made available in advance of lectures in a format accessible to them, no further adjustments were needed. The participants were also positive about the notes being available to all students in advance of lectures, as part of standard (inclusive) teaching practice. This made them feel less 'singled out'.

The participants' reports of using electronic material demonstrate how beneficial it is to students with visual impairments to have access to electronic lecture material, particularly in advance of lectures. It can enable them to work more independently (which this research has repeatedly highlighted they wanted to do).

- There is evidence that for students with more severe visual impairments who are reliant on screen reader software or braille, that the lecture material which is provided to them is not accessible, unless further adjustments and modifications are made.
- Several participants relied on other staff in the university, for example library support assistants or transcription teams, to make these adjustments.

Electronic lecture notes were typically made available to students via the institutions VLE. Fifteen of the participants considered their institution's VLE to be accessible, whilst ten found at least sections of them to be inaccessible. In the most extreme cases, the students would not use their VLE at all and instead relied on being sent information directly.

4.4 Accessing libraries and other reference materials

Thirteen of the participants were regularly unable to access library and reference materials. For example:

- Five participants did not have access to their key texts for a significant part of the first year
- Four participants who struggled to access these materials reported not even knowing how they were meant to go about getting accessible copies of text
- Two participants who requested accessible copies of texts from the publisher, experienced delays in receiving them. This posed particular challenges to participants who were not provided with reading lists in a timely manner

- Four participants were frustrated at being restricted in working independently, because they were in a position where it was impossible to access the text without support from others.

Two participants reported receiving lower grades for their assignments due to the limited breadth of referencing (and related reading) – something which they attributed directly to their visual impairment and associated inaccessibility of reading material. The responses by four participants indicate a general reluctance to use the library, and the students trying to 'get away' with using the resources which they could access most readily.

The participants suggested some strategies that they would use in order to access books and journal articles.

- The most common adjustment was to access the material electronically, by using their assistive technology, or by making basic adjustments.
- When finding electronic articles, they would tend to use a particular online catalogue that they had identified to be accessible.
- One participant was reliant on her tablet computer to be able to access e-book version of texts.
- Nine participants reported receiving library support to enable them to access books and journal articles. The staff typically met them in the library and worked with them directly to find the resources needed for their assignments. Other participants had their reference material transcribed or provided in an accessible format.
- Four participants who did not have designated (additional) library support received assistance from a librarian.
- One participant was directed to specific chapters of relevance, or was recommended specific journal articles to read. His lecturers acknowledged it was a more complex process for him to locate chapters of relevance, when compared with his sighted peers, and supported the searches.

4.5 Working alongside students with vision impairments: perspectives of academic staff

As part of the case study work, interviews were conducted with five members of academic staff who had responsibility for overseeing the implementation of reasonable adjustments and the student's support plan. It was most common for this responsibility to be taken on by an academic member of staff based within the students department, although in the case of one larger institution, there was a dedicated

member of support staff who took on the role. In the case of two of the academic members of staff, this was their first departmental responsibility suggesting that at least at their institutions this is a role which is given to relatively junior members of staff.

The staff echoed what was said by the DSOs, that typically the DS service would develop a support plan with the student, and then they would forward it to the departmental representative to ensure it was implemented (or communicated to individual lecturers). However, in the case of students with severe visual impairment, they recognised that it was important for the department to also participate in the process of developing the student's support plan; although in some cases they had not fully appreciated the importance of this before working with the student.

As well as helping the department understand how best to support the student, two of the interviewees described how important it was for the DS service to consider what the courses entailed, and what adjustments were realistic.
Whilst they were able and willing to broaden their understanding of the support that was required, one academic interviewee highlighted the workload challenges that are imposed upon lecturers, and described how this would mean they were restricted in what they could do. Two academics spoke of managing the expectations of the student, and ensuring that support plans remained flexible, for the benefit of both parties (student and institution). They also highlighted the need for it to be viewed as a learning process, and placed a reliance on the young person to inform them if the support arrangements were not working as intended.

More specifically, one academic described how the support plan that they received from the student's DSO did not provide guidance for support on an academic level; for example, in terms of how to modify their lecture style and how to make their lectures as accessible as possible. Instead this was something which they had to consider themselves at a departmental level. A challenge in relation to reasonable adjustments was ensuring that course content was accessible for the student. One academic stated that there were some parts of the course that it was not possible to make accessible. Another academic spoke of how frustrated a colleague was by copyright regulations.

Over the course of these interviews with the students, DSOs and academic staff, it has been identified repeatedly that academic staff

have limited knowledge of how to make their course material accessible. As a specific example, there is persistent evidence that staff do not consistently format electronic files so that they can be accessed using screen reading technology.

5 Accessing examinations and assessments

5.1 Overview

It is common for assessments to be adjusted to make them accessible to students with visual impairment. This includes a range of strategies, e.g.: extra time, rest breaks, the use of computers in examinations, modified exam paper (e.g. braille, large print), and the support of a reader or scribe. We spoke to 24 participants about modified examination arrangements that they had experienced; twelve reported having problems including: inappropriately formatted exams, electronic files which were inaccessible, poor equipment, and incorrect time. Three participants took there exams later than their peers (in the summer when others were re-taking exams), and four more experienced other delays with written assessment.

It was relatively common amongst our participants for them to experience delays in progressing through university: of the 33 who started university, four re-took their first year and a further seven were delayed completing an academic year. Whilst those students who have re-taken the first year had their course fees refunded, it has still been necessary for them to secure additional student loans to fund their living costs. Similarly, students taking longer to complete a given academic year had additional living costs and missed the opportunity to find work experience and voluntary work over the summer break.

5.2 The coordination of examination arrangements

The most common form of assessment for the participants was by examination, although a smaller number of the participants were assessed primarily through coursework and practical assessments.

The majority of those who took exams had examination access arrangements put in place. These were initially arranged through the DS service as part of their support plans. In some cases these adjustments would continue with the student throughout their time in HE, unless there was any reason to change them.
The amount of responsibility placed on the student prior to their exams to ensure that access arrangements were put in place varied greatly

from institution to institution. For example, at one institution it was the student's responsibility to provide confirmation of the adjustments that they would need for each individual exam. In other institutions the support was put in place independently of the student, but they were contacted on an individual basis with regards to these adjustments (e.g. to advise them of which room to go to). In another institution they incorporated these exam adjustments into their central exam timetable systems (i.e. adjustments to exams for individuals such as location and time were just incorporated into the overall timetabling system for all students).

Examples of exam arrangements included:

- extra time
- modified papers
- having a separate room
- reader/scribe/support worker
- the use of a laptop (and assistive technology where applicable)
- rest breaks
- permission to making adjustments to the room (e.g. adjusting blinds)
- changes to the content of the exam and permission to use other specialist equipment.

5.3 Experiences of taking exams

Of the 24 participants we spoke to who had taken examinations, 12 reported having problems with the arrangements which were supposed to have been put in place:

- Three of the participants report not receiving all their papers in an enlarged format. In two cases they were able to work around this, but in the third they were unable to properly complete the exams.
- One student reported that whilst the actual papers were modified, they were not enlarged sufficiently. Additionally there were diagrams and material that she was supposed to use, but these had not been modified at all.
- One student who uses a screen reader to access material electronically was given a paper in a 'picture form' of PDF, which cannot be read using a screen reader.
- Two participants who used braille papers had problems. In the first case the mathematical paper was written using a slightly different braille code to what he would normally work in. In the second case the student discovered inconsistencies between their braille copy and the text copy which had been provided to their reader/scribe.

- Three of the participants had problems with the assistive technology that they were due to use, including arriving at the exam and discovering the assistive technology detailed in their support plan had not been set up correctly.
- One participant had problems with the scribe they had been allocated, as they did not have the necessary specialist knowledge to be able to transcribe his responses.
- One participant was not allocated the full amount of extra time that had been detailed in her support plan and struggled to complete her papers in time.
- One participant had problems having been given a separate exam room which was in a noisy area, and disrupted his concentration.

The most common special arrangements that were put in place for the students were extensions to their coursework deadlines. Seven participants reported requesting for extensions. In some cases they requested these for individual pieces of work, whilst in other cases they were asking for general extensions to their work for the academic year as they had found themselves to be so far behind with their course. The participants this applied to found that whilst it was helpful in the short term to have these extensions, it proved to have a knock-on effect in the longer term.

Of those who reported that they did not receive any adjustments for their assessments, one participant felt that in hindsight he would have benefited from them. He was studying a practical course which required using technical equipment, and struggled with using the available equipment.

Eight participants who are severely sight impaired were asked about their experience of formatting and referencing written assessments and whether they received any support in doing so:

- Four participants reported that they were assigned members of staff who specifically assisted them with doing this
- One participant had help from a proof reader who also helped with formatting and referencing, and a further participant either received assistance from their note-taker (unofficially) or relied on acceptance from the department that their referencing would not be formatted correctly.
- One participant reported that he had not had to submit any assignments which required specific formatting or referencing at that stage in his course.

- One participant reported that they had struggled having not received any ongoing assistance in this area.

5.4 Delays in completing the academic year

During the course of the interviews with the participants in HE, it has been noted that a number of the participants have been delayed in completing the academic year. This is illustrated through eleven specific cases:

- Four students made the decision to retake the first year of their course, for reasons associated with their visual impairment such as the institution not making reasonable adjustments (in each case, fees were refunded).
- Three participants were unable to take their exams during the normal exam period and instead their exams were delayed until the time of the summer retakes. In two cases this was due to the institution not putting adjustments in place at the appropriate time.
- Four participants were given long extensions for their written assessments, which meant they were unable to officially complete the academic year until a later date than their peers.

These eleven cases demonstrate how the different challenges that the students face as part of accessing HE have long term implications for the students. For a student with a visual impairment, the amount of time required to participate in a course often would exceed that of a sighted student, as they tend to work at a slower pace and have to follow a longer process in order to obtain accessible copies of learning material. This means that once the student is delayed during the course of the academic year, it becomes extremely difficult for them to catch up. Whilst it is inevitably frustrating for the students to still be completing assessments when their sighted peers have finished for the academic year, there are significant implications of this which need to be considered:

- Whilst those students who have retaken the first year of the course have had their course fees refunded, it has still been necessary for them to take out an additional year of student loan to fund their living costs.
- Similarly, students taking longer to complete a given academic year will have additional living costs for this time period.
- Students taking longer to complete the academic year will have less available time for finding work placements, work experience and voluntary work over the summer break – all of which have

been identified as enablers for young people with visual impairment successfully making the transition into employment.

6 Mobility training and orientation

6.1 Overview

Most participants who wanted mobility training when arriving at university received it (although there were exceptions). Often this was funded through the student's own Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), but also some universities offered funding in this regard as well as Guide Dogs.

Some participants described experiencing delays in receiving this support and training. Also, the training tended to particularly focus upon moving around the university campus / teaching areas. While this was very important and useful, it was often at the exclusion of wider travel (e.g. into the local community or city shops). This frustrated some participants, making them feel limited in their travel and having to rely upon others. For some this was a reason why they remained living on the university campus in their second year at university (in contrast to many of their sighted peers who moved to cheaper private accommodation).

A reason for this narrowness of mobility training appears to be linked to the limits put upon the use of DSA funding which can only be used for mobility training which is linked to studying. Nevertheless, there were examples of good practice in which the university and Guide Dogs funded a wider range of training.

6.2 Provision of mobility training and orientation

Just over half of the participants reported receiving some form of mobility training or orientation whilst in HE. Of the 14 who said they had not received mobility training, one participant received assistance from her note-taker when going between lecture rooms, whilst another student who prior to starting HE thought that she would not need mobility support, later concluded that it would have been helpful. The remaining 12 participants reported that they did not require any mobility training. Unsurprisingly there is a strong association between severity of visual impairment and whether the participants received mobility training/orientation, with all participants who are registered blind having some form of mobility training.

Nine of the participants had their mobility training/orientation funded by DSA, five by the institution and three through Guide Dogs (linked to them being matched with a guide dog).

There was a lot of variation in who provided mobility training/orientation for the participants:

- The most common provider was the DSO. This tended to be for those participants who did not require ongoing/extensive support, and in these cases the provision was for orientation around the campus rather than mobility training (which requires a qualified rehabilitation worker).
- Two participants with more severe visual impairment received their mobility through someone (presumably a rehabilitation worker) based within the local authority social services department.
- Four participants received their mobility support through external agencies that were identified by the HE institution DS service.
- As mentioned above, three received additional mobility training/orientation through Guide Dogs once they had been matched with their guide dog.

Several of those participants who received mobility training through qualified rehabilitation officers experienced delays. This tended to be the case for those participants who were receiving their mobility training through the local authority social services.

6.3 Scope of mobility support

The participants who received mobility training/orientation were invited to discuss the scope of the mobility support they received, both in terms of what it covered, and also whether it was sufficient for their needs. As would be expected, the primary focus of this mobility support was to ensure that the students could get to and from their lectures, and to other key buildings such as the library. The support that was received beyond this focus tended to differ from individual to individual, with many participants describing limitations in the mobility training/orientation which they received:

- Six participants spoke of limitations in the mobility support which they received around university campus. A common theme which emerged in the course of interviews was the student not being shown more recreational and social aspects of the campus. Additionally, some participants reported that they were not taught routes which would enable them to get independently to buildings

on campus which were central to their learning, or alternatively they were shown how to get to these buildings, but not around them.

- Eight participants expressed their frustrations and spoke of the limitations of not receiving any mobility support external to their HE institution. Mobility support outside of the university environment should be provided by local authority social services, and arranged through the student's home local authority. None of the participants were successful in arranging mobility support of this type with their local authority, although not all were aware that this was an option that was available to them. Two participants spoke of trying to arrange off university campus mobility but encountered barriers.

Those who did not require such extensive mobility support reported more positive outcomes. Three participants who required off campus orientation had this provided by the institutions' DS service, and this enabled them to get to know some areas external to their institution which other students commonly visited.

Two participants living away from the their family home at university when matched with guide dogs spoke positively about how they would be able to receive off-campus mobility training through the Guide Dogs service.

We note an association between the participant's lack of off campus mobility and their decision to continue to live in institution-owned accommodation, rather than moving into private accommodation.

7 Living independently in Higher Education

7.1 Overview

Many young people lived in student accommodation owned by the university (often halls of residence). Those with more severe visual impairment tended to continue living in this accommodation in their second year. For some this was linked to concern about travel (and getting necessary training for the journey), but there appeared to be other reasons also linked to their disability including finding suitable accommodation which was large enough for their equipment.

Importantly, the accommodation they chose was often more expensive and potentially isolating. Those who did move to private accommodation appeared more confident and experienced at living independently

(perhaps derived from home and school) and had access to additional mobility support.

Many participants spoke positively about their independence skills – cooking cleaning and shopping. Nevertheless, some participants were less confident about one or more aspect of independent living. It is also interesting that none of the participants described drawing upon Disability Living Allowance (or Personal Independence Payments) which are benefits available designed to cover the extra costs associated with disability. Also, few participants drew upon the local social services that could have supported them (although some participants who had tried had been unsuccessful).

It is useful to note that three participants had been match with a guide dog during their time in university (and others were hoping to do the same). Working with a guide dog was described very positively by participants who referred to the mobility and social benefits. They also spoke positively about the additional training and support offered by Guide Dogs association.

7.2 Accommodation choices

Almost three quarters of the participants spent their first year living in HE institution-owned accommodation, 2 participants lived in private accommodation. A further seven lived at their family home and commuted, and for six of these participants their decision to stay at home seems to be linked more toward financial and practical considerations rather than their visual impairment. However, one participant linked this decision to the fact that her mother acted as her carer.

In their second year, ten of the participants decided to continue living in institution-owned accommodation, 14 moved into or continued in private accommodation, and six continued living at their family home and commuted. We note that of ten participants who are registered as severely sight impaired/blind, only two moved into private accommodation, and their responses to further questions suggests that these young people faced a variety of barriers in living away from their institution.

7.3 Barriers in moving into private accommodation

Those participants who decided to continue in institution-owned accommodation beyond their first year in HE were asked to explain their decision further. Several themes were identified in their responses.

- Concerns about travelling independently
- Desires to stay close to lecture halls to avoid additional stress
- Lack of suitable accommodation for people with disabilities
- Impractical to share accommodation when they have a guide dog
- Lack of friends for a house-share

These findings raise two matters of concern. Firstly, it suggests that these students are restricted in engaging fully with the HE experience, and restricted in having a range of accommodation choices. Secondly, it means that these students are likely facing an additional expense in comparison to the average student because typically private accommodation is cheaper than institution-owned accommodation.

7.4 Institution owned accommodation

Several participants reported that their visual impairment did not impact on them in terms of living independently. However, for those with more severe visual impairments, there were a number of considerations, e.g.: whether they would be able to share facilities or need their own bathroom/kitchen; whether the accommodation was in a suitable location for getting to their lectures; whether there was enough desk space for all their equipment; and whether the room was big enough for a guide dog.

Four of the participants described receiving recommendations to help them decide which accommodation would suit them best. Three participants reported that the options available to them were limited by the institution itself, who directed them towards a specific type of accommodation – in two of these cases the participants were disappointed with the type of accommodation they were allocated.

A theme which emerged from those participants who required specific accommodation due to their visual impairment was that it was often one of the more expensive accommodation options that were available, as these were deemed to be the most suitable for the young person and their needs.

- Seven participants required larger rooms for reasons associated with their visual impairment, whilst another participant felt that she would benefit from en-suite room.

- Two participants were due to receive funding through DSA or the institution to pay for a larger room (the primary reason for this being they were expecting to have a guide dog). In both cases, neither ended up having a guide dog in the first year, as they were not matched with one in time. Neither ended up being compensated for the extra money that they spent on having a larger room. The reasons for this are not entirely clear; especially as they were not confident as to whether it was the institution or DSO who was supposed to take responsibility for this extra cost.
- One participant who believed he would have benefited from a larger room due to reasons associated with his visual impairment was disappointed at not being able to afford the accommodation which would have best suited him. The institution in question did not discuss accommodation options with him, and it was also something that was not discussed as part of his DSA assessment (although he later learned it could have been). Instead he based his accommodation choice on what he could afford, rather than what he felt he needed.
- In positive contrast, one participant had his preference prioritised by the accommodation services, due to his disability and two participants who decided to stay in institution-owned accommodation were offered the same room for the next academic year.

The participants' responses highlighted some practical considerations which may need to be made. Firstly, several of the participants moved into their institution-owned accommodation before the majority of the other students, to enable them to settle in and start their mobility training and orientation. They found this very beneficial, but noted that this was something they had to request themselves, rather than something which was instigated by the institution. As well as allowing the students to have time to learn routes prior to their lectures starting, by moving into the institution-owned accommodation early it also allowed the student to learn these routes whilst the institution itself was very quiet. For those who moved into accommodation early, there was some confusion about who should take responsibility for paying for this. In some cases the institution met the cost, whilst in others they expected the student to pay.

Eight of the participants reported that either modifications were made to their accommodation, or they would have benefited from them being made. The main adjustments made were ones in the kitchen, such as tactile marking of equipment. These adjustments were either made by

someone from the institution, or in situations where this had not been discussed with the institution, by the young person/their family.

One participant reported that she was not allowed to make any adjustments to her kitchen, despite asking the relevant accommodation services.

Common adjustments to rooms included extra desk space and storage, and adjustments to the lighting. It appears that the institutions were reliant upon the student raising with them the need for adjustments, and making suggestions of what these should be. This approach from the institution assumes that, firstly, the student has the confidence to do this, and secondly, that the student is aware of the adjustments that are needed. We have previously identified that several of the participants felt ill-prepared for living independently, and were not necessarily aware of adjustments which could be made.

7.5 Private accommodation

In the second year, all but one of the participants living in private accommodation had moved in, or had arranged to move in, with friends that they had made during the first year of their course. The other participant had decided to look for accommodation on her own. All these participants described their new accommodation as being a short walk or a short bus journey away, and within popular student areas.

As we have noted there are several barriers for students with visual impairments in moving into private accommodation, and therefore it was particularly interesting to look at the experiences of two participants who were able to make this transition. In both cases they were confident in living independently having already lived away from the family home and with a degree of independence whilst at a residential specialist school. Additionally they both had very flexible arrangements for mobility support, with one being given orientation training by a member of staff based within the institutions DS service, whilst the other had mobility training from an independent rehabilitation officer who was able to work flexibly.

Those participants who had moved into private accommodation were asked about any considerations they made in relation to their visual impairment when choosing their accommodation, and with regards to modifications that were made to their living environment. Their responses showed that on the whole they gave little consideration to

this. Two participants acknowledged that there would be/were challenges initially when moving into the different accommodation, but were confident of quickly overcoming these. Another participant spoke of making some compromises in terms of how suitable the accommodation would be, as he knew that it would be difficult finding a property that suited them all. However, one participant who finds it difficult to get around independently, said that she ensured the property was in a suitable location for her to be able to get to campus. Of particular concern are her reports that she was refused accommodation by one agency because of the disability related benefits that she was receiving.

7.6 Living in the family home

Seven of the participants lived in their family home and commuted to their HE institution. They travelled there using a variety of means of transport, including bus (4), train (1), tube (1) and taxi (1). In all cases, other than the participant who travelled by taxi, these were routes they were familiar with already, which inevitably would have made the journey easier.

Only one participant received mobility training to and from university. This student has a guide dog, and therefore received this training through Guide Dogs. The participant who travelled by taxi has a condition which means she needs to avoid being in situations where she could potentially get bumped as this could lead to her damaging her vision further.

Several participants living away at HE identified how they had benefited from living more independently, and how that acted as a stepping stone towards living independently when they graduated. Therefore one concern for these participants still living in their family home is that they were missing out on this experience. However, when posed with this suggestion the participants disagreed and responded that they did feel independent.

7.7 Independent living skills

The majority of the participants described being able to cook for themselves. One participant reported however that she did not have the skills needed to cook independently - this was something she recognised she would need to develop in time. Another participant reported that whilst she was able to cook independently, she felt very uncomfortable doing this around her flatmates. In contrast, one participant enjoyed being able to cook and clean independently whilst

living away from home, and spoke positively about the independent living skills she developed whilst at specialist school which had enabled her to do this.

Six of the participants said they would go shopping independently with no real challenges. They would walk or get the bus to their local supermarket.

- One of these participants felt that the only real difference was that sometimes she would need to concentrate more when choosing products.
- In contrast, one participant reported that she was unable to shop independently, and instead her parents would regularly drive over to take her to the supermarket.
- Four participants reported they would use the campus shop, although one of these participants would have preferred to have been able to shop somewhere cheaper, with more choice.
- Three of the participants at times did their shopping online, and had found this to be a positive experience. Another participant was also considering doing this in the future as he had heard that the online shopping sites were generally accessible.

It is interesting that none of the participants referred to Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payment in relation to shopping. Paying for travel to and from the supermarket is the type of provision which these benefits are intended to contribute to.

7.8 External services

Those participants who had indicated having some challenges in living independently in HE were asked whether they had drawn on external services to help them with this.

- Two participants had made contact with the local social services to arrange for a concession pass for the buses.
- Two participants were receiving more extensive services through their local social services, and had found this very beneficial.
- However, several participants responded that they were unaware that these services were available even though they may have benefited from them.

Those participants who required mobility training outside of the main university campus were asked whether they had spoken with social services to see if they could arrange this. Two participants who were

aware that this was an option had received discouraging responses, and concluded it was not worthwhile pursuing.

7.9 Guide Dogs

At the time of the last data collection, three of the participants had been matched and were working with guide dogs, one participant was due to start training with a guide dog, and another participant was on the waiting list. However, none of the participants were matched with guide dogs prior to starting university education.
One participant who had already covered the majority of routes on campus used her training period as an opportunity to learn routes off campus, and in particular in the city centre.

Once they were working with their guide dog, the participants identified a number of benefits of doing so. One participant found that it helped her socially, as people seemed to respond to the dog better than they did a cane. She also found that they could learn routes more quickly and easily. Limitations included being restricted sometimes in going out, and not feeling like they could move into shared accommodation as their dog may then receive too much attention.

The participants also shared some practicalities which needed to be considered as a guide dog owner in HE. For example, it was necessary for example to ensure there was a ‘spending pen’ in a suitable location for their lectures and their accommodation. One participant experienced quite a negative response from staff, and other participants had problems with the reactions of fellow students.

Three participants had challenges in being on the waiting list for a guide dog, both in terms of knowing when was the most appropriate time to be matched with a dog as a student in HE, and also in terms of not knowing how long the wait would be. Two of the participants in the first year arranged to have larger rooms, as they were both on the waiting list for a guide dog. However, in both cases they were not allocated a guide dog before the end of the year, which meant they ended up paying a lot more for their accommodation than they would have done otherwise.

8 General life in Higher Education

8.1 Overview

Most of the participants we spoke to joined social groups and societies at university. In fact, some described how this was an important strategy

to help them meet people, which some found difficult. Relatively small but significant numbers of participants said they found it challenging getting to know other students for a variety of reasons including difficulties introducing themselves, travelling independently (e.g. to social events), and telling people about their visual impairment. Nevertheless, many overcame these challenges and most described having good friendship groups. Two participants had taken advantage of a befriending service.

As with many students, some of the participants were engaged in part-time paid and voluntary work during their studies, and several had work placements as part of their course.

8.2 Extra-curricular activities

The participants joined in a variety of societies, typical to those of any student. These include: sports (e.g. hockey, mountaineering); special interest (e.g. Christian Union, student radio); music (e.g. musical theatre); and academic (specific to their course). Nevertheless, two participants reported having problems in relation to their visual impairment in participating in societies. One participant was interested in being a member of the skiing society, but the society organisers were unsure how to cater to her, and so this had been put on hold. Another participant wished to participate in societies, but was not confident enough in going to campus at night on her own.
It is interesting to observe that with the exception of one, all of the participants who are registered as severely sight impaired/blind took part in societies. One of these participants, as part of the case study interviews, described how before coming into HE, he took some time to consider the type of societies he might enjoy, and had a specific strategy of attending these societies as a way to meet other people. Another participant when asked what advice she would give to students with visual impairment in getting to know others when in HE, recommended that they should join societies.

8.3 Relationships with peers

Several of the participants identified challenges in getting to know other students.

- Four of the participants found that it was hard to get to know people on their course, due to the large lecture groups.
- One participant felt restricted in lectures as they had to spend time afterwards with their note-taker, as part of the administrative responsibilities of their support provision.

- Two of the participants found that they were restricted in not being able to get around independently when off campus. Similarly, other participants found it difficult in social contexts as they might lose the people they were with.
- One participant felt that he missed out on opportunities to get to know people as the equipment training provided through DSA took place during Fresher's week
- One participant described how as a result of many challenges she faced during her first year, her confidence became very low, which meant she found it hard to interact with other people.
- Three participants had problems in knowing how best to disclose their visual impairment and ensuring that their friends understood and remembered that it was something which affected them.

The participants described a broad range of reactions from their peers, to the fact they had a visual impairment.

- Ten of the participants reported that they weren't treated any differently. These tended to be those with less severe visual impairments.
- Ten of the participants described ways in which their friends would help them overcome challenges that they might face in relation to their visual impairment, such as helping them to read something, helping them with their shopping, or helping them get from one place to another. In the case of four students, their peers helped make some adjustments to group work they were doing together, to ensure they were able to access it.
- Five of the participants spoke of people reacting negatively to them as a person with a visual impairment. Generally they described these people as acting awkwardly around them, but in two cases they were treated unkindly.
- One participant found that they were ignored by their classmates in a seminar. This, they felt, stemmed from the fact that they were unable to participate in these seminars as they did not have the core text available in an accessible format until several weeks into the course.
- Five of the participants indicated that they had not made any strong friendships during the first year of their time in HE. One of these participants instead spent time with friends outside of the institution so was not entirely isolated, but on reflection she wished she had got to know people at the institution better. Another participant was disappointed because although his course mates were supportive of him in terms of his visual impairment, he had struggled in getting to know them socially outside of lectures.

The participants identified several facilitators in getting to know others.

- Several found attending societies helpful, as they were then able to meet with others with similar interests.
- One participant found attending an induction for disabled students a helpful way of getting to meet other students in a similar position at the start of the academic year.
- Two of the participants benefited from using a befriending service
- One participant who struggled in getting to know people in the first year found it much easier in the second year when she was allocated a guide dog. As well as helping her to get to and from social events, she felt it also made her more approachable.

8.4 Part-time employment/voluntary work

Seven of the participants had paid employment whilst in HE. In two cases this was regular work (in a children's nursery, and as a waitress in a restaurant), whilst in the other five cases the participants had casual work based on campus. Four participants were involved in voluntary work, which was helping them gain some work experience. Interestingly, all four of these participants have severe visual impairment. They were all helping with charities, and in two cases, with charities related to visual impairment.

Several of the participants had taken, or were due to take placements as part of their course. These placements took a variety of forms, including: full time placements (e.g. one year of the course) (2); placement throughout their time on the course (e.g. one day per week) (2); short placements (e.g. one month).

Thirteen of the participants reported that they had not done any form of work, paid or otherwise, during their first year in HE.

- Six of these participants had not looked for any work previously, but anticipated doing so in the future.
- Four participants who wanted work had looked, but could not find anything to apply for, or had been unsuccessful in their applications.
- One participant simply had not thought about getting part time work.
- One participant felt that they could not fit it into their schedule, due to the pressures of their course.

8.5 Anxiety

Two of the participants had difficulties with anxiety during the first year of their courses. In one case, this had been an ongoing challenge, prior to going into HE, whilst in the other, this was something which developed during the year after experiencing significant problems with course access and accessing mobility support, which in turn had impacted on their overall experience of HE.

- One of these students had counselling during the summer break, which gave her the confidence to return to HE.
- The other student was advised to take a break from their course, and return the following academic year.

9 Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in Higher Education

We were able to draw upon larger datasets to inform our own analysis and provide context for our qualitative findings. This included UCAS administrative records, Futuretrack longitudinal study, and Destination of School Leavers Survey (2010).

9.1 How many young people with visual impairment go into Higher Education?

Statistics from UCAS record the number of students who are visually impaired who apply for HE undergraduate courses. Of particular note, we see that the proportion of students who are recorded as being 'blind/partially sighted' fell between 2009 and 2014 (from 0.16% and 895 to 0.11% and 610). As similar patterns were identified for students who are deaf/partially hearing, this was investigated further by researchers at the UK based charity NDCS. They found that in 2010/11 the UCAS application form changed so that students were no longer asked to identified themselves as "blind/partially sighted", and instead as "blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses". This could therefore explain to a large extent the apparent fall in students who have a recorded visual impairment. It also raises concerns that some students who have visual impairment which is significant enough to have required support whilst in education, but not severe enough to describe it as 'serious' will have not declared their disability, and therefore would not have been identified by the institutions DS services.

In 2014, 1.2% of all UCAS applications with a disability recorded themselves as meeting the criteria of "blind or a serious visual impairment". This relatively small figure highlights how low incidence

visual impairment is in Higher Education. It creates a challenge for academic staff, and disability support officers who likely will have limited experience of working with students with visual impairment, and in particular, students with severe visual impairment. Whilst visual impairment is also low incidence, it is also worthwhile to remember that it is regarded as 'high need', potentially requiring a high level of support and adjustment.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency records there to have been 1,040 first year students with visual impairment across the different levels of study (i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher degrees) in the academic year 2013-14.

9.2 Futuretrack

Futuretrack is a longitudinal study which has been conducted by researchers working at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research, who have been tracking students' entry into HE, their experiences in HE, and their employment outcomes after they have left HE. The findings of the Longitudinal Transition Study were considered in the context of Futuretrack's findings.

- Futuretrack found that students with disabilities tended to be older on entry into higher education than students without disabilities. In our study we have observed 'churning' amongst the participants, which has meant that they have spent longer in FE than other students, having repeated years of their courses and taken additional qualifications at the same level, resulting in a delay making the next transition. This has meant that entry into HE was delayed for several of the participants
- Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were slightly more likely to have left HE during the first year of their course (5% compared to 3% of non-disabled students). In the case of our study, two participants left HE during/after the first year of their studies, due to problems that they experienced with accessing their chosen courses. A third student left during the first semester, having not enjoyed the course they had chosen. This means that 9% of the participants in our study who entered HE withdrew during the first year of their course, although it is important to consider our very small sample size before making direct comparison.
- When compared with their non-disabled peers, Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were less likely to view their experience in higher education favourably. Interestingly, however,

students with visual impairment (along with students with autism) were more likely to view the experience favourably than students without disabilities. When considering the very challenging experiences our participants have described this is somewhat surprising, although the Transitions participants did indicate that overall they are satisfied with their HE experience.

- Futuretrack found that students with visual impairment were more positive about the information and support available for new students, and about the range of extra-curricular activities available than other students with disabilities. We have noted that many of our participants have engaged with extra-curricular activities.
- Futuretrack found that students with visual impairment were more likely to continue living in institution-owned accommodation beyond the first year, mirroring our own findings. They also found they were more likely to experience problems in arranging their accommodation, when compared to non-disabled students.
- Supporting the Transition Study findings, Futuretrack found that students with disabilities, including students with visual impairment, were less likely to have had paid employment during their first year, but more likely to have had voluntary work.

Our research findings are broadly in line with the findings of large-scale surveys. Nevertheless, drawing upon our participant's detailed qualitative accounts, our findings provide richer explanations for the problems young people with visual impairment encounter.

9.3 Destination of Leavers Survey: 2010

An estimated 40.6% of graduates with visual impairment entered full time paid employment. This is considerably lower than non-disabled graduates (49.0%) and also than disabled graduates in general (45.5%). Students with disabilities were slightly more likely to be in voluntary/unpaid work following graduation than students without disabilities (3.1% compared to 2.0%).

A greater proportion of graduates with visual impairment were assumed to be unemployed in comparison to both the disabled graduates and non-disabled graduates. This is consistent with previous studies such as Network 1000 and secondary data analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey.

In our future data collections we will be investigating the destinations of our participants when they leave HE, and will explore these findings further in the context of this survey.