

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**Summary Report: The Transition  
Experiences of Young People with Visual  
Impairments aged 17-21**

**Summary report of findings to February 2015**

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

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

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

## Context and comparison data

### Data on young people with visual impairment in education

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

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

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

Based upon DfE administrative records:

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

## **Secondary data relating to employment and apprenticeships**

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

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

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

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

## **Current settings and plans for the future**

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

### **What were the participants doing?**

In the previous year's interviews (autumn 2013), the majority of participants were still in education, and either in FE/Sixth form or University/HE. Several had made the transition into employment or apprenticeships. Two participants were in voluntary work, three on gap years and two participants were NEET.

By autumn 2014 almost half (28) of the participants were in university at various stages of their degree courses (one of these participants had dropped out and moved onto a gap year). Eleven were in FE/Sixth Form, five in permanent employment, three in temporary employment and five NEET. Other settings include gap years, voluntary work, maternity leave and gap years in industry as part of their degree course.

There is an indication of lower expectations amongst the Welsh participants when compared to the rest of the sample (based in England). This is evidenced particularly in the participants who are in long term voluntary work and long term unemployment. There is also evidence of a lack of drive from job centre staff in pushing these young people towards the labour market. Finally, there is evidence of limitations due to lack of public transportation options for the participants in Wales, when compared to the participants in England who are predominately based in large urban areas.

Thirty-two (approximately half) of the participants made some form of transition over the previous year. The most common transitions made

were FE/Sixth form onto a new course and FE/Sixth form to University/HE.

### **What deviations have the participants made from their intended plans?**

Seventeen of the participants (about a quarter) experienced some form of deviation from their intended pathway. In some cases this was the result of their own decision, but in other cases it was due to factors beyond their control.

- Five participants who were due to transition into HE had to change their plan. One started the course but dropped out due to problems with accessibility, one had difficulties in accessing the course and failed their exams at second attempt and so was not able to proceed into the second year, one decided to take an education-based gap year to prepare for university, one returned to FE/Sixth form to take a BTEC and one took an extra year to complete their A-levels.
- One participant had intended to take a gap year, but this had to be cut short due to health problems.
- In spite of ongoing efforts, ten participants had specific plans with regards to employment and apprenticeships which did not materialise. None of these participants had made alternative transitions which was an obvious positive progression: some became or remained NEET, or were taking temporary agency work; while others had returned to education, but not on a higher level course (i.e. there was no obvious progression).
- One participant would have liked to have progressed from the level 2 qualification they had obtained onto level 3, but were unable to find a suitable work placement to facilitate this and instead they became NEET.

### **What transitions were the participants intending to make next?**

Twenty three of the participants hoped to either continue in employment or enter employment:

- Twelve participants intended to complete their degree and then decide.
- Ten participants were looking to enter HE (plus one who was looking to re-enter HE after withdrawing from their course in 2014/15).
- Seven participants who were graduating from HE courses were looking at postgraduate courses.
- Two participants were looking at taking gap years.

- One participant was looking to continue in voluntary work.
- One participant was hoping to transition from their college course into an apprenticeship.
- One participant was planning to take a year in industry as part of their university course.
- Three participants were undecided about what to do next.

In autumn 2015 we will reconnect with the participants to investigate whether they did make these intended transitions, and to learn more about their experiences in doing so. This is particularly interesting because many will be entering the labour market.

## **Individual transition pathways**

### **Participants in Further Education**

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

### **Participants who have been in Sixth Form/FE**

- Almost half (11) of those participant's in college/FE were studying A-levels, 6 were taking more vocational level 3 courses such as BTECs, and 2 were taking a combination of A-levels and other level 3 courses. Four were taking Level 2 qualifications, and 1 participant was taking short courses.
- All but one of the participants obtained the grades that they needed to make their next transition. One participant was unable to make the transition into HE and had gone back to sixth form/FE college to take an additional Level 3 course. Whilst the other participants who wanted to go into HE obtained the grades to do so.

### **Participants' destinations after Sixth Form/FE**

- Three participants continued on with the same courses as they were part way through.
- Other participants moved to a variety of destinations, including new courses in FE (in some cases at a lower level than their previous course), higher education and gap years. In four cases they had moved to new FE college/Sixth Forms and were positive



about the move. One participant who had continued at the same FE college reported having significant difficulties linked to a loss of a considerable amount of vision in a short space of time. The college seemed unsure of how to address the challenges of her new support needs.

- One participant was NEET following completion of their Level 3 course.
- One participant had moved into employment.
- One participant had moved into voluntary work, helping at the school they previously attended.
- The participants received guidance in making decisions regarding FE courses from a variety of sources including teachers at sixth form, Connexions, open evenings, and mentors.
- Five participants who transitioned into different courses had different motives for doing so including gaining additional qualifications to go into Higher Education, to pursue specific careers, and liking the look of the course after hearing about it at an open day.

### **Churning**

- Over the course of the research we have identified evidence of 'churning' by the participants as they have repeated years, repeatedly taken courses at the same level (or even lower levels) and not made a positive progression.
- Similar findings were noted in a study by other researchers in different sectors, e.g. the transition experience of deaf young people.
- We noted churning again in the experiences of four participants.

### **Participants in Employment and Apprenticeships**

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

### **Overview of the types of role**

Over the course of the research, describing the participants' employment status has become increasingly more complex. At the time of interview

there were eight participants who would described themselves as exclusively being in work (five in long-term positions, and three in temporary roles). However, there were others who had part time work (particularly those in HE and those who had taken gap years), and therefore any considerations related to adjustments in the workplace and declaration of their visual impairment are of relevance to them also. Additionally, there were two participants who were in voluntary work, but still gaining work experience in the process. In summary:

- There were 21 participants in some form of employment or voluntary work. Five participants were in long term employment, 3 in temporary employment (looking for permanent roles), 4 in part time work alongside HE, 7 working as part of a gap year, and 2 in voluntary work.

### **Participants in long term employment**

- Within the group of participants who have transitioned into employment (exclusively), there is a greater propensity of those who have less severe visual impairments.
- The participants were in a variety of roles including horticulture, accountancy, childcare, retail, IT, and administration.
- Only one of the participants had difficulties sometimes in getting to and from work when the area in which he would normally walk became very crowded. Instead he found an alternative route which he could navigate more easily.
- One of the participants sometimes struggled with eye strain, and another sometimes had headaches as a result of reading for a long period of time. Two participants said they would make adjustments to their computers to read text easier, whilst another participant said they would ask for help from someone else.
- None of the participants had made contact with Access to Work for a workplace based assessment, and in the majority of cases it was not something that they had seriously considered or were particular aware of (despite it being discussed in previous interviews).
- Of the five participants in long-term positions, three had moved to higher positions, one participant felt there was not any opportunity to progress but had taken additional qualifications, and one participant was self-employed.

### **Participants working alongside HE courses**

- Four of the participants in HE were in regular part time work alongside their full time courses. Notably these tended to be those participants who had less severe visual impairments.
- The participants were employed in a variety of jobs including private music tuition, sales and demonstrations in a department store and working as a student ambassador on campus.

### **Participants working as part of gap years**

- During the academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15, seven participants worked during gap years. In one case this was as part of their university course. The other six participants were taking a gap year away from education, three in paid employment and three in voluntary placements abroad.
- None of the participants in paid positions in the UK had enquired about the possibility of Access to Work assessments.

### **Participants in voluntary work**

- Two participants were in long term voluntary work. These participants were classified this way (rather than on a gap year) as they did not have any clear plans of what they were going to do after the voluntary work and to some extent did not have any aspirations to leave their voluntary positions.
- Both participants were volunteering at local.

### **The transition to entering the labour market**

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

Fourteen of the participants had either moved into the labour market since the time of the last interview or were considering either making this transition or changing their current job. That is, they were engaged in job search activities to some extent (even if this was just planned activity). For some employment was one of a number of options they were considering. An overview of their situations is as follows:

- Thirteen of the 14 participants had strong ideas about what type of job they would like. Examples included childcare, business administration, retail, data entry, catering, computing, engineering, customer service, horticulture and building work.
- Two participants in Wales were having difficulties in identifying suitable positions in locations which they were able to travel to.

- The majority of participants looked for opportunities on the internet, particularly on specific recruitment sites, and also by attending their job centre. The participants benefited from being able to make applications online as they were able to make basic adjustments to ensure that the websites were accessible to them.
- One participant wanted to access advice from the job centre, but was unable to do so at first as she was not eligible to receive benefits.
- One participant was reluctant to look for work as she was potentially going to receive treatment for her eye condition and was concerned about starting a job and then having to take off time for surgery and recovery.
- Amongst this group of what could be broadly called job seekers, only four participants were aware of Access to Work and there appeared a general lack of engagement with the services available to them. One participant was receiving support through Work Choice, but reported that none of the advisors had discussed Access to Work with her.

### **Support received in looking for employment**

- The participants received support in their job search from a variety of places, including: professional advisor as part of an employability course; family and friends; Connexions; social worker and staff linked to the job centre.
- Some participants reported that they had not received any support, in one case because they felt they hadn't needed it, and in other cases because they hadn't made any applications to date.
- One participant felt that she needed professional support in making job applications, but she was initially unable to get this support through the job centre because she was not on benefits due to her partner earning too much money. Her social worker had been advocating for her.

### **Participants who have been in apprenticeships**

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

- One participant took a 12 month placement in customer service, and applied to continue in the role in a permanent position but was unsuccessful.
- One participant took a 18 month placement in retail. After completion she spent a brief period of time unemployed before obtaining a temporary role in retail.
- Neither participants applied for the Access to Work scheme for support whilst on their apprenticeships.
- Both participants felt their apprenticeships would enable them to get a better paid job and to get promotion. One felt it helped her get paid more in her current job and the other felt that it helped her start a new career.

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

- Six of the participants were considering apprenticeships. All had decided the type of apprenticeship they were interested in and were investigating possible options. In most cases they were deciding between either an apprenticeship or employment. One of these participants was registered blind, one partially sighted and four were either not registered or did not know whether they were registered.
- Three participants were confident of the type of apprenticeship opportunities they were looking for. These included: mechanics; engineering; medical related. The other three participants had less developed ideas and instead intended to see what opportunities were available.
- Two participants had applied for apprenticeships. In one case they had received help from a Connexions worker who had arranged an interview for him. This turned out to be a negative experience as once at the interview he learned they were looking for someone with more experience and specific qualifications than he could offer. The other participant had a more positive experience, although she did have to wait some time to hear back from applications before being invited back for interview. They had applied online and found the application process to be accessible to them.
- One participant was aware of the support that would be available to them through Access to Work. Another participants identified some adaptations they would want making.

- As part of case study work an interview was conducted with careers and guidance officer responsible for supporting students leaving Sixth Form. It was interesting to note that he did not consider it appropriate to discuss Access to Work with one young person as they were looking for an apprenticeship rather than employment. He believed that Access to Work did not cover apprenticeships, which is not accurate.

## **Participants in Higher Education**

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

## **Participants who had continued in HE**

Twenty one participants who had previously been in HE completed this years' interview. Twelve were scheduled to graduate in 2015, six in 2016 and two in 2017. One participant did not complete their course but left during the first academic year.

- One participant left HE part way through the first year of his course. This was the second time that he had taken the first year of this particular course, and the second time that he had to leave the course during the first year. The problems experienced appears to have resulted from the course not being made accessible to him (including assessments), as well as him not receiving the non-medical help that he had been assigned through Disabled Student Allowance.

The young people had a range of plans for what they were hoping to do after completing their courses:

- Six of the participants were hoping to take postgraduate courses; three of these cases they were linked to a specific career route they hoped to take.
- Three were looking to apply for graduate jobs which were directly linked to their courses
- Three were looking for graduate jobs not linked to their course.
- Three were looking for jobs linked to their course but not necessarily at graduate level.
- Two of the young people were hoping to take gap years (one to travel and one to get some relevant experience before going back to take a Master's degree).
- One participant was intending to go into self-employment.
- Two participants were undecided about what they were going to do.

Eight of the participants had been in contact with the careers service at the HE institution. The extent to which the participants had contact with the careers service varied, ranging from simply having set up a single appointment to having visited throughout their time at university. Two participants had drawn on disability specific careers advice available to them through their institution. Ten participants had not engaged with the career service at time of interview.

Only two of the 12 participants due to graduate in 2015 had started applying for jobs. One of these participants was still unsure about what they wanted to do, but had applied for roles in Sales – something which he had prior experience in. These two participants did not have any real challenges in terms of the accessibility of the application forms. Barriers to applications included the application process for opportunities they were interested not having opened and time demands of the final year of their course.

Several of the participants had looked to enhance their CV during their time in Higher Education, including four work placements as part of their course, part-time work alongside their studies or during the summer, work experience and voluntary work. It is interesting to note that none of the participants who are registered as blind have had paid employment since being at university. They were more likely to have had voluntary work (in particular) or work experience opportunities. It was also noted that two participants who are blind have not enhanced their CV at all in relation to employment experience (one participant had never had any form of work experience, including no work placement when at school).

### **Participants who transitioned into HE in 2014-15 academic year**

Nine participants made the transition into HE for the 2014-15 academic year, whilst a further three made applications but had subsequently decided to defer their places until the next academic year.

- The participants came from across the three cohorts. If they had been following the natural progression through the school years, those in Year 10 would have applied the previous year, and those in Year 11 two years previously. Most notably three participants had taken their A-level courses over four years, and one participant had reapplied for different courses in HE after not achieving the necessary grades the previous academic year.
- The participants who deferred their entry into university were all on gap years. Two were working/planning to work abroad (one voluntary and one paid) and the other was studying abroad.

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

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

### **Length of time participants have been NEET**

Six participants had been NEET for six months or less, whilst four participants had been NEET for over a year.

- With the exception of one participant who had actively made the decision to look primarily at voluntary work, rather than find paid employment, the participants who had been NEET for less than 6 months appeared to have been well positioned for re-entering employment, having all had previous paid employment. It is striking however how many of the young people were relying on short term contracts.
- In contrast the four participants who had been unemployed for one year or more appeared to be a lot further from the labour market. What is particularly noticeable with this group of four young people



is that they tend to have more severe visual impairments than the group who had been NEET for six months or less. For three of the participants there was a sense of contentment with what they were doing and a sense of acceptance that they may not work.

### **Careers guidance and support through local Jobcentre Plus**

- Only one participant who was NEET reported receiving careers advice in the previous twelve months. This was the participant who petitioned through her social work to be allowed to join a Work Choice programme.
- One participant reported actively avoiding careers advice following previous bad experiences.
- Only half of the participants had registered with the local job centre when NEET. Those who had done so spoke quite negatively about their experiences. In one case the young person had not declared his visual impairment to staff, so they would have been unaware that he may have needed additional support.

### **Participants unemployed for over three months**

Three participants who had been unemployed for over three months were asked some additional questions. All three participants felt their visual impairment prevented them from getting a job. Additionally:

- Two participants felt limited by their general health
- Two participants felt limited by their travel options
- One participant felt limited by the attitudes of employers

Only one participant felt that it was 'likely' they would be in paid work in the next twelve months, whilst the other two participants saw it as 'unlikely'.

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

Five case studies explored the views of 5 young people who had experienced challenges during their respective transition journeys from compulsory education into further education, training, employment and unemployment. At the time of interview, 3 of the participants were in in some form of further education, 1 was engaged in voluntary work and seeking paid employment and 1 was long term unemployed. Three significant themes were identified, each highlighting some of the challenges that these young people faced in navigating their vulnerable situation (and how they are seeking to move forward positively):

- The first significant theme to emerge from the case study interviews concerned the way in which the participants tried to make sense of the degree to which they felt either dependent on, or independent of, professionals, family and friends during the process of transition and how they conceptualized their experiences.
- A second theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the way in which the participants conceptualised the personal and study-based challenges they faced and their response to these.
- A third theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the way in which the participants conceptualised the availability and influence of support systems that they experience and their responses to these.

### **Participants on Gap years**

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

- Year abroad at language school before going into HE
- Paid work in tourism abroad
- Voluntary work abroad, e.g. in specialist schools and a wildlife refuge
- Year gaining relevant experience to chosen degree course

### **Future projections for the longitudinal research**

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