

UNIVERSITY OF  
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# **The Transition Experiences of Young People with Visual Impairments aged 19-22**

**Technical report of findings to September 2016**

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# GLOSSARY

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

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

The Longitudinal Transitions Study was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham in response to the research brief prepared by RNIB.

The key objectives of the project were:

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

Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of an original sample of approximately 80 young people to the longitudinal study and carrying out several surveys of their views and circumstances. This took place between autumn 2009 – March 2012 and was funded by RNIB. The phase of research resulted in a number of reports (e.g. Hewett and Douglas, 2011a; Hewett and Douglas, 2011b, Hewett, Douglas, Ramli, and Keil, 2012). Phase 2 of the study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and centred on follow-up surveys and case studies of the sample of young people with visual impairment. Phase 3 commenced in November 2015 is being funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust.

This report focuses upon data collected between December 2015 and September 2016 when the young people were aged between 19 and 22 years old. The report is part of a series of technical reports which present all findings in the project since 2010.

## **Overview of data collected in Y1 of Phase 3 (November 2015-October 2016)**

The first round of interviews with participants in Year 1 of Phase 3 of the project took place between December 2015 and March 2016. These interviews covered the following topics:

- What the participants were currently doing (including details of transitions made and planned)
- SEND reforms and Education Health and Care (EHC) plans
- Reflections on specialist support received during time in compulsory education and level of preparedness

It was possible to speak with 59 of the participants in the first round of interviews. Sixty-three participants remain involved in the project. The participants' responses to the 'reflection' based questions are discussed in a companion report, Hewett et al (2017).

In line with previous data collection, the interviews were tailored to each individual participant to reflect their most recent experiences, the amount of time they had available, and their previous responses. For example:

- A small number of participants had experienced complex and challenging transitions, and therefore more time was devoted to exploring this than with the average participant.
- Several participants, and particularly those in the last year of higher education, were only available to complete part of the interview due to pressures on their time.

In summer 2016 the participants were surveyed again to establish what setting they were in and what their plans were for the next academic year.

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

At the time of the autumn 2015 interviews, half of the participants remained in some form of education, whilst a fifth were either NEET or in voluntary work. Just over a quarter were in employment.

Thirty-nine of the 59 participants interviewed had made some form of transition, whilst 20 had continued with what they were doing the previous year. Fifteen (about a quarter) of the participants experienced some form of deviation from their intended pathway. In the majority of cases this was due to external factors rather than personal choice.

Projections based upon the participants' plans indicate that the majority (88%) expect to enter the labour market by summer 2019. It should be noted that the majority of young people who have more severe visual impairments have chosen to go to university, and therefore we are likely to have limited evidence of participant experience of entering the labour market (and use of Access to Work) until these participants graduate in summer 2016 onwards.

### **Further Education**

Between autumn 2014 and autumn 2015, 8 of the participants were in FE. They were studying a range of courses, including A-level, BTEC and Access to Higher Education. Four of the participants had left FE by the

time of the autumn 2015 interviews. Three had gone into higher education as they had originally intended and one had left their course due to health problems. By autumn 2015 four participants continued on their BTEC Level 3 courses with the intention of going into employment (3 participants) and HE (1 participant) the following academic year.

Three participants with severe visual impairments in FE were not receiving any specialist guidance, and did not have an Education Health and Care plan. Two participants in particular had challenging times with accessing their course, leading to one participant withdrawing from their course.

## **Employment**

Nineteen participants had been in the workplace during the previous 12 months. Over half of these participants had been in long-term positions and a quarter in temporary positions. Two of the participants had been self-employed and one in voluntary work. Some of the participants also moved between settings during the course of the 12 months. The participants had been working in a range of sectors, including the care sector (e.g. childcare), retail and office based professions. As in previous technical reports we have noted a skew towards a greater number of participants with less severe visual impairment in the labour market, while participants with more severe visual impairment have tended to continue in higher education, and therefore are not looking for employment yet.

Thirteen of the participants reported that they had not experienced any challenges relating to their visual impairment in the workplace (although several explained minor adjustments that they made to ensure that this was the case) whilst six participants gave some examples of challenges that they had faced such as finding it difficult to read small writing on printed material.

Fifteen of the participants reported that they have been actively looking for employment, whilst the other three were still investigating their options. Two participants revealed that they had completed a large number of applications, with only one having had success. Two participants shared that they had not started looking for employment opportunities yet, despite in the case of one participant having been NEET for a long period of time. One participant had considered applying for apprenticeships but had concluded that she was over-qualified for the opportunities available. Finally one participant had received specialist assistance from Action for Blind People (now RNIB) to help her during



her initial job search, whilst a further participant had been linked to a particular programme by the job centre.

Nine of the participants seeking employment said that they were aware of support that could potentially be available to them once in employment, referring to Access to Work. Two participants said that they were not aware of any specific types of support, whilst a final participant felt that they did not require any support.

## **Apprenticeships**

Four participants reported that they had been in an apprenticeship at some point during the previous 12 months. These participants were working in a range of roles, which included: administration; engineering; customer service and pharmacy. Only one of the participants successfully completed their apprenticeship. The participants gave a variety of explanations for this, such as one participant who directly attributed her experiences to her visual impairment.

Of the four participants, one felt that they did not really face any challenges relating to their visual impairment, while the other three identified examples of problems they encountered. One participant who was reportedly asked to leave her role after a short time felt the main problem she faced was not having the right equipment which consequently slowed her down. A participant who worked in a pharmacy found it difficult not being able to read the small writing on the packaging. She did not find a solution to this challenge before leaving the post after a short time. A final participant reported problems with his employer's attitude towards his visual impairment, and lack of understanding of how he could make adjustments to perform the role.

The participants were asked whether they had made contact with Access to Work, and what their experiences had been. Only one of the participants had applied for Access to Work. Of the three participants who had not, one did not believe that they required any specialist support and two were unaware of the scheme. The participant who applied for Access to Work reported experiencing problems with Access to Work taking a long period of time to supply the agreed equipment.

## **Higher Education**

Sixteen participants who had been in HE in the previous year completed the autumn 2015 interview. Over half of the participants expected to graduate in summer 2016. The participants had a wide range of plans following completion – five hoped to stay on to take a variety of

postgraduate courses and five were looking at graduate jobs. Two participants were still undecided about what they wanted to do and were considering either further study or a graduate position. One participant intended to go into voluntary work at first as she was concerned by the limited amount of work experience she had.

Only five of the 16 participants in HE had made contact with their institution's careers office during the previous 12 months. Those participants who had not made contact with the careers service were asked to give further explanation for this. Four of the participants said that they considered it too soon in their time at university to be investigating careers, while a further two participants had not found the time to make contact although they had considered it. Two participants identified careers advice that they had received directly from their department instead. Two participants were on study years abroad during the academic year, making it difficult for them to access careers services.

Only one of the five participants who intended to graduate at the end of the academic year and enter the labour market had applied for a graduate role. Two participants reported that they would have liked to, but did not feel able to at this stage as they did not have their grades available for completing the application form. In particular one of the participants highlighted how he had been delayed as a consequence of exam resits. The student in question had a number of modules to re-sit, and in almost all cases these re-sits could be directly attributed to challenges with the accessibility of his course. A further participant had investigated graduate roles through the assistance of the organisation Blind in Business and had a very positive experience.

### **Not in Employment Education or Training**

Eight of the 59 participants who took part in the autumn 2015 interviews were NEET at the time of interview. Four participants had been NEET for six months or less. Positively, three of these participants appear to have been relatively close to the labour market, and all were confident of finding alternative employment opportunities. In contrast, 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 second group of young people is that they have on average more severe visual impairments than the first group who had been NEET for six months or less. Three of the participants reported a continued sense of resignation over several interviews with what they are doing and a developing acceptance that they may never work.

Only two of the participants who were NEET reported receiving some careers guidance, and in one case they described this as 'limited' support through the job centre. In the other case they had been part of a disability work programme. A further participant had received specialist support through Action for Blind People and the job centre to help with things such as her CV. She did think however that she would have benefited from additional careers advice. Previously she had engaged with her university's careers service, but had found that they did not provide appropriate guidance for students with disabilities. Five of the participants who were NEET said that they had been receiving some support through their local job centre.

Three participants who had been unemployed for 12 months or more were asked some additional questions. Firstly the participants were asked what they thought would help them get a job. One participant identified an improvement in their vision and improved attitudes of employers. A second participant thought they would benefit from improved ways of finding out about jobs. The third participant did not know. The three participants were also asked what they thought stops them getting a job. One participant highlighted a lack of jobs relevant to their qualifications, low motivation and a lack of encouragement from others. A second participant highlighted her visual impairment, attitudes of employers and a lack of understanding from employers about what people with visual impairment are capable of doing. The final participant felt restricted by a lack of jobs in his geographic area and the number of hours that he would be able to work. Finally the participants were asked how likely they thought it was that they would be in paid work in the next twelve months. One participant thought it 'likely', one 'unlikely' and a final participant 'very unlikely' with the most positive response coming from the participant who had been unemployed the least amount of time. We note falling levels of confidence amongst these participants the longer they are out of work.

## **SEND reforms**

Nine of forty one participants who were not already in long-term employment were aware of the introduction of Education Health and Care plans. Those participants who had heard of the introduction of EHC plans generally had low levels of knowledge with regards to what these new plans were and their relevance to them. Only four of the participants were aware that the new Education Health and Care plans extend to the age of 25 for those in education (other than HE) and training.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

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

The key objectives of the project were:

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

Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of an original sample of approximately 80 young people onto the longitudinal study and carrying out several surveys of their views and circumstances. This took place between autumn 2009 – March 2012 and was funded by RNIB. The phase of research resulted in a number of reports (e.g. Hewett and Douglas, 2011a; Hewett and Douglas, 2011b, Hewett, Douglas, Ramli, and Keil, 2012). Phase 2 of the study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and centred on follow-up surveys and case studies of the sample of young people with visual impairment. Phase 3 has been funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust and commenced in November 2015.

This report focuses upon data collected between December 2015 (“winter 2015 interviews”) and September 2016 (“summer 2016 interviews”) through semi-structured telephone interviews. This wave of interviews explored:

- What settings the participants were in and details of any transitions that they had made
- The participants’ knowledge and understanding of the SEND Reforms and in particular the introduction of Education Health and Care Plans
- The participants’ reflections on the support that they had received during their time in compulsory education and how well it had prepared them for living and working independently.

This report is part of a series of technical reports which present all findings in the project since 2010.

The nature of this report (focussing upon the transitions the young people have made) means that we also draw upon data collected in previous rounds of interviews, therefore exploiting the longitudinal nature of the project.

# SECTION A: PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – CURRENT SETTINGS

## 2 CURRENT SETTING AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Section 1 presents an overview of the pathways that our 59 participants were following. It provides an overview of:

- What the participants were doing at the time of the previous interviews in autumn 2014
- What the participants were doing in winter 2015
- What transitions have been made since autumn 2014
- What deviations have been made from their intended plans as reported in autumn 2014
- What the participants hope to do next

A more thorough overview of their experiences will be provided in Section B: Individual transition pathways.

### 2.1 WHAT WERE THE PARTICIPANTS DOING IN AUTUMN 2014?

**Table 1 Setting of participants in Autumn 2014**

Setting	Total (N)	Total (%)
FE/Sixth Form	9	15%
University/Higher Education	26	44%
Employment	8	14%
Gap year	3	6%
Apprenticeship	2	3%
NEET	7	12%
Voluntary work	3	5%
Stay at home mum	1	2%
Total	59	100%

The table above presents a summary of what the 59 participants interviewed had been doing the last time we had spoken to them, in autumn 2014.

## 2.2 WHAT ARE THE PARTICIPANTS DOING ONE YEAR LATER?

**Table 2 Setting of participants: Autumn 2015**

Setting	Total (N)	Total (%)
University/higher education	25	42%
FE/Sixth form	5	8%
Employment	16	27%
NEET	8	14%
Gap year	2	3%
Voluntary work	2	3%
Apprenticeship	0	0%
Total	59	100%

The table above looks at the settings of the 59 participants at the time of the autumn 2015 interviews. Half of the participants remained in some form of education, whilst a fifth were either NEET or in voluntary work. Just over a quarter were in employment.

## 2.3 WHAT TRANSITIONS HAVE THE YOUNG PEOPLE MADE?

**Table 3 Transitions that the young people have made: Autumn 2015**

	Total (N)
<b>Transitions</b>	
FE/Sixth form to HE	3
FE/Sixth form to Gap year	1
FE/Sixth form to Employment	1
FE/Sixth form to NEET	1
Foundation degree to HE	2
HE to new HE institution	1
HE to Year in Industry/Year abroad	2
HE placement to HE	2
HE to Masters	1
HE to Employment	6
HE to Gap Year	1
HE to NEET	2
HE to Voluntary work	1
Gap year to University	3
Apprenticeship to Employment	1
Apprenticeship to NEET	1
Changed employment	3
Employment to HE	1
Volunteering to NEET	2
NEET to Apprenticeship	1
NEET to Employment	2
Stay at home Mum to Employment	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>No Transition</b>	
No transition – continuing on University/HE course	8
No transition – continued on same course in FE/Sixth form	5
No transition – continuing in same employment	4
No transition – still NEET	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>



The table above provides an overview of the transitions which have been made by the young people since the time of the autumn 2014 interviews. Thirty nine of the 59 participants interviewed have made some form of transition, whilst 20 have continued with what they were doing the previous year.

Sixteen of the participants have remained in higher education, although 8 of these have made transitions within this setting, including:

- 2 participants who moved from Foundation degrees to undergraduate level
- 2 participants who have gone abroad for placements
- 2 participants who have returned for their final year following placements
- 1 participant who restarted the first year at a different institution
- 1 participant who started a Master's degree

Five participants have continued with the same course in FE/Sixth Form, four participants have continued in the same jobs and three participants have remained NEET.

Two participants made more than one transition between autumn 2014.

- 1 participant went from voluntary work into a temporary seasonal job before becoming NEET
- 1 participant who had been NEET successfully secured an apprenticeship and a new job. Unfortunately in both cases the offers of employment were later retracted and therefore he remains NEET

## **2.4 WHAT DEVIATIONS HAVE THE PARTICIPANTS MADE FROM THEIR INTENDED PLANS?**

Fifteen of the participants experienced some form of deviation from their intended pathway as reported in autumn 2014. In some cases this was the result of their own decision, but in other cases it was due to external factors. A description of these deviations is as follows:

- 1 participant had hoped to find a new job but had not found time to apply for vacancies
- 1 participant had hoped to go to FE college but was unable to get onto their intended course as they were too old at time of admission
- 1 participant missed the grades for their first choice university

- 1 participant hoped to complete an apprenticeship, but they were asked to leave after a short time as it was deemed they were not working to a sufficient speed
- 1 participant intended to complete their Foundation year at university but were instead advised to take a leave of absence due to health problems
- 1 participant left HE and intended to find a job but became NEET
- 1 participant was unsuccessful in their application for a permanent job at the organisation where they had undertaken an apprenticeship
- 1 participant was made redundant shortly after starting a graduate role
- 1 participant left their apprenticeship before it ended as they did not feel they were benefiting from it
- 1 participant decided to change jobs due to relocation

## 2.5 WHAT DO THE PARTICIPANTS HOPE TO DO NEXT?

**Table 4: What do the participants intend to do during 2016-17?**

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Continue in employment	9	15%
Change employment	5	9%
Enter employment	14	24%
Continue with undergraduate degree/complete undergraduate degree	18	31%
Complete a Masters degree/postgraduate qualification	6	10%
Start a FE course	2	3%
Start an apprenticeship	1	2%
Take a gap year	2	3%
Find voluntary work	2	3%
Total	59	100%

The table above gives an overview of what the participants reported they intended to do during the academic year 2016-17. We note that twenty nine (or half) of the participants intend to be in the labour market (both in employment and seeking employment) during this time.

## 2.6 FUTURE PROJECTIONS FOR THE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

**Table 5: Projected entry date into the labour market following Autumn 2015 interviews**

Date expected to enter labour market	Total (N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Already in employment	14	24%	24%
Ready to enter labour market (by expected year of entry)			
2016	15	25%	49%
2017	10	17%	66%
2018	9	15%	81%
2019	4	7%	88%
2020	1	2%	90%
Unknown at present	6	10%	100%
Total	59	100%	

The table above shows our projections for when the participants who took part in the latest interviews are likely to (exclusively) enter the labour market. The majority (88%) are expected to have entered the labour market by summer 2019. It should be noted that the majority of young people who have more severe visual impairments have chosen to go to university, and therefore we are likely to have limited evidence of participant experience of entering the labour market (and use of Access to Work) until these participants graduate in summer 2016 and beyond.

In the case of six participants their projected entry dates are more complex as at the time of interview they were still considering various options available to them such as whether to study for an undergraduate degree, or in the case of graduates, whether to go straight into the labour market or apply for a Doctorate.

## **SECTION B: PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – INDIVIDUAL TRANSITION PATHWAYS**

At the start of each interview participants were asked to provide an overview of what they had done since the previous round of interviews in autumn 2014. During this dialogue the researcher identified which components of the interview schedule were relevant to that young person. Their responses to these questions are presented in Sections 2 to 7. It should be noted that in some cases the participants were asked questions from more than one segment of the schedule, having pursued more than one pathway during that previous year.

### **3 FURTHER EDUCATION**

#### **3.1 PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE BEEN IN SIXTH FORM/FE**

##### **3.1.1 Participants who had been in FE in 2014-15**

**Table 6: What type of courses were the participants taking in 2014-15?**

	Total (N)
A-levels	1
BTEC Level 3	5
BTEC Level 2	1
Access to Higher Education	1
Total	8

At the time of the previous interviews in autumn 2014, 8 of the participants were still in FE. They were studying a range of courses, including A-levels, BTEC and Access to Higher Education.

##### **3.1.2 Transitions from FE**

Four of the participants had left FE by the time of the autumn 2015 interviews. Three had gone into higher education as they had originally intended while one had left the course as he was experiencing health problems. Four continued on their BTEC Level 3 courses with the intention of going into employment (3 participants) and HE (1 participant) the following academic year.

### 3.1.3 Experiences in FE

Two of the participants in FE, who were both studying vocational BTEC courses incorporating work placements, described contrasting experiences. In both cases the participants faced particular challenges as their visual impairment had deteriorated, leading them to change from being registered partially sighted to blind. Neither of the participants had ongoing support from the local authority sensory support education service, although in the case of the first participant, a specialist teacher (QTVI) who had previously worked with her met with the college before the course commenced.

The first participant was very happy with the arrangements the college were making to ensure she had accessible copies of lecture notes:

“They have still given me a laptop this year just like the year before. The tutors are printing stuff out, sending me PowerPoints before the lesson so I have got them. Anything I need is already pre-sent to me, so I have got it on email and a paper copy at the same time so I have got a choice”.

In contrast the second participant shared that she was very unhappy on the course and what was being offered in terms of support:

“...personally I hate it...it’s just like the atmosphere and everything and the lighting, and there is nothing they can do about the lighting. When I told them my eyesight was getting worse it was a case of ‘well what do you want us to do about it’. They weren’t giving me any options of what they can offer. I have got no idea, I am just as new to it as anyone else...”

Both participants had to take work experience placements as part of their courses. In the case of participant 1 this turned out to be a very positive experience:

“I did the week work experience. And then once I’d done it they offered me a chance to go in once a week for more work experience, and I finished doing that around Christmas so I did around 6-7 months there.”

In contrast the second participant had wanted to take a placement in a particular setting in line with the type of career she was interested in pursuing. However she reported that all the placements that she requested refused to take her because of her visual impairment:

“I want to do [...] care, but all the placements that I asked for recently have declined me because of my visual impairment.”

Since completing their college courses in summer 2016 Participant 1 is seeking employment whilst Participant 2 is in voluntary work to boost her confidence and CV.

### **3.2 A CASE STUDY: MAKING THE TRANSITION INTO FURTHER EDUCATION**

Between autumn 2015 and autumn 2016 we followed the experiences of “Matthew” as he prepared to transition into Further Education. Matthew’s experiences are summarised in the case study below.

In January 2016 Matthew reported that he was hoping to go to FE college the following academic year in order to study a course which would enable him to apply for Higher Education and eventually pursue his intended career.

Matthew had identified a particular college he was interested in attending and had applied and was waiting for an interview.

“I have filled in an application form and am going for an interview in March actually. I am quite looking forward to that.”

Matthew only had limited knowledge about the introduction of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP). He had not applied for one at that stage as he was unaware of its relevance to him and his current situation. He was encouraged after learning from the researcher that he could apply for an EHCP assessment:

“That’s better in some ways. I will have to contact my careers advisor actually because I don’t have a copy of it [an EHCP] and I will probably need it for college... I am actually going to look into it. Thank you for that!

In April he provided an update saying that he had applied for an EHC Plan with the assistance of his careers advisor and had also had an interview with the college he was hoping to attend. However he was discouraged by the attitude of the college staff they had met.

“But I was really disappointed, not very organised. They just seemed like ‘yeah we don’t care’ kind of people. I wanted to apply for [another college] but it’s a bit far...from where I am living it’s a bit far and I don’t know if I am entitled to transport and stuff. So I kind of just applied for [...] College which I am kind of regretting now.”

Shortly afterwards Matthew shared that there had been an administrative error and the information he and the careers adviser had provided during his initial interview at the college had been lost and therefore he had to repeat the process.

In September he received a letter to say that he was eligible for an EHC Plan and that he would receive further communication at a later date. He also started at college. In order to be able to get to and from college he had mobility training to become familiar with the necessary bus routes. He was also allocated a support worker. He however had some concerns about the preparations which had been made to ensure that he would be able to access the course:

“I’ll be having a support worker for the first couple of months but hopefully later on during the year she will be able to step back. I’ve met her today and she’s really nice. With the rest of support on the whole course we will just have to improvise as we go along. I’m still disappointed as this college is very disorganised. They haven’t sorted out my laptop and they said they would last week... I found today’s lesson quite interesting but frustrating at the same time. Several reasons, one because I was unable to take my own notes and my support worker had to do it, everyone was handed out [lesson materials] and I have a print copy but not a braille copy.”

At the time of the September interview it also emerged that while the participant had applied for an EHC Plan, he still had not been linked with his local authority sensory education support service. The research team helped link him with the relevant team. The local authority service then tried to make contact with the college to offer their specialist education services to help ensure the accessibility of the course. However Matthew reports that the sensory service staff were unable to establish communications with the relevant person at college. At this stage Matthew was still waiting for the plan EHC Plan to be processed.

Just after the first half term (in November 2016) Matthew updated the research team to say that he had decided to withdraw from the course

as he was finding the experience too stressful. He was disappointed as he had been looking forward to the course and had connected well with the other students. However he was continuing to face problems with accessing the course, and more recently had experienced problems with completing necessary assignments as they had proved inaccessible to him.

“I think the last straw was a [assignment] which I couldn’t do as it was a lot of graph work... I couldn’t do the questions so I couldn’t get a high mark. Too stressful for my liking, I stopped enjoying it, so that’s that with that.”

Originally his plan was to complete the course and then go into Higher Education. However Matthew’s experience in FE had put him off doing so as he was concerned that he would face similar problems in accessing the curriculum:

“How would I cope at uni, wouldn’t it be worse than FE?”



## 4 EMPLOYMENT AND APPRENTICESHIPS

### 4.1 PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE BEEN IN SOME FORM OF EMPLOYMENT OR VOLUNTARY WORK

#### 4.1.1 Overview of the types of role that the participants were in

**Table 7: Type of position that the participants were in: primary setting**

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Long term employment	12	63%
Temporary employment	5	26%
Self-employed	2	10%
Voluntary work	1	5%
Total	19	100%

The table above presents an overview of the primary employment status of the nineteen participants who had been in the workplace during the previous 12 months. Over half of these participants had been in long-term positions, a quarter in temporary positions. Two of the participants had been in self-employed and one in voluntary work. Some of the participants also moved between settings during the course of the 12 months, and this is discussed further below.

**Table 8: Types of sector the participants were working in**

	Total (N)
Care sector	3
Sales	3
Administration	2
Call centre	2
Marketing/Creative	2
Retail	2
Customer service	1
Entertainment	1
Horticulture	1
IT	1
Leisure industry	1
Total	19

The table above provides a summary of the sectors in which the participants were working. The participants had been working in a range

of sectors, including the care sector (e.g. childcare), retail and office based professions.

**Table 9: Characteristics of participants who were in employment (N=19)**

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	9
Female	10
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	2
Year 10	0
Year 11	17
Registration type	
Registered blind	2
Registered partially sighted	10
Registered – category unknown	1
Not registered/unsure	7
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	1
Large print user (point 16+)	5
Standard print user	14

The table above shows some key characteristics of the participants who have been in employment. In previous reports we have noted a skew towards a greater number of participants with less severe visual impairment in the labour market, while participants with more severe VI have tended to continue in higher education, and therefore are not looking for employment yet.

#### **4.1.2 Transitions made by the participants within employment pathways**

During the previous 12 month period the employment status had changed for some of these participants:

- 1 participant who had been offered a permanent job left after a short time as the role was not what he had hoped. Instead he moved into voluntary work/work experience before applying for teacher training

- 1 participant who was offered a permanent position reported that the job offer was subsequently revoked by another manager due to her visual impairment
- 1 participant changed employment and moved from retail to a call centre
- 1 participant who was working in the care sector left to go into higher education
- 1 participant who was working as a peripatetic music teacher left to go back into higher education
- 1 participant who had a permanent job was made redundant and moved into voluntary work whilst seeking a new position

#### 4.1.3 Travel to the workplace

The participants were asked how they had travelled to and from their workplace.

**Table 10: Main method used for getting to and from work**

	Total (N)
Walk	6
Public transport	5
Private car	4
Lift from family member	3
Taxi	1

The most common methods for the participants to get to and from work were by walking or by using public transport. Additionally, three of the participants occasionally received lifts from family members instead of walking/using public transport. The participant who reported using a taxi had this funded by Access to Work, whilst one of the participants who relied on lifts from family members said that he was going to investigate the funding available.

One participant who is now living in London explained how she benefits from using tube apps to help navigate her way around the city:

Researcher: How have you found navigating the tube?

Participant: Not too bad. I have got the app, got a few apps, otherwise I am a bit rubbish. The tube is... now I have got to know it, I find it much easier.

#### **4.1.4 Challenges faced in their work/voluntary role in relation to visual impairment**

The participants were asked about any challenges they face in their work or voluntary role in relation to their visual impairment and about any adjustments which are made to overcome these.

Thirteen of the participants reported not experiencing any challenges (although several explained minor adjustments that they made to ensure that this was the case) whilst six participants noted some particular challenges that they had faced.

Two of the six participants said that they had found it difficult reading small writing on printed material, while a further participant who had just started voluntary work in a charity shop was worried about using the till. In all three cases they had not identified any independent solutions to the challenges they were facing:

Researcher: You mentioned paperwork, how do you find all that?

Participant: I try and get on with it myself, but if I am struggling or can't see some of the words I just ask for help really.

Finally two participants reported that they sometimes have difficulties with cleaning responsibilities of their job. For example one of the participants who works in child care spoke of problems with clearing up after the children she is working with, and other staff members. lack of understanding about the effect of her visual impairment in this respect:

Because it's like when I first started, they have obviously got cleaners and stuff, but I was cleaning up after the babies and I missed a piece of orange on the floor, and this one girl was going mad at me about it. I was like if I saw it... I didn't leave it there on purpose!

When discussing the challenges they face some of the participants identified several examples of adjustments that they or their colleagues had made to minimise the challenges that they might otherwise face.

Three participants said that they were able to overcome challenges by either zooming in on the content of their screen or by making adjustments to their computer.

To be honest the majority of the time, well all of the time it's on the computer, and I can alter the settings so that I can physically view it without my straining eyes. I have had to zoom in from 100% to 125 because the system is that small, it kind of does my head in some times

Two participants said that they used a magnifier in their workplace to be able to read smaller text. Of particular note in this case however is one of the participants who had never been personally provided with a magnifier, and instead had been using one which had previously belonged to her grandparents.

Participant: "I do have a little magnifying glass, that's probably the size of a credit card and I just use that..."

Researcher: "And where did you get that magnifying glass from, do you remember?"

Researcher: "We had a few at home, I am guessing, well the grandparents used them, I don't know where we actually got them from, but we had a few at home because the grandparents used them in their later life."

Two participants reported benefiting from the fact that their employer had ensured that material was accessible to them. In one case this was something that the participant had requested and had informed their employer about. In the other case it was company policy to ensure that materials circulated could be accessed by staff:

They have mandatory rule now that any text has to be... because I work a lot from PDF files...they all have to be a minimum size 12 font. Even if I get sent something from global, I know if I print it out its size 12, or if I view it on the computer I can make it bigger myself. They are good. That's the only thing, the sizes of font that I struggle with and the brightness and stuff.

One participant who particularly struggles from tiredness as a result of his condition reported that his employer allowed him to have additional paid-breaks as way of adjustment.

A final participant for whom cleaning is a small but regular component of his role described how he had arranged with his boss to double-check the work that he had done:

..... after my shift I have been asking my supervisor to just walk around the bar and say to me if anything needs cleaning, so that's just safeguarding myself really.

#### **4.1.5 Progression within their organisation**

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

“Have you looked at the possibility of promotion within your current company? Could you tell me more about this?”

Three of the participants responded by saying that they had already been promoted within their roles and had further ambitions to be promoted again in the future. In contrast one participant, whilst he recognised there were opportunities to progress within the organisation, had not thought about pursuing these. A further participant reported that he was considering opportunities outside his current organisation as he viewed his employment situation to be unstable, whilst a final participant felt there weren't opportunities to progress and instead was looking to leave the organisation. Two of the participants were self-employed and therefore not able to seek promotion.

#### **4.1.6 Participants in voluntary work**

Three of the participants had been in voluntary work over the previous 12 months.

- 1 participant was gaining work experience in preparation for starting teacher training the following academic year. They were helping out in a local school working alongside the pupils. “Just observe lessons, I just help children out with their work. They have let me sort of half take a couple of lessons before. The teachers are really good, they do try and involve me as much as they can and they give me plenty of advice as well”

- 1 participant was gaining work experience before applying for jobs, following the completion of their university course. She was working at a charity shop in her local area and also helping out at a local school. “I do job search but I am mostly committed to the voluntary. Mostly because the job searching is experience that they want in most things”
- 1 participant was looking to boost their CV and fill their time whilst job hunting having been made redundant from their previous job. They were still seeking employment whilst in voluntary work and finding the experience beneficial. “I really enjoy it. I was there just before Christmas, I should have left last month, but the head of the company said to me can you stay on a bit longer because we really like what you have done...”

## 4.2 A CASE STUDY: MAKING THE TRANSITION INTO EMPLOYMENT

“Jennifer” had been NEET for a long period of time and earnestly seeking employment. She had engaged with various services such as her local job centre, a work programme targeted for individuals with disabilities and specialist services offered by the voluntary sector. She had applied for a number of jobs, but described being discriminated against by the employers once they knew she had a visual impairment.

“I have been for a couple of interviews...I got to one of them and they actually sent me away again because I was VI. They said that there wouldn't be anything they could do for me, yet they didn't even let me try. And I also started another job which they sent me away from”

Jennifer explained that whilst she was deemed employable by the member of staff who had conducted her original interview, when she turned up for her first day at work the manager on duty revoked the job offer.

Jennifer: “They did the interview and said I had the job, I mean I had my whole assistance package in place, and I got there and they said no.”

Researcher: “Did they talk to you at all about the adjustments that could be made?”

Jennifer: “No not at all.”

Researcher: “Did you have any ideas of things you could suggest to them?”

Jennifer: “Yes, oh yeah, I had lots of ideas, I had the Access to Work people involved trying to get them ready to come and they said they haven't got time.”

Researcher: “Was that the company saying they hadn't got time?”

Jennifer: “Yeah.”

Jennifer was left feeling very discouraged by the whole experience and identified that she was struggling with the financial implications of not being in employment:

“I have been finding that I am running out of money because I am going out and spending for something to do”



Jennifer had also made contact with specialist visual impairment services, but states “they haven’t been very supportive to be honest”. She reports receiving a particular negative response by staff at a visual impairment support service:

“Well I went to this one group and the lady, I said “have you got any ideas for VI people getting jobs?” and she said “I have sort of drawn a line for VI people getting jobs, I think it’s impossible”. I was like “oh ok – thanks”.

In response the researcher linked Jennifer to a report produced by RNIB which investigated the type of jobs that people with visual impairments in the UK are doing.

### 4.3 THE TRANSITION TO ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET

This section explores the experiences of 18 participants who have made or were preparing to make some form of transition in the labour market. This section therefore is about the process of job seeking and includes:

- Participants in apprenticeships moving into employment
- Participants changing jobs
- Participants who have been NEET and seeking employment
- Participants who have been in education and seeking employment

**Table 11: Characteristics of participants who had been looking for employment opportunities since autumn 2014 (N=18)**

Characteristic	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	9
Female	9
Cohort originally recruited into	
Year 9	4
Year 10	0
Year 11	14
Registration type	
Registered blind	6
Registered partially sighted	7
Registered – category unknown	1

Not registered/unsure	4
Reading format	
Braille/electronic user	2
Large print user (point 16+)	10
Standard print user	6

The table above provides a summary of the participants who were seeking to transition in the labour market. In particular, we note a higher proportion of participants in this position who have more severe visual impairment than in previous years. This is of particular significance as to date, very few of the participants in employment have felt their visual impairment sufficient to warrant applying for Access to Work.

#### **4.3.1 Type of job sought**

The participants were interested in pursuing a wide range of jobs and sectors. Their responses included:

- Sales
- Administrator
- Customer service
- Account manager
- IT
- Office worker
- Photographer
- Retail
- Travel and tourism
- Open to all roles within skills set and qualification

#### **4.3.2 The job search**

Fifteen of the participants reported that they have been actively looking for employment, while the other three were still investigating their options.

Four participants identified various sources of help they had benefited from during their search. This included:

- 2 participants who had help from their parents
- 1 participant who had help from friends
- 1 participant who had help from their tutor at college

My mum was helping me look online and stuff, she was looking online for me, and then sending me them, or she would ring for me.

Two participants revealed that they had completed a large number of applications, with only one having success:

I've applied for about 400 probably

I am applying for jobs every day, but sometimes the job I am applying for the closing date isn't until like two weeks' time or something, so I probably won't hear until the closing date passes. I have had some interviews, mainly phone interviews and then they say 'right come in for an interview'. I had one last week and they said that I wasn't eligible for what they wanted me for, but they have got another department that I might be good for.

Two participants shared that they had not started looking for opportunities yet, despite in the case of one participant having been NEET for a long period of time, while a further two participants felt that it was too soon to start looking properly as they still had to complete their respective courses.

I've had a look, there's a few jobs going, but they depend on me finishing the course, so can't really do anything with it yet.

One of the participants who was successful in applying for a job decided to leave it shortly afterwards as the job was not as he expected. Instead he found a volunteering opportunity.

A further participant spoke of adjustments which were made for him as part of the job application process. At his interview they also discussed with him possible adjustments which could be made:

In the process we had to do short English and Maths tests and they allowed me some extra time which I will get during the skills tests which we all take as well.

One participant had received specialist assistance from Action for Blind People to help her during her initial job search, whilst a further participant had been linked to a particular programme by the job centre.

Yeah, I had some help learning how to go through them [application forms] from Action for the Blind. They gave me telephone help in learning how to do job applications...It was quite useful, it was done over the course of a couple of weeks, just having telephone consultations, and they have offered further help for more specific fields if necessary, but some of the general advice is quite helpful.

They have put me on this talent match programme. Well I am going to find out more about it when I meet them next week.

Finally one participant had considered applying for apprenticeships but had concluded that she was over-qualified for the opportunities available.

#### **4.3.3 Support once in employment**

Nine of the participants said that they were aware of support that could potentially be available to them once in employment, referring to Access to Work. Two participants said that they were not aware of any specific types of support, whilst a final participant felt that they did not require any support.

### **4.4 PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE BEEN IN APPRENTICESHIPS**

Four participants reported that they had been in an apprenticeship at some point during the previous 12 months. These participants were working in a range of roles, which include:

- Administration
- Engineering
- Customer service
- Pharmacy

#### **4.4.1 Participants who failed to complete their apprenticeship**

Only one of the participants successfully completed their apprenticeship. The participants gave a variety of explanations for this, including Victoria who attributed her experiences directly to her visual impairment. This is explored in more detail in the following case study:

Case study: "Victoria" was successful in her application for an apprenticeship working as an administrator. Victoria is registered as severely sight impaired and relies on assistive technology to be able to use a computer. Therefore she applied for Access to Work to help provide the equipment that she would need. She reports that Access to Work took a long time in responding to her application:

Researcher: "Were Access to Work involved?"

Victoria: "Yes, but Access to Work were quite slow in getting there, getting stuff."

Researcher: "How far into the two months did they get involved?"

Victoria: "It was sort of a month into it."

Two months into her apprenticeship Victoria reports she was told by the company that they would be ending her contract, giving what they deemed to be her slow working speed as explanation. Victoria argued that her work rate had improved since receiving her Access to Work support:

Researcher: "So you were saying that obviously the apprenticeship they were saying you were too slow...how did you feel about it and how it was going?"

Victoria: "I thought in the end it was going quite well. The day I got sacked was the day that I did the most work, so it's like he was waiting until I did the work and then let me go."

Researcher: "How much of it was...obviously I don't want to put words into your mouth, but were you slowed down because you hadn't got the right equipment in place?"

Victoria: "Oh definitely, yeah, definitely."

Researcher: "Did you feel that you the skills to do..."

Victoria: "Oh gosh yeah, I think I could have done the job very much, very easily."

The second participant who left their apprenticeship after a year reported that he had personally made the decision to leave. He identified some challenges that he had faced with regards to his employers attitude towards his visual impairment. In particular the participant shared that his supervisor questioned how he could perform the role properly when he had a visual impairment:

Researcher: "When you say used it against you, how do you mean? In terms of attitude?"

Participant: “Yeah attitude. If I did something wrong he would bring that up, it was really annoying.”

Researcher: “Do you think it did affect you?”

Participant: “I don’t think it affected me in all honesty, it’s got to be something, it’s never affected me, I just get on with it, it’s never really affected me which is weird. When you tell people about it sometimes they think you must find it really hard, but you don’t... it’s how people view it isn’t it”

The third participant stayed in their apprenticeship for four months before making the decision to leave. They declined to explain their reason for leaving, but said that it was not related to their visual impairment.

#### **4.4.2 Travel to apprenticeships**

The participants were asked how they got to and from their apprenticeships. Two participants said that they walked the short distance to and from their workplace, one participant caught public transport and the other was supposed to have taxis provided by Access to Work.

Participant: “I was getting taxis, they said [Access to Work] they would put it on a... so I didn’t have to pay for it, like a...I can’t think of the word.”

Researcher: “An account or something?”

Participant: “Yeah an account so it comes out of the account, but they never did it.”

#### **4.4.3 Apprenticeship in relation to visual impairment**

The participants were asked whether they had faced any challenges in their role in relation to their visual impairment, and if they had, how they had overcome them.

Of the four participants, one felt that they did not really face any challenges relating to their visual impairment, while the other three identified examples of problems they encountered.

The participant who was asked to leave her role after a short time felt the main problem she faced was not having the right equipment and that that had slowed her down.

I thought in the end I was doing quite well. The day I got sacked I was doing the most work... I was slowed down without the equipment.

A participant who worked in a pharmacy found it difficult not being able to read the small writing on the packaging. She did not find a solution to this challenge before leaving the post after a short time:

Participant: "Sometimes I had to work a lot with prescriptions and some of the medicines I had to hand out, they had very small writing on them, and I had to check the expiry dates on a lot of them, and I am not very good with that area."

Researcher: "What happened with that, did you find a way around it?"

Participant: "A lot of the time I had to wear my glasses when I got put onto that area of work, my colleague usually took that up for me, with the expiry dates...I mean my glasses kind of helped, but not really."

A final participant, as reported earlier, had problems with his employer's attitude towards his visual impairment, and lack of understanding of how he could make adjustments to enable the employee to perform the role. The participant's response indicates that it affected his supervisor's confidence in his ability.

#### **4.4.4 ACCESS TO WORK SCHEME**

The participants were asked whether they had made contact with Access to Work, and what their experiences had been. Only one of the participants had applied for Access to Work. Of the three participants who had not, one did not believe they required any specialist support and two were unaware of the scheme.

The participant who had applied for Access to Work described her experiences of doing so.

Case study: When offered an apprenticeship position "Victoria" contacted Access to Work to arrange specialist support for the role. As part of this she had an assessment of needs which initially she described as positive.

Victoria: "I thought that was very good, I was very pleased with what they came up with, it was just getting someone to actually come and assist me."

Researcher: "So what did they suggest putting in place?"

Victoria: "Well they got me the Zoomtext to put on the computer, they were going to get me, they were trying to get me a wider screen but I don't think that turned up in the end."

Victoria reported that she did not feel very prepared for the Access to Work assessment and to know what type of support she would like, or could potentially request. In evaluating her experience further she concluded that she did not have the support allocation she required:

Researcher: "How prepared did you feel to meet with them and talk about the support that you would like to have in the workplace?"

Victoria: "Not very, because I didn't know what I could ask for. They didn't explain it to me what could help me."

Researcher: "How did the assessment work, was it just the assessor saying I will give you this, or was there a conversation?"

Victoria: "It was basically what have you got now at home, but they didn't really make me think about paperwork and reading that..."

Victoria also shared that in general she has lacked in confidence in discussing her visual impairment

Researcher: "How well equipped did you feel for talking about it yourself?"

Victoria: "I do struggle with it to be honest...I am not afraid to tell people now, whereas before I was...Just to tell how actually how bad my eyesight is...Now I know I need to tell people."



## 5 HIGHER EDUCATION

The experiences of the participants in Higher Education have been explored thoroughly in Hewett et al., 2015. This section provides an overview of the experiences of the participants in HE over the past twelve months – particularly with regards to their future plans and the support available to facilitate these.

### 5.1 PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE CONTINUED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sixteen participants who had previously been in higher education completed this year's interview. The table below shows the year in which they anticipated graduating. Over half of the participants expected to graduate that coming summer.

**Table 12: Planned date of graduation**

	Total (N)
2016	8
2017	3
2018	4
2019	1
Total	16

#### 5.1.1 Plans for after completing higher education

**Table 13: Plans for after completing university**

	Total (N)
Postgraduate course	5
Graduate job	5
Non-graduate job	1
Gap year	1
Self employed	1
Voluntary work	1
Undecided	2
Total	16

The participants had a wide range of plans for after they had completed university. Five hoped to stay on to take a variety of postgraduate courses and five were looking at graduate jobs. Two participants were still undecided about what they wanted to do and were considering either further study or a graduate position.

One participant intended to go into voluntary work at first as she was concerned by the limited amount of work experience she had:

I am sort of thinking, because our careers group have been really bad at signposting me to anything that they have got coming up on [university job page], it's all bars and shops and things like that, so my experience is pretty rubbish. So I am thinking I will take a year and stick to voluntary and try and get these things in that way, to get my experience up and go from there.

### **5.1.2 Contact with careers service**

Only five of the 16 participants in Higher Education had made contact with their institution's careers office during the previous 12 months. They gave various accounts of their motivations and experiences:

- 1 participant who was in the second of three years of his degree course had been in contact with the careers service as part of his search for an internship for the summer.
- 1 participant who was in the final year of his degree course had made contact with the careers service, but had found that they did not have the specialist knowledge he felt he required. This was a cause of frustration for him. "There is one lady and she was really good, she did her best but with her not being an actual specialist. I found this, not just with the university, but even with Connexions, they just chuck websites at you and fob you off, I know it's quite a strong way of putting it, but it is what they do. They don't really research... they don't send you email addresses. They just... you try and tell them how rubbish you feel and they make some sympathetic noises and that's it."
- 1 participant met with their university careers officer and reports finding that they were not able to provide any careers guidance of specific relevance to them as a student with disabilities. "I had a one hour meeting thing with them, and they basically went 'actually disability, we are not really very sure... can the student services team help' and I sort of went 'no, not really'."
- 1 participant in his final year had a meeting with the careers service to think about the type of career he would be interested in pursuing. "Yeah pretty helpful, I had a quick meeting to establish the sort of thing I would be interested in, and just arranged for them to email me if anything comes up. I haven't seen them often but I get email"

- 1 participant in his final year reported that he regularly received communication from the careers service, but was unable to review this due to the time pressures associated with his course and the difficulties he faced in managing his time. “I have, they send me emails and stuff, again I have not really got the time to follow up on all links that they send me because I have got worksheets due in every single week and they take me all week to do, I have got multiples of them, and I procrastinate quite badly, and I am trying to get over that, I have just not quite got the time.”

Those participants who had not made contact with the careers service were asked to give further explanation for this. Four of the participants said that they considered it too soon in their time at university to be investigating careers, while a further two participants although they had considered making contact had not found the time to do so.

Not yet, no, to be honest. I have a little bit more time to do that.

No, simply because as I say, I am thinking of doing a postgrad before getting employed, so I am thinking that it might not be relevant at this stage. I will probably be speaking to them next year.

Two participants had been interested in making contact with the careers service but had found that they were too busy to do so:

No, I haven't... I was meaning to last term, but I never ended up going to be honest, because there was lots of other stuff going on... But I am definitely going to go a couple of times before I finish... I was thinking of going, reading week is the week before Easter... and hopefully after.

Two participants identified careers advice that they had received directly from their department instead:

We have, yeah we have got various people in the department occasionally do sort of getting into psychology seminars and things. I think a lot of it to be fair is related to the degree, a lot of it tends to be further study and if you are going into this then you can do this course, I have sort of ruled out further study, I haven't studied enough over the last three years to think that I can honestly do more of it.

Two participants were on study years abroad during the academic year, making it difficult for them to access careers services.

Seven of the participants were also asked if they were aware if their careers service offered specialist guidance for students with disabilities, for example in terms of considering how best to declare their visual impairment. None of the participants were aware of any specific guidance tailored to students with disabilities, although in two cases they assumed that there would be:

No I haven't, but I presume they do but the disability services at [university] are usually pretty good, so I suspect if I were to contact and ask them about something they would be able to talk to the disability service as well.

### **5.1.3 Applications for graduate roles**

Only one of five participants who intended to graduate at the end of the academic year and enter the labour market had applied for a graduate role.

Two participants reported that they would have liked to, but did not feel able to at this stage as they did not have their grades available for completing the application form. In particular one of the participants highlighted how he had been delayed as a consequence of exam resits. The student in question had a number of modules to re-sit, and in almost all cases these re-sits could be directly attributed to challenges with the accessibility of his course.

I think the problem is because my resits and everything came in so late we didn't get the marks in towards the end of September, and then I have still got this one module which is a 20 credit module, which is sort of hanging over... So my... because obviously it all goes on expected grades, and at the minute that's dragging down where I am at... So anything I apply for my grades look really low. It's almost not worth... I don't think realistically I am likely to get anything with what I am currently showing.

A further participant had investigated graduate roles through the assistance of the organisation Blind in Business and had a very positive experience:

I went to see Blind in Business in London and heard about it, just to learn a bit more about grad schemes and what kind of things are

out there. So they showed me, they pointed me in the direction of lots of different things. I didn't really find anything that really sort of grabbed attention, where I thought 'oh yeah, I really want to do that'. So I thought if I wasn't 100% into it to just wait, because it's not something you have to do straight out of uni, you can do it a few years after. So keep it on the table as an option but not straight away, not right now.

#### 5.1.4 Activities to enhance CV

The participants were asked whether they had had the opportunity during the previous academic year to take part in any activities that may enhance their CV. Their responses are summarised in the table below:

**Table 14: Activities undertaken by participants in HE to enhance their CV**

	Total (N)
Placement as part of course	6
Voluntary work/Work Experience	5
Part-time job	2
Disabled leadership programme	1
None	2

Six of the participants had taken placements as part of their course. The arrangements of the placement varied between the participants. For example one participant took a short placement lasting around a month, one participant has attended his placement weekly throughout the majority of his degree course and two participants had taken yearlong placements.

Five of the participants said that they had undertaken some voluntary work/work experience. In four cases this directly related to the type of career that they were interested in pursuing. One of these participants shared how he found it challenging at times to secure work experience placements and felt that his visual impairment acted as a barrier in doing so:

...the tutors have tried to help me, but they have thrown the health and safety book at me, the tutors have not been able to do much. The problem is, and I am not blaming my tutors, because they can only do so much... They [organisations] sweet talk into thinking they are really concerned but they can't help, but really they don't want to help.

Two participants had had part time jobs during the previous twelve months. In one case this came about as a result of his university placement.

A further participant had successfully obtained a placement on a leadership programme aimed at disabled students, and had found the programme to be extremely beneficial:

They are really good. It was a three day course...they did all these workshops on leadership, and presentation skills and working in a team, and all this different stuff.

### **5.1.5 Experiences in higher education over previous year**

In the final question, participants in higher education were asked about their experiences at university during the previous year, and in particular how accessible they had found their course to be. Their responses have been grouped into various themes, as discussed below.

Nine participants highlighted their experiences of accessing reading material. This was particularly true for participants who were completing research projects such as dissertations. Six of these participants described more negative experiences during the past year:

- 1 participant avoided using the library as he found it difficult to access material
- 1 participant had delays in receiving accessible text as the member of staff who took responsibility for this had left the university and not been replaced in time
- 1 participant on a year abroad found reading material was not as readily accessible as in their home institution
- 1 participant was restricted by very small text in library books, although was able to overcome this using a magnifier
- 1 participant was delayed in receiving software funded by the university disability support office which would allow him to access mathematical content in research papers using his screen reader
- 1 participant was delayed in his research because of the length of time it had taken to obtain accessible copies of text from publishers

It's been fine, it's been great by and large, but the only thing is with some books that I am trying to get, some publishers take longer than usual and that obviously eats into the time we have got. So

sometimes I have to leave some books out because the publisher takes longer to approve it.

Four participants highlighted more positive experiences of accessing research material. In three cases the participants spoke of how beneficial it was being able to obtain electronic copies of text. A further participant had benefited from 'text to speech' software provided by his university which had enabled him to read PDF files he would otherwise have struggled to access.

Several of the participants also talked about the accessibility of the lecture material they received. Five spoke positively about how they received accessible material which enabled them to follow lectures, including one participant who did not receive the note-taker support he had expected due to staffing problems, but he was able to overcome this challenge because of well-prepared lecture notes. A further participant shared that it was university policy for them to be provided with electronic notes in advance of lectures.

It's been good so far, most it has been electronic, in fact all of it has been electronic, so I have been able to enlarge it when I want to.

In contrast three participants identified problems with their lecture material. One participant who had experienced problems in the previous two years of her degree described how she based one module choice on what she thought would be the most accessible options for her, rather than what she would have been most interested in.

Because this year all my module were elective, I sort of picked ones which are very text based, and don't have much stats and diagrams going on. So in that sense it's been quite straightforward, it's just read the slides and learn them...there was one module that was a choice between two and I chose it because of the accessibility of it. The other module I would have done anyway, so that's fine.

One participant described experiencing a 'nightmare' claiming the university would not provide the material in the format she preferred. A further participant shared that there had been delays in receiving his course notes which meant that he had not been given them by the department until the end of the semester. Instead his research assistant had been making modifications to electronic lecture slides on his behalf

to ensure they were accessible to him (this was beyond the research assistant's job description):

Researcher: "Have they been getting the lecture notes to you in time to have them in lectures?"

Participant: "No, not really. My lecturers definitely [not] last semester, I am not sure about this one, have not been very good in putting them up on [VLE] in advance... So I have been sat with my note-taker, because he's also my research assistant, so he's been sat before the lectures going through and downloading slides and doing it that way. I went in the last week of term and was given two big folders full of lecture slides for the whole semester, which is a bit like 'it's a bit late now'. So they are just cluttering up my table"

Five participants discussed mixed experiences with regards to taking exams. Two participants spoke positively of the adjustments that were put in place:

Very good – very, very good. They let me use my laptop and have a reader/scribe in the exam which was certainly what I wanted...I have to explain to them what I want beforehand, but that doesn't take long to do.

However, three participants had more negative experiences, including:

- 1 participant who was not informed correctly of his alternative room allocation, which was 'disruptive' on the day of the exam
- 1 participant who had problems associated with his visual impairment on the day of the exam, but the university did not take these into account with regards to mitigating circumstances
- 1 participant who had problems with various aspects of her support agreement not being met, including not providing an accessible paper

Four participants in particular praised the non-medical support that they had received. One of these participants described the system that she and her research assistant had adopted when working together on her dissertation. This is explored in further detail in the case study below.



## Case Study: Working with a research assistant

“Martha” is registered blind and a braille/screen reader user. At the time of interview she was in the final year of her degree course and working on her dissertation. Her chosen course is heavily text based and therefore requires a lot of reading.

Martha shared that she was confused at the start of the project regarding how best to work with her assistant:

I was really confused about how I was going to do it at the start of the year. So I went to my dissertation supervisor with my research assistant, and because I wasn't sure how I was going to do it...

Positively her research assistant had worked with students with visual impairment before and was able to offer some suggestions:

So my research assistant said that what she done before with a visually impaired student before was she would... together they would browse shelves, or go on the online library for text, and then instead of having every single book they found made accessible only to be discarded if it was irrelevant, she would go through the index and find any relevant passages and then read those passages to the student, and then the student would say whether they wanted that passage or that chapter or that book or whatever made accessible... So that's basically how I have been doing it.

Martha spoke to her dissertation supervisor for approval for this method of collaborative working:

So I went to my dissertation supervisor and explained this is what I would be doing, that in no way is she going to be writing for me, but she is going to be, we are going to be finding books, she's going to be reading back to me, and then I am going to be deciding whether sections are relevant or not. That's basically how we have been doing it. It's working well so far...

Martha has also found her own techniques for managing the large amounts of information she has to process as part of her dissertation:

...what I do then is, when I get the section made accessible and emailed to me, I read through and make a separate document

just full of notes and page numbers for that chapter, and I mainly just work from my own notes, I don't really go back to the original documents. If there are chapters they are maybe 40-50 pages long, and it's a lot to try and manage for like one quote. I mean sometimes I have to go back and scroll through loads of pages to find one bit, but that's what I am trying to do at the moment, cut it down and find the relevant bits, make notes and then work from my own notes.

## 5.2 PARTICIPANTS WHO TRANSITIONED INTO HIGHER EDUCATION SINCE AUTUMN 2015

Twelve participants had sought to make the transition into higher education since autumn 2015.

**Table 15: Characteristics of participants who have transitioned into university during the academic year 2015-16 (N=11)**

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

The table above provides a summary of some key characteristics of the participants who had made the transition into university during the academic year. In particular we note four participants from Year 11 who were only just about to start on their university courses, aged 21. The reasons behind their delayed entry into HE can be explained by the following:

- 1 participant went firstly into an apprenticeship before being offered a permanent role. His organisation have offered to pay for him to study part-time for his degree.

- 2 participants had already started studying at different institutions but had problems with the accessibility of their respective courses.
- 1 participant spent two years in sixth form, followed by two years in FE and then a gap year abroad
- 1 participant for the Year 10 cohort and 1 from the Year 11 cohort started on postgraduate courses.

## 6 NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING (NEET)

Eight of the 59 participants who took part in the autumn 2015 interviews were NEET at the time of interview. Their experiences are investigated further in this section.

### 6.1 OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE BEEN NEET

**Table 16: Characteristics of participants who have been NEET (N=8)**

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

The table above presents some key characteristics of the participants who were NEET at the time of the autumn 2015 interviews.

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

The participants were asked the approximate length of time that they had not been working, in education or training (or if they were now in employment, how long they were NEET for). This information is important as it could be anticipated that many young people would be

NEET after completing their courses and before finding their first job simply due to the length of time the application process can take. The key question, therefore, is how does this translate into the length of time that they have remained NEET. Their responses are presented in the table below.

**Table 17: Length of time participant has been/was NEET**

	Total (N)
Less than 3 months	2
3-6 months	2
6-12 months	0
Over 1 year	4
Total	8

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

**Table 18: Overview of participants who have been NEET for 6 months or less (up to autumn 2015)**

	Registration type	Preferred format	Details
1	Partially sighted	Standard	Participant left education 18 months previously. He spent 9 months volunteering before getting a temporary seasonal position in retail. After this position ended he became NEET and at the time of interview was looking for suitable positions to apply for.
2	Blind	Electronic	Participant left education the previous academic year. He planned to set up working self-employed and was still setting up his business at the time of interview.
3	Not registered	Standard	Participant had been working in an apprenticeship but had decided to leave before the end as he was no longer enjoying it and did not feel he was benefiting from it. At the time of interview he was looking for other apprenticeship opportunities as well as jobs.
4	Partially sighted	Large	Participant had been in Higher Education but had had a very challenging time. He had started to repeat the first year but the problems he previously encountered persisted, at which point he questioned his motivation for getting a degree. At the time of interview which was shortly after he had left university he was developing his ideas for his future career.

Positively in the case of the first three participants they appear to have been relatively close to the labour market, and all were confident of finding alternative employment opportunities. In contrast, the four participants who had been unemployed for one year or more appeared to be a lot further from the labour market. Their individual experiences are summarised below:

**Table 19: Overview of participants who have been NEET for one year or more (to autumn 2015)**

	Registration type	Preferred format	Details
5	Blind	Large print	Participant has been NEET since leaving FE college over two years previously. Since then he has been unsure of what he would like to do and has not been actively seeking employment. He is living independently and receiving disability related benefits. He has engaged with his local job centre who have directed him towards support specific to people with disabilities.
6	Blind	Large print	Participant has been NEET since withdrawing from HE after the first term of his course three years previously. Since then he has been unsure of what type of career he would like to pursue. He has not signed on at his local job centre.
7	Partially sighted	Large print	Participant has been NEET since completing a Level 2 course at college. He had initially hoped to take a Level 3 qualification but did not have the required GCSEs to do so. Since leaving the course he has been volunteering – something which he enjoyed. He recently decided to stop volunteering and is now NEET. He has engaged with his local job centre. He lives independently and receives disability related benefits.
8	Blind	Large print	Participant has been NEET since leaving their Level 3 course prematurely three years previously after having difficulties accessing the course. He has been actively seeking employment and voluntary positions. During the previous 12 months he has been offered employment but had these offers subsequently retracted, reportedly due to his visual impairment.



What is particularly noticeable with this second group of young people is that they have on average more severe visual impairments than the first group who had been NEET for six months or less. Three of the participants reported a continued sense of resignation over several interviews with what they are doing and a developing acceptance that they may never work.

### **6.1.2 Careers guidance**

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

Two of the participants responded saying that they had received some careers guidance, although in one case they described it as 'limited' support through the job centre. In the other case they had been part of a disability work programme.

Researcher: "So obviously part of the idea of the Work Programme is to try and help equip you for work... have they done anything like that?"

Participant: "They have helped me with interview skills and they are helping me come up with ideas of what I want to do."

Researcher: "So have you found it helpful in any way?"

Participant: "Oh yeah definitely, they are very supportive."

A further participant had received specialist support through Action for Blind People and the job centre to help them with things such as her CV. She did however think she would benefit from additional careers advice. Previously she had engaged with her universities careers service, but had found that they did not provide appropriate guidance for students with disabilities:

They did a course for everyone that was run by the careers service and there were a couple of meetings, but the big problem was they weren't very good at dealing with the disabled. That was a problem for most disabled students they found.

### **6.1.3 Support received through local job centre**

Five of the participants who are NEET said that they had been receiving some support through their local job centre. The experiences of two of the participants are presented below:

Participant 1 is partially sighted and a large print user and has been NEET for over 1 year . She reported that she goes to the job centre every 6 months. At these meetings the job centre staff will establish the activities she has been involved in (which in her case over the previous 12 months was voluntary work) and to establish whether there had been any changes to her visual impairment. “They ask me what I am doing, if I am still volunteering, how many hours I am doing it for, what my eyesight is like, what I see myself doing in the future and [advise] if there are any schemes out there which would be of use for me.” The participant also shared that the job centre recommended to her an apprenticeship opportunity, but she felt unable to apply for it because of the potential consequences for entitlement to the benefits she receives:

“There’s a youth based scheme where you started off as an apprentice for six weeks and you’d get £100 a week for it, but there wasn’t any guarantee at the end of it that you would actually get a job...I did look into it, but it was the fact that where I am now and what I am getting...this is going to sound like such a bum thing to say, but I get housing benefit and things like that to obviously help pay for the house that I am. If I go for that scheme there’s not a job actually at the end of it, it’s not guaranteed, and it’s the fact if I was to go for it for them 6 weeks I would lose all the money for the house and I would be getting £100 a week from there, so I wouldn’t be able to provide for myself. I’d lose the house and everything.”

Participant 2 is registered blind and a large print user and has been NEET for over 1 year. When asked whether he received support from the job centre he responded by saying “Yeah. They are useless, absolutely useless.’

He felt that both they and the work programme he was referred to did not provide the type of support he needed, particularly in terms of thinking about the type of work he might be able to do.

“...last year I went there and said ‘look I want to do something’ and I weren’t in there literally two minutes... I rang up a couple of days before because I made an appointment. Job done. Went there, they write stuff ‘I will send you a letter through the post’, just fobbed me off to someone else. Didn’t have time to talk about what I want to do. Referred to this place... I can’t remember what type of place, but went there, seen this bloke, friendly and all that but again not helpful. I think

what it was, he wanted to know about me and my eye conditions so I gave him a list and I think he was a bit thrown by my eye conditions. He just said 'oh nothing round here... only alternative is you will have to move to [neighbouring city] or whatever.'

He reports that he had not had any contact from the work programme since his initial consultation and that he is not required to go into the job centre to review his process.

Participant: "No I don't bother. They just leave me be, leave me to it."

Researcher: "How do you feel about that?"

Participant: "In one way I am glad I am not pestered, but in another way it would be nice if I had a hand...here's something...what do you think about this. It would be nice but you know, yeah."

#### **6.1.4 Participants unemployed for over twelve months – additional questions**

Three participants who had been unemployed for 12 months or more were asked some additional questions. The questions were taken from the Network 1000 project, and focused on:

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

Possible responses were provided to the researcher for coding purposes, but these were not used to prompt the participants. These questions were posed to three participants who had been unemployed for over 3 months, and had been seeking work.

##### **6.1.4.1 What would help you to get a job?**

The participants were asked what they thought would help them get a job. One participant identified an improvement in their vision and improved attitudes of employers. A second participant thought they would benefit from improved ways of finding out about jobs. The third participant did not know.

Getting my eyesight back, but that's not going to... More understanding, people understanding really. Knowing that blind people can actually do something

I reckon probably a bit more help actually sitting down with me going through, because I think there might be things I am missing

when looking... Yeah just a bit more helping looking. I mean obviously like I said, probably a bit more encouragement from someone as well.

#### **6.1.4.2 What stops you getting a job?**

The three participants were also asked what they thought stops them getting a job. One participant highlight a lack of jobs relevant to their qualifications, low motivation and a lack of encouragement from others. A second participant highlighted her visual impairment, attitudes of employers and a lack of understanding from employers about what people with visual impairment are capable of doing. The final participant felt restricted by a lack of jobs in his area and the number of hours that he would be able to work (the medical condition which causes his visual impairment also results in fatigue).

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

Finally the participants were asked how likely they thought it was that they would be in paid work in the next twelve months. One participant thought it 'likely', one 'unlikely' and a final participant 'very unlikely' with the most positive response coming from the participant who had been unemployed the least amount of time. We note falling levels of confidence amount these participants the longer they are out of work. For example, the participant who had responded 'unlikely' this year had the previous year had responded to same question by saying "I am hoping it's likely, I will say likely, yeah be positive".

## 7 SEND REFORMS

Participants not already in employment were given the following introduction to recent SEND reforms and in particular, Education Health and Care Plans.

“The government has recently introduced Education Health and Care Plans which have replaced Statements of SEN which you may have had when in school. The EHC Plans now cover support for young people with SEN up until age 25. We are interested to find out more about what you know of the EHC Plans”

**Table 20: Were you previously aware of the introduction of the new EHC Plans?**

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	9	22%
No	32	78%
Total	41	100%

The participants were firstly asked whether they were aware of the introduction of EHC Plans. Only nine of forty one participants Those participants who had heard of the introduction of EHC Plans generally had low levels of knowledge of what these new plans were and their personal relevance to them.

I was aware that it changed, but I don't think it affects me

I heard briefly about them, but I am not too sure what the implications are

One participant shared that he had been advised not to apply for a plan because by the time it was implemented he would be in higher education:

Yeah, I was actually advised not to follow up because I was told at the time I wouldn't be entitled to it for long after I got it. So the process of getting it wasn't worth having it...

**Table 21: Were you aware that you could apply for an EHC Plan up until the age of 25?**

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	4	10%
No	37	90%

Total	41	100%
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Only four of the participants were aware that the new Education Health and Care Plans extend to the age of 25 for those in education (other than HE) and training.

Yeah, I knew that they last longer than the statements did, but I didn't know if I would make use of it. It's one of those things where I don't know what I will do afterwards... I probably will just stay in education afterwards to get a Master's degree, just because I don't really have any plans!

The participants made various other responses in relation to this news. Five participants either requested further information or indicated that they would conduct their own further research into EHC Plans.

Participant: Can I get one now?

Researcher: Not whilst you are in HE...

Participant: Oh that's a shame

Two participants noted a lack of information and appeared disappointed that they had not been informed of EHC Plans beforehand.

They haven't really publicised them anywhere. I think because they have had all the cuts, you know DSA and Access to Work and stuff like that, I think everyone has been caught up in that and that's where the campaigning and publicity has been

Finally two participants responded cynically to the concept of EHC Plans and questioned how beneficial they would be:

I think these documents telling of disability is just a way for people to not talk to the actual person about it. I think if you have this document detailing everything, it's a way for people to go 'oh I don't have to ask them what they want, or ask if they need anything, I can just look at this perfect document that will tell everything that they could possibly need and everything that I need information on'. I personally don't like them, because I feel it takes a bit of the personal help away from things. If I have one of those in employment, employers would use it as 'this tells us what the person needs, we don't need to talk to the person at all'. No, you need to talk to me about something.

I had a funny feeling you were going to say that, so basically they are trying to monitor us all!

In Section 3.1 we present “Matthew’s” experiences of applying for a EHC Plan as part of his transition into FE college.

## 8 FUTURE PLANS

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

- Phase 1: 2009-2011 - Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Phase 2: 2012-2015 - Nuffield Foundation
- Phase 3: 2015 onwards - Thomas Pocklington Trust

The study aims to track the experiences of the participants as they continue their transition towards the labour market. Over 60 of young people remain active participants in the project.

We continue to apply our research findings in more practical ways, such as by developing resources to help both young people with visual impairment navigating various transitions and those professionals supporting them.



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