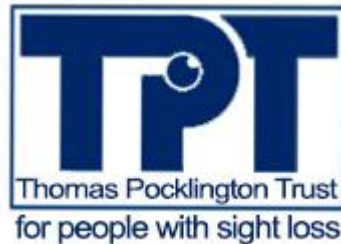


**UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM**



The Transition Experiences of Young People with Vision Impairment aged 21 to 24

**Briefing one of findings to November 2017
Current settings and activities of participants in the Longitudinal
Transitions Study**

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Overview

This is one of two briefings reporting on the latest findings of the University of Birmingham Longitudinal Transition Study, looking specifically at the experiences in education, the workplace, voluntary work, and those who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

Key to the recent findings is that participants have inched closer to the labour market, however once analysed further there are key areas that require consideration when developing policy. The key findings are:

- Just over a fifth (21 per cent) of participants are either NEET or in long term unpaid voluntary work
- Some experienced delays accessing the labour market, as it took them longer to complete higher and further education courses.
- Some are in unsecure employment
- A number became NEET for an extended period of time when leaving Higher Education (HE)
- Young people with vision impairment often choose to take on unpaid voluntary roles citing reasons such as having limited work experience
- Several participants returned to HE when they didn't find work
- Support from Access to Work, which supports individuals with disabilities in employment, is inconsistent. Awareness is low among young people with vision impairment on what it is, and what support it can offer.

About the research

The study began in 2009 to follow the journey of approximately 80 young people with vision impairment, from education into employment.

This briefing reports on the latest findings. In total 52 of the original participants were interviewed over the phone. They were asked the most relevant sets of the questions to their circumstances, therefore not all answers total 48. The participants were contacted on two occasions during 2017, and in that time, many had made a transition or even multiple transitions between settings. In this briefing, differentiation is made between the number students of their original and final reported setting of participants when last interviewed.

Moving on

The aim of the research is to follow young people with vision impairment as they make their way into employment, it is therefore important to understand the different transitions and pathways taken to achieve this:

- Two thirds had made a transition (65 per cent), the remainder continued with what they were doing the previous year
- As some of the participants graduated the percentage in HE dropped
- There was a slight increase in those in employment from 23 to 31 per cent
- There was also a slight increase of those NEET from 12 to 17 per cent.

NEET

Twenty participants reported that they had been NEET or in unpaid voluntary work at some point during the previous 12 months. Some had made the transition from NEET;

- **Two** moved into employment
- **Two** went into FE or training
- **One** moved into paid work experience.

While six young people transitioned from HE to NEET.

Higher Education

A number of participants left or took a break from HE undergraduate study:

- **Three** had a year in industry or abroad
- **Five** moved to a masters/postgraduate qualification
- **Eight** continued with university/HE course
- **Six** became NEET
- **One** moved into employment.

The study will continue to monitor the transition of the participants as they leave HE and seek to enter the labour market and is particularly interested to see whether those that subsequently become NEET have found employment.

Employment

- **25** participants reported being employed at some point during 2017

- **13** in long-term roles
- **Nine** in short-term positions
- **Three** in part-time voluntary work.

There was also movement seen by those who had previously reported being in employment

- **Six** had changed employment
- **Two** were in fluctuating employment
- **Five** continued in the same employment.

Looking at participants experiences

This part of the study explored some of the experiences of participants in the three main settings of university, employment and NEET.

Experiences of Higher Education

Accessibility

Participants were asked about their experiences at university over the year and how accessible they found their course. Access to learning materials continues to be an important theme.

“There were a few issues at the time getting hold of the text, mainly because a lot of my modules are literature. I struggled with that.”

An important finding is the role of institutions in making appropriate anticipatory and individual adjustments to promote as inclusive a learning experience as possible.

Several of the participants referred to specific challenges they faced in terms of either their vision impairment, including problems with fatigue when having to do a lot of reading, which can take considerably longer with a vision impairment.

Moving on from university

One of the important aspects of university is preparing for what happens next.

Careers advice

Just under half of the total participants in HE had contacted their university career service. Those that hadn't said they thought it wouldn't be of help, and they would be better doing the research themselves.

“I was briefly in contact with them leading up to applying. We get a year in industry officer who we meet up with, and they give you help with your CV and interview practice and stuff like that. I am still in contact with her at the moment actually.”

Activities to enhance CV

Positively, 80 per cent said that they had undertaken activities to enhance their CV. The roles they engaged with varied, including voluntary work, part-time work, work experience, sport and committee members.

“I have been doing quite a lot of music teaching. I do some teaching for the City Council on Saturday’s and then I have a number of private students.” (Paid work)

“I have been [volunteering] at [local hospital] since February, so I am there two hours a week, it’s been six or seven months now... It’s amazing, I have really enjoyed it. I like the fact that I have got the opportunity to do it. It’s only two hours a week.” (Voluntary work)

Experiences of work

There were **25** participants who reported the workplace as their primary setting at some time during 2017.

Paid employment

22 participants reported being in paid employment (including two on a paid placement), working in a broad range of sectors and settings - including; accounting and finance, retail, customer service, marketing and communication, administration, performing arts, IT, bar work and some individuals going into media, mechanics, teaching, child care, amongst others.

“I wanted to see whether I could do it basically, because I would never have known if I could do it or not if I hadn’t of tried. My philosophy is do it, see if you can do it, and if you can’t then, you know. So I tried it and I did manage it, very difficult though because I had to find ways around things, because I couldn’t see the till, so I had to explain to the people I was working with that I couldn’t see it. So we worked a way around it.” (Bar worker)

In previous reports a skew has been noted towards a greater number of participants with less severe sight impairment entering into the labour

market, while their peers severely sight impairment have tended to continue in HE, and therefore had not been looking for employment.

In 2017 there has been a larger proportion of participants with a severe vision impairment in the labour market, having graduated from HE. This has been reflected in multiple applications for Access to Work.

Participants in unsecure paid employment

Two of the participants who have been in the labour market, (**one** for over three years, and **one** for over five years), found it challenging to find a long-term secure position. Instead, they relied on short-term contracts and casual work, and had not had the opportunity to progress in a role.

Two further participants were working short-term contracts, but they noted that this was typical for the industry in which they were working.

One participant had been employed on a short-term paid work placement, aimed specifically at young graduates with disabilities. A final participant, who had undertaken voluntary work to gain experience, was offered a paid temporary contract by the same company.

Participants in voluntary work

Three participants had been engaged in long-term voluntary work which they did not anticipate leading directly to paid employment. **Two** of these participants were registered as blind and one as partially sighted, all required assistive technology to use a computer, or without visual aids required very large print.

Two of these participants were searching for paid employment opportunities alongside volunteering, while the **third** enjoyed volunteering as an activity, but didn't feel prepared to enter paid employment at this stage.

As reported earlier **five** participants also in HE reported taking part in some form of voluntary work:

- **Two** had undertaken voluntary work specific to the type of career which they were interested in
- **One** had taken on a committee role for a society they were part of
- **One** had participated in charity work at their university
- **One** had taken on various roles based on the broad theme of promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities

All the participants spoke positively about the opportunities that they had taken, and viewed them as a positive contribution to their CV.

Experience in employment and voluntary work

Questions were asked to understand participants experiences of being in work either in a paid or voluntary capacity.

Length of time in current role

Of the **22** participants 45 per cent (**ten**) have been in employment for a year or more. These ten young people have been judged as successfully navigating the transition into employment. However, their experiences will continue to be assessed.

Travel to the workplace

The most common methods to get to and from work was found to be walking or using public transport. One participant reported travelling to work by taxi, provided by Access to Work.

Journeys are often more complex and take longer than they would by car. For example, one participant explained their journey required two buses and one tram, another faces a one-hour journey requiring two buses that would otherwise would be a ten-minute car journey.

Declaring their vision impairment

Participants were asked about challenges they faced in their role in relation to their vision impairment, and of any adjustments made to overcome these. The open responses that they gave were analysed and several themes identified:

- **Nineteen** reported that they took the decision to declare their vision impairment to their manager
- **Two** actively decided against this
- **One** decided initially not to, until they faced any challenges.

A small number identified specific adjustments made by their employer to help them undertake their role. One participant who had been employed by the organisation for several years, had benefited from adjustments including enlarged menus in the canteen and a company policy of a minimum font size, noted how positive her experience had been:

“They pride themselves on supporting the needs of everyone in the building, and they are actually amazing on that.”

One person had a mentor, as standard part of their placement programme, to help to overcome challenges in accessing information and issues specific to their vision impairment.

Challenges faced in their work/voluntary role in relation to vision impairment

Participants identified adjustments they personally could make to undertake their role, rather than relying on adjustments from their employer.

Seven participants identified ways to use technology to access information. Some developed strategies to overcome challenges, for example one participant working in a shop, spent time to memorise the buttons on the till they used.

“I take a magnifier in and basically when it’s quiet I can sit and memorise.”

Challenges identified by the participants included:

- **Five** participants identified health and safety or welfare issues
- **Two** identified struggling with either the amount or the type of work. In one case the employer accommodated by reducing the number of hours worked, and the other they moved to a different role within the organisation, that required less time using a computer
- **One** found that the software was not compatible with the computer system. This was mainly overcome by using a different laptop, but for certain tasks help had to be relied on
- **One** person required a larger monitor, that the company was reluctant to provide because the participant was on a temporary contract
- **One** spoke positively about their broader role, but expressed some frustration not being able to carry out some task independently.

NEET

Twenty participants had been NEET at some point during the year. When comparing the participants who have been NEET against key characteristics of all the participants in the study there appears to be a slight bias towards participants who have a severe vision impairment.

Of those that were NEET at some point during the year, 85 per cent were registered as blind or partially sighted, compared to 70 per cent of the rest of the participants. Of the same group, 80 per cent had a preferred reading format of braille/electronic or large print, compared to 67 per cent of the other participants.

When making these comparisons, however, it is important to remember the small sample size.

Length of time participants have been NEET

Participants were asked approximately how long they had been NEET for. This is important as, for example, the research shows many young people became NEET after completing their HE courses, which could be attributed to the length of time the application process can take. A key question is therefore how this translates into how long they remain NEET and if this differs to the experiences of young people without disabilities.

The length of time the participants had been NEET varied considerably, but significantly of the eighteen who provided this information, of these:

- **Five were** NEET for less than six months
- **Five were** NEET for between six and 12 months
- **Eight were** NEET for over a year.

To explore further the reasons why the participants became NEET, the experiences of those who have been NEET for a short time (less than 6 months) are contrasted with those who had been NEET for over a year.

The different accounts demonstrate that a lot of movement has been made by the participants in the labour market. While some young people were only NEET for a short time, in several cases this is because they have moved on to casual contracts.

A small number of participants actively decided not to pursue employment, instead preferring to undertake voluntary work. Of concern is one participant who is not engaged in any activities which might help them to progress towards the labour market since leaving Further Education (FE), such as receiving support through the job centre or independently searching for work opportunities. Positively one participant who had been NEET for over four years successfully secured their first job during 2017. They partly attributed this success to one-to-

one support from a voluntary organisation who helped them identify and apply for jobs.

Overview of participants who had been NEET for 6 months or less

Participant three is blind, and her preferred format is braille and electronic. She had previously been in FE but withdrew from the course after facing some challenges in accessing the course material. Once she left the course she was undecided about what to do next and considered options such as further study or going into self-employment. After spending several months as NEET she eventually returned to FE at a different college.

Participant five has been in a variety of roles since completing an apprenticeship after his GCSEs. He was previously made redundant from a permanent post, and since then had been seeking a new job. After a brief period NEET, by the time of interview he was in a temporary role but looking for long-term positions.

Participant six is partially sighted and his preferred format is large print. He completed a degree. He was unsure what type of work he wanted to go into, but after several months volunteering at a school decided to apply to be a teacher. He was accepted onto the course but withdrew after a short time on the course. Since then he has been NEET and has applied for a range of jobs, but by the time of interview had not been successful in securing a position.

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

Participant two had been studying in FE, is registered as blind and her preferred format is large print. She successfully completed her course but had experienced several personal challenges and therefore did not start looking for employment opportunities as originally intended. At the time of interview, she had recently started volunteering, and was starting to consider looking for employment. She is NEET and not applying for jobs.

Participant six is registered as blind and her preferred format is large print. She had been NEET since completing a degree course the previous academic year. She had been in voluntary work and applying for a variety of jobs but had not been successful in securing a job. At the time of interview, she was still volunteering and seeking paid employment. She is NEET and still applying for jobs.

Participant eight is partially sighted, and her preferred format is large print. She had been NEET for almost all the time since graduating from university in the previous academic year. She did have a paid job for a short time, but the role was made redundant. She had been volunteering at an organisation linked to the field she was interested in working in. After several months volunteering there they offered her a temporary paid opportunity. At the time of last interview, she was still in this role, but was searching for a long-term position.

How participants used their time whilst NEET:

- **Seven** volunteered
- **Five** applied for jobs
- **Four** were dealing with personal circumstances (including **three** trying to find somewhere to work)
- **Three** undertook casual work
- **Two** travelled or participated in social activities
- **Two** pursued hobbies
- **One** researched career and study options.

Employment related benefits

- **Two** participants reported that they were receiving Job Seekers Allowance
- **Eight** reported that they were receiving Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

Five participants had not applied for any benefits at all – three who were in casual employment, one who was on leave of absence from HE and one who had been NEET for several months. Instead they were being financially supported by family members.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of 52 young people with vision impairment as they make the transition into employment from education. Whilst the numbers of participants are relatively low, several recommendations can be made.

The research shows a complex picture of young adults trying to navigate the world of work and pathways into employment. The research shows a high level of resilience amongst most of the participants, however, it does appear that they are taking a longer time to get into work, and to secure long-term employment than their peers and also highlights that

some young people who are long-term NEET are not accessing services that could help them access the labour market.

Policy recommendation

- Review of the support students with vision impairment receive at university to help prepare them for the labour market
- More intensive targeted support from specialists with an understanding of vision impairment to get people long term NEET into the work place
- Targeted support to communicate with young people with vision impairment about the importance of Access to Work getting them into the work place.

About the research

The study was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) and the Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham.

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
- Identify the roles of professionals involved
- Identify the factors that improve or reduce a young person's chance of gaining employment.

This is a briefing of the full technical report from the findings of the first half of stage three of the study. It looks at the transition experiences of young people from Higher Education, and NEETs into employment. Phase three commenced in November 2015 and is funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust until 2019. Previous stages have been funded by RNIB and The Nuffield Foundation. Technical reports and briefings are available from these stages at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/index.aspx>.

The research findings continue to be applied in practical ways, including developing resources to help young people with vision impairment navigate various transitions and ensuring that there are professionals supporting them.

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