

# Lost in Transition: The post-school experiences of young people with vision impairment



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In England, there are over 30,000 children and young people with vision impairment; a low incidence group who often have limited representation within society.
- Inclusion of young people with vision impairment is impacted by a number of enablers and barriers within education, employment and society generally.
- Young people with vision impairment face a number of pinch points in their journeys as they transition into adulthood and employment, including complex transitions into higher education and lack of support accessing the labour market.
- Key recommendations for policymakers to consider to ensure that young people with vision impairment have an equitable educational experience and are supported to reach their potential in life include:
  - 1) Address gaps in provision for students with vision impairment in further education, including exploring the possibility of extending the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) scheme to cover Further Education settings.
  - 2) Consider the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and disability (SEND) in ongoing policy developments such as the 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper and the National Strategy for Disabled People.
  - 3) For the DSA and Access to Work processes to be simplified so that young people with vision impairment can more easily and effectively access the vital support that they require to support their studies and access employment.
  - 4) Improve awareness and uptake of the Access to Work scheme. This should include investigating the possibility of introducing an Adjustment

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Passport for young people with disabilities, which would travel with the young person as they transition.

## About the research

The Longitudinal Transition Study is a unique piece of research that has followed the experiences of 82 young people with vision impairment for 11 years as they completed their compulsory education and followed various pathways. This included further education, higher education and employment. This policy briefing focuses on research findings and final outcomes of young people with vision impairment in England and Wales.

## Pathways following school

Young people with vision impairment face difficulties when transitioning from school to other pathways whether that is further education, higher education, apprenticeships, paid placements or gap years.

The majority of students followed the pathway into further education or sixth form with most having a positive experience, however some experienced challenges with accessing their courses. This included not being provided with essential equipment by the start of the academic year and learning material not being made available in an accessible format, which resulted in some students not able to participate in lessons and eventually withdraw from their course and have since become long-term not in education, employment or training (NEET) and not engaged with other activities to help move closer to the labour market.

Other pathways included apprenticeships with many using this as a route into employment and placement years, gap years and internships, which provided the opportunity to develop their independence and helpful stepping stones between education and long-term employment.

## Accessing higher education

Higher education (HE) proved to be one of the most complex settings for the students. Whilst no student

questioned whether HE was a viable option for them with a vision impairment, some identified ways they felt their choice was restricted due to their disability.

Most students identified ways their institution made reasonable adjustments to support with their learning, however there seemed to be an overreliance on this which then prevented the students from working independently and being included alongside their peers.

It was also found that it can take students with vision impairment longer to complete their degrees, often due to not having the necessary support in place in time, which had costly financial implications.

Many of the students viewed **Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)** as crucial to their participation on their courses; particularly as it enabled them to obtain essential equipment and specialist software, which they would not have been able to afford otherwise. However, the research has also highlighted a number of shortcomings with the DSA offer for students with vision impairment, including DSA assessors not having the necessary expertise to assess students with vision impairment, delays in the processing of assessments, and in the delivery of allocated support and equipment being provided that did not meet the needs of the students.

## Accessing the labour market

The students used a wide range of methods for searching for jobs, including recruitment agencies, employer's websites and their personal networks. However, they noted barriers in applying for jobs online, which resulted in them not being able to apply for jobs they were interested in or not being able to complete assessments that formed part of a multi-stage recruitment process.

Some students reported using job centres with only half declaring their vision impairment, highlighting that disabilities are not always identified by Job Centre staff. Some were referred to specialist support in relation to their disability, however several students highlighted negative experiences at Job Centres including inaccessible systems and staff unable to help them due to their vision impairment.

Unlike the use of DSA, the research shows a disconnect between young people with vision impairment utilising the government-funded grant, **Access to Work** with many preferring to make their own adjustments or rely on support from their employers.

Those who did use the grant recognised its value, however a number of challenges were identified

including: the length of time for applications to be processed, inaccessible processes and a rigidness of the scheme which seemed to be designed to cater for a particular type of job role.

## Factors for positive outcomes for young people with vision impairment

Self-advocacy was noted as one of the most important factors for positive outcomes and that the students needed to self-advocate in several ways; negotiating adjustments, explaining their vision impairment and how it impacts upon them, and challenging if things go wrong.

Another factor was the extent to which they were able to access information independently. The students preferred to avoid using specialist equipment and instead make their own adjustments to mainstream devices.

Mobility and orientation skills are important enablers for young people with vision impairment to ensure they're able to get around independently and safely, particularly when moving to new environments.

Young people also need opportunities to practise the skills they have learned and to develop their independence in less formal environments; for example, work experience placements at school.

Inclusive social and physical environments will help to improve many of the skills and experiences developed by young people with vision impairment through formal and informal education. The research identified aspects of the students' lives which would have been easier, more positive and fairer if some aspect of broader society had been more inclusive or adjustments had been anticipated. This was also significant for those students whose sight conditions worsened over time.

## Conclusion

The research highlights the importance of ensuring that sufficient opportunity is given for young people to develop key skills and experiences alongside the academic curriculum but to also focus on the broader skills and experiences needed in adult life.

It also highlights the difficulties of accessing specialist support and the complex transition journeys young people face.

## About the author

Dr Rachel Hewett, Birmingham Fellow, University of Birmingham. R.G.Hewett@bham.ac.uk