# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

# Transition to adulthood

## Final summary report for project "Longitudinal study of transitions experiences of blind and partially sighted young people (Phase 2)"

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## The Nuffield Foundation

# 1. Introduction

## Background to Research Study

The Longitudinal Transition Study, originally funded by RNIB, commenced in 2010 with the aim of understanding the experiences of young people with a visual impairment leaving compulsory education. We were particularly interested in the enablers and barriers experienced as the young people moved towards the labour market. The original research questions were:

- How well do education services prepare blind and partially sighted young people for life beyond school and college?
- What are the young people's post-education destinations and what are the key factors influencing their ability to gain employment?

A cohort of over 80 young people from England and Wales (aged 14-16 at time of recruitment) has taken part in the study. This study has a longitudinal qualitative design, with the same participants being interviewed at regular intervals along their transition journeys. Findings from Phase One of the research were summarised in Hewett et al (2014).

## Phase Two

Phase Two of the longitudinal study was funded by Nuffield Foundation and took place between April 2012 and November 2015. This phase consisted of regular interviews with the participants, secondary data analysis of existing data sources, and case study work with some participants and those involved in supporting them through their current stage of transition. This phase of research aimed to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are visually impaired young people's experiences and choices of transition from school?
2. What levels of independence do visually impaired young people have as they move through different phases of their life?
3. What services are available to the young people to support their transition?
4. How will emerging and ongoing changes in the area of transitions and SEN policy affect young people with visual impairment as they move from school to the next stage of their education (or training or employment)?

## Data collection and reporting

Over 60 participants have continued to take part in the study throughout Phase Two in the form of semi-structured interviews roughly twice a year. Each interview included repeat 'tracking' questions so we learnt about the transitions the young people had made. Interviews also included 'themed' questions in which we explored particular topics of interest or concern e.g. participant views of independence, benefits and understanding of their visual impairment. These interviews were supplemented with more focused case study work with individual participants. The

project has received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (re: ERN_09-880) and additional ethical approval has been sought prior to each data capture. Names used in the case studies do not relate to the real participant names. The project produced regular technical reports, which are available for download, and an overview of the methodology is presented in Hewett et al (2015). Table 1 gives an overview of the data collected and the corresponding technical report.

**Table 1: Overview of longitudinal data collected and resulting technical reports**

| Date of interview | Topics covered | Technical reports |
|---|---|---|
| Autumn 2012 | Tracking questions. Independence interviews – an investigation of the participants' views of independence | (1) Young people's progress and views of independence aged 16-19: Post-14 transitions support (June 2013) |
| Summer and Autumn 2013 | Tracking questions. Vision interview: registration of sight loss, use of equipment (specialist and mainstream), means of accessing information | (2) Vision, Accessing Information and Accessing Benefits (June 2014) |
| Autumn 2014 and Spring 2015 | Tracking questions. Investigation into well-being, friendships, support and information in relation to visual impairment, and independent living | (3) The Transition Experience of Young People with Visual Impairments aged 17-21: Technical report of findings (November 2015)<br><br>(4) Support and Information received by Young People with Visual Impairments (August 2015)<br><br>(5) Young People, Visual Impairment and Preparing to Live Independently (November 2015)<br><br>(6) Well-being of Young People with Visual Impairments (November 2015) |
| Spring 2012 – Summer 2015 | Preparing to go into HE, Disabled Student Allowance, developing support plans, accessing learning material, accessing examinations, mobility training and orientation, living independently, general life in HE | (7) Experiences of Blind and Partially Sighted Young People as they Make the Transition into Higher Education (November 2015) |

# 2. Overview of Research Findings

In this section we present summaries of the key findings from this phase of work. We present findings and related discussion as themes, each linked to one of the four research questions.

## Question 1: Experiences and choices of transition

### Where do people go after compulsory education?

Since completing their GCSEs, the participants have followed a number of different pathways. For the majority (over 90%), this included further study in a sixth form or further education (FE) college as a first step, and about half of these participants then continuing onto higher education (HE) (with more intending to do so). Just four participants went straight from GCSEs into apprenticeships or employment, while a further third followed this pathway having completed courses in sixth form/FE.

Another popular option for seven participants after completing their sixth form/FE courses was to take a 'gap year'. Most boosted their CV by getting some form of work experience (including working abroad).

Four participants since leaving FE have been long-term Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). Their stories vary, but two report having neither developed their CV nor applied for any jobs for a sustained period. In contrast, one has been extremely active in seeking employment experience (and on two occasions was offered positions only for the employer to change their mind, citing reasons related to his visual impairment); another has been in long-term voluntary work and was content with this situation.

For several young people their transition pathways have not been straightforward or as planned. For example: several participants spent longer in FE than originally intended (see 'Churning' below); some could not secure apprenticeships as they hoped; and five of those who started in HE did not complete the first year of their course. While the participants received some support to prepare for their next transition, this tended to focus specifically on their next intended pathway rather than taking a broader perspective of the potential routes that they might take.

*Read more about these pathways in reports 1, 2 and 3.*

### Churning

Over the course of the research, we have identified evidence of 'churning', particularly amongst participants in the FE sector (although this may be a feature of the current age of our participants). Churning is characterised by the young people repeating years in college, or repeatedly taking courses at the same level (or even lower levels) and appearing not to make a positive progression. Similar findings were noted in a study by researchers in other disciplines. Why churning appears to be

particularly associated with young people with visual impairment can be illustrated through the case study of Toby.

Toby is registered as partially sighted. He speaks of an overwhelming desire to be as independent as possible, and to be "normal". Since completing GCSEs, he has explored a variety of options, enrolling on three different types of course, and leaving two of them prematurely. In his efforts to be the same as his peers he has resisted support that would make him look different to others:

> I didn't ask, I didn't opt for any [support]. I got offered it but I thought no I'm grown up now, in the real world I'm not going to have anything so I'll do it myself.

There is evidence that this had an impact upon Toby's decision to drop out in the second year of two of the qualifications he was taking, when the courses became more theoretical and text based. Toby is now more reflective about the difficulties he has faced:

> Toby: I wouldn't say more difficult [for a person with visual impairment], I'd say slower…Because if there's a new thing I need to do it, say someone needs to do something 100 times for it to become natural, I need to do it 150 times…
> [..] so I think I needed the extra year in college…Getting me to get used to the, I don't know, the hands off climate [..]. Getting used to being alone.
> Researcher: To not having so much support?
> Toby: Yeah.

More recently, Toby reflects that at 16 years of age he did not feel prepared to make such decisions about his future. Most recently, after receiving advice (something that he had not drawn on previously), he had identified a potential career he believes he would have enjoyed. Unfortunately, at this point he had been in education for too long and says he is unable to find funding for the next level of the qualification, which he would need.

*Read more about churning in reports 1, 2 and 3.*


**Transition into HE**

The transition into HE has been the most challenging, as reported by the participants to date. Very few of the participants received any specialist guidance to assist them in planning the type of support and equipment they may need, and in most cases they felt ill-equipped at various points of the transition process.

Access to services seemed problematic for many. For example: being assessed for Disabled Student Allowance by assessors who did not have sufficient understanding of visual impairment; support plans put together by Disability Support Officers who did not have any experience of working with a young person with a severe visual impairment.

In the UK, the Equality Act requires education providers to make anticipatory adjustments for students with disabilities to enable them to fully participate on their courses. However, the research highlighted several ways in which HE providers are failing to do this, e.g. inaccessible virtual learning environments, not providing reading lists in sufficient time to obtain accessible copies of core texts and not providing lecture material or examination material in an accessible format. Instead, HE providers commonly sought to make compensation through extensions to coursework hand-in dates and asking students to sit examinations later than their peers.

Of 35 participants who went to HE, five did not complete the first academic year, citing challenges they faced due to their institution not making adjustments to accommodate them. In instances where young people had to re-take years of study, universities commonly met the cost of the extra tuition fees. However, the young person was still responsible for another year of living costs (and of course not-earning).

*Read more about the Transition into HE in report 7*

## Transition into employment and apprenticeships

By the end of Phase Two of the project, about a third of participants (21) were in some form of employment, although only eight of these would describe themselves as being exclusively in work (and just five of these holding permanent, long-term positions). Additionally, five participants have been in apprenticeships. It is noticeable that those successfully engaged in employment or apprenticeships at this stage tended to have less severe visual impairments and those with more severe visual impairments have tended to choose to stay on longer in education. One participant who is registered severely sight impaired experienced very challenging transitions into the workplace. Firstly, there was a significant delay in receiving equipment through Access to Work, and secondly two job offers were later retracted due to reported concerns of how quickly he could perform his role. However, the majority of participants described their transitions into employment and apprenticeships with regards to their visual impairment as relatively smooth. The majority had decided to declare their visual impairment to their employer, but at the same time highlighted that their vision would not impact upon their work. Nevertheless, several participants identified ways in which their employer made simple adjustments to help them in the workplace, including providing a large monitor, specialist software and enlarged materials. The participants also identified ways in which they could manage their own access needs independently (e.g. managing their computer settings and using low vision aids).

There was little knowledge of, or engagement with, Access to Work (a grant available to disabled people to pay for practical support in helping then start or stay in work). Even when reminded of Access to Work, none of the participants investigated the scheme further.

*Read more about the transition into employment and apprenticeships in reports 1, 2 and 3.*

## Question 2: Levels of independence and preparation

**Access to information**

Twenty seven of the participants reported using low vision aids (LVA) for reading. The participants' perceptions of LVAs were mixed, with several describing difficulties in using them. It was also noted that some participants who use large font sizes were not making use of LVAs. There were concerns regarding who had given the young people their LVA and whether they were qualified to do so and were offering appropriate advice.

While all the participants reported using a computer to access information, relatively few of them used specialist software to use the computer, preferring to make some basic adjustments such as changing the resolution or font size. The most commonly used specialist software used by the participants (who had more severe visual impairments) was screen reading software. Even so, several participants preferred to use the inbuilt speech software available on Apple computers.

Over 80% of the participants saw ICT as being either 'essential' or 'important' in their lives. Those who were registered as blind were more likely to see ICT in this positive way. Nevertheless, for some of the participants there appear to be gaps in training or using such technology. In two cases, despite being at a specialist resource base for pupils with visual impairment, the blind participants left school having not been taught how to use a computer at all. Many learned how to use their accessibility software through collaboration with friends.

The experiences of the 20 young people who had learned braille differed according to the time of onset of their severe visual impairment (since birth or a very young age, or later in life). There was a group who described themselves as being considered 'borderline' as to whether they needed to learn braille or not (based upon the severity and progression of their visual impairment), which meant that they did not receive any tuition until later in their school careers; in three cases they felt this was insufficient to be of any practical use. The age at which the young people were taught braille seems to be a factor in the eventual success of the learning outcome. In keeping with the findings from other research, the decision process for when braille is introduced seemed to be inconsistent for this group.

> Braille is like my pen and paper.

There were frustrations reported by those who had already learned to read print, and then had to 'start again' with the basics of learning braille. Use of braille was more common in an educational setting, and the participants noted having less opportunity to use it when at home. Those who had the greatest opportunity were the young people using refreshable braille displays linked to a computer.

Decisions about teaching different learning media are complex, e.g. when to emphasise the teaching of braille, print, technology and the use of LVAs. While it

must vary according to many factors, it seems it is vital to have a range of techniques to access information efficiently in different situations.

*Read more about access to information in reports 1 and 2.*

## Use of mainstream technology

Throughout the longitudinal study, we have noted a general movement by the participants towards the use of 'mainstream technology'. By this, we mean devices designed for use by the general population, rather than specialist devices designed specifically for a person with some form of disability. As examples: instead of choosing to use specialist magnification software, the young people would often use standard functions available on their computers (e.g. enlarging text or icons); instead of using a computer with a specialist screen reader, they would often use a computer that has speech software built into its operating system. Similarly, while all of the participants reported using mobile phones, only one used a mobile phone specifically designed for people with visual impairment. Additionally, almost half reported using mainstream devices like tablet computers, e-readers and MP3 players.

The participants spoke positively of how these devices were both accessible and useful to them. Beneficial features identified included: zoom/magnification options; inbuilt screen readers; the ability to adjust text size; the ability to change the screen contrast and brightness; and voice recognition. What is of particular note is many of the features the young people identified are standard within these devices, meaning that it is not necessary for them to download (and pay for) additional software or 'apps'. In fact, several of the features they benefit from would be used by the general user with normal vision (e.g. zooming in on the screen and adjusting the text size and screen brightness).

> I use an iPad in my placement for my notes. You can adjust the brightness and the darkness. Can enlarge things when they need enlarging. You can do all kinds of things with it – it's the best thing I've ever had.

Well over half of the participants said they would use mainstream technology as an assistive tool. By this we mean they would use their device to help them access information they would not otherwise have been able to access independently, in the same way they would use specialist assistive tools such as LVAs. Of concern, therefore, are reports from participants in universities that their Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) assessor informed them that they were unable to use DSA to purchase equipment unless it was 'specialist'.

*Read more about the use of mainstream technology in reports 2, 7 and Hewett and Douglas (2015).*

## Attitudes to independence

At various points during the longitudinal study, we have discussed in some depth the participants' views of, and attitudes towards, their own independence. This is

reflected in the content of this overview report and elsewhere. In terms of defining what independence meant to them, participants offered general broad definitions of aspirations to do things for themselves, without assistance and having a sense of freedom. Independence was valued and aspirational, and in many ways the definitions could be in line with those offered by any young person. Nevertheless, the interaction of disability and independence was recognised in these general definitions – perhaps the most explicit reference to visual impairment was that some young people made reference to sighted people as, 'everyone else' or 'normal' people. Sometimes participants referred to their visual impairment as an important and limiting factor, which nevertheless could be navigated with help from others and through learning:

> I think because I am blind, it is hard, but I've got a guide dog so that's increased my independence.

Many of the young people elaborated on general definitions by describing specific aspects of independence often associated with aspects of the 'additional curriculum' (often referred to as the 'expanded core curriculum' or ECC). The additional curriculum is typically described as including aspect of learning in which visually impaired children need more support to learn, e.g. mobility and orientation, cooking, independent living skills (washing, cleaning), assistive technology, access to written material, studying, dealing with money, and shopping. Some emphasised self-advocacy skills and the importance of when to ask for help (or say when help was not required).

> It's having the confidence and skills and knowledge to know that 'I'm stuck, I need help here', and then knowing who to go to for help.

We asked the participants to consider how they would respond to a range of employment-based scenarios. Analysis revealed a range of individual differences in style of response, which can be characterised as two overarching themes: (1) how active/passive the young people felt they should be in solving problems; and (2) to whom (themselves or others) the young person attributed the responsibility for problems and solutions. The ideal approach would be to try to maximise the strengths of all the approaches while minimising the potential weaknesses. The ideal working colleague or potential employee must be proactive, assertive and polite, but at times be patient with working procedures and equipment that must be adjusted and colleagues who must be educated. Such a person should have independence skills in place and actively seek to develop new ones, while also understanding what support and reasonable adjustments may be required, expected and demanded.

*Read more about views of independence in report 1 and Douglas and Hewett (2014).*


**Independent living**

The majority of participants aspired to live independently in the next few years, although they identified potential barriers to this, e.g. finding a suitable job and having the available money. More immediate barriers were also identified and these

included having the necessary skills to live independently and restrictions from family members who they felt did not facilitate them in striving to become independent.

Half of the participants felt their visual impairment would have an impact upon their ability to live independently. Unsurprisingly, those who have more severe visual impairments were more likely to conclude that their visual impairment would have an impact upon their independence.

When considering the transition into independent living, a number of themes emerged including: not feeling prepared for moving to independent living; the need for support; adjustments and preparations that would need to be made; and how living away from home while in higher education assisted as a stepping stone into independent living. It was interesting to note that despite several of the participants describing themselves as being prepared for independent living, when they were posed with specific challenges they might face, it became apparent that there were areas they could struggle with. This indicates that for at least some young people at this stage of their lives, they have not fully considered the skills and adaptions they will need in place to be able to live independently.

*Read more about independent living in report 5.*


**Self-advocacy**

A consistent theme in our research findings is the importance of young people with visual impairment being equipped with self-advocacy and social skills. There have been many contexts in which the presence or absence of these skills have benefited or restricted participants. This includes when: negotiating support packages as part of the 'Disabled Student Allowance' for university; negotiating support arrangements in higher and further education; explaining adjustments needed in the workplace; and challenging a lack of reasonable adjustments. We have also observed the importance of the young people having the confidence to establish whose responsibility it is to take action, and being able to articulate this position.

> And then, I had to do a lot of advocating in the first year, of actually explaining what I needed, and how I wanted it to go… I had to do my own research in terms of talking to other people, and talking to other students, stuff like that to give them suggestions of how to do things.

Factors that equipped young people to be effective at self-advocacy include: having had opportunities to self-advocate when younger (for example explaining adjustments to class teachers in school or college); having a good understanding of their visual impairment and how it affects them; and having a good knowledge and understanding of available specialist equipment and support.

*Read more about the importance of self-advocacy in reports 1, 7 and Hewett et al (2016).*


**Medical aspects, knowledge and understanding of visual impairment**

The participants had varying experiences in learning about their visual impairment (which in no small part reflects the considerable range of ages at which their eye conditions were first identified and diagnosed). Just under half remembered a specific point in time when someone explained to them that they had a visual impairment, and what had caused it. Others recalled learning about their sight condition over time, sometimes through asking questions. There were also those who reported never having had their condition explained to them, or is some cases sharing that no one was able to explain it to them because the medical professionals themselves did not understand it. Several other themes emerged from the accounts the young people offered, including: feeling their sight condition was difficult for them to understand; feeling they had a lack of opportunity to find out more about their sight condition (for example, some participants were discharged from the hospital eye clinic at a young age); finding the period around diagnosis/learning the details of their sight condition was an emotional time; not wanting to invest the time understanding it, but rather to 'get on with life' (although for some this view changed as they got older); different approaches and emotional responses from parents; and insufficient understanding of their visual impairment by both the young people and others (e.g. teachers), and how this had an impact on their education. Of particular concern were nine participants who rated their understanding of their visual impairment poorly.

> I kind of grew up with it, so no one really explained it to me.

About a quarter of the participants reported having a health problem or disability in addition to their visual impairment. A small number of the participants reported having to attend very regular appointments for their eye (and associated) conditions, which impacts upon their everyday life including potential full-time employment.

> I still go for regular check-ups. I am down to go for blood tests, to make sure my liver, kidneys and immune system are not failing. And then I am down to [hospital] normally every month to maybe six weeks having check-ups, where they will check [..] you know, whatever!

We have also noted throughout the longitudinal study that many of the young people have eye conditions that mean their level of sight loss has changed, and is likely to continue to change. Two participants whose registration changed from sight impaired to severely sight impaired were both in FE at the time this occurred. They found both they and their respective colleges struggled to adapt to their changing needs.

> 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… I had no idea of what to do when your eyesight changes or anything…

*Read more about medical aspects of impairment in report 4.*


**Registration of sight impairment and associated benefits**

About a third of the participants reported that they are registered as blind (severely sight impaired) and a third registered as partially sighted (sight impaired). The remaining third were evenly split between not being registered or unsure. The majority of participants could not remember the registration process as they were very young when this occurred. Eleven participants were unaware of any advantages of registration, and in three cases they/their families had simply been following instructions from their ophthalmologists.

After speaking with the young people about their knowledge of the registration process, there are some concerns over the lack of engagement the young people have made with the principle of registration and the purpose and advantages of it. This was also true when talking with the participants about Disabled Living Allowance (DLA) and Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) (non-means tested benefits designed to help with the extra costs caused by disability) – again, the level of understanding and engagement was very low.

## Question 3 and 4: Transition services and SEN policy

A Freedom of Information Request by the research team (Keil, 2016) identified a 'postcode lottery' of services available for children and young people with visual impairment from local authorities (LAs) in England. In 2014, legislative changes in England extended entitlement of specialist support to young people with SEND up to the age of 25 if they are in education or training. In spite of this, visual impairment services in a number of LAs were not supporting young people in post-school settings. While some services were actively seeking to improve provision to these older learners, it was apparent that others were not. This is reflected in the experiences our participants described in the most recent interviews – none of them had an Education Health and Care plan (EHC plans), and very few even knew what an EHC plan was. EHC plans are a key mechanism for recording what a child and young person with SEND wants to achieve and what support is needed to do this.

In Phase One we identified that most young people received advice and preparatory support for transitions up until the age of 16 as part of an official Transition Review. However, one young person, in reflecting on this experience, concluded that the time when she could have most benefited from such support was when preparing to leave sixth form, two years later:

> I remember having one in like Year 10 or 11 which was specifically focused on transition, and that was quite helpful because we kind of put together an action plan and stuff, with my parents and the school and stuff… But actually the time at which a meeting probably would have been most helpful would have been in sixth form, the transition to university, which I don't think I had, or if I did I don't think it was focused on transition.

Connexions are an example of another service that has been drawn upon by some of the young people. For example, one participant, after completing a Level 1 course at college, was very unsure of what to do next and spent a period of time NEET. Reflecting upon the time, he concluded that he had "wasted a year of my life to be honest" and described himself as having very low confidence at that time. He made

contact with a Connexions advisor who helped him with his CV and phoned him at regular intervals to see how he was getting on. The Connexions advisor also identified potential apprenticeship opportunities and gave encouragement to apply:

> To be honest all I did was keep in touch with my Connexions advisor, and she gave me a few apprenticeships to apply for. [I] got an apprenticeship because of it.

In completing the two-year apprenticeship, the participant was able to build up his confidence and feel more independent:

> To be honest, a lot of it is to do with this apprenticeship that I am on… just doing that has built my confidence up, which makes me feel more independent, and I can do a lot more things.

Since completing his apprenticeship, he has independently found employment and now is in a permanent role, which he enjoys.

Another participant highlighted how helpful she had found the continuity of support provided by a transitions officer at RNIB Cymru who had worked with her since she was 14. By working with the same person, trust and understanding was developed, and she has felt confident to come back to the same officer for guidance at multiple stages of transition. In talking about the support she had received, the young person said:

> The only other thing I can think of, I did mention her, the transitions officer from RNIB Cymru, I can't really emphasise how helpful she has been to be honest. Because she has been consistent since when I was 14 all the way to now, she has always been a support through uni and everything, when I was at [college], finding me these work placements that I did, thinking about when I graduate, she was on the ball with thinking about…she would help me with my job search and finding somewhere to live if I needed something. So she was a really valuable resource that I have been able to tap into – because I don't think they really have them in England? I am really grateful to be able to have them in Wales.

*Read more about transition services and policy in reports 1, 2, 3 and 7, and Keil (2016).*


# 3. Discussion

This project was designed to increase understanding of the transition journey from school to the labour market. Previous research had focused upon school or the labour market, but the journey between the two had not been examined in any great detail. This longitudinal study has provided, and continues to provide, a rich insight into this transition.

A key focus in our research is the analysis of the *resources* that are available to young people as they navigate their transition to adulthood. Individually-based

resources include the important independence skills examined in this research, while socially-based resources include support mechanisms, services, inclusive practice by services and employers, and also policies and legislation. How the balance between these different resources is navigated and conceptualised will inevitably vary from person to person. Importantly, the balance will *change* with time and place. It is this change, and the tensions and challenges associated with this change during periods of transition, that has been revealed by this research.

In many ways this resource balance is at the heart of many proposed models of human development and experience, two of which we have drawn upon extensively in this project: the International Classification of Function and Disability (ICF, e.g. WHO, 2001), and ecological systems theory (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The notion of 'progressive, mutual accommodation' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p107) is of particular relevance to this analysis because it highlights a need to focus upon the *changing* relationships between the individual and the environment rather than looking at each in isolation. These changes take place over time and across different settings including further and higher education, and the eventual labour market.

This progressive mutual accommodation can be illustrated by comparing the different emphases of resources and expectations when at school and university. The table below illustrates some of these differences. To this extent, the research provides evidence of enablers (the 'mutual accommodations') and barriers to successful participation within a given environment. The research also highlights the 'progressive' nature of these enablers and barriers. Taking the school to university transition as an example: the two environments have different support mechanisms, must respond to different policies and legislation, and assume different things about the students they serve.

**Table 2: Examples of resources and expectations when at school and university as an illustration of progressive mutual accommodations**

| Secondary school | University |
|---|---|
| **High levels of additional human support** to aid curriculum access (e.g. teaching assistants, specialist teachers). | **Low levels of additional human support** to aid curriculum access (some can be provided through disability support office and funded through DSA) |
| **Adjustment and inclusive practice** are required and expected to ensure that the curriculum is accessible (e.g. inclusive teaching techniques, modified assessment, environmental audits). | **Adjustment and inclusive practice** are required and expected to ensure that the curriculum is accessible (e.g. accessible online resources, teaching and assessment practice). Universities commonly fail to do this. |
| **Additional educational input** should be in place to teach additional curriculum (as conceptualised by the ECC) – e.g. independence skills, mobility, use of technology. | Some **additional support** and equipment is available through student support services and DSA. |
| **Independence skills should be progressively developed** during the school career. This should be a central part of individual education plans. | **Independence skills are assumed** to be in place, although some limited support to develop these skills may be available through student support services and DSA. |
| **Policy tension:** Schools are judged upon academic performance; young people require good academic grades to progress in many areas; outcomes in relation to independence may be neglected. | **Policy tension:** Universities assume student independence, which is not always in place. Reasonable adjustment and inclusive practice is assumed to solve most curriculum access issues – this is not the case, and these are not implemented consistently anyway. DSA is under review, and reduction of resource and change in emphasis may make universities less inclusive. |

The research has identified an overarching policy tension in relation to the education of visually impaired pupils. On one hand, the broad policy drive to increase academic standards is reflected in schools being held to account for progress and outcomes in relation to this aspect of the curriculum. In relation to pupils with SEN (and here more specifically pupils with visual impairment) there is an additional policy drive through the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). The code and underlying legislation makes explicit reference to independence, e.g. "Importantly, the aspirations for children and young people will be raised through an increased focus on life outcomes, including employment and greater independence." (p11).

The two policies are not fundamentally incompatible – maximising an individual's life skills, independence and academic attainment are all valid ambitions. Nevertheless, balancing the efforts and resource given to each requires careful consideration and this research suggests that this needs closer attention. Many of the challenges faced by our research participants (e.g. churning, poor levels of independence, difficulties entering HE) are partly linked to this balance not being appropriate when in compulsory education and beyond. Perhaps this is hardly surprising given the findings reported here in relation to support services – the SEND Code of Practice demands increased support, while services which are responsible for providing this support are not being expanded (e.g. LA post-16 specialist support services) or being reduced (e.g. Connexions services).

# 4. Recommendations and future work

We have drawn some initial recommendations from this ongoing research, which also make reference to some of the resources which are being developed from our work.

## 1. LA specialist visual impairment support services, and schools

LA specialist visual impairment support services are the key servics in the provision of appropriate advice and support to schools, colleges, parents and pupils. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) provides an important framework for this to take place, and the emphasis upon outcome, progress, independence and post-16 transition is helpful. Nevertheless, these services may need to reconfigure their service aims in order to respond to this new emphasis – this should be a central area of service development. Advice and examples are offered by the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) and the professional association of the Vision Impairment Education Workforce (VIEW). An example of this type of resource was developed from the findings of this project – a toolkit to assist visiting teacher services to design their services around broad educational outcomes (available at https://www.natsip.org.uk).

## 2. Providers of teacher training programmes of qualified teachers of visually impaired children (QTVIs)

Training providers have recently applied for (and been awarded) new mandates to provide teacher training programmes of QTVIs. These programmes must be delivered in line with nationally agreed outcomes. In keeping with these, training providers might draw upon the findings of this research to help them consider how QTVIs must undertake a range of tasks including advocating for the development of independence skills and supporting young people up to the age of 25 years. An analysis of QTVI training in this regard has been presented by McLinden et al, (2016), and draws upon some of the findings of this research.

## 3. Post compulsory education contexts, including FE, HE and employers

Suitable accommodations and support are required in post compulsory education contexts, including FE, HE and employers. As is the case for all young people, this would also include some clarity about the expectations such organisations have of individuals. The specifics of these requirements and expectations will require ongoing development, especially as policies change (e.g. changes to the Disabled Student Allowance from 2016/17). We have provided some initial suggestions in relation to universities: resources to help young people with visual impairment transitioning into higher education ('Starting University' available at http://www.rnib.org.uk/young-people/starting-university

## 4. Departments for education and educational inspection

Our analysis has identified tensions between educational policies which emphasise different educational outcomes – most notably academic attainment on one hand, and independence and transitions agendas on the other. Current accountability mechanisms and resourcing of services appears to mean that independence and transitions agendas are not being developed successfully. This is in spite of ambitious and potentially beneficial SEND legislation in this regard. Relevant government departments (DfE in England, DfES in Wales) and inspection services (Ofsted in England, Estyn in Wales) should attend to this.

The Longitudinal Transition Study has continued into Phase Three, and is currently being funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust. In this phase of research we aim to focus on the participants' experiences of transitioning into the labour market and independent living. We intend to continue gathering evidence and disseminating our research findings in practical ways to help improve the transition experience of young people with visual impairment.

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