

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 23, Education		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming higher education access and service provision for people with vision impairment		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Graeme Douglas	Professor of Disability and Special Educational Needs	2010-present
Rachel Hewett	Birmingham Fellow	2010-present
Mike McLinden	Professor	2010-2020
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>In the UK, children and young people with vision impairment (VI) often experience poor educational outcomes and associated social exclusion. Research undertaken by the Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR), through partnership with key UK NGOs in the vision impairment sector, has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Transformed higher education access and support services</b> for students with vision impairment and other disabled students in the UK;</li> <li><b>Shaped national policy development</b> on higher education provision for people with vision impairment;</li> </ol> <p><b>Changed NGO policies and practices</b> regarding higher education and the transition needs of people with vision impairment.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Specialist educational services in the UK are now required to support children and young people with vision impairment to the age of 25 (a population of approximately 35,000; two in every 1,000). Nevertheless, employment statistics consistently highlight poor outcomes for young people with vision impairment as they leave compulsory education, with just 30% finding paid work. Recent government statutory guidance (such as the DfE 2014 Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years) has sought to address this by placing greater focus on preparation for adulthood and increased requirements of services. Positively, research evidence identifies several factors which can increase the likelihood of a young person with vision impairment securing employment, such as obtaining higher level qualifications and having opportunities to undertake work experience. Whilst higher qualifications are an important predictor of positive employment outcomes for the general population, secondary data analysis highlights that this is considerably more so for young people with vision impairment.</p> <p>In response to this evidence of poor employment outcomes, the ongoing Longitudinal Transitions Study (LTS) (led by Douglas, Hewett and McLinden) has worked with a cohort of 80 young people with vision impairment for eleven years (since they were aged fourteen in 2010) to track their experiences as they have left compulsory education and transitioned into adulthood. The LTS is a unique study in the field of vision impairment education (in terms of the depth and longitudinal nature of data collected) and it has produced research findings which have transformed understanding of young people's post-school transitions, and the enablers and barriers they experience. This has included a particular focus on the young people's experiences of being included within higher education, including targeted data collections with the participants. This was</p>		

in response to early findings identifying this as a particularly complex and challenging pathway, which was of particular concern given the importance placed on higher qualifications by previous research literature and government statistics.

**Key findings:**

F1: Higher education (HE) is an extremely challenging pathway for young people with vision impairment as they navigate complex and sometimes inaccessible systems, including Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and institutional support systems which do not always meet their specific needs. [R1, R2, R3, R4]

F2: More flexible DSA funding structures (instead of the existing funding which is heavily weighted towards 'non-medical support') would allow students with severe vision impairment to access the range of equipment they require to study independently. [R3]

F3: Despite increased participation of students with disabilities in HE, there is still an overreliance by HE providers on accommodating students through individual adjustments, rather than inclusive practice. This places a significant burden on the student, negatively impacting their attainment and overall HE experience. [R1, R2, R3, R4]

F4: Due to being a low incidence condition in young people, the needs of students with vision impairment are often overlooked or not understood across the HE sector. [R1, R2, R3, R4]

F5: Specialist services that should support young people with vision impairment through post-16 pathways do not have sufficient resource, knowledge and expertise. [R1, R2, R5, R6]

**3. References to the research**

**R1.** Hewett, R., Douglas, G., and Keil, S. (2016). Final summary report for project Longitudinal study of transitions experiences of blind and partially sighted young people (Phase 2). Report to Nuffield Foundation. Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham. Available on [Nuffield Foundation website](#).

**R2.** Hewett, R., Douglas, G., McLinden, M., and Keil, S. (2017). Developing an inclusive learning environment for students with visual impairment in higher education: progressive mutual accommodation and learner experiences in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(1), 89–109. DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2016.1254971

**R3.** Hewett, R., Keil, S., and Douglas, G. (2015). Experiences of blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition into Higher Education. Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham. Available on [University of Birmingham website](#).

**R4.** Hewett, R., Douglas, G., McLinden, M., and Keil, S. (2018). Balancing inclusive design, adjustments and personal agency: progressive mutual accommodations and the experiences of university students with vision impairment in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.

DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2018.1492637

**R5.** Hewett, R., Douglas, G., and Keil, S. (2017). Reflections of Transition Experiences by Young People with Visual Impairments aged 19–22: Technical report of findings to April 2016. Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham. Available on [University of Birmingham Website](#).

**R6.** Douglas, G., and Hewett, R. (2014). Views of independence and readiness for employment amongst young people with visual impairments in the UK. *The Australian Journal of Rehabilitation Counselling*, 20(2), 81–99.

DOI: 10.1017/jrc.2014.12

**4. Details of the impact**

VICTAR's collaboration with the Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT), Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Policy Connect, the Department for Education and others has **created change at both policy and practice level, resulting in real improvements to support services not only for students with vision impairment, but also the wider population of over 250,000 disabled undergraduate students**. NGOs have also improved their policies and practices to benefit people with vision impairment as a result of their partnership with VICTAR.

## **1. VICTAR has significantly contributed to the transformation of higher education access and support services for students with vision impairment and other disabled students in the UK**

**Changes to the national Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)** to better meet the individual needs of vision impaired and wider disabled students followed from the Our Right to Study (ORTS) campaign underpinned by VICTAR's research [F1–F5; S1, S2]. The campaign, which was launched by VICTAR, TPT and RNIB in January 2019, gained political traction, leading to a roundtable with the then Universities Minister to address the issues that students with vision impairment face [S1, S2, S3; F1–F5]. Advance HE data indicates there are 3,565 students with declared vision impairment in HE, representing a notable 1.0% of the student population. In response, the **Department for Education acted to implement a review of the DSA** resulting in the following changes:

**1.i. A new, more flexible DSA funding structure was introduced** on a statutory basis “to increase flexibility for students to access the support they need” (Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP) [S4; F2]. This means that undergraduate students with disabilities in the UK will now access a wider range of relevant equipment to give them the educational access to which they are entitled [S2, S4].

**1.ii. Computer specifications offered through DSA have been improved**, with the minimum specifications being increased to ensure that students with vision impairment have more reliable access to assistive technologies [F1; S3].

**1.iii. Changes have been made to qualification requirements for the role of Specialist Notetakers** for students with vision impairment, helping to improve student access to specialist support [F4; S2].

**1.iv. The Student Loans Company (SLC) has begun to improve the accessibility of the DSA application process**, including through the development of a more accessible version of the application form than existed previously [F1; S5]. The SLC has committed to broader changes to the DSA service to ensure it is both accessible and relevant to students with vision impairment. The Head of Service Design at SLC, in response to a consultation event based on the ORTS campaign [S6], concluded that “This was a powerful call that will live with me for a long time. I feel terrible that you have had such a poor experience. This is not much consolation to you, but we are listening, and we will engage. It’s about more than ensuring we are compliant; it’s about doing the right thing and making sure everyone has access.” [S5]

## **2. VICTAR has influenced national policy development on higher education provision for people with vision impairment**

**2.i. New policy priorities for the higher education sector with regards to disability access have been shaped** by VICTAR's research evidence [F1, F3, F4, F5]. Specifically, **the new Disabled Students Commission (DSC) has been influenced by** VICTAR and TPT's ministerial roundtable with vision impaired students at University of Birmingham as part of the ORTS campaign [S2, S6]. The DSC aims to improve support for students with disabilities in higher education. After this roundtable, the Universities Minister “highlighted the need for universities to face up to their responsibility to be truly inclusive” [S6]. He also stated:

After listening to their stories, concerns and difficulties I am keen to do more as these issues are a key priority around access and participation to higher education [...] The roundtable discussion demonstrates to me issues such as the supportive equipment for students who are visually impaired need and the technology that is needed to allow students to progress in their courses. Also, the issues around exams and how the right educational material is produced and if things go wrong then students should be able to resolve these issues and have an effective complaints procedure. I want students

who are visually impaired to have access to higher education and they should not have these barriers in place [S2].

Further, **the Higher Education Commission focused its annual inquiry in 2019–2020** on “the experiences of disabled students in higher education, aiming to find constructive solutions to the challenges and barriers they face” [S7; F1, F3]. The LTS research directly informed the focus of the inquiry through its demonstration of the importance of a focus upon “transitions into and out of higher education” and in highlighting the “central role played by the Disabled Students’ Allowance in disabled students experiences in higher education” [F1; S8]. The inquiry report, which cited VICTAR’s LTS in four places [S7], outlined the key priorities for the sector which will be overseen by the DSC.

**2.ii. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) have updated internal processes for reviewing complaints** from students with vision impairment after being informed of evidence from VICTAR’s LTS through RNIB, who sat on the Disability Experts Panel [S9]. The OIA is the independent student complaints scheme for England and Wales, who act on complaints made by students with disabilities with regards to barriers to access. OIA have also used a VICTAR case study **to directly inform a Good Practice Framework for higher education providers** regarding student complaints and appeals [F1, F3, F4, F5; S10; R3]. The VICTAR case study shows how to support a vision impaired student who must do extensive course reading [S10]. These guidelines have since been used by OIA as a benchmark when making decisions in response to formal complaints from disabled students. They were developed to guide HE providers in England and Wales on how best to support students with disabilities and to ensure they are meeting the requirements of the Equality Act [S11].

### **3. VICTAR has changed NGO policies and practices regarding higher education and the transition needs of people with vision impairment**

**New strategic priorities, services and guidance of leading NGOs** have been informed by VICTAR’s research [F1–F5]. Specific examples are:

**3.i. The TPT have aligned their strategic priorities** to the findings of VICTAR’s LTS [F1–F5]. These new priorities have **led to a new national TPT support service** being set up in 2019 for people with vision impairment moving through higher education and transitioning into employment [S10], including recruiting staff to provide this dedicated service. The advice given by the service is informed by the findings of the LTS, and includes providing online guidance resources, determining what type of information students require and providing illustrative quotes and case studies [F1, F3, F4, F5; R3; S10].

**3.ii. Other national NGOs have also adopted more inclusive practices** as a result of VICTAR’s evidence-based support of broader policy change. For example, The Institute of Employment Studies now includes a focus on digital accessibility in its research for the Office of Students (OfS, the independent regulator of HE in England). As a result, the OfS now has “highly valuable insights into the use of technology by HEIs” for student inclusion purposes [F1, F3; S8]. These insights have led the Institute of Employment Studies to recommend to higher education institutions (HEI) that they develop additional indicators of inclusive HEI practice. Such indicators include “Provision of advice, guidance and good practice examples to staff on meeting digital accessibility standards” and “Offering alternative formats as standard practice”. These new insights are published on the OfS website to guide HEIs on developing student Access and Participation plans [S8].

## **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**S1.** Chattaway, T. (2019) [Our Right to Study](#). Thomas Pocklington Trust. [Available as PDF]

**S2.** Summary report of the outcomes of the ‘Our Right to Study’ campaign (January 2021). [Available as PDF]

**S3.** Testimony from Department for Education (16th December 2020). [Available as PDF]

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- S4.** Thomas Pocklington Trust statement in response to change in DSA policy. Website: "[TPT welcomes Disabled Students' Allowance reform](#)" (July 2020) [Available as PDF]
- S5.** Thomas Pocklington Trust statement following roundtable meeting with SLC and key stakeholders: "[Students speak plainly about their experience of applying for student finance](#)" (August 2020) [Available as PDF]
- S6.** Announcement by Disabled Students Commission. Website: "[New group to boost support for disabled students](#)" (27<sup>th</sup> June 2019) [Available as PDF]
- S7.** Higher Education Commission (2020). [Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all](#). [Available as PDF]
- S8.** Testimony from Policy Connect (December 2020). [Available as PDF]
- S9.** Testimony from former Royal National Institute of Blind People research manager (15<sup>th</sup> December 2020). [Available as PDF]
- S10.** Testimony from Thomas Pocklington Trust (dated 11 December 2020). [Available as PDF]
- S11.** OIA (2017) [The good practice framework: Handling student complaints and academic appeals](#). Office of the Independent Adjudicator for students in higher education. [Available as PDF]