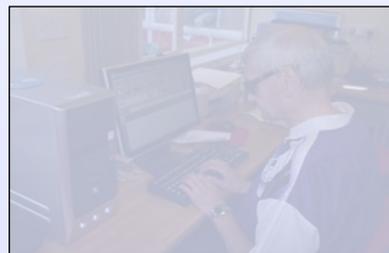




‘Skills for Life’: Investigating the barriers to labour market integration for Visually Impaired people in North West England

Executive Summary

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**Catholic Blind Institute (CBI)
European Social Fund Objective 3
Research Report in association with
Liverpool John Moores University**

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1. Executive Summary

The report documents the main outcomes of a European Social Fund (ESF) Objective 3 research project entitled; “*Skills 4 Life: Investigating the barriers to labour market integration for Visually Impaired people in North West England*”. The research was undertaken on behalf of the Catholic Blind Institute (CBI), in conjunction with John Moores University at the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure. The project remit was concerned primarily with investigating the barriers to labour market integration for men and women who are visually impaired¹ (VI) in the North West (NW) region of England. The primary focus of the research was concerned with employment, however the project also investigated the support provided for students with VIs at mainstream Higher Education institutions (HEIs) within the region, in addition to the career support made available to those students. The location choice for the project was driven purely by the circumstances of the Catholic Blind Institute’s position (Liverpool), and with the ESF funding being Objective 3. Therefore, the study recruited participants from Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumbria and Greater Manchester (excluding Merseyside, which holds ESF Objective 1 status).

Context

There is presently a wealth of literature which focuses upon the area of VI in general. Limited research tends to investigate the barriers faced by individuals with VIs when accessing *both* employment and education simultaneously. Studies tend to be more focused upon experiences *within* employment and/or education, as opposed to gaining access to either service. Rather than simply exploring what the barriers were, the research exemplified how such barriers can be overcome by individuals, and more so how to learn from such barriers.

The research initiative had as its foundation, the need to contribute appropriate and applicable findings to the wider framework of social inclusion, within both an employment *and* educational context. The social inclusion agenda has powerful backing from the government and it embraces many aspects of policy and practice, including the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the more recent Disability Equality Duty (2006) (Directgov, 2007a), as well as a range of disability and specific VI initiatives. In response to such acts and schemes, employers and educational professionals are becoming increasingly aware of the need to assess services and respond positively to the challenge of providing for social inclusion.

¹ Classification of VI by the individual themselves did not necessarily mean that they had to be registered as either severely sight impaired or sight impaired. It had to be to a point where their vision affected their day-to-day activities, they had sought medical help for it and the aid of corrective lenses, or contacts did not aid their vision in any way.

The Aim

- To establish the levels of support available to aid both the employment and education of the visually impaired community in the North West region.

The Objectives

- To determine the impact of current intervention strategies² available to and experienced by people with VIs.
- To evaluate the enabling mechanisms for individuals with VIs (e.g. employment teams, supported employment, government schemes) which are provided by national and regional charities, organisations and agencies.
- To explore employer perceptions of their organisations' potential and willingness to employ individuals with VIs.
- To examine the support mechanisms for students with VIs, as well as the advice and guidance for future career prospects throughout mainstream HEIs.
- To investigate whether the attitudes and perceptions of individuals with VIs affects motivation to obtain or retain employment.

Background

According to the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) (2006) there are currently 359,000 people registered as severely sight impaired (blind) or sight impaired (partially sighted) in the UK. Previously, statistics regarding blind and partially sighted people in England were collected and published every three years by the Department of Health (DOH). More recently, Adult Social Services Statistics through The Information Centre have taken over the collation and distribution of the registers. They are recorded solely on those people with VIs who register themselves, following a referral from their GP to a consultant ophthalmologist. The two official registers remain with England's Councils with Social Services Responsibilities (CSSRs) presently, and the terminology of the registers has changed, "blind and partial sight should now be expressed as severely sight impaired (blind) and sight impaired (partially sighted)" (The Information Centre, 2006:3). The last publication (released in December 2006) reports that the number of people with VIs who had registered themselves up until 31st March 2006 was 307,000. The number of registrations has decreased since the last record taken in March 2003 when there were 312,000 people recorded as being on either register. The latest publication reports that 41,250 people in the NW region (excluding Merseyside for ESF purposes) are registered as either severely sight impaired or sight impaired.

² Strategies aimed at reducing unemployment within the VI community.

The RNIB estimate that one hundred people will start to lose their sight everyday. Action for Blind People believe that there are actually around two million people in the UK who have a sight problem (this number includes those who are not eligible for registration but who have a sight problem which means they 'cannot see well enough to recognise a friend across the street' even whilst wearing glasses) (Action, 2007). Moreover, one in twelve of us will become severely sight impaired or sight impaired by the time we are sixty, and this statistic rises to one in six by the time we reach the age of seventy five (Action, 2007). These facts alone emphasise the importance of this type of research and the effect visual impairment can have on every persons' life.

Three out of four people who are VI of working age are not in paid employment (Winyard, 2006). Where people are not working, they are excluded from significant labour market integration, and forced to rely on government benefits, many living on an income close to the poverty line. Exclusion from the working world also means denied access to the many associated benefits, and this has been found to be a reality for up to 85,000 people within the UK (Winyard, 2006). It is not a reluctance to work that results in the high unemployment rate, but more fundamentally a lack of understanding and unwillingness to offer job opportunities on the part of potential employers. To counter this, Action (2006) found that 75% of employers agree that there is no difference between the performances of an employee with VIs compared to that of a sighted employee. These results suggest a need for change within people's hearts and minds, this report therefore intends to take a step further in progressing.

Educational attainment has been strongly correlated with unemployment and income within developed countries. According to Sparkes (1999), basic literacy and numeracy attainment have a particularly profound effect upon labour market participation and unemployment. In terms of labour market access, Moser (1999) claims that only one in every fifty jobs is open to those without the Basic Skills Agency³ 'entry level skill', and only 50% of jobs are open to those with such skill level. Subsequently, adults with poor skills are up to five times more likely to be unemployed, compared to those with average skills (Bynner and Parsons, 1997; Ekinsmyth and Bynner, 1994).

Change within the education system has arisen through a combination of a variety of factors, including the voices of disabled people themselves, pressure from voluntary organisations, legislation, and other substantial programmes. It is clear that legislation has helped considerably

³ See the Basic Skills Agency website for further details on basic skills;
<http://www.cityandguilds.com/sites/basicskills/index.htm>.

to change the situation for disabled people within education as a whole. HEIs' provision for disabled students has developed substantially, particularly in terms of the support dedicated to students with VIs. Although somewhat dated, the RNIB conducted research on colleges and universities around ten years ago and concluded that the will to do things was there, but a lack of resources was identified as a fundamental issue (Crosby and Maher, 1998). A further survey by the RNIB found that 47% of students did not usually receive materials in accessible formats, and 39% of students reported that they struggled utilising libraries (RNIB, 2000, as cited in Bolt, 2004). Such accessibility issues were further highlighted by additional research by the RNIB which found that only 5% of the written material available to all students was accessible to those with VIs (RNIB, 2003 as cited in Bolt, 2004).

Respondent Study Group

A regional study group of 26 men (17) and women (9) with VIs was surveyed by interview and/or questionnaire, as were 34 employer representatives across the public, private and voluntary sector. Interviews were also conducted with appropriate agencies, charities and organisations which aid people with VIs (and other disabilities), into employment and education, as well as nine NW HEI disability support team representatives. Overall, 48 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed in detail, with one focus group and two in-depth case studies. The quantitative data consisted of 59 questionnaires, 33 from employers and 26 from individuals with VIs. The following table shows the exact breakdown of how the data was collected between the individuals and organisations within the study group.

		Interviews	Questionnaires	Focus Group	Case Diaries
Employers	Private Sector	3	9		
	Public Sector	3	17		
	Voluntary Sector	2	7		
	Total	8	33		
VI People	Employed	17	19		
	Unemployed	4	5		1
	Student	2	2	3 ppts ⁴	1
	Total	23	26		
VI/disability service providers	Education (including HEI representatives)	12			
	Employment	5			
	Total	17			
	Total Study Group	48	59	1	2

Table 1: Breakdown of participant study group.

Summary of Findings

- There was no consensus of opinion which favoured either specialist or mainstream education (pre-16 years old) for individuals with VIs, although results did suggest that socialisation levels (how one learns to be a participating member of society; e.g. the ability to communicate, levels of confidence and general acceptable behaviour) amongst those individuals who attended specialised provision were lower. Furthermore, there was found to be levels of stigma attached to specialist provision.
- It was found that the educational experiences for individuals with VIs (up to the age of 16) seemed to create differential outcomes, for instance, whilst those who attended specialist provision gained more qualifications compared to those who attended mainstream, the integration into mainstream Higher Education (HE) was for them more problematic. Furthermore, the levels of expectations of students with VIs with a specialist provision background were found to be higher, and sometimes their hopes were not fulfilled in reality.
- The findings demonstrated that there was a high demand for HE from those adults who lost their sight later in life. Moreover, specialist training/education was found to be essential (at least in the early years of schooling) for those who were VI from birth or an early age, and for those who lost their sight as adults.

⁴ 'ppts' = study participants/respondents.

- It was generally felt by the majority of the sample that government legislation had largely improved the quality and amount of support provided by HEIs, although the range of adaptations were varied in terms of breadth and quality amongst the studied institutions. There appeared to be little interaction between HEI disability representatives and the VI community, which in turn created a barrier for potential students, who often failed to disclose their disability despite the acknowledgment that early disclosure created better outcomes.
- The career guidance provided by the institutions was varied, however largely generic, showing little specific support for students with visual difficulties. Barriers were still apparent within education for individuals with VIs. Such issues as demands of study, inappropriate provision, and the low expectation of support staff regarding students' capabilities, were identified. Furthermore, the majority of individuals blamed their visual condition for their lack of success within an educational context.
- The majority of respondents in this study with VIs were successfully employed; they tended to explain their success through the attribution of their own personal motivation, determination and the desire ultimately to work. Motivation levels were lowest amongst individuals who often questioned whether they were capable of finding work after losing their sight.
- Employer representatives were generally positive towards employing individuals with VIs, indicating good intentions towards the employment of disabled people. Yet, even though a high proportion of disabled employees were employed within the organisations, there were far fewer individuals with VIs compared to other disabilities.
- The severity of vision loss conversely affected employment success (i.e. those who were registered as *severely* sight impaired were found to be employed more than those who were registered only as sight impaired⁵). A higher proportion of individuals who had been VI from birth or a young age were employed, compared to those who had become VI as an adult. This suggests that the former group adapted better to the challenges faced as a disabled person.
- The lack of clear diagnosis of a visual impairment and guidance was perceived as a barrier to meaningful employment. The time between diagnosis and the formal registration of that visual impairment denied many of the sample access to the services, support mechanisms and financial aid to which they were entitled.
- Employers were less likely to select a potential recruit for interview if they were registered 'partially sighted' or 'blind'. Misinterpretation of the term visual impairment was frequently

⁵ It should be noted that the majority of respondents in the study group were registered as severely sight impaired and due to the overall small sample, the finding cannot be considered statistically robust as a result.

found amongst employers. Their perceptions being based upon the common stereotype that VI signified a total lack of vision i.e. blindness. There was also a consensus among employers that individuals with VIs were best suited to lower level roles and not for managerial positions.

- The majority of respondents discussed their negative experiences within past employment, with almost half of those having felt as though they had been a victim of disability discrimination. However, such experiences did not necessarily have a damaging effect upon their future employment prospects.
- Opinions differed regarding the social versus financial advantages of accessing work.
 - ❖ Professionals working within agencies which facilitate employment deemed the receipt of benefits to be a barrier in accessing work (with lower remuneration) for individuals with VIs.
 - ❖ Respondents with VIs suggested that this was a misconception, and that the social advantages often outweighed the financial considerations, with most of the individuals with VIs having the desire to work rather than to rely solely on benefits.
- Financial incentives (i.e. Working Tax Credit) provided by the government were viewed as a positive step to encouraging individuals with VIs into work.
- A supportive work environment was found to be essential in encouraging the disclosure of impairments amongst staff.
 - ❖ The evidence suggested that the majority of employer respondents did not actively encourage the disclosure of prospective *or* existing staff.
 - ❖ Individuals and agencies agreed the importance of disclosing an impairment positively by emphasising ones abilities rather than inabilities.
- A high proportion of the organisations did implement positive employment schemes aimed at encouraging disabled individuals; most notable was the two-tick scheme⁶. However, only a minority of individuals with VIs thought the scheme was a positive move in terms of equality, with many respondents seeing it merely as a box-ticking exercise.
- Access to Work (AtW) (Directgov, 2007b) was highly criticised by both individuals with VIs and employers regarding the time it takes to contract equipment required for a new employment position.
- Health and safety issues were identified as the most predominant discouraging factor in the recruitment of individuals with VIs. The perception of the assumption of health and

⁶ The purpose of such scheme is to ensure that employers conform to the new legislation introduced under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). This scheme guarantees that all applicants with disabilities who meet the minimum selection criteria for a position are interviewed and subsequently judged upon their job capabilities. See Disability Jobsite, (2005) and JCP (2007c)).

safety being an issue versus the reality highlights the lack of understanding of visual impairment.

Summary of Recommendations

- Educational professionals within local authorities should provide impartial guidance on the respective benefits and drawbacks of specialised and mainstream schooling (pre-16 years), to individuals with VIs (and parents/guardians) which is based upon reliable evidence.
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), local authorities and individual schools should seek to improve the overall image of specialised provision to remove the associated stigma. Moreover, the education of individuals with VIs who require the dedicated support provided exclusively within specialised provision should be wholeheartedly encouraged.
- Higher Education Institutions should endeavour to provide disability-specific support, through both career teams and disability support advisors, thus aiding the transition of individuals with VIs into employment or further education. Furthermore, career guidance needs to be individually tailored to the needs of the disabled student with career advisors aiming to raise their expectations.
- The support provided within both educational and employment contexts should refrain from treating people with VIs as a homogenous group, based on assumptions that all have the same needs. The support mechanisms should assess and identify the particular requirements of the individual with VIs in question.
- 'Disability Champions'⁷ need to be identified within educational establishments and public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The Disability Champion's role should be to encourage disclosure, act as an advocate for individuals with VIs, and work towards the education and promotion of equality of opportunity.
- Rehabilitation for individuals who have lost their sight later in life presently appears to revolve around basic skills training. Whilst some provision is available, there is a clear need for rehabilitation to also provide for further readjustment (both psychologically and practically), and educational achievement opportunities within the transition period, thus facilitating entry into mainstream education and/or work opportunities.
- Some employers and education course providers impose recruitment restrictions based upon medical or safety grounds (concerned with the severity of disability an individual

⁷ A disabled individual who has been successful within a company or an educational institution, who is there to prove the outcome of such a positive working partnership between that individual and it's respective employer/HEI to implement change and equality within the overall organisation.

has). Therefore, whilst adhering to legislation⁸, every effort should be made by all such organisations to ensure that individuals with VIs are accommodated for and integrated into organisations.

- Visual awareness training should form part of the standard equal opportunities training and should be mandatory for *all* staff. Such training should incorporate thorough explanation of the VI registration process (and its benefits); it should also explore how disability stereotypes and assumptions conspire to limit access to education and employment, and in so doing perpetuates disadvantage and ultimately social exclusion.
- Transferable skills acquired through unpaid work, as well as the skills gained throughout the rehabilitation experience need to be recognised and valued by employers and education providers.
- Eye specialists should provide individuals with more accurate diagnoses, and whilst remaining positive, realistic indications regarding implications for their future (career/education) should be provided. Specialists should also have the knowledge to inform individuals of the registration process, its associated benefits, and signpost individuals to further support provided by various agencies in relation to both education *and* employment.
- Agencies and organisations designed to facilitate the employment of individuals with VIs should concentrate on 'better-off' calculations in terms of *social gains* as identified by the sample rather than the focus being predominantly on financial gain.
- Positive marketing strategies to improve and promote financial employment incentives such as Working Tax Credit for disabled people need to be implemented by the government agencies concerned. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Job Centre Plus (JCP) can encourage individuals to engage with the labour market, rather than (as in current practice) impose a negative threat of removing state benefits altogether if long term unemployed.
- Government work schemes (such as the New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP), Pathways to Work, AtW, WORKSTEP and Employ Ability), and the associated funding should be better publicised to make individuals and organisations aware of the procedures and advantages of engaging in such schemes.

⁸ Organisations would have to refer to the Disability Discrimination (1995) legislation to comprehend under what circumstances ability and/or medical restrictions were lawful and therefore justifiable. The law states that "treatment is justified if, but only if, the reason for it is both material to the circumstances of the particular case and substantial" (DDA, 1995a). Moreover, "treatment is justified only if — (a) in the opinion of the provider of services, one or more of the conditions mentioned in subsection (4) are satisfied; and (b) it is reasonable, in all the circumstances of the case, for him to hold that opinion. (4) The conditions are that — (a) in any case, the treatment is necessary in order not to endanger the health or safety of any person (which may include that of the disabled person)" (DDA, 1995b).

- Access to Work requires improvement; the time taken for adaptations/equipment to be implemented within organisations is prohibitive and must be reduced substantially. Moreover, additional financial aid should be provided to smaller organisations who are unable to afford to pay the required 20% for associated adaptations in order to retain current staff.

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