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UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Experiences of blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition into Higher Education

November 2015

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Contents

Contents	2
Acknowledgements.....	5
The Nuffield Foundation.....	6
Glossary	7
1 Executive Summary	8
1.1 Preparing to go into Higher Education.....	9
1.2 Disabled Student Allowance	9
1.3 Developing support plans.....	10
1.4 Accessing learning materials	11
1.5 Accessing examinations and assessments	11
1.6 Mobility training and orientation.....	12
1.7 Living independently in Higher Education	12
1.8 General life in Higher Education.....	13
1.9 Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in Higher Education	13
2 Background of the RNIB Transitions Project	17
2.1 Project Overview.....	17
2.2 Data collected relating to Higher Education	18
3 Analysis and Reporting	24
3.1 Data management	24
3.2 Analysis of questions and reporting style	24
3.3 Researcher effect.....	24
4 Preparing to go into Higher Education.....	25
4.1 UCAS/Higher Education Institution applications.....	25
4.2 UCAS applications and the participants visual impairment.....	28
4.3 Initial contact with HE institution.....	32
4.4 Preparing to go into Higher Education: Parent/Carer perspective.....	39
5 Disabled Student Allowance.....	45
5.1 Overview of Disabled Student Allowance.....	45
5.2 Overview of data collected on DSA.....	46

5.3	Initial applications for DSA and preparations made.....	47
5.4	Preparing for DSA Needs assessments	50
5.5	DSA assessment meeting.....	55
5.6	Support allocations	62
5.7	Budget limitations.....	66
5.8	Delivery of DSA support.....	71
5.9	Restrictions on the funding of non-specialist equipment.....	86
5.10	Reflections on DSA by the participants	93
5.11	Reflections on DSA by Disability Support Officers	98
6	Developing support plans	107
6.1	What are disability support offices?.....	107
6.2	Making contact with disabled support service	108
6.3	Disability support officers understanding of visual impairment 110	
6.4	Support agreements	113
6.5	Participants' understanding of reasonable adjustments	117
6.6	Role of Disability Support Officers.....	126
6.7	The transition experience of VI students into Higher Education: the perspective of Disability Support Officers	131
7	Accessing learning materials.....	140
7.1	Experience of accessing information in lectures and seminars 140	
7.2	Use of electronic material.....	150
7.3	Virtual learning environments (VLE).....	152
7.4	Accessing libraries and other reference materials.....	155
7.5	Working alongside students with vision impairments: perspectives of Academic Staff	161
8	Accessing examinations and assessments	173
8.1	Access arrangements for exams.....	173
8.2	Experiences in taking exams	176
8.3	Assessed coursework, written assessments and referencing	180
8.4	Delays in completing the academic year	183
9	Mobility training and orientation	187

9.1	Provision of mobility support	187
9.2	Arranging mobility training/orientation	188
9.3	Scope of mobility support.....	192
9.4	Accessibility of the institution	195
10	Living independently in Higher Education	198
10.1	Accommodation choices	198
10.2	Barriers in moving into private accommodation.....	199
10.3	Institution-owned accommodation.....	204
10.4	Private accommodation.....	211
10.5	Living in the family home.....	215
10.6	Independent living skills	216
10.7	External services.....	220
10.8	Guide Dogs.....	221
11	General life in Higher Education	225
11.1	Extra-curricular activities	225
11.2	Relationships with peers	226
11.3	Part-time employment/voluntary work	232
11.4	Anxiety.....	234
12	Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in higher education	236
12.1	How many young people with visual impairment go into Higher Education?	236
12.2	Futuretrack.....	240
12.3	Destination of Leavers survey.....	243
13	Conclusions.....	247
14	Future Plans	251
15	Appendix	252
16	References.....	257

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The Nuffield Foundation

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Glossary

CCTV	Closed circuit television
DLA	Disabled Living Allowance
DSA	Disabled Students' Allowance
DS	Disability Support (office or service)
DSO	Disability Support Officer
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
ILS	Independent Living Skills
LVA	Low vision aid
QTVI	Qualified teacher of visually impaired children
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People
Statement	Statement of Special Educational Needs
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VI	Visual Impairment
VICTAR	Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research
VTS	Visiting Teacher Service
Year 11 cohort	Participants were in school Year 11, aged 15-16 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 10 cohort	Participants were in school Year 10, aged 14-15 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010
Year 9 cohort	Participants were in school Year 9, aged 13-14 when recruitment commenced in summer 2010

1 Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the research project: “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. The project has surveyed a sample of young people about their circumstances and views since 2010 when they were aged between 14 and 16 years old.

This report focuses on data collected between spring 2012 and summer 2015 from participants who had completed the application process to Higher Education (HE) institutions and made the transition into HE.

Interviews were conducted at various stages:

- prior to starting in HE
- following completion of the first year of their course
- as part of regular longitudinal interviews in parallel with the whole cohort of participants
- as part of summer 2015 follow up interviews to specifically investigate emerging findings those with participants in HE

Interviews prior to the young people starting in HE focused on their plans following completion of their current courses at sixth form/college. The interviews focused on their chosen institutions and courses, and any preparations that they had made for moving into HE in relation to their visual impairment.

The report presents findings in relation to:

- Preparing to go into Higher Education
- Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)
- Developing support plans
- Accessing learning materials
- Accessing examinations and assessments
- Mobility training and orientation
- Living independently in Higher Education
- General life in Higher Education
- Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in Higher Education

1.1 Preparing to go into Higher Education

The young people applied to study at a variety of universities and their reasons were in line with most young people (e.g. location and choice of course), but also included reasons specific to their visual impairment (e.g. good reputation for supporting students with disabilities). Of concern, about a third had problems accessing the UCAS application form (including six who could not complete it independently). Most recalled declaring their visual impairment on the UCAS form, and encouragingly many (over a half) reported communicating with department and/or disability support officers about their visual impairment during the process of application.

A good proportion of our participants were successful in achieving the qualifications required to get into HE. Only one participant did not achieve the grades to get into her first choice institution. All the participants who completed the first year of their course were at least “quite happy” with their plans to continue in higher education.

Twenty-eight of the participants (out of 33) successfully completed the first year of their courses the first time of asking and progressed into the second year. However, of real concern was that four participants failed to complete their first year because of access issues linked to their visual impairment. Similarly, a further seven had to delay the completion of their assessments, having experienced barriers linked to their visual impairment throughout the year.

1.2 Disabled Student Allowance

Most of the participants applied for DSA and all of these were successful in their application. Nevertheless, we concluded that at least two participants were misadvised that they should not apply for DSA. Those participants who received support through DSA found it to be invaluable, with several of the students describing themselves reliant on the funding available through DSA to be able to take their courses. This re-emphasises the importance of this scheme and demonstrates just how valuable it is to these young people.

Most participants found the application forms accessible, but surprisingly three participants were sent the wrong (inaccessible) versions of the forms.

DSA involves a needs assessment meeting. The amount of preparation and advice received prior to this meeting varied considerably. Related, DSA assessors did not always have the specialist knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of visually impaired students. Unsurprisingly then, several participants wished they had been more prepared for this assessment and were disappointed with the outcomes, particularly with hindsight.

DSA offers three categories of support: specialist equipment, non-medical help, and general. Each category is allocated a maximum level of financial support over the period of the student's course. There was evidence that some allocated equipment was poor quality, and this may have been because the limited budget was being stretched too far. Also of great concern was the delay in processing the DSA at the beginning of some participant's studies which meant that there were delays in receiving crucial services, training and equipment.

1.3 Developing support plans

The development of a support plan is a key approach to ensuring that appropriate and timely support is in place for young people with disabilities at university. University disability support services, and specifically Disability Support Officers (DSOs), are important in this process.

The participant's support plans contained a range of important information (with links to the DSA), e.g. note taker support, mobility support, library support, special arrangements for exams, and transcription of text books. For some DSO and participants it was difficult to develop support plans in the tight timescales (often in the few weeks between the young people accepting a place and the start of the academic year).

Some participants reported that some DSOs lacked of specialist knowledge (although many had significant expertise). Also the young people themselves were quite passive on occasions and in some cases they did not know the content of their support plans. Nevertheless, independence was a key priority for the majority of the young people – ideally preferring adjustments and accessible learning materials which minimised the additional human help needed.

1.4 Accessing learning materials

Access to learning material is an important part of university life. Many challenges faced by visually impaired students can be overcome by following well-established inclusive teaching practice (e.g. making teaching material available electronically and in advance; ensuring the institution virtual learning environment is accessible for screen reader users) and making anticipatory adjustments (e.g. ensuring accessible versions of key texts are available in advance). Some adjustments must be done in response to a given situation, and may require human support (e.g. readers and note-takers).

A range of positive practice was identified in which many participants described how they had worked with their lecturers and libraries to successfully access the learning material. However, there were consistent challenges experienced by many participants in all aspects of accessing learning materials – delayed availability to reference materials, inaccessible VLEs, unhelpful lecturers, difficulty accessing the library. As a specific example, there is persistent evidence that staff do not consistently format electronic files so that they can be accessed using screen reading technology.

1.5 Accessing examinations and assessments

It is common for assessments to be adjusted to make them accessible to students with visual impairment. This includes a range of strategies, e.g.: extra time, rest breaks, the use of computers in examinations, modified exam paper (e.g. braille, large print), and the support of a reader or scribe. We spoke to 24 participants about modified examination arrangements that they had experienced; twelve reported having problems including: inappropriately formatted exams, electronic files which were inaccessible, poor equipment, and incorrect time. Three participants took their exams later than their peers (in the summer when others were re-taking exams), and four more experienced other delays with written assessment.

It was relatively common amongst our participants for them to experience delays in progressing through university: of the 33 who started university, four re-took their first year and a further seven were delayed completing an academic year. Whilst those students who have re-taken the first year had their course fees refunded, it has still been necessary for them to secure additional student loans to fund their living costs. Similarly, students taking longer to complete a given academic

year had additional living costs and missed the opportunity to find work experience and voluntary work over the summer break.

1.6 Mobility training and orientation

Most participants who wanted mobility training when arriving at university received it (although there were exceptions). Often this was funded through the student's own Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), but also some universities offered funding in this regard as well as Guide Dogs.

Some participants described experiencing delays in receiving this support and training. Also, the training tended to particularly focus upon moving around the university campus / teaching areas. While this was very important and useful, it was often at the exclusion of wider travel (e.g. into the local community or city shops). This frustrated some participants, making them feel limited in their travel and having to rely upon others. For some this was a reason why they remained living on the university campus in their second year at university (in contrast to many of their sighted peers who moved to cheaper private accommodation).

A reason for this narrowness of mobility training appears to be linked to the limits put upon the use of DSA funding which can only be used for mobility training which is linked to studying. Nevertheless, there were examples of good practice in which the university and Guide Dogs funded a wider range of training.

1.7 Living independently in Higher Education

Many young people lived in student accommodation owned by the university (often halls of residence). Those with more severe visual impairment tended to continue living in this accommodation in their second year. For some this was linked to concern about travel (and getting necessary training for the journey), but there appeared to be other reasons also linked to their disability including finding suitable accommodation which was large enough for their equipment.

Importantly, the accommodation they chose was often more expensive and potentially isolating. Those who did move to private accommodation appeared more confident and experienced at living independently (perhaps derived from home and school) and had access to additional mobility support.

Many participants spoke positively about their independence skills – cooking cleaning and shopping. Nevertheless, some participants were less confident about one or more aspect of independent living. It is also interesting that none of the participants described drawing upon Disability Living Allowance (or Personal Independence Payments) which are benefits available designed to cover the extra costs associated with disability. Also, few participants drew upon the local social services that could have supported them (although some participants who had tried had been unsuccessful).

It is useful to note that three participants had been match with a guide dog during their time in university (and others were hoping to do the same). Working with a guide dog was described very positively by participants who referred to the mobility and social benefits. They also spoke positively about the additional training and support offered by Guide Dogs association.

1.8 General life in Higher Education

Most of the participants we spoke to joined social groups and societies at university. In fact, some described how this was an important strategy to help them meet people, which some found difficult. Relatively small but significant numbers of participants said they found it challenging getting to know other students for a variety of reasons including difficulties introducing themselves, travelling independently (e.g. to social events), and telling people about their visual impairment. Nevertheless, many overcame these challenges and most described having good friendship groups. Two participants had taken advantage of a befriending service.

As with many students, some of the participants were engaged in part-time paid and voluntary work during their studies, and several had work placements as part of their course.

1.9 Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in Higher Education

We were able to draw upon larger datasets to inform our own analysis and provide context for our qualitative findings. This included UCAS administrative records, Futuretrack longitudinal study, and Destination of School Leavers Survey (2010).

1.9.1 How many young people with visual impairment go into Higher Education?

Statistics from UCAS record the number of students who are visually impaired who apply for HE undergraduate courses. Of particular note, we see that the proportion of students who are recorded as being 'blind/partially sighted' fell between 2009 and 2014 (from 0.16% and 895 to 0.11% and 610). As similar patterns were identified for students who are deaf/partially hearing, this was investigated further by researchers at the UK based charity NDCS. They found that in 2010/11 the UCAS application form changed so that students were no longer asked to identify themselves as "blind/partially sighted", and instead as "blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses". This could therefore explain to a large extent the apparent fall in students who have a recorded visual impairment. It also raises concerns that some students who have visual impairment which is significant enough to have required support whilst in education, but not severe enough to describe it as 'serious' will have not declared their disability, and therefore would not have been identified by the institutions DS services.

In 2014, 1.2% of all UCAS applications with a disability recorded themselves as meeting the criteria of "blind or a serious visual impairment". This relatively small figure highlights how low incidence visual impairment is in Higher Education. It creates a challenge for academic staff, and disability support officers who likely will have limited experience of working with students with visual impairment, and in particular, students with severe visual impairment. Whilst visual impairment is also low incidence, it is also worthwhile to remember that it is regarded as 'high need', potentially requiring a high level of support and adjustment.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency records there to have been 1,040 first year students with visual impairment across the different levels of study (i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher degrees) in the academic year 2013-14.

1.9.2 Futuretrack

Futuretrack is a longitudinal study which has been conducted by researchers working at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research, who have been tracking students' entry into HE, their experiences in HE, and their employment outcomes after they have left HE. The findings of the Longitudinal Transition Study were considered in the context of Futuretrack's findings.

- Futuretrack found that students with disabilities tended to be older on entry into higher education than students without disabilities. In our study we have observed 'churning' amongst the participants, which has meant that they have spent longer in FE than other students, having repeated years of their courses and taken additional qualifications at the same level, resulting in a delay making the next transition. This has meant that entry into HE was delayed for several of the participants
- Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were slightly more likely to have left HE during the first year of their course (5% compared to 3% of non-disabled students). In the case of our study, two participants left HE during/after the first year of their studies, due to problems that they experienced with accessing their chosen courses. A third student left during the first semester, having not enjoyed the course they had chosen. This means that 9% of the participants in our study who entered HE withdrew during the first year of their course, although it is important to consider our very small sample size before making direct comparison.
- When compared with their non-disabled peers, Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were less likely to view their experience in higher education favourably. Interestingly, however, students with visual impairment (along with students with autism) were more likely to view the experience favourably than students without disabilities. When considering the very challenging experiences our participants have described this is somewhat surprising, although the Transitions participants did indicate that overall they are satisfied with their HE experience.
- Futuretrack found that students with visual impairment were more positive about the information and support available for new students, and about the range of extra-curricular activities available than other students with disabilities. We have noted that many of our participants have engaged with extra-curricular activities.
- Futuretrack found that students with visual impairment were more likely to continue living in institution-owned accommodation beyond the first year, mirroring our own findings. They also found they were more likely to experience problems in arranging their accommodation, when compared to non-disabled students.
- Supporting the Transition Study findings, Futuretrack found that students with disabilities, including students with visual

impairment, were less likely to have had paid employment during their first year, but more likely to have had voluntary work.

Our research findings are broadly in line with the findings of large-scale surveys. Nevertheless, drawing upon our participant's detailed qualitative accounts, our findings provide richer explanations for the problems young people with visual impairment encounter.

1.9.3 Destination of Leavers Survey: 2010

An estimated 40.6% of graduates with visual impairment entered full time paid employment. This is considerably lower than non-disabled graduates (49.0%) and also than disabled graduates in general (45.5%). Students with disabilities were slightly more likely to be in voluntary/unpaid work following graduation than students without disabilities (3.1% compared to 2.0%).

A greater proportion of graduates with visual impairment were assumed to be unemployed in comparison to both the disabled graduates and non-disabled graduates. This is consistent with previous studies such as Network 1000 and secondary data analysis of the UK Labour Force Survey.

In our future data collections we will be investigating the destinations of our participants when they leave HE, and will explore these findings further in the context of this survey.

2 Background of the RNIB Transitions Project

2.1 Project Overview

The research project is entitled “A longitudinal study of blind and partially sighted young people in the UK”. This project was designed in 2009 by a team from RNIB and the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham in response to the research brief prepared by RNIB.

The key objectives of the project were:

- To track the process of transition for blind and partially sighted young people from age 14 for [initially] five years;
- To identify the roles of professionals involved;
- To identify the factors that improve or reduce a young person’s chance of gaining employment.

Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of an original sample of approximately 80 young people to the longitudinal study and carrying out several surveys of their views and circumstances. This took place between autumn 2009 – March 2012 and was funded by RNIB. The phase of research resulted in a number of reports (e.g. Hewett and Douglas, 2011a; Hewett and Douglas, 2011b, Hewett, Douglas, Ramli, and Keil, 2012).

Phase 2 of the study has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and centred on follow-up surveys of the sample of young people with visual impairment. By autumn 2014/spring 2015 there were 73 participants actively involved in the research.

This report relates to data collected between Easter 2012 and summer 2015. Interviews were conducted with participants in the late spring/early summer prior to them starting in HE, and also after they had completed their first year in HE. Additionally, case study work was conducted with some of the participants, as described below.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants who participated in the HE interviews (N=39)

Characteristics	Total (N)
Gender	
Male	20
Female	19
Cohort participants recruited into	
Year 11	26
Year 10	7
Year 9	6
Registration type	
Blind	14
Partially sighted	12
Not registered	5
Participant does not know	4
Information not available	4
Reading format	
Standard to large print (pt 14 and under)	9
Large print (pt 16+)	19
Braille/Electronic	11
Academic year they planned to transition into HE	
2012	21
2013	8
2014	10

2.2 Data collected relating to Higher Education

2.2.1 Longitudinal interviews

As part of the longitudinal study, participants were regularly interviewed about their future plans, and any preparations that they had made in pursuing those plans. For those intending to start HE the next academic year, the interviews covered the following:

- Their destination for the next academic year
- The proposed HE institution and course
- Their reasons for applying for the course
- The accessibility of the application process

- Details of support received in applying for HE
- Details of applications made for disabled students allowance
- Details of discussions with department around support needs

Those who had completed their first year at HE were interviewed about their experiences. The semi-structured interviews covered the following topics:

- Disabled Student Allowance
- The Disability Support Office
- Accessing lectures and learning materials
- Arrangements for examinations and other assessed work
- Independent living
- General life in HE

2.2.2 Case study interviews: participants in Higher Education

Table 2: Overview of case study interviews/data collected: participants in Higher Education

Type of interview/data collection	Total (N)
Participant in-depth interview	5
Participant shadowing record	5
Participant shadowing follow up interview	5
Parents/Carers	4
Tutor/Department representative	5
Disability Support Office	5
Mobility officer	1
Total	30

Participant shadowing record and follow up interviews

One of the core components of the case study work was ‘shadowing’ the participants around a typical day in HE. Permission was requested from participants for the project researcher to shadow them in person. If, however, this was not an option, they were provided with a template diary in which they could record key events that had taken place that day. This corresponded with the template diary that the researcher used when taking observations during the day. The figure below shows the different headings used

Figure 1: Headings used for participant diary

Time	Details of	Any equipment	Any assistance	Detailed notes
------	------------	---------------	----------------	----------------

	activity	used (specialist or otherwise)	received	(including relevant background information)

It was possible (once having obtained permission from participants, course leaders and lecturers) to shadow four of the five case study participants who were already in HE during a typical day on their courses. This data collection took place between November 2013 and February 2014.

It was not possible to shadow one of the participants in person, due to a shortage of available seating in their lectures and security restrictions in their lecture buildings. Instead she completed the diary herself, by following instructions given in an example diary and additional guidance notes. These documents may be found in the appendix.

Following each day shadowing, the researcher conducted a short interview with each of the participants to clarify any matters of confusion, and also to request further relevant background information.

Participant in-depth interview

In-depth interviews took place with all participants following the shadowing work. These interviews covered the follows topics:

- Preparedness for the transition into HE (academically, socially, living independently)
- Expectations and actualities of support (support provided by disability support office, support provided by department, access to exams)
- Details of specific support (disabled students allowance (DSA), use of specialist equipment, accessing the library and other resources)
- Long term expectations (career ambitions, access to work, specialist advice through careers service)

Interviews with associates

Associates were asked questions covering the following topics:

Parents/carers

- Background family information (composition of household, household occupations, whether others in family have a visual impairment, background of son/daughters condition)
- Preparedness of young person before going into HE (support received through school/college, support through sensory support service, statutory transition planning, careers education and guidance, independent living, support provided to young person by themselves and other family members)
- Expectations and actualities of support received (initial contact with the HE institution and discussion of support, support received through disability support office, support received through department, support available in accommodation)
- Specific issues relating to HE (researching and visiting universities/HE institutions, application process through UCAS, application process to student finance and disabled student allowance, support and information available to parents)
- Future plans of son/daughter (career ambitions, access to work, where they see their son/daughter in ten years' time)

Tutor/department representative

- Background information (their role and experience, knowledge of Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), whether the department has supported anyone with a visual impairment in recent years, department's experience in providing support for students with disabilities)
- Preparedness (notice received that the young person would be on the course, preparedness of the young person for life in HE, preparedness of the department, evaluation of young persons' transition into HE)
- Expectations and actualities of support received by young person (expectations of support from young person and the disability support office, negotiation of support agreements, procedures that the department follows in terms of providing support, reality of support received, exam arrangements)

Disability Support Officer (DSO)

- Background information (role and experience in the field, departmental written policies, structure of the service, services that they provide as a DSO, staffing, evaluation of the general accessibility of the HE institution)

- Preparedness of the young person before going into HE (academic transition, skills and knowledge of assistive technology and other low vision aids, independent living, self-advocacy, their broader experience of visually impaired students coming to HE)
- Expectations and actualities of support received (expectations of the young person, agreed support, working relationship between disability support office and the participant's department, exam arrangements)
- Disabled student allowance (professional experience of DSA, participant's experience of DSA)

Mobility officer

- Background information (role and experience in the field, training received)
- Mobility training and DSA
- Mobility training and Social Services
- General accessibility of HE institution
- Mobility skills of students with visual impairments

Participant support documentation

Participants were invited to forward onto the research team official documentation that they had received in relation to their support in HE, including written support agreements drawn up by disability support officers and the reports written as part of their DSA meetings.

2.2.3 Case Studies: Participants currently at 6th form/college and preparing for Higher Education

Additional case studies were conducted with two students who were in their last year of sixth form/college. This provided the opportunity to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the support that they received when applying for HE, and the preparations that they made prior to starting in relation to their visual impairment.

Table 3: Overview of case study interviews/data collected: participants preparing for HE

Type of interview	Total (N)
Participant interview 1	2
Participant interview 2	2
Participant interview 3	2
Participant interview 4	1
Parent/carer	2

Tutor	2
QTVI	1

Participants were interviewed at regular intervals through their final year at sixth form, corresponding with the times at which they completed their UCAS forms, received offers from institutions, and after they had received their exam results and were preparing to start in HE.

3 Analysis and Reporting

3.1 Data management

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, before being entered into the project database, an IBM Statistics SPSS 20 programme.

3.2 Analysis of questions and reporting style

The responses to closed questions were analysed through simple summary statistics using IBM Statistics SPSS 20. These are presented in table format with both counts and percentages (where appropriate). Shorter open questions were themed and coded into IBM Statistics SPSS 20. The results from this analysis are either presented in tables, or described, in accordance to what was most appropriate. Any themes are illustrated using quotes.

3.3 Researcher effect

One inevitable consequence of qualitative research, and in particular longitudinal qualitative research, is some form of researcher effect. The participants were interviewed at several time points during their transition into Higher Education, during which they were asked about different sources of finance, services and systems, and whether they were drawing upon these or not. In some cases, information shared with the participants during the course of the interviews was new to them, and it is likely that this would have had some effect on their future actions (for example, applying for Disabled Student Allowance, or making contact with the institutions Disability Support Office). Additionally, a number of the participants were facing very difficult times when interviewed, and it was felt important to link these young people with relevant services to help them navigate these challenges and therefore some of the outcomes for these young people have been improved as a result of this research. Whilst this is extremely positive that the research study could have immediate benefit for these young people, it is important that the report is read with this in mind.

4 Preparing to go into Higher Education

In this section, we present our findings of the young people's experiences in preparing to go into HE. This includes:

- initial experience of applying for their respective courses
- declaration of their visual impairment
- initial communication with their HE institution (including both their department and the disability support office)
- experiences of applying for disabled student allowance, including how they found the assessment of needs and details of the support package that they were offered

4.1 UCAS/Higher Education Institution applications

4.1.1 Background to the participants

Table 4: Number of applications

	Total (N)
Admission date October 2012	22
Admission date October 2013	9
Admission date October 2014	10
Total	40

The table above provides a breakdown of the academic year which the participants were applying for. Whilst thirty eight different participants took part in these interviews, two of the participants applied for Higher Education on two separate occasions and therefore have been recorded twice: one for entry in 2012 and then again for 2013 and one for entry in 2013 and then 2014.

4.1.2 Institutions and courses participants applied to

The participants were asked for details of their first choice and reserve institutions, as well as the courses they hoped to study, and their reasons for choosing to apply for those particular institutions and courses.

Table 5: Type of institution participants applied to

Type of institution	Total (N)	Total (%)
Pre-1992 HE institution	18	45%
Post-1992 HE institution	19	48%
Specialist institution	3	8%
Total	40	100%

The table above shows the classification of HE institution that the participants applied to as their first choice. Eighteen applied to pre-1992 universities, 19 to post-1992 universities, and three to specialist HE institutions whose degrees are accredited by a separate HE institution. As noted previously, two participants applied for HE on two separate occasions and their choices on each occasion have been recorded bringing the total to 40.

Types of course

The participants applied for a wide range of courses. Due to the diversity of courses that are available in Higher Education, it makes it difficult to classify the types of course chosen. However, some participants chose courses which tended to be more the traditional 'academic' type, whilst others were looking at more creative or vocational type courses. Examples of the traditional subjects that the participants chose to study include Politics, History, and English Literature and Language. Examples of vocational/creative type courses included Journalism, Musical Theatre and Music Technology.

Reasons given for choosing HE institution and course

The participants were asked their reasons behind choosing their particular institutions and courses. The responses given have been analysed into themes and are summarised in the table below. Each theme is explored in more detail below

Table 6: Reasons for choosing HE institution and course

	Total (N)
Decision influenced by a feature of the course	24
Decision influenced by a feature of the institution	24
Location of institution	23
Factor specifically related to visual impairment	14
Provide further opportunities (employment; specific aspects of course)	11
Entry requirements	5
Influenced by others	5
Good reputation for subject	3
Only offer received	1

Twenty four of the participants were attracted by a particular feature of the course. This included being interested in the subject (10), being attracted by the course content (12) and being impressed by the facilities available on the course (2).

“The course is because I am really interested in politics”

“...went on open days to all courses, only one which was what it said it was - full package of performing arts including dance, acting, singing, etc.”

“The facilities that they had seemed amazing”

Twenty of the participants were influenced by particular features of the institutions. Thirteen were attracted by the institution’s reputation, 7 were attracted by the atmosphere of the institution (whilst one was put off by the feel of a university he had applied to after visiting it) and 3 reported liking the campus.

“Its course in Politics is one of the top in the country, I have just heard good things of it.”

“Universities are good for it, have research knowledge at [institution’s name] which is internationally recognised.”

“Because the university is a good uni, it’s a top ten uni in the UK.”

“No, not really it was mainly it seemed like a really nice place.”

4.2 UCAS applications and the participants visual impairment

Students in the United Kingdom predominately apply for undergraduate degrees in HE through a central admissions system known as the Universities and Colleges Admissions system (UCAS). Three of the participants, however, who applied to specialist HE institutions applied using separate application systems. Of initial concern for young people with visual impairments is how accessible the application systems are to them. The participants were asked how accessible they found the application system to be (in relation to their visual impairment), and also to explain their response.

Two main themes were identified. Firstly, several of the participants spoke of their overall experience in applying for HE, and the various ways in which they had found the process to be either a positive or negative experience. Secondly, several of the participants spoke of how they went about completing the application form. These themes are discussed further below:

Table 7: Evaluation of experience of HE application

	Total (N)
No problems with the accessibility of the form/positive experience	17
Some problems with the accessibility of the form	13
Unable to complete form independently	6
Delayed in completing the application due to accessibility challenges	2

Seventeen of the participants gave responses which indicated that they did not have any problems with the accessibility of the form which they completed, or spoke of an all-round positive experience.

“It was ok. Used Jaws, it was compatible”

“Good – could alter size of text on the application form”

“Was fine – no problems at all”

In contrast, thirteen of the participants reported having problems with the accessibility of the form.

“Not very good at all actually...The text was red-on-yellow. And then things could be, there was so much detail that things got confused. It just came across as really, really difficult”

“I don’t know if it was just the way my computer was set, but when you were using the magnification software, some of the things seemed a bit distant from each other, and it was hard to keep track of sometimes.”

“Not very [accessible] - the website was not accessible with screen reader Jaws. Not set up very well.”

To interpret these differing experiences by the young people in completing the UCAS application form, some key characteristics were investigated further.

Table 8: Participant experiences of applying for HE by key characteristics

Characteristic	Participants who reported difficulties (N=11)	Participants who reported no difficulties (N=14)
Registration type		
Blind	7	1
Partially sighted	2	6
Not registered	1	4
Information not available	1	3
Way of accessing a computer		
No accessibility software	2	9
Magnification	4	2
Speech	4	1
Speech and magnification	1	
Information not available	0	2

Whilst numbers are small, and therefore caution must be taken in interpreting the findings, the table above shows that those who struggled

with the accessibility of the application tended to be those who were registered as blind, and those who used specialist accessibility software.

Due to the problems that they had in accessing the application form, six of the participants reported being unable to complete it without the assistance of others.

“Quite inaccessible, because I had to be assisted to apply... basically I couldn’t do it on my own, I had to have someone. It was inaccessible in the sense that it was too visual, and it wasn’t compatible with speech software. It wasn’t compatible to the extent I would have liked.”

“Bits of it were ok. The things that I found most difficult were the combo boxes, and when you had the subject and you had to choose your results, you had to choose them but select your results. These lists were a nightmare, I had to get sighted help with those. I would much prefer there was an edit box and you could type in Biology-whatever the grade was, Chemistry-whatever the grade was, it would have been so much easier. And even if it did cut straight to the point, rather than having combo boxes. It was a bit visual.”

Five of the participants who were unable to complete the application independently were registered blind and one partially sighted. Four were users of speech software, one magnification and one had attempted to complete the form making basic adjustments to their computer. However, it should also be noted that one participant who reported no difficulties in accessing the application form is registered blind and a user of speech software. This indicates that the application form on the UCAS website should be accessible, but for some reason, not all of the participants were able to access it. Possible explanations include using different versions of specialist software or not having the required skills to navigate the form.

Two participants spoke about delays in completing their application form whilst they had to wait to receive assistance from others. For those applying for more popular courses where it is necessary to submit your application promptly, this could prove problematic.

“Delayed the application a bit waiting to get help”

"Made it longer to do, got it in later - isn't brilliant"

Three participants shared that they did not feel that their experience was any different from other applicants who do not have seeing difficulties, although in two cases, this was because they felt that their accessibility software put them on a level footing with the general population.

"It was fine, it was online, so again I used a magnifier. It was quite complicated, but I think that's true for anyone. They could make it a lot simpler. It's not just for visually impaired people."

Table 9: Approach to completing the form

	Total (N)
Support from others	16
Made adjustments for accessibility purposes	9

Sixteen of the participants spoke of getting support from others in completing their application form. In the majority of cases, this appears to have been coordinated through their school, with 11 of the participants receiving support through their tutor or someone else in the school/college. Two participants received support from a family member, whilst three participants did not specify who had provided support. In almost all of these cases, the participants spoke of how they had needed this support to help them overcome challenges in accessing the form.

"Lot of support from mother...main method for dealing with forms. Will in future learn how to navigate forms with Jaws"

"Found the website quite difficult, quite visual, screen reader struggled with it...asked for assistance from tutor."

"It was ok, did it in college and had one to one support in completing the form"

Nine of the participants reported making adjustments to enable them to access the form, either through magnification software, speech software, or making some adjustments to their computer.

"Did have to use magnification software to use the site. Couldn't have done it without assistive technology"

"It was fine, it was online, so again I used a magnifier"

“Good - could alter size of text on the application form”

4.3 Initial contact with HE institution

4.3.1 Declaration of visual impairment

Table 10: Declaration of visual impairment

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Declared visual impairment on application	38	93%
Did not declare visual impairment on application	2	5%
Unsure if declared visual impairment on application	1	2%
Total	41	100%

The majority (38) of the participants declared their visual impairment on their application forms, although two reported that they did not, and one was unsure if they had or not. A number of the participants expanded on their responses.

Six of the participants reported simply ticking a box to say they had a disability, whilst four reported ticking a box, and specifically stating that they had a visual impairment.

“Ticked a box - didn't ask anything specific”

“Ticked a box saying had a disability and then what kind”

One participant said that they had declared their visual impairment as “to me it's stupid not to really, you know”

Two of the participants found this part of the application confusing, with one sharing that there was nowhere for them to specifically record that they had a visual impairment, and another saying that she was confused which option to select.

“Put it as 'other' as visual impairment wasn't listed”

“Wasn't sure what option to put”

One participant who applied through clearing stated that there was nowhere on the form that he used to make the declaration.

Researcher: “Was there any opportunity to do that?” Participant: “No. I have applied for Disabled Student Allowance, and that was all through Student Finance, but the university themselves don’t know, as yet.”

For many of the participants their declaration on the UCAS form was a trigger for their chosen institutions making contact with them to find out more information about their disability. This is something which was confirmed by many of the disability support officers working in HE, emphasising the importance of the young person declaring their visual impairment on the UCAS application. As this information would tend to be processed at a central location, department tutors would not be informed of this declaration of disability, and therefore would likely be unaware in advance that a person with a visual impairment was applying for a course in their department.

4.3.2 Provisions for visual impairment in the application and visiting process

Table 11: Did any of the institutions make provisions in the application and visiting process?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	25	64%
No	13	33%
Not applicable	1	3%
Total	39	100%

The participants were asked whether their institutions made any provision for them whilst they were going through the application process and visiting the institutions that they were interested in. Two thirds reported that they had received special provisions, whilst one third had not. One participant did not apply for HE until just before the course started, and therefore did not go through the usual application and visiting process.

Table 12: Types of provisions made by institutions during the application and visiting process

	Total (N)
Separate tour	7
Meeting arranged with disability support office	7
Accessible copy of prospectus	5
Adjustment made to assessment process (e.g. admission test)	3
Early discussions of support	3
Provisions for getting to open days	3
Questionnaire from disability office about support needs to inform conversations	4
Discussions of Disabled Support Allowance application process	1

Seven participants reported being offered a separate tour when they visited:

[HE institution] gave a separate accommodation tours for accommodation that would be guide dogs accessible.”

“Made special arrangements for the open day - e.g. had a one on one tour.”

Similarly, three participants spoke of the institutions giving consideration to their particular needs in terms of the logistics of them getting to the open days, including giving details of accessible parking, providing advice with regards to public transport and providing a sighted guide:

“Yeah, they did, they did offer sort of advice on how and when to visit them. Particularly [HE institution], because they actually told me about the disability thing that they had, and they also told me how to get to the university, which according to them was by train, and then once I got to [city] I could take a taxi. So [HE institution] was quite helpful in that sense.”

Seven participants reported that they had a meeting arranged with Disability Support Officers as part of the open days that they attended, or as part of early preparations they were making:

“Met with head of equipment and the disability team. First met with them in January and been in touch since.”

“Disability support officers - had quite a lot of contact and still in regular contact now. Met DSO at open days. Rang up and made an appointment to see them. Some had a timetable, whilst others [different institutions] agreed to make an appointment.”

Five participants said that they were provided with accessible copies of prospectuses or other similar literature:

“Offered large font, got a CD and had a phone interview.”

“At open day was provided with braille prospectus and braille notes of the presentations which were given during the day.”

Three participants reported that their institution made some form of adjustment during the assessment process for their place on their chosen course. Two participants were provided with an enlarged copy of a test that they had to do as part of the interview process, and one participant said that she was offered adjustments for her audition.

Finally, three participants reported that they had early discussions with representatives from their chosen institutions about potential support agreements, three participants received questionnaires asking for more details about their disability, and one participant said that they had had discussions to start considering their application for disabled student allowance.

“[HE institution] sent a form for more information about needs.”

“They are already considering having as many lectures in the same building as possible, for my sake. The tutors, and my disability officer, she is really good. I do think that [HE institution] are very keen to take me. I think that they are very much willing to work with me, to give the support I need”

4.3.3 Communication made with chosen HE institution department about visual impairment

The participants were asked whether they had spoken to anyone from their chosen department about their visual impairment and the support that would be made available to them.

Table 13: Have you spoken with anyone from your chosen department about your visual impairment and support?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	22	54%
No	19	46%
Total	41	100%

There was an almost even split between those who had spoken with their chosen department about their visual impairment and support needs prior to the summer holidays (in two of the cases of those who had not spoken with their department, it is worth remembering that they did not formally apply for their courses until clearing/adjustment).

Table 14: Types of early discussion with department representative in relation to visual impairment

	Total (N)
Discussed support needs	5
Had some discussion about visual impairment, but not support needs	4
Informed young person of the service offered by disability support office	3
Provided assurances of support	4
Discussed specific access challenges relating to the course	3
Informed young person of disabled student allowance	1
Provided a discouraging response	1

The table above presents a summary of the type of conversation that the young person had with their department in relation to their visual impairment. Five participants said that they had discussed their support needs with someone from their department in advance of their place being confirmed on their chosen course.

“Yes, definitely I have. They rang me a couple of times, and sent me emails. They want me to come in just before I have my support.”

“During audition process they talked about what they could do to help.”

Three of the participants reported that when they informed their department about their visual impairment, they advised them to make contact with the institution's Disability Support Office, or ensured that they had made some contact with them and support discussions were underway.

Four participants spoke of how they were given assurance that they would receive the necessary support to be able to partake in the course. In each case whilst it is encouraging that the department representative showed such commitment, their responses potentially lead to some concern of naivety in what they were promising to deliver, especially without consultation with the institution's DSO:

"Had a small conversation in the interview, the Head of Department picked it up from the personal statement. He said "whatever you need let me know""

"Will help with 'whatever she wants'"

Three participants reported speaking to a representative from their department about challenges that they might face which were specific to that degree course. One participant spoke to her department about specialist software that she would need to use, and they advised her it would be advisable to arrange additional tuition to be able to use it. A second participant who is registered blind reported that his tutor made contact with his chosen department to discuss on his behalf how they could go about making the lectures accessible (something which was likely to be particularly challenging, due to the nature of his course).

One participant, who was advised by their department to look into DSA, seemingly was not aware of DSAs existence until this point. Another participant spoke to someone in her chosen department, but not in much detail, and instead she intended to speak to them again in her first week on the course. Finally, one participant was discouraged after speaking to her department's welfare tutor after they responded to one of her questions with "I don't really know", and seemingly did not have any advice of how to pursue the answer to her question.

Ten participants who had not spoken to their department about their visual impairment at the point of interview elaborated more on their response. Six of the participants indicated that they had plans to make

contact with their chosen department regarding their visual impairment, or had an appointment set up.

“Will be a meeting to discuss this in a month’s’ time”

“...will go there and will make an appointment”

One participant reported that they had not been able to do so, as they still had not decided which would be their first choice HE institution. Another reported that they had spoken with the DSO, and they would be speaking with the department on his behalf. Finally, one participant demonstrated quite a ‘laissez-faire’ attitude, responding he was “sure they will [make contact]”.

Table 15: Have you spoken with anyone from the disability support office about your visual impairment and the support that would be made available to you?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	30	73%
No	10	24%
Not applicable	1	2%
Total	41	100%

The participants were also asked whether they had spoken with anyone from the disability support (DS) office about their visual impairment and the support that would be made available to them once in HE. Just under three quarters of the participants reported that they had had correspondence in some way with the DS office at their chosen institution. Ten of the participants were interviewed after they had confirmed their place in HE, and therefore were more likely to have made contact with the DS office (9 out of 10 had done so). Those participants who had spoken with the DS office were invited to give more details about the discussions that they had had.

Several of the participants spoke of adjustments that their institutions had said that they would put in place to enable them to be able to access the course and institution. In four cases, the participants described adjustments that the institution proposed to make to their learning environment, including adjusted lighting. Five spoke of adjustments that the institution proposed to make to their learning material, such as enlarging material, giving notes in advance, and transcribing course notes into braille. In three cases the HE institutions

had early discussions with them about adjustments that they would make to exams, such as allowing for extra time and adjustments to papers. Finally, four participants reported that their institutions had arranged for induction programmes for them, prior to their first terms officially beginning.

A number of the participants also spoke of support provisions that their institutions had proposed putting in place, including mobility support (6), and note-takers (5).

The participants spoke of the practicalities that they had gone through in communicating with the DS office about the support that would be available to them. Examples of this included the DS office setting up meetings with the young person (and in some cases also inviting a representative from their new department), providing forms to the young person to request information about their visual impairment and what adjustments might be needed, and conducting assessments of the young person. Such discussions and assessments culminated in the drawing up of support agreements, which detailed the support that the institution committed to providing. The content of these plans is discussed in more depth later on in this report.

One participant spoke of her disappointment that the DS office would not talk to her in more depth about her support until she had formally registered on the course:

“I wasn’t that confident. I was sitting there thinking... if the only way in how to get information out of you is to register, that seems a pretty poor way to kind of like advertise yourself, as far as... I was just sitting there thinking “you aren’t actually telling me anything that I couldn’t already have guessed”. They gave very broad statements, and I was like “you don’t seem to understand that I need details”.

4.4 Preparing to go into Higher Education: Parent/Carer perspective

As part of the case study work with the parents/carers of five of the participants, we spoke with them about their experiences in supporting a young person with visual impairment in looking to make the transition into HE. We asked them about the information which was available, and for examples of what they had done personally to help that young

person. This section presents the main themes which were identified in these interviews.

Firstly, it is important to consider some of the key characteristics of the participants and the type of school in which they were being educated. Three of the participants attended specialist schools for their visual impairment prior to going into HE, whilst two were in sixth form colleges in mainstream school. The three participants at specialist school were all registered blind, whilst the two in mainstream were registered partially sighted. They were looking to transition into a wide range of courses, including Psychology, Physics, and Environmental Studies.

4.4.1 Support provided through the participants school and/or sensory support service

The parents/carers were asked about the support and information which they received through their son/daughters school in relation to accessing HE. The responses were quite mixed, ranging from receiving comprehensive information to not receiving any information at all. There was also one parent who reported that whilst the information was there, they had already carried out a lot of independent research.

“That was actually quite excellent, because they start with that quite early, as soon as they maybe go into the sixth form, they organise a meeting with the parents, and inform them as to, you know, how to go about doing, and what’s available there, through the DSA, and how and when to apply for DSA, what sort of things to look out for, and ask for. Things like that. That was excellent what they did there, because it gives you an insight of what’s coming to you, sooner rather than later, and then so you are aware of the deadline dates, and stuff like that.”

One of the parents spoke of the challenges in finding the information needed, and highlighted the fact that there seemed no central place to find all the information that the required:

“But there isn’t anywhere centrally, there are bits and bobs, all the universities have webpages for students with disabilities, and on an individual basis, that is very helpful, but I don’t recall in anyway, UCAS having anything that is centralised, you know, when you go to the funding, you find out that there is information on the funding and assessment pages. It’s all quite bitty. And I think parents, there are a lot of parents who stopped education at 16, and it must

be so hard for them. And not every family has access, constantly, to the internet. And we had an elder son who had already been through the process.”

Two of the parents of students attending specialist schools highlighted support that their son/daughter received that they considered particularly helpful. In one case, the school arranged for the student to have a mock interview with a subject specialist external to the school, which he found very beneficial. In the other case the student had extensive support from their teacher (a qualified teacher of the visually impaired) in considering how they might access their chosen course, and how they might overcome challenges they would likely face in relation to their visual impairment.

The two parents of the students at mainstream schools reported that their son/daughter did not receive any guidance from a QTVI at any stage of the application process to HE, and when arranging for their support. On reflection they felt that it would have been helpful:

“The only thing that I did think that it would be worth talking about, is that when we have talked to the universities, they have asked if [son] uses any particular programme on the computer to enlarge his work. You probably know more about that than me. Which he doesn't, but the universities seem to hold that as quite an important thing, and so I did think that it's worth talking to somebody about what's available, and perhaps get him used to that kind of programme before he goes to university, whether it would be easier.”

One parent was concerned at his son not having a Statement of Needs. As has been highlighted in a previous report (Hewett et al, 2010), many services actively decide not to statement some of their students, even if they would be eligible. There is some suggestion from this parent's experience that at least some institutions use statements as an indication of whether a student would require support or not:

“You know with university, because when we have gone to open days, and we have talked to the disability people there, they have said 'has he got this Statement', and I say 'no, he hasn't got one!' So it does sort of concern me now. Should he have had one? I wouldn't question the education he has had so far, but I just

wonder now whether it's going to hold us back a bit. Do you know what I mean?"

4.4.2 Support the parent/carer gave the participant

All of the parents/carers shared examples of support that they gave their son/daughter in the process of applying for and preparing for HE.

However, when discussing this support, they also highlighted how independent their son/daughter was or aspired to be. For example, after explaining to one parent what the content of the interview would be, they replied saying:

"I hope that I can be of help, but I must admit with [participant], he is quite independent and he will get on with things, and it's only when he starts to struggle, or I realise that it's going to be hard for him. But I will do what I can with you, and see how it goes."

Carrying out early research

Three of the parents spoke of carrying out early research into the suitability of institutions and types of course, as well as the support available:

"One of the reasons being because of what he wanted to do. I mean, I don't know if he has told you, but you know, what he is studying now, wasn't going to be his first choice. So for that reason, we started looking at universities, quite early, so that we could make enquiries as to whether it was going to be appropriate for him to do what he initially wanted to do. But obviously he had to change back. And that helped, with starting early, that definitely helped us, to help [participant] make a choice for university, you know where he wanted to go and what he wanted to study, and stuff like that."

"So we got a lot of information before the school gave it to us. Not that the school were dragging their heels or anything, but we just got a lot of information early on, as a result. And every single university had something new to say, and something that added to our knowledge, or would benefit."

One parent reflected back that this early research and planning was vital, as it enabled them to make an application for DSA as early as possible.

“We started the day the assessment could be applied for, we applied for it, and so he had it done really early, because he got it done when he came home for either half term or a holiday, or something. So he had it done extremely early. Thank goodness, because it was really only done just in time, ultimately”

Similarly, two of the parents spoke of making contact with the institution on their son/daughters behalf, to ask questions in relation to the support available, and to help develop a short list of potentially suitable options:

“Well, I think we probably, right at the beginning which was probably February time, I think [participant], I made the first few phone calls so he could get the gist of what to ask for, we made contact with twenty. And very quickly managed to whittle down to, we made contact with the support departments at the universities that did maths or physics or both, and that when down to a short list of twelve, and then over the period of the summer, he visited all twelve.”

Visiting HE institutions

All of the parents/carers accompanied their son/daughter when visiting the institutions. They highlighted how beneficial this process was in terms of discerning which institutions would be most suited to their son/daughter and their learning needs.

“He visited all twelve, and nearly every single one at the open day, they were very welcoming in that they would, if we couldn’t get to the open day because they are often held on the same day, we would go just one to one, [uni x] and [uni y] and I can’t remember which other ones saw us, and we met with the support department who interviewed participant, or chatted to him and found out about what he would need. And you very quickly got an idea... they would tell you if they had had a blind student before...”

One parent in reflecting back wished that they had done this more:

“In hindsight I would have probably made more effort to make, not to trust everything that was said to me. Because of the university making everything seem that nothing was a problem. We only discovered problems later down the line. So I would have probably gone and met with the head of the [course] department at the

university, and had an appointment and said ‘what can you ...is there any way in which we can be in touch with staff that are supposed to be supporting [participant] to make sure that stuff is done for her?’”

One parent described the range of responses that they received when visiting the institutions – ranging from welcoming support her son as a positive challenge, to panic.

“When we went to open days we would approach the admissions tutor who was manning this wonderful physics department and [participant] would approach with his white cane, and you would see the panic on their poor faces and they thought ‘oh my goodness, how are we going to do this?!’ And that was, you know, I totally understand that, it is a challenge, and you really realise straight away that some of the actual departments were really going to enjoy meeting that challenge.”

5 Disabled Student Allowance

In this section we look at the participants experiences of drawing on Disabled Student Allowance, including:

- the initial application,
- the assessment of needs (and preparations made for it)
- the delivery of support.

5.1 Overview of Disabled Student Allowance

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) is a non-means tested allowance given to students going into HE, in the event that they have a disability, health condition or specific learning difficulty which will affect them in accessing their chosen course. UK based HE students living in England are eligible to apply for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) if they have a:

- Disability
- Long-term health condition
- Mental health condition
- Specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia

They must also:

- Be an undergraduate or postgraduate student
- Have a condition that affects their ability to study
- Qualify for Student Finance
- Be studying on a course that lasts at least a year

For full time students, such as those involved in this longitudinal study, in the academic year 2015-2016 the following funding restrictions applied:

Figure 2: Categories of support for Disabled Student Allowance

Category of support	Examples of what each support category covers for students with VI	Maximum allowance
Specialist equipment	Laptops with screen readers, low vision aids, electronic refreshable braille devices	£5,212 for the whole course
Non-medical helper	Note-takers, mobility training, assistance in practical sessions	£20,725 a year
General	Photocopying allowance, printer cartridges, printer paper	£1,741 a year

In order to apply for DSA, students must complete an application form, and provide proof of their entitlement (e.g. in the case of students with visual impairment, they must provide a report or letter from their doctor/consultant). Once eligibility has been established, the student will be invited to attend an assessment centre where an assessor will work with the student to establish the types of support that they will need. Following this assessment the young person will receive a written report detailing the agreed support.

5.2 Overview of data collected on DSA

The participants were asked to share and evaluate their experience of DSA at three time points, as summarised below:

5.2.1 Time of initial application

Firstly, the participants were asked some questions about the initial process they went through in applying for DSA. They were at varying stages of application at the time of interview, with some having already started in HE. There were several reasons for this variation, including the practicalities of having to conduct the interviews over a number of weeks, some participants applying for disabled student allowance earlier than others, and also because we have been following transition experiences into HE over three different academic years.

5.2.2 End of first year

Secondly, further questions were asked as part of “end of year interviews” with the participants, in the summer after they first entered HE. The participants were asked:

1. Were you successful in applying for DSA? Could you tell me more about the process you went through in applying for DSA? What was the assessment of needs like? Did you have any problems? Anything that you would like to see changed, or that you thought was particularly good?
2. What was offered as part of DSA? (Equipment/Assistance/Extras) (Prompt: if equipment were they given sufficient training?) Were you happy with this? How much input did you have in this process? Looking back is there anything that you would change? Were you given any equipment you didn't use? Was there anything that you would have benefited that you have to press to get/get yourself or were unable to access?

5.2.3 Follow-up interviews

Finally in summer 2015 some specific follow-up questions were asked on the participants experiences of DSA. The main purpose of this was to investigate some emerging findings from previous data collections.

In total, 29 participants who had applied for DSA spoke of their experiences. These responses have been coded and themes identified. These are presented in chronological order of the application process.

5.3 Initial applications for DSA and preparations made

5.3.1 Initial research and guidance on Disabled Student Allowance

Table 16: Do you know if you would be eligible for Disabled Students Allowance?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Eligible	17	61%
Not eligible (including those who assumed they would not be eligible)	10	36%
Unsure	1	4%
Total	28	100.0%

Twenty eight participants who were interviewed prior to being accepted on their course were asked whether they knew if they were eligible for DSA. Seventeen of the participants reported that they were eligible for it, whilst 10 said they were not eligible and 1 was unsure.

However, 7 of those who said that they were not eligible also said that they had not looked into the process of applying for Disabled Student Allowance and rather were assuming that was the case. As these young people received support for their visual impairment whilst in school, it is likely that they would have been eligible for DSA if they had pursued their applications. At the time of interview, the researcher encouraged these young people to consider applying.

Table 17: Have you had any support from the Visiting Teaching Service/School/College in applying for DSA?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	15	60%
No	10	40%
Total	25	100%

Of particular interest was whether the young person had received any support in applying for DSA from a QTVI from their visiting teacher service, or at their specialist school/college. The assessment process often relies on the young person to talk about the support that they would like to receive, and to self-advocate, and therefore it is interesting to learn whether the participants had received any form of specialist guidance in order to prepare for this.

Over half (60% or 15) of the participants reported that they had received some support. Whilst the majority of the 10 participants who had not received any support, had not applied for Disabled Student Allowance at this point in time, it should be remembered that they had already completed their courses and left school. This suggests that support of this nature is not very likely to have been available, as at that time only a few visiting teacher services provided support to students in non-school settings. (Over time this situation may change in response to the new SEN Code of Practice which was launched in September 2014).

One participant spoke of how the VTS came to their school to help them, another said that a QTVI talked them through the process and explained more about what they may be entitled to, whilst a third participant received advice on the specification they would need for their laptop.

5.3.2 Applications made for DSA

Table 18: Participants who formally applied for DSA

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Completed application and successful	29	74%
Completed application and not successful	0	0%
Not completed application – eligibility unknown	4	10%
Not completed application – decided against going into HE	4	10%
Not completed application – deferring place on course	1	3%
Not eligible to apply – international student	1	3%
Total	39	100%

The majority of participants completed the application process for DSA and were successful in being awarded support through the scheme. Five participants did not complete the application form. In one case, the student was applying as an international student, and therefore would not be eligible for disabled student allowance. The four other participants were asked to give more explanation why they chose not to apply for it:

- One participant reported that they had simply decided that they didn't want to
- Similarly, another participant reported that he was happy with what got as part of the normal student loan system and decided not to apply for anything else
- One participant concluded he wouldn't be eligible for anything that the institution offered, having spoken with their head of department
- One participant spoke with disability staff at the institution and was told they wouldn't be eligible for any support

In the case of those who concluded that they did not see any real advantage in applying for DSA, it raises the question of whether they were properly informed of what DSA was, and what provision it could offer them. Additionally, there are uncertainties over how qualified the members of staff who advised the students that they would not be eligible for DSA actually were. Whilst they may not have required much direct support from the institution itself, they may still have benefited from some support provision. As we continued working with these young people throughout their time in HE, we found that they did encounter some challenges in relation to their visual impairment, and in some

situations they paid for adjustments themselves which DSA would ordinarily have funded.

5.3.3 Accessibility of the application process

The vast majority of participants indicated that they found the application process for DSA to be reasonably accessible. However, three participants who are braille/screen-reader users shared that they were unable to access the application forms as they had been sent paper copies.

“It’s not a very accessible. All the forms and stuff we get sent out in print. That was a bit frustrating. We didn’t get email copies of anything, and I wasn’t able to fill it out myself, so I had to have someone else do it for me or with me, so that was frustrating, but apart from that.”

“I find it really pathetic that they allow you to do the online form for all the bits that you don’t need to be blind for, but the second you actually need to have any form of disability, you need to print out the form. That’s just beyond ridiculous and it shows how out of touch they are as a company”

In contrast several of the participants indicated that they were able to complete the form online:

“It was alright. I did it on the internet”

“I applied on the website, and after that, I had to go for an assessment, and following that, I was told what I would be eligible for.”

It is unclear why these participants were sent paper copies as in their initial application they had indicated that they had a visual impairment.

5.4 Preparing for DSA Needs assessments

5.4.1 Knowledge of participants prior to attending DSA assessment Advice and guidance received

Several of the participants spoke positively of advice and guidance that they had received prior to attending their DSA assessment. This advice came from a range of sources, including: specialist teachers; friends

who had previously attended a DSA assessment of needs meeting; and disability support officers based at their chosen HE institution.

“I think it helps in that I’d been told roughly what I would need to begin with. As in, I had been lots of advice by teachers and contacts, who knew what they were talking about. Which meant that I could go in with a reasonable idea of what I wanted, and tell them, tell the gentleman exactly what I wanted. I didn’t feel like he was going to, his suggestions weren’t very well tailored to me, if I had had no idea what I wanted, I may have ended up getting a load of other bits, but I might not have... it’s hard to say what would have happened, because it didn’t happen, so. It was ok though, yeah, as I say, get advice in advance.”

“I think I spoke to my friend, and just, I didn’t really ask advice, I just told her that I was going to it, and she said what they were going to do, and that kind of prepared me a bit. That was the only preparation that I had really”

One participant was disappointed by the level of support which he received when in sixth form in relation to disabled student allowance:

“...no they were a bit rubbish helping with that actually, so I had to do most of it myself”

Independent research

Other participants spoke of their own independent research that they had carried out in preparation for their assessment of needs meeting.

One participant had attended “Sight Village” shortly prior to their assessment. This is an exhibition specifically for people who are blind and partially sighted, and provides an opportunity to review different technology.

“I was very lucky, I went to Sight Village about two weeks before my DSA assessment, so obviously I was walking around, and they had all the equipment, and I was like ‘ahh, that looks like it could be useful’ and whatever. So based on that, I then went and looked through all the websites, and did some playing about. But yeah, for a lot of people, I know a lot of people that have gone in, and come out with a £4000 worth piece of kit, and then decided that they like my £2000 piece of kit more. But there’s just no, you know, option

to... because your assessment, they are supposed to talk through what your options are really aren't they, and so you know, this piece of kit will be good, but they don't tend to. You say you want a braille note, and then they will say 'do you have a preference', and if you say no, they just kind of write 'braille note' and that's all that gets done."

"I researched the scanner that I wanted, and that's the thing I didn't get. I used Jaws so I knew how that worked, and I knew a lot about Apple computers which is what I would have liked. And the braille sense, I had seen one of them before, and decided not to get one before, so I knew what they were like"

Another participant in looking back wished that they had done more research into the type of support available – particularly as he felt the assessor had only presented equipment available from a limited range of manufacturers:

"But it would have been nice to get a wider range. We could have gone to, there is a thing in, there are conferences and stuff in London, like I think there's something called Sight Village or something, which displays loads of accessibility equipment for the visually impaired, we could have gone to that, we just weren't made aware."

Drawing on previous experiences

Seven participants spoke of drawing on their previous educational experiences and the equipment and tools that they had used to think ahead to how they might want to approach learning once in HE.

"I sat at home and thought 'right, think back to when I was in school, what support did I have, what support was useful' and then I thought 'well, having somebody there with me in the classroom would be useful because if say there were a PowerPoint presentation and I had to write down what was on the slides, the teacher had moved on before I had written everything down."

"It's been a growing thing since I was 14, so you know what works and what doesn't work."

"I went through what I used in college and thought about different scenarios that I would be in at uni, tried to forecast"

Looking to the assessor

Four participants shared that they did not do any preparation in advance as they wanted to go into the assessment with an open mind and listen to the suggestions that the assessor made.

“No, because the person who I went to, I assumed would be the person who told me what I needed”

“I just went there open minded”

Gaps in knowledge

Finally several of the participants spoke of having a gap in their knowledge prior to attending the assessment – particularly with regards to the range of equipment available. In some cases the final outcome seemed positive as the participants were surprised by the existence of equipment they had previously been unaware of.

“There’s a lot of things that I wasn’t aware of at the time. I was very surprised with what they can actually provide, and the detail they actually go into, I had no idea there was software programme that can read out stuff to you, if you highlighted things. I was very surprised with what was there really.”

Whilst it would appear that this young man had a beneficial outcome and was happy with the equipment that he received, as will be discussed later, in other cases the participants felt that the assessors were not equipped to provide a comprehensive overview of the type of specialist equipment that was available. Therefore if an assessment was being conducted between an assessor and a student, both of whom had a limited knowledge of the range of technology available, this could result in an unfavourable outcome for that student. The DSA website provides a list of over 100 assessment centres that students could potentially attend for their needs assessment, with users being encouraged to search for an assessment centre by postcode rather than type of disability/specialist expertise. As visual impairment is a relatively low incidence group amongst young people (roughly 0.2% of the population according to Vision 2020, 2015), this means that DSA assessors are likely to have minimal experience in conducting needs assessments for young people with visual impairments (and particularly so for those who are not print readers). Combined with the fact that technology is rapidly advancing, it could be suggested that it would be unwise to attend a

DSA needs assessment with the assumption that the assessor will have a full knowledge of all the equipment that a student might possibly benefit from.

In other cases, once they had started on their courses some participants wished they had had more information on the type of equipment and non-medical support available before finalising their support allocation.

“I could have done with more information about what technology is out there. Because I had issues with it, I got the wrong Dictaphone to start with...And, my scanner as well, I am aware now that there are scanners out there that are lot more portable, and a lot more smaller, so that, if I did get to a lecture and they gave out a hand out that I had no warning of beforehand, if they had given it to me, if I had one of these little portable scanners, I could have taken a picture of it, and it would be on the my computer screen straight away. Whereas I have this big, bulky thing! That isn't, I wouldn't like to carry around. So it's just stuff like that really.”

5.4.2 Delays in the processing of assessments

Of particular concern are five participants who experienced a delay in the DSA assessment process (additionally there were those who reported a delay in receiving the support they were allocated, as will be discussed later). In four cases they were unsure of the reason behind the delay, whilst in the other case it was due to Student Finance losing important medical evidence.

“I filled the form out and sent it off, but it took them like four months to process it.”

“It was quite slow, it was a really slow process.”

“Well they were better than last time. I had a hearty good shouting at them last time, if you remember. They lost medical evidence. I told them under no uncertain terms that they need to provide better service for me next year otherwise I will take the matter to court with the local MP.”

A number of participants were late in completing their DSA applications due to a variety of reasons, such as applying to HE through the clearing process. Whilst it could be expected that there would be some delay in receiving their support allocation, they felt that the process was

particularly slow. In one case the participant went the whole way through their first year without any support:

“It was round about January, because... it did take quite a while... I got my assessment, and then it took a good while to get the approval of it, and the letter saying this is what you are entitled for, and when I got that it was round about Christmas, so I waited until January when I went back and they said, you know, you should get it by the end of your first year, but if not it should be the first six weeks of the second year”

Of particular concern to this student was the fact that part of his DSA support was to be funding to pay for taxi journeys to and from his institution on days when he was struggling with his eyes and unable to wear his contact lenses.

One participant experienced significant delays at two stages. Firstly they had difficulty in getting together the necessary medical evidence as they had been discharged from the hospital they had previously attended, and secondly when their assessor went on unexpected leave due to illness. Whilst illness cannot be avoided, there is concern that it was not identified that the assessment report had not been processed until it was chased up by the student, and later their institution’s DS office.

Finally one participant spoke of how he felt “lucky” in not having experienced any problems with the DSA application process.

“I was one of the lucky people because a lot of the others suffered delays with the application. I stayed on top of mine and managed to get all my equipment on top, and all of my support.”

5.5 DSA assessment meeting

5.5.1 Identifying the assessor

In the summer 2015 interviews we asked the participants how they identified their DSA assessor. Whilst some were unsure, others were able to recount how they had first made contact.

Table 19: Do you remember how you identified your DSA assessor?

	Total (N)
Looked for nearest assessment centre	8
Received a recommendation	6
Looked for earliest available appointment	1
Arranged by someone else	1

The most common way was by looking for their nearest assessment centre. On the DSA website applicants can search for assessment centres by postcode, and therefore for many this was the default method.

“I think just the nearest one, I can’t remember how I actually got to it, I think I went to the website maybe and put in my post code, something like that, I can’t remember exactly.”

“I went to an assessment centre which wasn’t far away. It was in the city centre, it wasn’t really hard to find, it was in a massive building actually, it was in the middle of the city centre.”

The second most common way of identifying an assessment centre was through recommendation. Recommendations came through the participants’ friends, their specialist school and the disability support office at the institution that they would be attending.

“Two friends of mine who had been through the process, they used the same company, I think it’s a company called [name removed]. They said they are really good, and they helped my friend who had a more significant visual impairment, so I was just like ‘fair enough’”

“The university got me in touch with the assessment company that they always use for students, so they sort of say we always use this company, make an appointment with this company.”

In our interviews with DSOs two of them spoke of how they would routinely advise potential students to arrange assessments with assessors who they regularly worked with and trusted.

Finally, one participant had chosen an assessment centre based on the availability of assessment dates as there had been a delay in their application being processed, whilst another was unsure how his

assessor had been identified as the meeting had been arranged on his behalf.

5.5.2 Knowledge of the assessor

When asked about their experience of the DSA assessment meeting, many of the young people referred to the knowledge and ability of the assessor to be able to provide appropriate advice and cater for their level of visual impairment. Their experience was quite mixed with some speaking very positively about the meeting, whilst others were less so. The next two tables explore the types of response given by some of the participants.

Positive responses

Table 20: Types of positive response

	Total (N)
General positive experience	7
Assessor suggested things participant would not have thought of independently	3
Got the support allocation needed	1
Assessor provided them with a number of options	1
Assessor had a specialist knowledge of VI	1

Seven participants in general spoke positively about the experience, and felt that they had come away with positive outcomes:

“I think it was really, really good. It was literally asking questions about everything, and I found that everything was tailored to what I needed, there wasn’t anything that I am not really happy about, because everything I needed was taken into account and it really, really helped.”

Three participants found that the assessor suggested things that they could use when in HE that they would not have thought of independently:

“Mine was really good. They suggested things that I didn’t realise you could get.”

One participant who went to a specialist assessment centre felt that she benefited from having an assessor with a specialist knowledge of visual impairment:

“My assessor was really, really good actually. I think it helped that she worked at [specialist institution] and she obviously had a lot of previous experience with people with visual impairments. So she was really good in terms of advising me on what I would need and what I wouldn’t need.”

Another participant liked that they were given a number of options and were able to consider which would work best for them. A final participant came away satisfied with being given the support allocation that they had already concluded they would need.

Negative responses

Table 21: Types of negative response

	Total (N)
Assessor not very knowledgeable in support for people with visual impairment	4
Assessor going through the motions	2
Allocated inappropriate support	1
Mistakes on report	1

In contrast, 8 participants spoke negatively about the assessment meeting which they attended. Four felt that the assessor was not sufficiently knowledgeable in visual impairment to be able to advise them:

“It was clear she hadn’t worked with a blind person before, and it was clear that...because she said it herself, basically ‘I don’t know what I am doing, you have got to tell me what you need’, rather than... I was like ‘actually, I think that’s your job!’”

Two participants were critical of their assessors who they felt were not really looking at them as individuals and just ‘going through the motions’ and therefore not really tailoring the support to them and their visual impairment:

“They didn’t provide any advice, and she kind of seemed to just be going through the motions as well. It was almost as though she

had done so many of these already that she knew what she was going to do without my input.”

One of these participants reported being shocked at how much the assessment cost when reviewing their needs assessment report:

“It said that it was like £580 or something for this needs assessment... That’s outrageous. How is it that much money? They literally, all I did was I went into a room for half an hour and he clicked a few boxes, and then was late with bringing it back, so I don’t understand how they are getting that much money.”

One participant in reflecting back on their allocation felt that he was not given an appropriate allocation of support, whilst two participants reported finding significant mistakes on the needs assessment report:

“They got a few details wrong on the sort of summary report, they sent to the university about how my eye sight affects my day to day living and learning, they got a few inaccuracies, but apart from that it was all ok. For example they said how I suffer from tiredness, when I don’t, but something like that can be quite hazardous, because if the university did assume that from my report that I did suffer from tiredness and they put some things in place, so that wouldn’t be an issue, but in actual fact, I don’t suffer from... It is a bit annoying.”

5.5.3 Dynamics of assessment meeting

One notable difference in the participants’ accounts of their needs assessments meetings was in relation to its dynamics. The majority of participants spoke of the assessment meeting being a discussion between themselves and the assessor, with typically either the young person describing the challenges they may have in relation to their visual impairment, and the assessor suggesting solutions, or alternatively the assessor suggesting possible support options, and the young person deciding whether or not it would be helpful to them.

“I would say what some problems were that I had had previously, and they would kind of say ‘we have got this way of getting around that’, and ‘this equipment for that’, that’s pretty much how it went.”

“He would go through everything he had really, that he could offer me, to help me throughout the year, and I would tell him if it would be beneficial or not.”

Other participants described apparently less evenly directed assessment meetings, with either the assessor taking the lead, or alternatively the assessor looking to the young person to provide direction:

“...they just told me about the things they would provide me with”

“I was literally explaining to my assessor what I need, and she was good because she wrote it all down correctly”

Six participants spoke positively of having the opportunity to review equipment as part of the assessment process, and therefore being given the opportunity to decide whether the equipment the assessor had recommended to them would be of benefit or not.

“The DSA officer, once she came out to do the assessment, it was really good, and she recommended that I get a braille note-taker device but she wasn’t sure which one I would prefer, so she arranged for representatives for two different companies to give me a tutorial with the different types, so that was really good.”

5.5.4 Overall satisfaction

In the summer 2015 follow-up interviews the participants were asked to reflect back on how satisfied they were with their assessment meeting. The majority were very positive towards this part of the DSA process, although some did identify particular challenges that they faced. Others were less positive.

Those who were positive about the meeting highlighted various aspects they were happy with, such as it being an efficient process, relating well to the assessor and having positive long term outcomes:

“I’d say just the assessment, just the way that the process was done really, sending the forms off, and then once I had been through the assessment of what I was entitled to, just how quickly it was all pushed through really.”

“I think my assessor was very good, she was quite quick, she emailed me a draft and I sent it back. She didn’t take her time, she got it done.”

Two participants described how, whilst they were initially happy with the assessment outcome, once they got into HE discovered the support was not appropriate, for example, having insufficient hours of mobility support or note-taker support.

One participant in reflecting back on the assessment process as a whole felt that it was very difficult to predict at that point in time the support that she would require. In looking back she concluded that she could have benefited from a different equipment allocation to the one that she got.

“...it was a bit difficult to predict what would actually be useful, and what wouldn’t be in the short time that we were discussing”

This is a theme which continued to emerge from other participants during their time in HE, although they did not necessarily attribute it to their original DSA support allocations. This will be discussed further in Section 8: Accessing learning materials.

5.5.5 Experiences of participants who did not apply for DSA

As previously noted, 4 of the participants decided against applying for DSA. By the time of the summer 2015 interviews three had graduated from their respective courses, therefore providing an opportunity for them to reflect back on their time in HE and whether in hindsight applying for DSA may have been advantageous to them.

One participant who had decided at the start of his course that he was unlikely to benefit from DSA did find that he had challenges on the course in relation to his visual impairment.

“I tried to just get along without it, I felt that it wasn’t something that I needed necessarily a lot, it just didn’t feel like I needed it enough to really apply for it.”

Firstly, he found that he was unable to follow lectures by looking at the whiteboard, and instead paid to print out copies of the lecture slides prior to each lecture (something that DSA would have covered). Additionally he found that in the third year of the course he struggled to keep up with

the volume of reading required for his course as he was experiencing eye strain.

"I was generally alright accessing the books. It took me longer to do the work because I would normally have to break it into intervals because it would start to hurt my eyes reading the books. I could only do maybe an hour, an hour and a half and I would have to take a half hour break and come back, so it took me longer to do the work. When I was writing essays as well I found it a bit difficult because I would be writing and having to take breaks or go and do something else, so not to strain my eyes continually reading."

It is possible that he would have benefited from some form of specialist equipment that would have caused less strain on his eyes, which could have been identified as part of the DSA assessment process, such as using a screen reader or talking books.

Two other participants who did not apply for DSA both found that they were able to complete their courses with very minimal challenges in relation to their visual impairment. They benefited instead from the adjustments that their institutions made, such as making lecture slides available online prior to lectures.

The final participant who did not apply for DSA left the course in the first semester of the first year. Therefore as he reported at the time, the reason for him leaving the course early was unrelated to his visual impairment, it is not possible to know whether he would ultimately have benefited from DSA or not.

5.6 Support allocations

5.6.1 Examples of type of support allocated

The participants were asked to give an overview of the support which they received through DSA. For some this proved complex at times as they were unsure whether a particular aspect of their support package was being funded through DSA or through the HE institution themselves. As explained above, DSA support is broken down into three categories: specialist equipment; non-medical help and general support. Each of these categories and the support that the young people received is explored in turn. As some of the participants received quite a range of

support through DSA, it is possible that despite some prompting on the type of support they may have received, some items were forgotten.

Equipment

In order of frequency, examples of specialist equipment allocated to the young people include:

- Windows laptop
- Dictaphone
- Printer
- Scanner
- Large monitor
- Electronic braille device
- Magnification software
- Scanning device with optical recognition
- Screen reader software
- Screen reader and magnification software combined
- Magnification equipment (e.g. CCTV)
- Dictation software
- Handheld magnifier
- Apple Mac computer
- Pen friend
- Software specific to chosen course
- Talking calculator
- External CD drive
- Microphone

Some of the participants were only allocated equipment through DSA (i.e. they did not require any non-medical support). This demonstrates the importance of specialist equipment for students with visual impairment.

We also note that participants with more severe visual impairments required several items of equipment, e.g. a laptop with screen reader software, braille device, optical recognition scanning device, and a Dictaphone. A real challenge to those participants with more severe visual impairments was the range of equipment that they needed to access their course and the amount that this equipment cost. As the equipment component of DSA support is capped and limited to the start of the course, this posed difficulties, as is discussed further in “Budget limitations”.

Non-medical support

In order of frequency, examples of non-medical support allocated to the young people include:

- Note-taker support (including specialist note-takers)
- Library/research assistant
- Learning support
- Mobility training
- Exam support
- Taxi allowance
- Practical assistant
- Assistant on placements/residential courses
- Sighted guide
- Transcription support

The most common type of non-medical support allocated to the participants was note-taker support. However there were several participants who felt that they could access their courses through just the equipment they had been given and the adjustments that the institution would make. Participants with more severe visual impairments were also commonly allocated a library/research assistant and/or a learning assistant. This largely was due to anticipated challenges in independently accessing learning material such as textbooks in the library.

A final key support which was allocated to several of the participants was mobility and orientation around the institution, and to and from their accommodation. Those who were reliant on receiving mobility training to be able to get to and from lectures also could draw on sighted guides at the start of the course as they were still learning the routes they needed.

General support

In order of frequency, examples of general support allocated to the young people include:

- Printer cartridges
- Printer paper
- Photocopying allowance
- Braille paper
- Tactile drawing film
- Batteries for equipment
- Book allowance

Those who required enlarged copies of lecture notes – in some cases to enable them to follow the lecture while it was taking place - were facilitated in doing so by their printing allowance from the general support allowance.

It is interesting to note that those young people with more severe visual impairments who would use non-sighted means of accessing information were less likely to draw on the general support pot, whilst they would often maximise their budget for equipment and in some cases non-medical support.

5.6.2 Changes made to support allocations

Seven participants reported that they had applied to have their assessment of needs changed in some way, whilst another participant was confident that his report had changed in some way, but that the institutions DS office had handled the administration of this on his behalf (it was unclear whether they formally applied for a re-assessment or not). The majority of applications were in relation to needing more or different non-medical support:

One participant had not anticipated the difficulties he had been experiencing in keeping up with the lectures, and since starting on his course had applied for a note-taker:

“Yeah, I have had to have a note-taker sit next to me now as well so I can keep up with the lectures”

Another participant had found she needed more mobility support, so applied for additional hours. Accurately predicting the required hours of mobility support appeared to be a common problem, and one which a mobility officer advised could be anticipated, hence the need for some flexibility:

“I mean, like I have been doing this job for so long, so many years doing mobility, and I can usually gauge from a person very quickly, how kind of able they are going to be, but a lot of it depends as well, there needs to be a bit of flexibility in there, which there is, there needs to be the room to say at least 50 hours of mobility, but may need more, you know, there needs to be that kind of flexibility, 50 hours, but may need more, something along those lines, stretch it out, because you never know, you never know how long it is going to take.”

A final participant tried to make changes to the equipment which she was due to be allocated, but was told that it was not possible to do this without another assessment:

“I tried to get it amended because I wanted a Mac, but I couldn’t because I had ordered instead supernova on my assessment, so my assessment said I would get a normal Windows computer, and they said they can’t take things off. The whole reason I wanted a Mac is because the accessibility is really good. This computer is fine, it would have been nice to have a Mac, but I have got the Windows laptop and at least I have got it now.”

5.7 Budget limitations

5.7.1 Reaching the DSA budget limits

A theme which continued to emerge through the interviews with the participants in HE was that those who had more severe visual impairment were often limited by the budget caps of DSA. In the summer 2015 follow up interviews this was something which was investigated further amongst those participants who had applied for DSA.

Table 22: The amount of funding available for applicants of DSA is capped. Do you know if you reached this maximum amount of available funding in your application?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	10	50%
No	8	40%
Unsure	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Of twenty participants we spoke to who had previously received support through DSA, 50% reported that they reached the maximum amount of funding available in at least one of the three categories of support, whilst another two were unsure. Eight of these ten young people are registered blind and two registered partially sighted, showing as would be anticipated a direct link between the level of visual impairment and the amount of support required.

5.7.2 Implications of budget limitations

Several of the participants described how they ‘ran out of money’ when their DSA assessment of needs report was being put together.

“I was given a note-taker if I needed one, I was given a library support person, I was given an examiner support person, and I think that was it. Because I ran out of money at that point.”

Implications on equipment allocations

For some this meant compromising on the range of equipment that they were allocated, or the specification of the equipment they were given:

“I got everything I needed, minus my braille display, because there wasn’t really enough money to cover that. I think financially there could have been more money. I think apart from that it was good.”

Fortunately for this young man, his family were able to buy him a braille display instead. However as these are very expensive it would not be an option for all.

Another participant who had wanted to get a higher specification of braille display than she one she was allocated (due to budget restraints) instead decided to sell the equipment she was given and use the money to buy the equipment which she would have preferred:

“I bought my braille sense... because of my equipment budget being limited at that point, I got a 18 cell, but actually I needed a 32, so I got the 18 and sold it and then used the money to put towards something I actually wanted, which I am not sure is strictly legal... still it’s my equipment isn’t it... I am not sure what the rules on that are.”

Another participant who went over budget spoke of making up the shortfall himself, which could have been an option to the young person who sold her braille device, if she had been aware of it. However, this is still reliant on the young person have the financial means to be able to pay for the short fall.

Similarly, one participant chose not to ask for a computer as part of DSA as he knew that the equipment budget was limited, and was concerned about receiving a low specification computer which would not be capable of running the necessary software:

“I decided that I would buy one before I went through DSA, thus freeing me up another couple of thousand on the budget [...] You need the best laptops really, because running screen reader software as well, they freeze to death.”

One participant was concerned about how the DSA funding structure works in the same way, regardless of disability:

“I basically think they need to think of it more and have separate processes for different disabilities. Because obviously the non-medical help is completely different for someone who is in a wheelchair than someone on the autistic spectrum. If you have someone who is disabled in terms of their visual impairment, or they have a hearing impairment, then they will need a bit more equipment. It just seems a bit more logical, but these processes aren't ever logical!”

Implications for non-medical support

One participant spoke of how she ran out of non-medical support during the first year of her course, and had to apply for additional funding to compensate. This came about after her mobility support was delayed at the start of the year, and therefore she was reliant on sighted guides to get to and from lectures for much longer than anticipated:

“I had to apply for extra funding last year, because I ran out of funding for my note-takers. Because it comes back to the mobility in a way. Because I didn't know my way around, I had to get my note-taker to come and get me and take me to my lectures a lot of the time, and they were counting that as working with me, so they were logging that down as time working for me, and getting money paid for that. So a lot of money was going to them which meant that I ran out”

A further participant who has chosen a course which is quite practical in nature, and therefore requires more non-medical support than others also described how he had to make a further application for funding.

Whilst in both of these cases they were able to access additional support, it inevitably put an extra strain on them during a very demanding time. As will be discussed in further sections, we have

observed significant additional pressures which are placed on these young people.

Where the participants were close to using all of their non-medical support allowance, this posed challenges to some as they tried to calculate the number of hours support that was available to them:

“I think I have gone over it. Not by a hell of a lot, but they are just having to juggle around the hours and things. Personally I think they should cap the hours as oppose to the money, because it’s a lot easier to work everything out, but you know [...] it’s trying to figure out all these bands and brackets that everything falls into.”

Support needs changing over time

A final limitation identified in the DSA funding structure related to support needs developing over time. For example, one participant in her second and third year was required to use a specialist piece of software which she could not access with her version of a screen reader. However, she was aware that if she could upgrade to the most recent version, that was far more compatible. Unfortunately she had already used up all of her equipment budget.

Another participant after dropping out of the first year of her course (due to having difficulties in accessing it) concluded that she would benefit from having a Dictaphone. However, she was advised that she would not be able to apply for this through DSA as she had already received her equipment allowance. Instead her institution offered to purchase it for her:

“I think I need a Dictaphone, because you only get your equipment once, and so they said it’s easier to get everything in one go rather than go back and get something.”

As a further participant has entered into his final year, the institution has realised that, as a braille/screen reader user, he will have some difficulties with his research project and accessing scientific journal articles which have a significant mathematical content. The institution has identified some software which could be used to convert the PDFs into a readable format (including this mathematical content), and he is hoping that he will be able to get this funded through DSA. However he unfortunately had previously used all of his equipment budget, and therefore it is unclear how this will be funded. Whilst this need should

have been anticipated sooner, it is also worth noting that this software had only recently been released.

Finally, another participant who was disappointed with the specialist magnification software which she received through DSA, had concluded that she would prefer to go back and use the same magnification software as she had done when in sixth form. Whilst she had not used all her allowance in the equipment component of DSA, she was unclear about whether she would be able to go back and request additional equipment, and also it could be considered a duplication of support.

Moving money between support categories

Two participants who were interviewed informed us that their DSA assessor moved money from one of the three pots to supplement another. This is something which they both felt they benefited from:

“I had to draw from various sections. You know you have your equipment section, your other section, they had to draw from one section to pay off another section and they had to get my permission.”

In contrast, other participants who felt that they could have benefited from this were very surprised it had been presented as an option to some of their peers:

Participant: “Really? Oh!” Researcher: “I was going to say was it something you did, but obviously not!” Participant: “No! I was told that’s a big ‘no no’, you can’t do that.”

Those participants who had maximised at least some of their budget were asked whether they thought it would be beneficial to them to have been able to do this. In general they thought it would have been, even giving examples of what they have done differently:

“I was running a bit tight on my equipment budget, so I would have possibly got a different braille note-taker for example, or a different recording device. I didn’t use my general at all, so it possibly it could have been helpful from that.”

5.7.3 Institutions supplementing budgets

Table 23: Did the university/HE institution assist in any way by “topping-up” this amount, or by assisting you in applying for a separate funding source?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	7	35%
No	2	10%
N/A – did not reach limit	8	40%
Unsure	3	15%
Total	20	100%

Seven of the participants reported that their institution assisted by supplementing the budget available – in particular in the case of non-medical support. In some cases, however, this was not a straightforward process. As mentioned earlier, participants had to complete documents to apply for additional funding, which was an added burden on them.

In one case where the participant reached the limit of their equipment budget, there was a disagreement between DSA and the institution in terms of who should be making up a relatively small shortfall in funding. The participant reports that eventually the institution conceded that it was their responsibility to do so, but at this point the student had already gone through almost a whole year of their course with no equipment in place as her support package had not been finalised. This caused a lot of difficulties for the student, and ultimately she was forced to repeat the entire first year. This issue of disputes over whether the institution will provide top up funding has had financial consequence for many parties: the student who will have to take another year of student loan, the institution that has invested significant time in meetings in firstly deciding whether they should fund the equipment and secondly what should happen once it became apparent she would be unable to complete her exams, and the public purse which will need to provide an additional year of non-medical support.

5.8 Delivery of DSA support

Once a needs assessment has been conducted and approved, the delivery of that support is then open for tender from various suppliers of specialist equipment and non-medical support. Therefore in order to understand the experiences that these young people had in transition to

HE, it is also necessary to consider the delivery of the support that they were been allocated through DSA.

5.8.1 Equipment suppliers

In the summer 2015 follow up interviews we asked those participants who had drawn on DSA to talk about their experience with the companies who were responsible for providing their equipment.

Communication

The most common aspect which the participants highlighted was the quality of communication that they had had with the suppliers. Some participants had had very good contact with their supplier throughout the process, including at the point of arranging delivery, at the time at which the equipment was delivered and also post-delivery in the event of any unexpected problems with the equipment..

“I contacted them, they were very efficient very helpful. When I arranged a date with them, they were flexible, because I was going on holiday, I got it done before I went on holiday.”

However, some participants had the opposite experience, including having problems in arranging the delivery of equipment and also in resolving problems which occurred:

“The only thing I would change is sometimes the communication between you and the supplier is really difficult. At one point they charged me again for the redelivery of my DSA because the driver completely messed up and delivered it at a time I wasn't there, and it got into a whole bit of a mess.”

Another participant felt that the suppliers weren't listening to her in relation to some technical problems that she was experiencing:

“They delivered the equipment, but apart from that I would say that they aren't much good, because they don't listen to me.... I have rang up, I have contacted them twelve times about the same issue, about the scanner, and they don't...they don't fix it.”

Similarly another participant tried to arrange for the repair of his laptop, but the company did not send through the necessary paperwork to him on time:

“There was one time I needed a repair and they didn’t send me through the form until it was a bit too late to get it repaired which wasn’t great, but I still managed through it.”

The reliability of the equipment provided is discussed in more depth later in this section.

Setting up equipment

Several of the participants shared how helpful it was to have the suppliers set up their equipment and ensure that it was functioning correctly.

“When they first came and delivered it the guy who came, that’s when I was in halls, he came in, he set everything up for me, he installed all the things for me, so he did it all and that was all fine, and he told me how to use everything.”

Two of the participants described how at this point the supplier explained how to make contact with them in the event of any problems with the equipment. They found this extremely beneficial:

“They are really good if I have got any issues or anything, I just ring them up and they are really helpful. I had some problems with my laptop, I had to send it back twice, but they have been really efficient and really helpful [...] It was the trainer who came out to give me the training, they gave me their contact details and told me to contact them directly if I had any issues.”

In contrast, other participants reported being unsure at first of who to contact in the event of problems.

One participant reports that the supplier arrived much later than previously arranged, and did not stop to set up their equipment as they were supposed to have done:

“The guy who dropped it off, he was meant to come at around 12 or something, and I had to get my mum to come round because I had a social thing that night, so I had to go to that. He was like at 7 o’clock and the guy still hadn’t turned up, so I had to get my mum to stay in the flat whilst I went out. When he delivered it, he didn’t set anything up, it was like ‘here’s the box’, so we had to ring someone from the company to send someone to set it all up. None

of the software was on, it was all fresh out of the box, here you go and he leaves.”

Delays in the delivery of equipment

A small number of participants experienced delays in the delivery of equipment once it had been approved. This meant that they started their courses without the necessary equipment in place:

“Yeah I can’t remember why... oh yeah, the company that was meant to be bringing it, just kind of didn’t for three weeks. So I was three weeks into term before I had any of my equipment.”

“The [talking] calculator though, we kept being told, the date kept being rescheduled for its delivery, until eventually I received it about two weeks, no getting on for a month into my course starting. It being something that I really did need. I actually managed to, I was visiting my school, my old school, just before the start of term, which meant that I could get a spare calculator from there, they had spare calculators that I could use, and I borrowed one, and returned it near the end of the term. So I did manage to, it was ok, although it was potentially quite an issue.”

As has been highlighted earlier in the report, several participants experienced delays with their needs assessments, which meant that they also did not have the equipment in place at the start of the academic year.

5.8.2 Training for use of equipment

Several of the participants were allocated training for the use of their equipment. In some cases it seems that this was given as default, and when it came to be arranged they declined the training as they did not feel that they required it.

“He also offered support, like 6 sessions of support on how to use Zoomtext, how to use the laptop, but I didn’t want it so I didn’t use all of the support that was available – but it was really nice of them to ask. The company was very accommodating.”

In this instance the participant had concluded that the training was being offered by the company, and had not realised that this would have been funded by DSA, thus implying that there was content on his assessment of needs report which he was unaware of.

Those who received training had mixed experiences. One participant spoke extremely positively of the training that she received. Previously she had used a screen reader at school, but had never received any formal training in using it. Despite thinking that she was able to use it competently, once she had the training she discovered that there were gaps in her knowledge, which positively the training was able to fill:

“When I had my training session from DSA, I found I kind of realised quite a lot, but at the same time, I don’t know very much if you know what I mean! Like I know quite a lot for the fact that I never had any training, but in terms of everything that Jaws has to offer, I know very little, realistically... The trainer was like ‘do you know how to do this?’ and I was like ‘yeah, yeah’, and then she would go ‘oh, so you know how to do that?’, and I was like ‘nooo!’ So a lot of stuff I worked out how to do, but in a very sort of long-winded way most of the time, going around the world, doing something that I could do with two strokes of the keyboard, you know. So its shortcuts, stuff like that.”

The young person’s experience highlights potential problems for those using specialist software. Whilst they may have known how to use the equipment sufficiently for the tasks they would require it for when in school, it is possible that they could benefit from developing their skills further for HE. This is discussed further in the section on accessing information and learning material.

One participant was frustrated as despite receiving his equipment in good time, there was a delay in his training being put into place:

“Yeah, actually. I got my equipment really late in August, which meant that I did not get my training until September, and I had to do it mid to the end, the dates were so scattered, they were a week apart some of them. It impacted on my time at Freshers, and there was really, I was a bit, I am not terribly happy about that, because I had to miss a social afternoon with my course to do some training that would affect my studies. I really wanted to embrace the whole social thing, but I had to sacrifice it for training, and I would have liked. I did my assessment in April, and I didn’t get my equipment until August. I think if I got my equipment earlier it would have helped, I could have done my training earlier, and

finished it earlier. I could have had a bit more time to get used to the equipment before my studies started.”

Another participant was unaware that she could have received training, before switching to a different institution and having an additional needs assessment:

“No, because I didn’t realise I could have training, no one told me, that is a bit strange. I kind of figured it out myself.”

Finally, one participant had added complications as her training was to be provided by a different company to the one who delivered her equipment. This has caused additional complications when there were problems in compatibility between the specialist equipment she was allocated, by adding an additional layer of bureaucracy to navigate:

“...the man came, he didn’t seem to really know what it was doing, he went through things quickly, he couldn’t get the braille-ex working. He also did not know what equipment I had been supplied with before he came, he said he didn’t get a list, they just get told to go and train, he came in and said ‘what equipment do you have...what is your disability’. [...] I think it is going to resolve in having to send it back to the manufacturer. I don’t know who is going to pay for that, or not.”

5.8.3 Reliability of equipment provided

A further theme which emerged throughout our discussions with the young people was of the reliability of the equipment which they were given.

Broken laptops/desktop computers

It is particularly notable how many of the participants’ DSA laptops broke during their time in HE – and in some cases, multiple times. Some participants who were not as reliant on their computers were not affected too significantly, as generally a repair was made within a reasonable time frame:

“They were good. I think in the first year I had a technical fault, and they came and showed me how to work it and fixed the fault, it was really good.”

However, this posed more of a challenge for participants who were reliant on their computers to be able to do any form of work. In one case the participant was able to continue accessing some information using her self-funded tablet computer:

“My laptop kept on getting taken back to DSA to get fixed, and then I was left with nothing, so fortunately I had my iPad. For like six weeks I would have been able to do absolutely nothing. When I asked if they had a back-up they said oh yes, but we haven’t got Jaws. I was like ‘oh yay!’”

When asked a general question about how his year in HE had gone, one participant responded saying:

“It had ups and downs. Most of the downs, you could link very directly to technical issues I had, laptop failure... I had technical issues in all three terms. The first term it was concerning and worrying. The second time it was ‘oh no, not again’, but I think the second term was the more problematic one as it left me with days where I didn’t have a laptop [...]. Then I got it back, and then it started having problems again and they hadn’t fixed it at all. So I ended up significantly, a week or so behind the rest of my class. I was absolutely going full pelt just to keep up, and it’s one of the modules from that term is the one that I failed, and yeah, the other module is one which I generally didn’t get much of it.”

These last two responses firstly demonstrate the implications of breakdown in equipment for some young people with visual impairments in HE, and secondly illustrate the importance of the equipment which they receive through DSA and how reliant they are upon it. It also raises two points of concern. Firstly it is of concern how many of the participants had faults with their laptops or desktop computers (9 of 21 participants who were interviewed with regards to their DSA support in summer 2015 reported having to have faults repaired on their devices). This indicates a possibility that the participants are being provided with cheaper laptops, more prone to breaking down. Regardless however of whether this is the case, it is also of concern that there was little in place for contingency in the event of the participants not having access to a computer. One participant did say that the supplier offered him an alternative laptop whilst his was being fixed, but then they discovered that all their replacement laptops were already out on loan.

Performance of laptop computers

Several participants also highlighted problems with the performance of their laptop computers. This was particularly the case in the context of participants using their laptops in conjunction with specialist software. One participant described the implications of this on his learning:

“The laptop that they provided is, I knew from the offset that anything that is a Windows orientated is really, really bad, well for me especially, because obviously I rely a lot on magnification software, and part of that... relying on magnification software you need reliability, and if your computer crashes, you know, during lectures or during critical moments of your course where it’s really critical to drop something down, and if you are not able to do that and it’s because your computer is unreliable, then that’s really, really unfortunate.”

This participant concluded that the when deciding on the equipment specifications DSA assessors look at the minimum specifications required:

“On paper probably what DSA do is they get the minimum specs required to support Zoomtext. But in practice that does not work, it is very unreliable, it keeps crashing, and you can’t use that... it’s just impossible, it’s not practical, you can’t use that for university. So if they did spend a bit more on processing power and a better computer, yeah I think that would have made a massive difference, and I might have stuck with a Windows computer rather than going for a Mac, but I don’t know.”

This theory is supported by another participant’s account. After receiving his DSA needs assessment report an IT specialist looked at his report and recommended that to run the software he had been allocated, he would require additional memory in the computer. This was posed to the assessor and the report changed.

Some participants had given up on using their DSA funded laptop as they just found that it was not fit for purpose:

“I don’t use my laptop that much because it’s really slow, and it kind of freezes all the time, so I use my old one really. I thought it would be good [...] it didn’t have a very big memory on it either,

with all my law PDFs it is already full, that's the only problem. But I was lucky in a sense I had one I could use.”

There were also indications in the case of one participant that he had ‘given up’ on using the assistive technology which he had been given as it was slowing down his laptop computer so much. This in turn meant he was struggling in accessing large pieces of text.

Other equipment not functioning correctly

Several participants also reported that other pieces of equipment they had been given through DSA had not been working correctly. This included braille displays, scanners, dongles with specialist software installed on them, and monitors.

5.8.4 Suppliers of non-medical support

Non-medical support is typically provided by external agencies whose services are bought in. This works well for the HE providers who then do not have to take on the responsibility of recruiting, training and managing staff. We asked the participants about their experience in using the services of these agencies.

Administration required by student

Several of the young people spoke of the administrative responsibilities involved in drawing on the non-medical support through DSA. This included contacting note-takers to arrange meeting them to get to lectures, informing note-takers of changes in their timetable, and signing off timesheets for those providing their non-medical support. These tasks proved time consuming to those who were already feeling the strain of their workload:

“It took me a while to get used to signing off their timesheets, but it ended off being ok. I would occasionally get an email and I would be like ‘that’s the 97th email I have had this week, please don’t bother me to do more signing’, and they are like ‘oh yeah, you have got to sign them off every single week now’... Why?! Just why, seriously. I have already got a million and one things to do, I don’t need to do another thing. Thank you for improving my workload somewhat.”

Another participant spoke of difficulties in being able to access the agencies systems to be able to sign off timesheets with her screen reader:

“They have got an online portal and you just go and confirm the sessions you have done, and that’s fine. The confirmation of support tells you who is meant to be doing what sessions, they are not all that easy to work with, they are PDFs and they are a bit messy”

A further participant reported being confused in signing off time sheets after the agency changed the way in which note-takers were paid, but did not inform the students:

“So the system changed, and I wasn’t told, I had to again have a note-taker tell me. It used to be that they would get paid how many hours they were in the lecture and it would be half that time for type-up in terms of pay. It changed to, they could put the equal amount of hours they had been in the lecture for type-up, but no one informed me of that, so with the new note-takers I was unsure what was going on.”

Coordination challenges and quality of support staff

Two participants experienced difficulties with regards to how these services were being coordinated, and how this would have implications for them as well:

“I think the leader who organised it all just delegated it, they looked at the expertise and how people had gelled sort of thing. But then she left, I don’t know why, for a while in October/November to the end of the year, so it wasn’t organised as well after that I don’t think – they worked it out themselves sort of thing, so it wasn’t the easiest.”

Linked to this, two participants reported being given support staff who were not trained sufficiently to give them the support needed:

“I didn’t find the library support that helpful. They employed someone to transcribe my work, and they gave me a library support person who didn’t know how to do it, and I had to show them what I had been told, which was the wrong way.”

Some of the participants were also disappointed with the quality of the note-taker support that they received:

“It’s been ok, but I need to talk to some of the note-takers because sometimes they miss bits out. I record the lectures as well, and I record seminars and things on my Dictaphone, but the notes are often very, very vague. They include the key points which is fine, but it can be annoying if I am trying to use them for revision and I end up using the PowerPoint lecture slides and making my own notes based on the slides.”

One of these participants described how some of the note-takers struggled with her course and the scientific content:

“One admitted that they were struggling quite a lot with the more science based aspects, because of course they weren’t educated in that field, so of course there were a lot of words and names that they didn’t quite understand, so those notes weren’t always clear.”

One participant advised that other young people with visual impairments should not necessarily accept the first person who is allocated to them to provide support:

“It’s important for a student not to just accept the first person you are coming to, to talk to people, talk to the personal tutor and disability officer to find the right match”

In two extreme cases, despite having the agreement through DSA to fund certain types of non-medical support, the staff were not made available to them:

“Like I say, I was supposed to get proof-readers and research assistance. In the first year the note-taker that I had did, but in the second year I didn’t get those note-takers anymore I got these different ones who had no idea what that stuff was...the first year they did help me with proof reading my assignments and research, and helping me in the library which I was entitled to. I don’t know if they were just more better informed”

This participant was particularly disappointed in this as she felt that it affected her overall degree result as she was unable to access some of her lectures – and in particular practical sessions. At the time of the last

interview she was preparing to make a formal appeal with regards to her degree classification. A further participant who did not receive the allocated non-medical helper support failed the first year of his course. He believed that his problems lay with both the inaccessibility of the course, and not having the support in place that he required.

Mobility and orientation support

As has previously been identified, mobility and orientation support was vital for several of the participants when they started at HE, as well as at the start of each semester when they had to learn routes to new buildings. We have noted some significant challenges to the young people in accessing this support, which in turn has impacted on their time in HE. These findings are discussed further in the 'Independent Living' section.

Positive outcomes

Whilst there were many challenges faced by the participants in accessing their non-medical support, there were examples of participants who were very satisfied with the support that they received. Of particular note were two participants who were given note-taker support from people who were specialists in the subject. In both cases they were studying courses which use a lot of diagrams. The specialist note takers were able to draw these diagrams for them on tactile drawing film to make them tactile, and then able to explain them to the student. These note-takers were recruited to work for the relevant agencies at the respective institutions, but identified by the participants department.

One of these participants also described how he benefited from the lecturers working alongside the support person he was given, and the importance of having a partnership between the two. Whilst this would not be necessary for all courses, for more practical courses such as the one he was studying, it proved very beneficial.

“As I said before, it’s not good enough just a note-taker and an assistant doing the work, it has to be a partnership between the assistant and the tutors. I think they produced the best kind of support that you can get.”

5.8.5 Importance of note-taker support

As note-taking was the non-medical support most commonly received by the participants, we also asked some questions of those who had had

note-takers about their experience of working with them, and how beneficial they had found it in accessing their lectures.

Four participants described how they found the note-taker support to be vitally important, otherwise they would struggle to keep up with the pace of the lecture, or would be worrying about missing something important:

“Very, very beneficial, yeah. It’s very difficult to follow the lecture because you have to make extra effort in the lecture either on the iPad or your computer, and having to do that whilst taking notes and listening to what the lecturer is actually saying, doing three things at once it’s quite difficult. So having a note-taker takes a lot of the strain off.”

One participant who had recently completed his course turned down the offer of note-taker support at his initial needs assessment meeting, but later decided that he would have benefited from it:

“Thinking about it now maybe I should have. Because at first I wanted to do everything on my own, I was really stubborn. But thinking about it now I think it would have helped me a lot, definitely [...] Because I may have missed... because it’s quite fast paced the lectures, it was about 70/80 slides. But even though I could catch up with it on the iPad, when I was typing up I could have missed information, the most important information, because the slides could say one thing and the lecturer would be saying something. So maybe what I could have done is focused on the lecture slide and the note-taker could have focused on what the lecturer was saying, and then just joined them together if you understand what I am trying to say.”

Three participants found the note-taker support to be essential, otherwise the lectures would have been inaccessible to them. However in the case of one participant, this appears to have been compensating for the institution’s failure to make reasonable adjustments:

“Really helpful. I think because so many of my lecturers use diagrams, or sort of scan in pages from books and make them their slides, so it reads it as an image and I can’t convert the PowerPoints. So what my note-taker does at the minute, when he writes up my notes, he essentially writes up the slide, and does diagram description, and copies out the text and things like that.

So I have got access to the slides as well as things relating to them. Because with all the stuff going on I would really struggle with connecting the two”

One participant in a second year module decided to try and get by without note-taker support, but later regretted this decision:

“Then unfortunately I tried one term without a note-taker, and that was the one that there was actually a lecturer who was a terrible lecturer, and his lecture notes were totally incomprehensible, and it was like ‘argh, this is one where I could have done with a note-taker’. The one time where I realised I could have done with lecture notes from a note-taker. But nevermind”

Two participants spoke of the benefits of receiving lecture notes through their note-taker in helping them with preparing for their exams, and producing assessed work:

“It’s really good. Especially when I need to revise for exams. That’s been the most beneficial part of my note-take support. It means I am taking information in, and the note-taker can be getting all the notes. But even when preparing a presentation you can look back at the notes of the lecturer and remember all the key points, that kind of thing”

Finally, one participant simply expressed being reliant on receiving this support to be able to take the course:

“I think it is a highly beneficial system – I don’t think I could have done a lot without note-taker support”

5.8.6 Accessing DSA support

As has already been mentioned, some participants had difficulties in accessing the support that they were allocated through DSA. Firstly, two participants who were assigned support in lectures did not receive this due to staffing problems:

“The help that I usually get from the university has not been very good this time, like note-takers, I was having a lot of inconsistencies. I had one note-taker leave, and they took a while to replace her. And then for one of my seminars I just never got a note-taker at all. This has been a problem that other people have

had as well, just not really having the note-taker support that they should.”

Another participant who had previously expressed having a challenge in accessing materials in the library, later discovered that she was supposed to have received research assistance support, but for some reason had not realised this to be the case.

A participant who had difficulties at first in accessing mobility support (as discussed further in the Independent Living section) felt that this was a particularly problematic aspect of the DSA process:

“I never really understood what the process was for mobility for DSA. A lot of people seem to get mixed messages for who is supposed to fund mobility. Personally I think I was told that I was allowed so many sessions paid by DSA, but that was only supposed to be on campus, and mobility off campus or above this sort of set limit would have to come from my local authority. It’s something to do with that, that resulted in the confusion and the huge delay in me getting mobility. That would be the only thing I really would want to figure out, and have a proper system put in place. Because there didn’t really seem to be a set structure, people seemed to think different things, and that’s why all this confusion came up [...] Everyone did something different, there don’t seem to be any guidelines of what you are supposed to do.”

A further participant had been informed that she would be given some funding through DSA to help pay for a larger room (for reasons associated with her visual impairment), but this never materialised and she was unsure of how to address this.

Finally, one participant was allocated money to buy a bag on wheels to help transport her equipment and other learning materials. However she felt limited by having to pay out for this first and then claim the money back:

“...but they give you £100 for a bag on wheels, or they did for me, you know, but I could only afford to go to £30 or £40 because it takes you months... I know one lad on my course, he done it and it took him four months to get the money back for his bag. I mean, that is too long a wait.”

5.9 Restrictions on the funding of non-specialist equipment

During the course of the interviews with those participants in HE, several of them spoke of firstly, how they have benefited in using non-specialist equipment which has inbuilt accessibility options and secondly how they have been restricted in not being able to access this through DSA. This is a topic which has already been investigated by the research team in previous publications. For example, in Hewett et al (2014) we looked at the way in which participants use mainstream technology to access information, and in Hewett and Douglas (2015f) we looked at the benefits of inclusive design in mainstream technology for young people with visual impairment.

This section combines all discussions that we had with the participants with regards to this topic, including some follow-up questions as part of the summer 2015 interviews.

5.9.1 Requesting Apple Mac computers

One inconsistency which has been observed during conversations with the participants about the equipment which they would have liked to have received and the equipment that was allocated, was in relation to Apple Mac computers. Apple Mac computers are preferred by some people with visual impairment due to the inbuilt accessibility options. Whilst these machines are more expensive than Windows based systems, the operating system has its own highly rated magnification function and screen reader, which means that no additional specialist software is required. Additionally, from the perspective of a young person with a visual impairment who does not want to appear different to their peers, being able to use the same equipment as their peers comes as a significant boost.

Several participants reported requesting an Apple Mac computer as part of their assessment of needs, but with varying outcomes. Two participants described how they were able to argue that an Apple Mac would be the most appropriate piece of equipment for them as they were used to using Apple products and therefore would not want to switch to Windows based systems:

“I said a lot of things which are very true about how I wasn’t very confident with Windows anymore having used a Mac for the last three years, how I had a Mac, I had a Mac already actually and

they insisted on getting another one for insurance reasons. Basically just because the software is built in, I know how to use it, something to do with iBooks for my course, just because of that, but again my assessor didn't know very much. I am very, very lucky!"

In this case the young person has also concluded that part of the reason she was allowed to have an Apple Mac was due to a lack of knowledge by her assessor of the options available, and therefore she was able to benefit from being able to advocate for herself and her need for that equipment. However, this did have consequences for her DSA application as Student Finance at first were resistant to letting her have the Apple Mac, and therefore it took a long time for her equipment to be approved.

Another participant was given an Apple Mac, but this appears to be more in relation to the type of course that she was studying (photography), rather than because she specifically needed an Apple Mac for her studies, or because she had used one extensively before.

"I wasn't really fussed about getting an Apple Mac. The Apple Mac has been really useful. At first it was hard to get used to sometimes, I have always worked on a Windows PC, but then once I played around with it a bit more, I got used to it, to the point that now all the time, even when I am at work, my work they are all PCs, I am in the Apple Mac mind, I am having to take a long time."

Two other participants were allocated Apple Macs, but only because they paid a top-up fee, above the cost of the Windows PC that they would have otherwise been given. It would appear, however, that some participants who were interested in having an Apple Mac were not presented with this as an option.

From discussions with the young people about their experiences in trying to get an Apple Mac computer and the feedback they received from assessors, the argument appears to be these will only be given to participants who have used Apple computers in the past (meaning that if they were given a Windows PC they would need to learn to use a new piece of software), or alternatively if they required an Apple Mac computer for their course. This was the understanding of one participant who decided to fund his own Apple Mac computer:

“No! No, it’s a Mac, they don’t even contemplate giving you a Mac, unless you need it for your course.”

However this apparent logic of Student Finance is contradicted by the fact that other support allocations received by the participants include screen reader and magnification software and braille displays that the participants had not previously used or owned before.

Several participants requested Apple Mac computers, and were either informed by the assessor that there was no point in applying as it would not be approved, or once their application had gone in, it was blocked by Student Finance:

“I asked about the possibility of getting Apple Mac computers, and I was told that it was unlikely that I would get one, because I had used Jaws in the past. So my assessor told me that there was no point in me applying for an Apple Mac, because they would say no because I was a Jaws user, even though I also have Apple products and I have an iPhone and an iPad and I told her that, and she was like ‘no, there’s no point’. I would have preferred an Apple Mac. Not, just because they are more advanced I think, and there is more... it’s all inbuilt isn’t it, you haven’t got to keep putting on someone else’s bit of software onto someone else’s machine, which is... having to figure out who to contact if you have got a problem. And then you know because I have got my own iPad and my own phone, I could have connected them all to the Cloud and I could have had it interlinked on the device.”

As has been discussed earlier in this report, one of the disadvantages of using separate accessibility software is that it can slow the computer down, and it can also be unreliable and ‘crash’ the computer. One young man who had hoped to get an Apple Mac computer explained why it was so important to him to get one, and why ultimately he went to a charity to get funding to buy one:

“The only downside is that... the laptop that they provided is, I knew from the offset that anything that is a Windows orientated is really really bad, well for me especially, because obviously I rely a lot on magnification software, and part of that... relying on magnification software you need reliability, and if your computer crashes, you know, during lectures or during critical moments of your course where it’s really critical to drop something down, and if

you are not able to do that, and it's because your company is unreliable, then that's really, really unfortunate. So they said that they wouldn't fund a Mac, and that is a common problem throughout DSA that they won't do that, because they are really stubborn, and because for that reason they think they still need to buy software for the Macs, but that would be very very expensive. But for the Macs you don't need any software because they have got it installed anyway, and that actually makes it cheaper, and it's a lot better. Loads and loads of visually impaired people I know who have gone to university haven't managed to get Macs, they have had to find some other way of getting them like I had to. So basically I had this computer which, because I have a £5000 budget, they couldn't spend an awful lot on the computer, so I didn't have an enormous amount of processing power, and that coupled with Zoomtext meant that it crashed an awful lot, and times when I really didn't need it to crash like in seminars when I was typing something down when I needed it to be reliable, it just wasn't reliable. So I had to get a Mac instead, that was funded through a local charity. But yeah, I just shouldn't have to do that unfortunately. They should just accept that these computers really do help visually impaired people, and that is the only option, that is what most people use."

As can be seen from the previous quote, in this case the participant has been funded for a laptop and additional specialist software through DSA. However he has found that due to the poor processing power of the computer he is unable to use this laptop for his studies. Instead he has found alternative funding to buy an Apple Mac computer, and the DSA funded laptop is redundant.

5.9.2 Tablet computers as a learning tool

Another popular piece of equipment used by people with visual impairments is tablet computers. Again, the benefits of these are explored in Hewett et al (2014) and Hewett and Douglas (2015f), but most notably, and as in the case of Apple Mac computers, many tablet computers come with inbuilt accessibility options (such as the ability to magnify the screen and inbuilt screen readers). None of the participants were given a tablet computer through DSA, although many spoke of how they were using them for reasons relating to their visual impairment.

Why are young people with visual impairments using tablet computers in higher education?

Portability

Several of the participants spoke of how difficult they found it to transport their laptops to lectures, along with their books and other equipment. Whilst many students take laptops to lectures, the participants tended to have bulkier and heavier laptops due to needing a larger screen. One participant also struggled due to having stitches in his eye, which meant that he was unable to carry heavy objects. It is unclear why this was not identified at his needs assessment:

“So yeah, the iPad was very much a big help. I would have loved to have taken my laptop, but I had books to take as well, so taking my books and my laptop would have just been too heavy, and the fact that I have got stitches in my eye would have affected that as well.”

“It basically... because it was something that... my laptop that I was provided, because the screen is bigger, it's too heavy to carry to university. So using my iPad for loading up lectures on it instead was actually a lot more useful, and being able to get... if some things were going to be printed out in lectures, if I could find it beforehand and put it on my tablet, then I could sit in the lectures and use that and that was a lot easier, because I could just use that however I wanted.”

Accessing lectures

Several participants described how they used their tablet computers to help them access their lecture slides:

“I get the lecture slides emailed to me, or I can get them on the student sharing website thing at university, I can just download them onto my tablet and I can view them as the slide is playing during the lecture, and I can pull the screen quite close to my face, whilst I wouldn't be able to do that with a computer. In different situations, they are both very, very good. But you know, the iPad in just certain situations is very useful, especially in a packed, crowded lecture theatre where it's not always easy to lug around a big computer, you want something a bit more portable, but still with as much on with the accessibility options installed into them, as the iPad does”

One participant described how she no longer needed to use her DSA printing allowance to print lecture notes out as instead she was able to use her tablet computer:

“Because I got the printer and it meant that I could print off all my slides, and I could annotate them on a hard copy, but it’s just, the problem was you could only print them so big, and you still wouldn’t be able to see all of the little text or whatever. So it was still a pain when it came to revision and that kind of thing. Whereas with the iPad I could zoom in, zoom out, save it and put it on drop box and all that kind of stuff. The name of the app that I use is called Noteability if you want to [...] Yeah, I am sure it is free or £1.49, something like that. But I still think the whole system is a little bit outdated in some ways. But yeah, before I had the printer, the iPad was essential. The printer is less essential now because I have the iPad”

Accessing books

Some participants spoke of using their tablet computers to read books that they would struggle to access otherwise:

“You can get things like Kindle books, to read things on my iPad, rather than having the physical books in front of me. And it’s a lot quicker than waiting for the publisher, because they can take months”

Another participant spoke of how she would have liked to have an e-reader, but decided that there was no point in asking for one as DSA would not fund it:

“Thought no point in asking for anything like that, an e-reader, anything that would help me do an English degree. There’s no point. There are brilliant apps for, like iPad and other Tablets that would be helpful, but thought there is no point asking, not going to get it. They are just shooting you down, they don’t want to start thinking about it. If you said I can try, but I don’t think you will get it, that’s a little better than being told no straight down.”

Tablet computers as a tool for accessing information

Other participants simply listed a number of tasks that they would use the tablet computers for in relation to their course:

“The iPad, oh lots of things, making notes, recording (I had a Dictaphone now but I can’t work that yet), I use Dropbox a lot for saving chapters and things that we get emailed to read, obviously emails, researching things, I have a little foldable Bluetooth keyboard so I can type on that. I can connect the braille-x to it as well, my calendar, sync with Gmail which is what uni runs off”.

“I use it ALL the time [...] To access our virtual learning environment. To do emails, type notes, to record lectures, so most stuff.”

Participant reactions to DSA policies on tablet computers

The participants also gave their thoughts on what they at least perceived to be DSA’s policy on the funding of tablet computers.

Duplication of support

Two participants believed that DSA viewed having a computer and an iPad as a duplication of support. However, this is was something which they disagreed with, and both of them made the decision to fund the iPad themselves (alongside their DSA laptop):

“It’s the fact that they look purely on price, and not on what they actually do. I can’t use an iPad to type up an essay, that’s illogical, but they are just... what can you do... In order to see my laptop I have to connect it up to a 47 inch TV screen in order to see some things. Imagine the tiny... it’s literally like 7 or 8 inch screen an iPad, imagine me trying to type a 3000 Law essay on that, it wouldn’t work. They are too money orientated, they just need to figure out that things are for different reasons. I can tell us as a person who uses both, they aren’t interchangeable, you can’t have one or the other, you need both. The only reason I have been able to have both is because I have saved my DLA money, DSA would not have given me one.”

One participant was given a tablet computer for HE by a specialist VI charity, emphasising how within the field of visual impairment they are recognised as beneficial to young people with visual impairment in an educational setting.

Not understanding the benefits of tablet computers

Other participants felt that DSA did not fully understand the benefits that tablet computers can have to people with visual impairment, instead seeing them as a device which is used for leisure purposes:

“I know a lot of people who have tried to get them through DSA and DSA haven’t allowed them, because they think that an iPad is used for leisure, but it’s so not the case, because it’s a lot better using an iPad in a lecture”

Tablet computers can be more beneficial for certain types of VI

Finally, one participant spoke of how in terms of her particular visual impairment she found the tablet computer more beneficial to her than the laptop computer.

“When I was first going into DSA and all that, they were saying that maybe we could get you a laptop, we wouldn’t be able to get you an iPad or anything like that, but if it was an on balance thing, the iPad in terms of my visual impairment and accessing uni, the iPad has made a bigger impact to me, and made it easier to access things. Although obviously my laptop has been very useful, if I was to have to choose between the two, the iPad would be a bigger deal.”

She concluded instead that DSA appear to have a default approach of giving laptops, rather than really considering how they might be beneficial to that young person:

“I think it’s just the standard thing that everyone through DSA gets a laptop, but actually if it was a question of what is more helpful in terms of accessing education, an iPad is actually the answer”

5.10 Reflections on DSA by the participants

5.10.1 Appropriateness of DSA to students with visual impairment

In light of the proposed changes to DSA by the UK Government (BIS, 2015), we asked the participants to reflect on their experience of DSA and its appropriateness to them as a young person with a visual impairment. A wide range of responses were given, reflecting their individual experiences. These are presented in turn:

Assessments and delivery of support

Firstly, several participants made some observations with regards to DSA assessments and delivery of support.

Need for the student to be at the centre

One participant spoke of her frustration at being left out of discussion between her needs assessor and Student Finance when deciding on her final support allocation

“The only thing is sometimes there is a problem between... sometimes the student doesn't really know what is going on behind all the conversations the assessor has with Student Finance, because obviously they can't... but then Student Finance only notify you once everything has been done [...] I think I called up Student Finance about something else, and they started going on about how I had had something rejected on my DSA, and I was just like 'do I get a notification of this at all', and apparently no, they only communicate with the university. And then when it's all done they send you a final report. The only thing I would change about DSA is the student having a bit more of a role in what is going on. Sometimes you have the assessor talking to Student Finance about the person, and the student has no idea. It should be a three way conversation, not a two way conversation.

Whilst it does not extend to HE, the recently introduced SEND legislation emphasises the importance of the voice of the young person being heard.

Too many levels

Another participant felt that there were too many levels involved in providing the required support:

“I would say that there need to be fewer steps in the chain... for example, and I hate to say this because I know that [assessor] did such a great job for me, but if he could work for a supplier and then there would be no gap between what he said, and what the supplier gave”

Improvement of suppliers

Similarly, this participant also felt that there needed to be an improvement in the quality of the suppliers, having been provided with the wrong type of equipment:

“I would say they need to get their suppliers in order.”

Better assessments

One participant spoke of how inappropriate the support allocation was to her and described how she would have preferred a different type of equipment which the assessor had not presented as an option:

“In terms of the funding, reviewing how it is actually used. Because I think, like I was saying before with the practicality of the equipment my DSA has paid for. It’s a lot of things that weren’t practical enough for me to ever use, and I think that was a lot of money wasted really.”

Greater clarity

During the course of these interviews, a number of the participants also expressed their confusion about how to claim back some expenses relating to DSA, such as printing costs, accommodation costs and internet costs. This suggests that for these participants, there has been a need for clarity on the procedures that they should follow:

“With your general allowance, I think I have got an internet one for £150 a year, which is great, and it’s all ‘send receipts to this place’ or whatever, and how that is actually done isn’t made especially clear. So things like for example, in my first year when I was in halls we got a deal where you pay for your internet off their thing, and it never really sends you a receipt, it doesn’t send you a bill, you put in your card details and it says ‘ok, that’s bought you three months worth’, so there is no way of really claiming that back. It’s not made especially clear how you go about that.”

Budgets

Too inflexible

One participant felt that the funding structure of DSA was too inflexible, as it is the same format for all students with disabilities, regardless of

how their disability might impact upon them. She concluded that there needed to be greater flexibility in the system:

“For some people they don’t need a lot of non-medical help because they need more things that say general allowance would pay for. I basically think they need to think of it more and have separate processes for different disabilities.”

Insufficient funding for equipment

Echoing the previous point, three participants particularly highlighted that they did not consider there to be sufficient funding for equipment for those with more severe visual impairments, as this equipment is often very expensive:

“There definitely needs to be more. I think there shouldn’t really be a cap... I think what the assessor should do is just... I think you should be provided with what you need. It’s not like you are taking advantage. At the end of the day you need stuff... it’s just a case of the government should... the government should just be willing to give you whatever you need providing your assessor says so. I think it’s really unfair because blind stuff is really expensive and it’s not fair, and I think the government should help us with that.”

Access to an equipment budget throughout the course

Another participant spoke of her frustrations at not being able to access an equipment budget as the course progressed:

“I think possibly, like because your needs change through the course, especially with the equipment budget, you know, you sort of get... with everything else the budget is ongoing, but the equipment budget is a one-time big pay out, it might be useful to have that, and then a smaller budget for the next two years in case something does come up, that you need to get some additional... things like, now to run SPSS for example, later versions of Jaws deal with it slightly better, and if I were to update my SMA [software maintenance agreement], I could get slightly more usage out of the software, but it won’t cover, because I have blown all my budget, I can’t now apply for a SMA to upgrade that. So possibly that might be helpful. It’s not made especially clear either.”

Specific funding pot for mobility

Similarly, another participant felt that there should be a specific pot of money allocated to mobility support, and that this should not be drawn out of the non-medical support pot. This participant has spoken throughout her time in HE about how she has been limited through the mobility support that was available to her. This is something which is explored more in the independent living section.

“I think there should be a separate pot specifically for mobility so that it makes it easier. I think it comes out of the non-medical help does it? And then you know, because it has to be shared with something else if you use note-takers, or research assistants or whatever else, and there is a limit of how much you can have for your mobility, and then that limits the amount of mobility that you can have, which in my case has limited everything, my uni experience as whole. That’s one thing that I would like to change and that I think would make a big difference in terms of making it easier for people, especially who have to have long cane training, or guide dog training, or whatever.”

Funding for non-specialist equipment

Finally, one participant highlighted his frustration at DSA not funding equipment which was deemed to be non-specialist:

“Definitely be more flexible about funding for Apple. It’s not only Macs, it’s also iPads. Because I have both and they make life so much easier for us. I think it’s because DSA believe that they are more used for leisure rather than work [...] People are beginning to use them in serious academic environments, and DSA really need to realise that, and they realise that lots of visually impaired people are starting to pick up these Macs because they are so much more reliable than PCs and the software which... the magnification and the speech software which comes on them pre-installed, is just as good, and in some ways even better than the software which you have to pay £700 on a PC. If I had to speak to them, and if I could change anything... It’s so important, because so many people I have spoken to have suffered from that.”

Overall importance of DSA

Secondly, some of the participants spoke of the overall importance that DSA has for them in their educational experiences and just how essential it was to them. One participant highlighted how she simply

would not have been able to go to into HE if it were not for the support that she received through DSA:

“It’s been very, very useful in terms of my equipment and my non-medical help, because without those things I couldn’t go to university really. I wouldn’t be able to access my course without this equipment that I put through DSA because I didn’t have it otherwise. I couldn’t have just bought it off my own back.”

However, another participant in describing how she used part of her DSA allowance demonstrated how the funding she was being given was being used to ‘plug gaps’ in her institution’s failure to make reasonable adjustments:

Participant: “...so I bought the textbooks myself and then photocopied them. If I could have had modified textbooks it would have been so much easier. It wasn’t that hard. I just did a chapter at a time.” Researcher: “Was that most books that you had to do that for?” Participant: “Yeah, it was like four a time.” Researcher: “It must have taken forever!” Participant: “Yeah, you do a chapter a week basically, like a topic a week, so I tended to just do them all on a Monday morning, like four chapters of what I needed, and then that was that [...] to get a modified book that’s ages, and we don’t really find out until the beginning of the term, so I realised that I wouldn’t have the books until week 5 or 6. They are so specific the books.”

This was also touched upon by another student who had benefited from his institution providing additional funding for non-medical support, but acknowledged that some institutions would be more likely to have inclusive practices than others:

“...but it entirely depends on how that institution is run, I think a lot of places under prioritise their universal access policies and will not be prepared to do that, so there would be certain institutions who would say ‘yes, DSA should pick up the tab’, but I think, in my case, because they are prepared to do it it’s no problem to me that they are having to do that”

5.11 Reflections on DSA by Disability Support Officers

As part of the case study work, we asked the disability support officers (DSO) working with six of the participants to discuss the support

allocation that the young person had received through DSA, and how appropriate they considered it to be. Additionally we asked them to reflect on their professional experience of DSA, particularly in relation to students with visual impairments.

5.11.1 Significance of DSA assessments

All of the disability support officers emphasised in their responses the importance of applying for DSA. They spoke of how in their first communication with students with VI potentially coming to the institution they would inform the student of DSA and advise them to apply for it.

“We highlight the importance of applying for a fund called DSA, which is a key part of the support at any university for a student with a disability.”

“We would always advise them to apply for this DSA, because then they can get the right equipment, the fund would pay for the equipment that they need”

One DSO also described how long the assessment process can take, and explained how they would encourage potential students to apply early:

“I mean the whole DSA process in itself is unwieldy. It takes a minimum of 14 weeks from start to finish, minimum, and for a lot of students with the current level of queries coming from student finance England it can take it a lot longer than that to get it all organised.”

All the assessors also spoke of how they would base the support plan for that student on the content of the DSA needs assessment:

“When any student that has had a disability arrives, we provide them with an inclusive learning and support plan, which is basically the information that is on the DSA assessment report.”

“We would look at what was in her original access report, and we would take the lead from that, so it would be the report that was done at [assessment centre] for her DSA.”

This approach by the DSOs emphasises the importance of the quality of assessments, and assessors who understand both visual impairment

and also the support available at a university. This is explored further below.

5.11.2 Evaluation of DSA

DSA assessors

Four of the DSOs referred to the quality of the DSA assessments, and emphasised the importance of a good assessor. One DSO spoke of how they worked with a particular assessor they had confidence in, and would steer their potential students to her. This is interesting in the context of our earlier finding which showed that the most common way for the students to identify a DSA assessor was by postcode:

“But as far as the students who really need it, I think it’s excellent. It’s all down to the needs assessor to be honest, and we have good needs assessors, and we have very poor needs assessors.... We now can’t advise, but we steer our students towards a needs assessor that we have great faith in, who comes to see us regularly, we talk to her and her team, about how we feel comfortable about how things are done... All the ins and outs, about SFE [Student Finance England] and what have you, and it’s an extremely good relationship and she is an extremely good assessor. Before that we had a dreadful one, who was awful. So a lot of it is down to the assessor. If the assessment is done correctly.”

Another DSO spoke of being dissatisfied with the content of the assessment which she received for one of the participants. Having worked with students with visual impairments before she was able to work with the student in developing their report further:

“Personally for me, [participant]’s needs assessment wasn’t the greatest. I was quite disappointed with that report, I have seen far better reports. So yeah, the allocation wasn’t great, and I basically rewrote the human support, with [participant]’s input, kind of thing, so we could get something better.”

She also expressed how important she felt it was that students with more severe visual impairments were assessed by an assessor who had a good knowledge of visual impairment and the range of support options available:

“For me, I think that study needs assessments for VI and blind students, should be done by somebody who absolutely understands that, and knows the technology that is out there, because I don’t think that’s happening, I think we are getting assessors who have seen the odd VI student, and perhaps aren’t as up to date as they should be on equipment. I think that’s an issue.”

This was echoed by the DSO from a different institution:

“I would expect that needs assessors who assess visually impaired students should be pretty much on top of their game in terms of what the latest technology is, and what can be recommended.”

DSA and Student Finance England

A number of the DSOs also gave their opinion on DSA and Student Finance England (SFE) who administer this process. One of the assessors felt that SFE were starting to be more careful with the money that was spent on DSA:

“Overall, nationally, for Disabled Student Allowance, you get a feeling that things are changing, but it’s difficult to put your finger on it really. We are working with the system as it is, and that’s all that you can do right now.”

Another assessor stated that she could understand the need to be careful with public money, but acknowledged that other DSOs would be less complimentary about SFE.

“I mean, a lot of disability advisors would sit here and say SFE are a waste of time, they are absolutely dreadful, blah blah blah. You always get the frustrations, there’s the times there is a problem, and you can’t get them to accept what you are asking for, but again, they are holders of public money, they have got to be careful what they give their money out for, so I think that’s actually fair, and I found very reasonable.”

One of the assessors highlighted how DSA is predominately based on the medical model of disability, making compensations for difficulties that the students might experience in relation to their visual impairment.

“And of course, it’s based on the medical model of disability, rather than the social model of disability as well, so for some students that’s a struggle as well, they don’t want to be providing evidence and all that sort of stuff, but you have to do it to get the support that you require. So that can be difficult for some students, but...”

Whilst another assessor was frustrated at how the funding structure works for post graduate students. As a number of the participants in this study are hoping to take postgraduate course, this is something which we will be able to explore further as the study progresses:

“With the DSA, one thing that I would say, that’s become a bit annoying, shall we say, is the, obviously if they decide to go onto post graduate study, then they don’t offer the top up, unless obviously their needs have essentially changed. So that’s quite sort of frustrating, because we have postgraduate students who have got a visual impairment, and we have had to do an awful lot of work with them as well, to make sure that we get the right stuff out of the package, and old equipment that may not be as good as it used to be, but because it’s still working, you know, so it’s those sort of issues as well, that’s quite interesting, with DSA.”

One assessor spoke of the differences of working with local authorities based in Wales, who have a different approach for approving DSA support allocations, which can cause delays in the students receiving their required support:

“The other thing that, with the Welsh local authorities as well, they need to know that the student has actually started their course, because they can order the equipment, so that’s another system that is different to England, so you have that as well! You know, so that’s quite frustrating as well. So you know, with [participant], she got her equipment when she started her course, you know, and which was quite annoying and frustrating.”

In this case the participant was unable to receive training in using her equipment until part way through the first semester, which limited her in the first year of her studies.

Budget limitations

The DSOs also spoke of the budget limitations of DSA and how their institution would respond to this. In two contrasting cases, one DSO

spoke of the importance of the institution being prepared to make up the difference in support, whilst in the other case they would work within the boundaries of the amount of funding available through DSA. The first institution's policy would be to work with the DSA assessor and to get them to assess the student according to what they needed, rather than the DSA budget:

“So basically, what we say to the DSA assessor, is we want you to assess her for what she needs, not what disabled students allowance will allow her to have”

Once the report was received, the institution agreed to then bridge any gaps in funding:

“DSA wise, disabled student allowance, she's basically got every last penny of support she could possibly have, so she's used the whole entire budget, so there's a big budget for equipment, she's got everything. There's about £10,000 over. For non-medical help support, she's got the whole lot, and she's way way over, thousands over. So what the institution does, we have an exceptional funding stream that we apply to, to make up the difference.”

In the other case, the DSO spoke of having to work within the boundaries of the DSA budget, thus not assessing the student principally according to what they are judged to need:

“These things that you just have to organise early, and what I found in the past as well, that visually impaired students, especially with severe visual impairment, obviously tend to be high spenders in terms of non-medical helper, as you may have had information and experience of. So you have to keep a close eye on the budget, all the time, constantly.”

Quality of support received

Two of the DSOs referred to the quality of the suppliers who would be providing the equipment for the students. One explained how they can sometimes have problems with the suppliers not having specialist equipment in stock, which could cause delays. In the case of the participant he was working with, however, a specialist supplier was used:

“Now, they actually in [participant]’s case, you can specify a specific supplier, if it’s difficult to get that equipment from other suppliers, that are not as tailored to those.”

Another DSO spoke of varying levels in quality of training provided by the suppliers, and also potential problems with warranties running out as the students come to the end of their course:

“With regards to provision of equipment, obviously, with regard to the hardware and software, that’s down to the companies that provide it, and the training they give, some of which are excellent, and some of which aren’t. Normally, if there is any problem, things like warranties have run out, we can negotiate with SFE and they will get it extended, it’s not normally a problem.”

On the whole the DSOs also spoke positively about working with external suppliers of non-medical support. They highlighted how beneficial it is to have these agencies who can take responsibility for the recruitment, training and management of these staff, although acknowledged that there were potential for some problems:

“With regard to the non-medical help support, we have an agency that provides that, and the agency are excellent, we very rarely have problems with our agency support. Having said that, there will always be individual situations where support hasn’t turned up for some reason, or the students and support don’t get on, or where the agency have found... because most of the agency support are students at university anyway, they might have trouble sourcing the right person with the right skills, so it can only be, you can only do the best you can for students. Mostly it’s very good and they are very well trained.”

5.11.3 Working with DSA assessors and Student Finance

Finally, the DSOs spoke of the necessity for them to work alongside the DSA assessors and Student Finance in ensuring the best quality of support for their students.

One officer described how the assessors would normally forward the assessment of needs report to the institution so that they could start making preparations:

“The assessment centres will generally send them to us, and then as soon as we get them, we pick them up, and offer an appointment to the student, so that’s done quite efficiently.”

In the case of the participant he was working with, however, the assessor had not done this, and the DSO had some difficulties in tracking them down:

“Originally [participant] wasn’t sure who actually assessed her either, because when I met with her prior to needs assessment, she knew she had a needs assessment, but she wasn’t too sure who did it, because her actual support worker at the time arranged it, so I was then trying to chase it up for her.”

Other disability support officers spoke of how they would communicate with the assessor to ask them to bear specific things in mind. For example, in two cases the DSO spoke to the assessor and asked them to keep the allocation of non-medical support as flexible as possible as they anticipated that it would be difficult to predict in advance exactly what the student would need:

“He had had an assessment of needs, and basically there was a report that was done for DSA purposes, that highlighted what support he would need, and we knew that we would have to tell the funder that it was pretty vague at the start, and that the number of hours of support would definitely need to change, as and when required. So we sort of put in a sort of random, quite a high figure of hours of support”

Another assessor spoke of the disadvantage of having an assessor who was unfamiliar with the type of support available at the institution, thus emphasising the importance of communication between the institution and the assessor:

“...there is kind of disadvantages with that, with the fact that the needs assessment may be done by a person who doesn’t have an idea of the type of support that is available in the university, you know.”

Two DSOs signposted the student to a particular assessment centre who they were confident in, and had worked with closely before. Another

DSO whilst she recognised that this would be beneficial, stated that she was unable to advise the students to go to a specific centre:

“Yeah, we can do. I mean obviously if students ask we will definitely advise them. We can’t advise them which assessment centre to go to. We do have our own assessment centre, but again, we are not allowed to do that, it has to be the student’s decision as to where they get assessed.”

Finally, one of the DSOs spoke of the advantages of having good working relationships with Student Finance, so that they could deal with any issues more efficiently:

“There is a team of advisors for DSA, there is about eight of them, so obviously we get familiar with them, and obviously we are on the phone to them a lot each day, it works really well. And they seem to be very quick at responding to our emails, if there are any issues that we need looking at quickly.”

6 Developing support plans

In this section we look at the support plans that were put in place for the participants once they started on their courses. In particular we look at the role of disability support officers in helping determine what reasonable adjustments should be made. As well as asking the young people about their experience with regards to support plans, we also investigate this process from the perspective of disability support officers.

6.1 What are disability support offices?

Support to students with disabilities in HE tends to be coordinated by central disability support (DS) offices / services. The staff working at these offices have a wide range of responsibilities, including:

- drawing up support plans for any student who declares themselves as having a disability
- advising departments of these support plans and helping them implement them where necessary
- helping resolve any problems that a student may be having
- directing and coordinating additional support that the student may need
- liaising with DSA assessors

Typically, academic departments have an academic member of staff who would take on the role of welfare tutor, taking responsibility for the liaison between the DS service and the other members of staff in a department.

A small number of the participants in the study were studying at much smaller, specialist institutions which did not have a dedicated DS office. Instead they were referred to an individual member of staff who had responsibility for any adjustments that they may require.

This section explores the relationship which the participants had with the DS service at their institutions by considering:

- the initial contact they had with the DS service
- how well they felt the disability support officers within the office were able to understand their visual impairment
- the process of drawing up support agreements
- the support structures coordinated by the DS service
- how well they felt the DSO was able to advocate on their behalf

6.2 Making contact with disabled support service

6.2.1 Participants who transitioned into higher education

Of the 38 participants who applied to go into HE, 4 decided not to go into HE, whilst another decided to take a gap year and had not started HE by the time of this report. One participant decided to withdraw from their studies very early in their first semester for reasons not related to their visual impairment. This remainder of this report therefore is based on the reported experience of 32 participants.

6.2.2 Initial contact with disability support service

The participants were asked how they first made contact with the DS service, or the person who was responsible for coordinating the support at their institution. A wide range of responses were given.

Some of the participants contacted their DS service very early on during the application process.

“I think it must have been, UCAS had to be in by October, so I accepted my offer in December, so it must have been January or February, around when I started doing my student finance application.”

Others met the DS office at open days and used this informal meeting as an opportunity to discuss the support available at the institution:

“At first, it started off when I went to an open day first. It was one of the open days, and the course I wanted to do, I spoke to the programme leader, and from there, he just found out about my disability, and from there he just told us who to contact. So initially just through an open day.”

These meetings at open days were also a catalyst for continued dialogue between the student and the DS office.

The DS services were also proactive themselves in sending communication to the students once they had been made aware of them via the information provided on the UCAS application, and arranged to meet with the students either in advance of starting, or shortly after

starting in HE. In some cases they sent out questionnaires to the students to investigate their support needs further:

“Yeah. Basically on my application I ticked the box to say you know, I require a certain amount of disability support and I think once they got my application, they then passed my details onto the disability office, and then they got in touch with me from there, and I had a meeting on the city campus in [institution], and kind of assessed all the needs and all the things that I will need to get me through my course really.”

“When I applied, they sent me a questionnaire and said what would I need.”

A few of the participants described how the communication they received was linked to either them accepting a place on the course, or receiving a firm offer once they had their A-level results.

“They didn’t sort of make contact until I had secured my offer, that’s when I started to arrange, in August, to come a week early in September to get mobility training and stuff. But apart from that, I think lots of visually impaired people have more contact with their universities beforehand. I didn’t, I don’t actually know why, I didn’t need to, there was no need, because they... the contact that I had was necessary and valuable.”

Two participants spoke of being invited to induction events run by the disability support (DS) office, to learn more about the services that the DS office offered:

“They emailed me, yeah they emailed me saying that they were having a meeting where everybody that was going to university with a disability would be meeting, and they would have a talk on how everything they would go about things over the year when we would join, which was good, because the first time obviously I had been there, yeah it was good, because it told you how the process would work, and how they go about organising things, and making sure everything is in place really.”

Some of the lecturers and DSOs interviewed as part of the case study work spoke of their reluctance to work with students prior to them receiving their firm offer (i.e. after having their grades and place

confirmed on the course) due to the volume of work that it can involve. Whilst this student did not feel that he had required such early dialogue with the institution other students found it to be of value, or had problems because they had not had such discussions in advance.

Two of the participants who received invitations to meet with a DSO declined to do so. Others met with them at the start of the year, but did not have much communication after this. Of note, one of the participants who did not contact the DS office or apply for DSA had difficulties in the final year of his course in keeping pace with the amount of reading that was required for his course, and attributed this to his visual impairment. Whilst speculative, it is possible that if he had engaged with the DS office and/or DSA, ways would have been found to overcome these difficulties.

Finally, one participant reports not having received any communication from the DS office prior to starting, despite having declared her visual impairment beforehand. Instead she was directed to the DS office by another member of staff after they discovered she was having difficulties in getting around the campus independently.

6.3 Disability support officers understanding of visual impairment

In the summer 2015 interviews, the participants were asked to evaluate how well they felt the disability support officers understood visual impairment, and their support needs in general. The responses given were very mixed:

6.3.1 Good understanding of visual impairment and support needs

Ten of the participants spoke positively of the DS service's ability to understand their visual impairment and their general support needs. Five of these participants are registered blind/SSI and five partially sighted/SI, so the response does not appear to be linked to severity of visual impairment.

- One participant highlighted the fact that his DSO had a visual impairment themselves, which he felt aided their understanding
- One participant felt the DSO had benefited from having worked with students with visual impairment previously
- One participant benefited from the fact his DSO had studied a similar course, so therefore had a good understanding of the course content

- One participant felt that the DSO had a better understanding of visual impairment and the available technology than other institutions they investigated (but no information was given on how the DSO had gained this knowledge)

“They were just brilliant. I remember, I went on the open day, and firstly, you know the UCAS fayre they do? They were the only uni to give me a braille brochure for the uni, and then when I got there they were asking straight away ‘ok, do you use Jaws, do you use this, do you use that? I was like ‘they seem to know what they are on about, I like this’.”

6.3.2 Poor understanding of visual impairment and support needs

In contrast, six of the participants spoke negatively about the DSOs understanding of their support needs. Three of these participants are registered blind, and three partially sighted.

Notably, two of these participants had support needs beyond simply their visual impairment, and in their analysis of their interaction with their DSO concluded that the DSO were unable to deal with the complexity of their support needs:

“Well they knew, they had the information, they everything they needed explaining what my condition was about, but I don’t know if they took it on board properly.”

The same participant also felt that whilst the DS office were able to deal with issues specific to learning, they were unable to facilitate their needs beyond the course:

“I think in terms of accessing the course, yes they did, but in broader things, they didn’t – accommodation, sort of being aware of different things. Certain individuals did, but as a sort of body I don’t think so.”

Two participants had positive experiences at first, but as time progressed and they started having difficulties, these were not resolved:

“That’s a difficult question, because on first impressions when I went there on the open day the person I met in the disability office had a visual impairment, and seemed to completely understand everything that I would need. And it gave me a lot of confidence in

the fact that they knew what they were doing, and that they would know what I need even if I didn't necessarily in the beginning. But then when I got there, the experience which I had made me feel a lot different."

"Initially, really well because they obviously had a VI person on staff and I dealt with him, so that was quite good. My actual support officer really hasn't got a clue, and to be honest, until I called them today to ask about spending areas [for the guide dog], I don't think I have dealt with them since maybe the October of my first year."

In both cases they have made the decision to by-pass the DS office, and take responsibility in advocating for themselves to their respective departments:

"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. So I don't really think that without me driving it, they weren't very, they didn't seem very knowledgeable in catering for a visual impaired person at all"

Finally, two participants described how they felt their DSOs did not understand that there are a range of visual impairments, thus requiring different adjustments:

"Terribly. Terribly. I think the reason why they had so much trouble providing things for me is because they didn't understand my visual impairment in the first place. I am in that blurry bit of disability in terms of, it's a very difficult, for some people to understand, visual impairment in terms of you can either see or you can't. They don't understand that there is a spectrum. Now for me because I am not completely blind, obviously they will think 'oh, she can see, that means that means that we don't have to do as much as for a blind person'."

It is of particular note that these six participants are amongst those who have had the most challenging transitions into HE. Two of the participants have retaken the first year, one has had to re-take several modules, one dropped out after concluding that the institution could not

meet their needs, and one nearly withdrew from the institution due to the stress that they were experiencing. Whilst these findings are based on relatively small sample sizes, the richness of the qualitative data collected gives evidence of the importance of DSOs being able to understand vision impairment, to be able to sufficiently advocate on their behalf to the students department.

6.4 Support agreements

One of the primary things a DSO does when working with a student is to draw up a support plan. This support plan will list the reasonable adjustments which the institution intends to make in order to help ensure that a student is able to access their course, as well as life in general in HE. These reasonable adjustments might include things like:

- Special exam arrangements
- Permission to record lectures
- Modified learning material
- Books in an accessible format
- Extended library loans

We asked the participants to talk about their experiences of working with the DSO in developing a support agreement. Several interesting themes emerged as a result of these discussions, and these are presented below:

6.4.1 Developing support plans

Timing of the support plan meetings

Several of the participants described how they met with the DSO at the start of the year to develop a support plan.

“Yeah, I went for a meeting at the beginning of the year, and sort of talked to them about my needs, etc. I didn’t really have any sort of particular requests or anything, or any specific, anything I particularly needed, that was sort of the extent of my contact with them.”

However, some participants with more severe visual impairments met with the DSO in advance of the start of term to allow more time to develop these plans:

“I came a week earlier just to sort out everything before Freshers week, sort everything out in terms of my support, tell them what I needed and what I didn’t need. Then the number of times I kind of paid them a visit really decreased throughout the year, because by that point I didn’t need to meet up with the head of disability. I knew who to contact if I needed help, and that was it.”

Experience of support plan meeting

The participants also spoke of their experience of the meeting with the DS service to develop their support plan. Many described it as a discussion between them and the DSO, as they talked through the support that was available to them, and made appropriate decisions:

“Yeah, so I went, I went to the [DS office] in my university, I went along and we just talked about support and that kind of thing, and that’s when this was discussed, and we wrote this support. So kind of, we went through it, and then he wrote it fully. There was a couple of emails, a couple of amendments, but it was fine.”

Five of the participants described how they were given a choice by the DS service about the support that they would or would not like to receive, including accepting their desire to be discrete about the support:

“They didn’t really single me out, because I don’t know, I didn’t really want to be singled out, or given any very special treatment, I kind of just wanted to blend in and just get on with it really. Because at the end of the day it’s going to cause a lot more fuss than it really should have. So I kind of... if I needed help I would ask for it really.”

On a more negative note, one participant described her frustration that his department and DSO met to re-develop his support plan after he experienced problems on the course, but without including him in the meeting.

Participant: “They had meetings which they invited me to that I couldn’t attend, and they said that they would reschedule them, but then they had them anyway to discuss my needs, and things like that.” Researcher: “Without you there?” Participant: “Yeah. They tried to solve problems without me being there.”

Students knowledge of the support plans

Eight of the participants indicated that despite having worked with the DSO to develop a support plan, they were not sure of what the content of these were. Some of these participants had quite severe visual impairments (including three who are registered blind), and therefore we would have expected there to be fairly extensive content to their support plans:

Researcher: “Did you draw up a support agreement or anything like that... I am not sure what you refer to it as at your university?”

Participant: “Yeah I think we did.” Researcher: “So do you recall what the content of that was?” Participant: “No.”

Researcher: “Do you know what was on that?” Participant: “No, I can’t remember, I should probably know these things!”

It is interesting also to note that two of the six participants who struggled in accessing the first year of their courses report not knowing the content of their support plans. In one case the participant had to repeat the year, and in the other, at the time of interview, the participant was preparing to submit coursework after lengthy extensions, and also retaking some exams.

6.4.2 Types of support

Of the 32 participants who went into HE, 29 developed support plans with their DSO (or a member of staff who took on this role, as in the case of smaller specialist institutions). We had the opportunity to ask 27 of the participants for more details about the support plans they developed, including asking them to provide further details of the types of support that were listed within these plans. The responses given are presented in the table below. As the participants were simply listing the support that they could recall, rather than giving responses according to a pre-prepared list, it is inevitable some of the support listed in their support plans will have been missed. Particularly because, as identified above, several of the participants were unable able to remember what was included in their support plans.

Table 24: Examples of support detailed in student support plan

	Total (N)
Exam facilitation	8
Modified lecture material	7
Note-taker support	6

Mobility support/coordination of mobility support	6
Transcription of textbooks and other learning material	4
Library support	2
Extended library loans	2
Lecture notes in advance	1
Coordinating arrangements for placement year/year abroad	1
Adjustments to accommodation	1

Exam facilitation

When asked to discuss their support plans, the most frequently mentioned aspect of support by the participants were exam arrangements. As will be discussed in the next section, many of the participants were able to access the learning material of the course without any adjustments by the institution as the course material was made available in advance of lectures to all students, in an electronic format. Therefore for many students, the priority was simply ensuring that the necessary adjustments were put in place to enable them to access their exams. Examples of adjustments include: extra time, modified papers (enlarged, electronic, braille), rest breaks, reader and/or scribe.

“I explained to the disability office what I needed, and they would talk to the exam department, examinations, they would explain what I needed, and usually it was all provided for me.”

The reality of how well these arrangements were coordinated is discussed further in Section 8.

Modified lecture material

Seven participants reported that it was agreed in their support plans that they would receive modified lecture material. Modifications included:

- Paper copies/enlarged copies of lecture slides being provided
- Lecture slides being converted into accessible formats (e.g. braille, or formatted correctly for use with a screen reader)

“Basically they are in contact with all my lecturers, and they say ‘can you give us some materials’, and they hopefully get the materials sent to them, and they will put it in an accessible format for me, and if I need something doing I take it over to their buildings, and say ‘hey, can you do this for me’.”

Note-taker support

Six participants said they were to receive note-taker support. Whilst in most cases this was funded by DSA, the DSO had responsibility for arranging this with external agencies, and also in two cases, in arranging for subject-specialist note-taker support:

Mobility

Six participants had mobility support documented in their student support plan. In four cases they received basic orientation support around campus, whilst in other cases despite having DSA funding for mobility support, they also needed sighted guide support whilst they learned the new routes they would be using.

Other support

- Four participants were allocated transcription support for converting additional learning materials such as textbooks into an accessible format.
- Two participants were allocated library support to help them in finding books in the library
- Two participants were given extended loans for library books
- For one participant it was agreed that lecture notes would be emailed to them in advance of the lecture
- One participant had support in coordinating specialist arrangements for their placement year abroad
- One participant had assistance from the DSO in arranging adaptations to their room

6.5 Participants' understanding of reasonable adjustments

Central to the support which disabled students receive in HE is the Equality Act 2010, which requires that education providers make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled students to ensure that they are not at a disadvantage in comparison to their non-disabled peers. Such reasonable adjustments apply to:

- The admissions process
- The course delivery
- The examination process

In the summer 2015 interviews the participants were asked some specific questions about reasonable adjustments, including:

- Whether they were a concept familiar to them
- What they felt were appropriate reasonable adjustments for them as a student with a visual impairment
- If they believed their university/institution had met these reasonable adjustments

6.5.1 Equality Act 2010 and Reasonable Adjustments

The Equality and Human Rights Commission provides an overview of the Equality Act and explains what this means for disabled students, and what reasonable adjustments they can expect a provider to make. They state:

If you are disabled, your further or higher education institution:

- Must not treat you unfavourably because of something connected to your disability where they cannot show that what they are doing is objectively justified.
- Must make reasonable adjustments to ensure that you can use the education and other benefits, facilities and services provided as far as is reasonable to the same standard as non-disabled students.

(Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2012 p6)

One important aspect to note in the reasonable adjustments which the Equality and Human Rights Commission highlight is the requirement to make anticipatory adjustments for a student's disability:

“If you are a disabled student, the duty requires further and higher education institutions to take positive steps to ensure that you and disabled students generally can fully participate in the education and other benefits, facilities and services provided for students. This includes taking advance action where it is reasonable to anticipate disabled students' requirements so that it is then not difficult or too late to make adjustments when disabled students ask for them.”

(Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2012 p14)

As will be explored in the remaining sections, many of the students reported experiences during their time in higher education situations where these anticipatory adjustments were not made.

The guide also provides an outline of what reasonable adjustments apply to:

Further and higher education institutions are required to take reasonable steps to:

- Avoid substantial disadvantage where a provision, criterion or practice puts you at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with non-disabled students
- Avoid substantial disadvantage where a physical feature of the building or premises puts you at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with non-disabled students; this includes removing the physical feature in question, altering it or providing a reasonable means of avoiding it
- Provide an auxiliary aid where, without one, you would be put at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with non-disabled students

(Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2012 p15)

The guide particularly highlights the need to ensure that information is provided in an accessible format. It also emphasises that any costs associated with making reasonable adjustments such be met by the provider and not passed onto the student.

One challenge the HE providers is the interpretation of what exactly reasonable adjustments should be – and this is particularly true when working along students with severe visual impairments. For further information, Equality and Human Rights Commission (2012) provide guidance on this matter.

We explore the interpretation of reasonable adjustments later in the report, as we examine the participants' responses to what they consider to be the reasonable adjustments that a university/HE provider should be making for them.

Disability Rights UK (Disability Rights UK, 2015) distinguish between 'General Adjustments', 'General Access Adjustments' and 'Impairment-specific adjustments'. These are described further below.

6.5.2 General Adjustments

General adjustments covers the main adjustments the institution should be making, such as ensuring that all documentation is in an accessible format; ensuring the student can access all college and campus facilities; allowing extra time for the student to complete coursework where required; and making support available for accessing the library.

6.5.3 General Access Adjustments

General access adjustments relate to adjustments needed for accessing exams, such as extra time, exam papers in a preferred format, reader/scribe assistance and the use of specialist equipment to complete the exam.

6.5.4 Impairment-specific Adjustments

In the case of students with vision impairment, impairment-specific adjustments would include mobility support, the use of assistive technology, adaptations to accommodation, and assistance for practical sessions/fieldwork.

When determining the support that a student should receive, the DS office should act in accordance to the Equality Act. All of the institutions that we worked with as part of the case study work have their own guidance documents which they have written for staff to describe what 'Reasonable Adjustments' they should be making.

6.5.5 Knowledge of the Equality Act

Table 25: Is reasonable adjustments a concept which is familiar to you?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	15	75%
No	5	25%
Total	20	100%

Fifteen of the participants were aware of the Equality Act and the requirement for educational institutions to make reasonable adjustments, whilst five were unaware.

“Yeah. Because when I complained to the [institution] that is the exact bit of the Equality Act which I complained with, because that’s what I didn’t get, and that’s why I won my complaint, because there was no evidence to suggest that they had made any reasonable adjustments.”

“No, it wasn’t, I didn’t know that it was in law – that’s interesting.”

One participant gave her own succinct definition of reasonable adjustments:

“I think it’s just adjustments which are reasonable that they wouldn’t give you an advantage over other people, they would just correct the disadvantage that you had. So things like extra time. Or if you needed it a note-taker, or Dictaphone, whatever you might need.”

6.5.6 What the participants would consider to be reasonable adjustments

Table 26: What would you consider to be appropriate reasonable adjustments for you as a student with a visual impairment?

	Total (N)
Accessible course materials	10
Exam adjustments	5
Accessible textbooks and other learning materials	5
Accessible virtual learning environment	4
Lecture notes in advance	2
Orientation	1
Accessible campus/HE institution buildings	1
Extra time to access information	1
Learning support	1
Text descriptions for diagrams	1
Positive attitudes from lectures	1
Transparent systems	1

The table above provides a summary of the responses given by the participants when asked what they would consider to be the reasonable adjustments which should be met in their own specific case. As with the examples of type of support being received, no list or prompts were provided, and therefore the responses are likely to be an indication of the main points that they would prioritise, or in relation to some specific problems that they encountered (as illustrated in some of their additional comments).

Accessible course materials

The most common reasonable adjustment suggested was access to accessible course material:

“Providing the material in Word, at least PDF that isn’t just a picture PDF, like a text PDF. Just making, because so much of what is done is done electronically now, and I think the main thing they can do is making their best effort to make that as accessible as possible. Because if you can’t access that, you are at a real disadvantage in so many ways”

Similarly another participant spoke of wanting equality with the others on the course:

“Just make everything accessible, and give you the same as everyone else”

A further participant spoke of their frustration at not always having accessible course materials:

“Just things like making sure that I have access to the documents on my computer. Things like when there is a seminar, making sure that I have access to the poem, or whatever, so I can actually discuss it, because there have been times when I haven’t had access and I have just sat there and got on Twitter because there was nothing else to do... it makes me absolutely mad. It’s little things like that.”

Exam adjustments

As has previously been discussed, the participants emphasised the need for appropriate adjustments for their exams:

“For me, it was more my exams, making sure my exam needs were met, because everything else I was able and happy to do on my own, it’s just exams were the one thing which I relied on the uni to do.”

Accessible textbooks and other learning materials

In addition to requiring accessible lecture material, five of the participants also stated that they would want to have accessible textbooks and reading material. One participant emphasised the importance of ensuring that they had at least a suitable alternative text:

“At the end of the day if it’s not an English book, you are not covered by English copyright. So either they should have to use an English book, or otherwise every lecture should have an alternative text which cover the same points”

Accessible virtual learning environments

Four participants highlighted the need for accessible virtual learning environments (VLE), having had problems in accessing their own institutions VLEs.

“...not being able to access my results, just stuff like that. And I had an issue with picking my modules for next year, because the module selection process wasn’t accessible, so I had a delay in being able to do it because I needed sighted assistance to be able to do it. Because of that delay I wasn’t able to pick the modules that I wanted to do, it said that they were full up.”

Lecture notes in advance

Two participants wanted advanced access to lecture material, to enable them to be prepared for the lecture:

“...having things put onto the intranet 24 hours before, like PowerPoints, things like that.”

Other reasonable adjustments

Some other reasonable adjustments suggested, included:

- Orientation around buildings
- Accessible campus/HE institution buildings (e.g. rooms labelled in braille)
- Learning support
- Text descriptions for diagrams (suggested by a braille user)
- Willingness from lecturers to make accommodations
- Transparent systems (e.g. for making extension requests)

What is particularly striking is that in the majority of these cases, the young people were referring to reasonable adjustments which could be made by the institution to enable them to work independently, rather than adjustments which would mean additional personal support. This emphasises the importance that the young people place on being facilitated to work as independently as possible.

Additional comments

Two of the participants made some additional comments which are worthy of note. Firstly one participant emphasised how important it is to look at reasonable adjustments on an individual level:

“I don’t think you can say you need to do a, b and c, because each person is an individual. Reasonable adjustment really is ‘what does that individual need’”

Finally, another participant described how reasonable adjustments also relied on him having skills in place:

Researcher: “So in terms of you and your personal learning needs, what would you consider to be reasonable adjustments?”

Participant: “Very little, and that’s the point, which is that I tend to adapt to whatever I am given, because I have been taught to do that. Things that have needed to be adapted like different teaching styles and what have you have always been implemented on time and have been very welcome and effective.”

6.5.7 How well have the institutions made these reasonable adjustments?

Finally, some of the young people discussed how well they felt their various institutions had met the legal requirements to make reasonable adjustments. The responses were very mixed – eight participants felt that their institutions had made these reasonable adjustments and were satisfied, whilst seven did not.

Table 27: Did your institution meet the requirement of the Equality Act in terms of ‘reasonable adjustments’? By registration type

	Blind	Partially sighted	Not registered	Total
Yes	3	3	2	8
No	3	3	1	7
Total	6	6	3	15

The table above breaks down the participants responses by registration type. There does not appear to be any link between the response and the student’s level of visual impairment.

Some of the participants who indicated that the institution made the reasonable adjustments spoke extremely positively about this:

“Outstandingly well, very, very well. I am very impressed. I didn’t really expect my experience to have been as smooth as it has been.”

Researcher: “How well do you think the university has met the requirements of the Equality Act?” Participant: “100%.”

As previously stated, one participant who believed their institution had not met the requirements of the Equality Act used this as justification for getting their course fees refunded. Other participants spoke of ongoing difficulties that they were having with the institution in relation to reasonable adjustments, such as one participant who had difficulties in accessing the institution's virtual learning environment:

“They don't care. I complained about Blackboard, and they don't care. That's something that they really don't care about”

A further participant described how she was concerned about ongoing issues that she was having in getting accessible copies of learning material (such as textbooks and journal articles), and how that would impact upon her dissertation:

“...at the moment they don't know who is going to be doing that, if anyone next year. And this is my third and final year, I have got my dissertation to do, so I am quite worried about that because if there is no one doing it then how is it going to happen?”

Finally one participant who felt that their institution was not making the required reasonable adjustments highlighted how complex a matter it can be, as they felt that reasonable adjustments are down to individual interpretation:

“In practice, probably not all that well, on paper, fairly good. I think the thing is, it's the problem with the Equality Act in general isn't it, reasonable adjustments is a bit of a loose term, and is very subjective. So they have probably done everything that they possibly could to do what they think is a reasonable adjustment.”

6.6 Role of Disability Support Officers

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the DSO, interviews were conducted with six disability support officers as part of the case study work. Each of the disability officers had been responsible for helping support one of the case study participants into HE.

6.6.1 Overview of roles of disability support officers

The six interviewees were asked to describe their role within the DSO. Their responses are grouped into three categories, as presented below.

Provide advice

Firstly, the DSO representatives said they would provide specific advice. In particular they would give important advice to the students as they were making the transition into HE. This included advice on matters such as:

- The importance of applying for DSA
- To gather together evidence of their disability
- Information on the type of support available
- Use of assistive technology

One of the DSOs also spoke of how they would act as an advisor to the student's department, particularly in terms of thinking about tailoring the course to that individual:

“We have explained to the School how group discussion should be managed with her not being able to receive body language and all the complication. We have talked about timetabling and trying to prevent [student] wander around too much around the university. Talked about all the assistive technology, JAWS etc, dragon. She's able to record lectures if she wants to.”

Work with disabled students

Secondly, the DSO representatives described how they would work alongside the students, both in terms of their transition into HE, and also in assisting with any challenges that they might face during their time there. This would include:

- Making contact with the student
- Working with the student to develop support plans
- Coordinating support
- Helping the student to navigate the transition

One DSO highlighted the importance of starting working with the students in plenty of time:

“We do a lot of pushing to get them to engage with us, well in time. The ones that don't actually respond and engage with us until the end of August, when the results come out, are the ones we really, really struggle to support, because it doesn't give us another time, particularly with visually impaired students.”

Act as advocates

Thirdly, they would act as advocates for the student, including:

- Working with the department to establish support plans and resolve problems
- Helping members of staff understand a student's disability
- Speaking with accommodation services about the student's support needs, and where necessary reassuring them of the student's abilities

“...so basically our role is to bridge the gap really between the student and the university lecturers”

6.6.2 Partnership between the DSO and the Student's Department

The DSOs described how in the case of students who require higher levels of support such as students with a visual impairment or a hearing impairment they would prefer to work closely with the student's department in determining the support that a student might need, and in putting it into place.

“In April we met with the School, because that's one other thing we always try and do with the students who are likely to have a high level of need, we meet together with the school, so it will be the admissions tutor, the welfare tutor, people who will be very much involved in working with her. Simply because we know exactly, well not exactly, but we can work with students to determine what they need, getting that in place is another matter, another matter entirely. Sometimes due to wrong attitudes, sometimes due to other issues outside of their control.”

One DSO described how this would be particularly important if it were a quite specialised course, so that they could understand its specific demands:

“We would probably have worked with the department as to what they felt the course involved. Because [...] it is slightly different to a lot of courses that we study here. So we would have worked together with the department, as to what they felt he may need to use as well. So it would have been a combined effort really.”

Another DSO supporting a student with a severe visual impairment who was taking a very practical course described the value of working

alongside the department and helping them think about how they could make the course more accessible:

“So it’s just getting people to think in a different way. So for example, [...] I told this tutor about [a piece of technology] that completely turned him around [...] the enthusiasm was just amazing. It’s changing people’s ideas [...] getting people to think about teaching differently was a big thing, but they were really, really up for it.”

In the case of students with less severe visual impairments who could access their courses with basic reasonable adjustments, the DSO would not necessarily meet with the student’s department. Instead a copy of the student’s support agreement would be sent to a person within the department who has responsibility for the coordination of support for students with disabilities. (This role is given various names by different institutions such as ‘link tutor’, ‘welfare tutor’ or ‘disability rep’). In turn they would disseminate this information to all staff who would be working with that student, to ensure that they are aware of any reasonable adjustments which need to be met:

“So with approval we would then finalise the student’s support agreement. The student and the advisor would sign to say that it has been finalised and it can be distributed. It is then sent off centrally to the faculty with a note saying these are the people who should be given a copy of this report to read. Then that’s sent out to those electronically for them to read. It’s double checked by the faculty disability coordinator, who is an academic within the faculty who has responsibility. And then hopefully all the recommendations are implemented. Or if they are queried, we deal with the queries at this end, and as I said before and put them right in no uncertain terms and hopefully in a timely fashion for the students as well.”

The importance of the disability link was highlighted by another DSO:

“The departments, they do all work slightly differently, and so, obviously when sending out the information to them, we encourage them to make sure that the tutors are aware of things. Some department systems are more efficient than others, and we are aware of that. But it’s really important that we keep linking with the link tutors.”

Three of the DSO also spoke of how they like to work collaboratively with both the student and their department, to ensure that the student was at the centre of discussions. However, one DSO also described how some departments can be resistant to this:

“Having us all there together, which again we always try to do... some of the schools would rather not have the student there, we just don’t adhere that at all [...] because the student is the best person to know what they want, so...”

6.6.3 What services are provided?

We asked the disability support officers to discuss the broader range of services that are available for disabled students in their institution, or for academics and support staff who are working alongside disabled students. In most cases these services would be delivered through the DSO themselves, but there were examples of support being provided in other areas of the institution.

Services for students

When asked what support they provide for students with visual impairment, one DSO responded:

“That’s an ‘as long as it’s broad’ sort of question. We take our lead from the students. We treat every student as an individual. We tend to look not at their impairment, but at themselves, and the support that they need, and they tell us they need.”

This principle was echoed by other DSO, although they did list some specific examples of support that they might provide, including:

- Providing training in the use of assistive technology (either through an in-house trainer, or by commissioning someone external)
- Working with an outside agency to provide non-medical support
- Providing orientation around the institution
- Arranging specialist mobility and orientation as part of DSA
- Providing an induction programme to aid the transition
- Outsourcing work, e.g. production of braille exam papers
- In house transcription service
- Assistive technology room
- Academic skills training
- Voluntary mentoring scheme to help disabled students socially

As could be anticipated there appears to be an association between the size of the institution, and the services which they are able to offer:

“Yeah, we don’t have any in house services for visual impairment, but what we do is, if we have a student like [participant] that we are talking about, that we know will need specific support or adapted coursework or that type of thing, examinations, braille, that type of thing, then we would outsource the work to an outside agency on behalf of the student. Some universities I think do the braille in house, unfortunately we haven’t got the resources for that.”

DSO working with the wider institution

The disability support officers also described certain services which they offered across the wider institution. These include:

- Training workshops for staff, and in particular for disability representatives within departments
- Information on reasonable adjustments and specific disabilities on intranet
- Work with accommodation services to address any issues relating to a student’s disability

6.7 The transition experience of VI students into Higher Education: the perspective of Disability Support Officers

We asked the DSO officers to discuss the reality of the transition experience of students with visual impairments moving into HE, and how well in practice the support and adjustments that are put into place work. These responses are presented below:

6.7.1 Importance of student declaration and early preparation

All six disability support officers spoke of the importance of early preparation working with the student, and in the case of more severe visual impairments, with the department. Linked to this is the importance of students declaring their visual impairment to the institution, as this enables the DSO to identify them.

“For the disability team, the bulk of our work will happen pre-admission, where we can. Obviously if students don’t declare for one reason, we can’t work with them until they do, but we contact

students as soon as we know that they have chosen [institution] as their first, or insurance choice.”

We note that since the academic year 2010/11 UCAS changed the categories for students with disabilities from “blind/partially sighted” to “blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses”. This raises concern that some students with visual impairment will not declare their disability, as they would not consider themselves to have a serious impairment. We became aware of this change in definition after there were some concerns in the drop of students in HE who identified themselves as having a visual impairment. In 2008/09 this figure was 1,230, but by 2013/14 after this new definition had been introduced, this figure had dropped to 795 (HESA, 2015)

Another DSO highlighted difficulties with students turning up having not previously declared their disability, and expecting support to be in place.

“Yeah, I mean it’s difficult for us, because it is our priority, and clearly what we find isn’t student’s priority when they are applying here. Why wouldn’t you think that you just turn up and somebody will support you? And you know, sometimes we get that, sometimes we do enrolment and turn up people who have quite a lot of needs, who just turn up and on the enrolment tell us that they have got lots and lots of needs, and they expect a support package to be put in instantly, and that creates all sorts of problems when that happens. We deal with it, but it’s something unnecessary really.”

6.7.2 Students as independent learners

Another consistent theme from the DSO was the importance of the students being able to work as independent learners, and having the skills to be able to take responsibility for self-advocating. Without these skills in place, the DSO would firstly have some difficulties in knowing what support to put in place, and secondly would not know when the student was facing difficulties.

“And what we do say to all students, you are an adult now, you have left home, you have come to university, we are going to treat you as an adult... we do expect you to tell us when there is a problem... so we are not going to grill them to the point that...”

One DSO explained how as he had had limited communication with the case study participant, he assumed that she was progressing well with her life in HE. However, in reality this student had experienced a number of issues in accessing the course. Following this interview the student was encouraged by the researcher to make contact with the DS office in the light of these discussions:

“Her last contact with us was, her last direct contact with the centre was just checking out her learning support agreement, to see where she was up to with her exams, so that would have been last January. So she hasn’t come back to us in that time. So what that indicates to me, it may be completely wrong, is somebody who struggled a little bit when they got here, but has eventually settled themselves in, and is now coping very well.”

6.7.3 Students having necessary skills in place

Five of the disability support officers discussed the importance of the students having necessary skills in place prior to coming to HE. These are consistent with the additional core curriculum, such as independent living skills, self-advocacy skills and skills for accessing information independently. Having had the opportunity to live independently was highlighted by several as a key area:

“I think what I would say, the most important thing, is to try and find some opportunities to live independently beforehand. Because it’s largely about... if you have come through the education system, you will already be aware of all the assistive technology and all the accessibility issues, but it’s really just awareness I think, is the biggest thing, being aware of how different it is, being aware of what it’s like, not to have somebody to call out to in the middle of the night if you need somebody, not to have friends that, you know, all around you, that know you really well... to be with strangers... it’s really awareness about what it is to live independently, that’s the biggest thing.”

6.7.4 Challenges faced

Several challenges were identified by the DSO, both in terms of working with the students, and working with other staff across the institution.

Challenges: students

A first challenge identified was students not responding to contact made by the DS service in advance of them starting in HE. This would put pressure on the DS services in putting support plans into place:

“I mean we have a lot of students who don’t respond to our contacts, we have a system where we contact them three time [...] The ones that don’t actually respond and engage with us until the end of August, when the results come out, are the ones we really, really struggle to support, because it doesn’t give us enough time, particularly with visually impaired students.”

A further challenge is the student’s attitude and approach towards independence and responsibility. For example, one DSO described the challenge of working with students who are still very reliant on support from their families.

“The law describes them as being adults, but really they are still heavily dependent on the family networks that they have got, they get used to the support that they have at home, and making the transition into independence is difficult. But it’s something that all students have to work through, so it isn’t any different in a sense to a non-disabled student. However, the volume is turned up for disabled students, so they often struggle with things like cooking for the first time, for example, or shopping, or all of the sort of, the things that we just take for granted really.”

Another officer described how he previously worked with a student who was very aggressive in her expectations, which proved a barrier in itself:

“She just walks around threatening litigation every opportunity that she has. There’s absolutely no need for it, and she knows that there is absolutely no need for it, but it’s so entrenched in her behaviour that she finds it very difficult to get beyond that.”

Another challenge identified was helping the student understand what life in HE is really like, and the difficulty of finding the balance of making them realise that it will be very different to school or college, without making it appear too intimidating a prospect:

“And you know, it’s really hard to get a balance when you are advising students pre-admission, you don’t want to put them off...

of course you want them to come... what I would say to them though, whether you decided to come, you may decide to come here, you may decide to go somewhere else... wherever you go, you are going to have these problems. And it's trying to get them aware of that, but every student, it doesn't matter how carefully you prepare them... but also with accessing the course material, it's major, and you know, it's really hard to get a balance when you are advising students pre-admission, you don't want to put them off, of course you want them to come..."

One of the disability support officers described how one student that she worked with was not prepared for the social aspect of HE:

"We did have one student with a visual impairment, but it was partly academic, but he didn't cope very well, and I think it was more of a social skills that seemed to cause the main difficulty. I think it was more expectations as well. He thought university perhaps would provide socially, which again, students do come to university and they are expected to live independently, obviously unless they bring in a care package as well."

Whilst she felt that the case study participant she was working with was dealing well with the social challenges, three of the other DSOs did highlight this as a particular concern when it came to the student they were supporting:

"[Participant] felt sort of quite isolated if she tried to, she was trying to get to meet people in the living space, you know, and they weren't really sort of, you know, saying hello – how's things. And she felt quite uncomfortable about that, and quite upset about that, and I totally understood that"

Finally, one DSO emphasised how despite the adjustments and support they put in place, there will always be additional demands on students with visual impairments:

"It is difficult when you are visually impaired, blind, it's not as easy as using the internet. You will have to put in more time, because we can put in adjustments, we can put in technology, but you know, there's all that additional effort that is required, unfortunately. You can't take that away."

Challenges: staff

Two of the DSOs identified challenges they face when the departments do not meet the terms of the student support agreement, particularly as they have limited power to enforce them:

“The problem we are having now is the School just haven’t done what they need to do, and this is always the frustration, always, always the frustration. Just to sort of help you understand it, we have no jurisdiction with the School. We do have the capacity to go higher, so we can go to our Director of Service and we can... which we constantly do, we reiterate the same problems, the same issues, with the wider issue. They then have got to try and influence other directors... it’s so difficult”

Another DSO described having similar challenges, but there appeared to be less tolerance to this within their institution:

“I have to say, she works in an area where some of the academics are resistant, for want of a better word, to supporting disabled students, however we don’t tolerate that, we just make sure that their managers know that they are resistant, and what is likely to happen if they carry on doing that. So we used carrots for students and sticks for academics, is probably the best way of looking at it in that case.”

As described earlier, it is the responsibility of disability tutors within the department to ensure that all staff working with a student with a disability are aware of any adjustments that they may need to make. Two of the interviewees highlighted problems in some subjects where they have a lot of lecturers, and in particular visiting lecturers:

“Whereas, coming here, with the best will in the world, because she’s not just seeing, three or four different teachers, she is seeing loads of different lecturers, there will be visiting lecturers coming in... we send the SSA [Student Support Agreement] to the Schools, it’s their responsibility to make sure that everybody is aware. There are so many staff, it’s such a big place.”

Attitudes of staff was another common theme – both in terms of their willingness to make reasonable adjustments, and also in terms of their confidence in doing so:

“Having said that, she’s actually been told by some lecturers [...] ‘well, if you can’t do this, you can’t do the course’, so those sort of attitudes are a bit worrying”

Similarly one DSO described how she had difficulties in explaining to staff that the student they were working with would be able to work and live independently. For example, they had to work with staff in the library and also staff within accommodation services to discuss some concerns that they had prior to getting to know the student:

“...there have been issues in the library. [Participant] hasn’t been aware of issues in the library, but the staff were... they weren’t sure how to deal with a blind student who is as independent as [participant] is. They were kind of used to people coming in with a support worker with them, and for some reason that makes people feel more comfortable when dealing with a disability.”

“I think the difficult thing was getting accommodation to understand that he could live independently. At one point, they really wanted him to have a carer, because it was like ‘how is he going to Hoover and clean up’.”

Broader challenges

Finally, some wider challenges were identified from across the institution and beyond (in addition to the challenges faced with regards to DSA, as discussed in the previous section).

One DSO identified resource challenges that they faced. Such challenges included lack of staff to advise on assistive technology and a lack of time for academics to meet with the DSO.

“And again, a lot of it isn’t down to a lack of willingness to do, it’s more down to lack of time. A lot of the time, a lot of the time a lack of expertise, a lack of knowledge, and lack of bodies, bums on seats to do the job. I think that’s a big thing. And it always comes down to numbers, because when the university looks at what they spend their money on, obviously they have to look at the majority, you know, no matter what the law says, no matter how strongly we may feel about supporting our disabled students, they have to look at the majority”

Similarly one DSO described how he tried to arrange specialist support for accessing a piece of software that a student was having trouble in using, but did not get any response from the person responsible.

6.7.5 Accessibility

Finally we spoke with the disability support officers about the general accessibility across the institution – both in terms of the buildings and facilities, and also in terms of the general infrastructure and systems.

One officer spoke of how beneficial it was that they have an assistive technology room in library that students could access whilst on campus. Some of the participants in their interviews have also spoken of benefiting from such facilities, as will be explored in the next section:

“We do have an adapted room in the library, for example, which has specialist software that the student, if they want to use stuff, which they want to use in the university, but quite often they will want to use it at home, because they will have been recommended the same stuff through the DSA.”

However, another disability support officer recalled having difficulties with a particular piece of statistical software called SPSS which is widely used in HE, but they deemed it to be inaccessible with screen reader software. Similarly, problems were identified by another disability support officer with the institution’s virtual learning environment, and the fact that not all parts are accessible:

“Yeah, the Moodle [VLE], the intranet, on the whole, it’s accessible. I think there’s parts of it that may not be as accessible as they should be, and we are in dialogue about that”

Two of the DSOs discussed how realistic it is to expect an institution to be completely accessible to students with disabilities, with one concluding that it is not, whilst another called for the institution’s Vice Chancellor to make more of an investment into improving the general accessibility of the institution:

“I think it would be the Pro-Vice Chancellor setting up a team of people, to ensure that the university is fully accessible to anybody, whatever their disability. So with regard to blind students, it would be considering all publications, all documentation that is provided.

All videos on the website.[VLE]. Everything that is done, is done with accessibility in mind.”

“Open days, parents coming, visitors coming... anybody at any time could come in with any disability... We should be ready for that. We should have everything in accessible formats, every building should be totally accessible... but in the real world it’s not like that. But I suppose if the university were like that, it would just be another specialist school, you know, and then how are they going to manage when they leave university?”

Finally, in discussing the general accessibility of the campus, two of the disability support officers shared how they had been reviewed by an external organisation called “Disabled go” who conduct audits of the accessibility of public buildings. They both valued the feedback they received from this. They also highlighted the challenge that is faced with older buildings which were not designed with accessibility in mind – in particular where extensions have been added to the existing building.

“Buildings vary. We have a very old building stock in some areas of the university, and the building that we are actually based in, although our centre is very accessible, is actually three buildings joined together, and it’s different levels, different heights and different stairwells, different ramps, different lifts and all that sort of stuff.”

7 Accessing learning materials

In this section we look at the reality of the participant's experiences in terms of accessing learning materials and whether the agreed support plans were put into effect. We also focus in particular on the use of electronic material and virtual learning environments. Finally we present the findings from case study interviews with members of teaching staff who work with the case study participants.

7.1 Experience of accessing information in lectures and seminars

The participants were asked about their experiences of accessing information in lectures and seminars. In their responses they discussed:

- Adjustments made by staff
- Strategies that they would use
- How responsive lecturers were to the need to make reasonable adjustments
- Problems which they encountered

7.1.1 Adjustments made by staff

Adjustments made by staff can be broken down into two types – adjustments the staff would make for the student to access the lecture material, and adjustments the staff would make to help to directly facilitate the student in accessing information the lecture.

Adjustments made to lecture material

The most common adjustments to lecture material, as identified by eight participants, was the lecturer ensuring that the course notes were made available in advance of lectures. Whilst all students in the lecture were able to benefit from this, the participants benefited in particular as it meant that they were able to have their lecture slides in front of them, and were able to make modifications if needed. Where the lecture notes were not originally prepared in a format which the student could access, seven students described how the lecturers would make the lecture notes available in advance to be transcribed. Additionally a further seven participants spoke of directly receiving the lecture material from the lecture in their preferred format.

“So, it was one of those things, some lectures you know, I knew I was going, beforehand I could get the stuff on my computer, and

have it twice the size as everybody else's, so I could still follow it in lesson."

"How it was, was that I would have my work sent to me electronically and then I would have, some work would be transcribed into braille, it just depended, and those were basically the two mediums that I used – braille and electronic."

"That's really helpful actually, because my lecturers, they would if there was a PowerPoint, they would print me, they would give me a paper copy, so instead of glancing up at the screen, I would just look down at my paper copy."

Adjustments made to facilitate access

Three participants reported that their lecturers offered to meet with them to discuss the lecture material further:

"If it was images and things that they were drawing on the board, then they would try and explain it in the course of the lecture, but if it was diagrams to do with phonetics and things, then we would have a separate appointment with them, and we would also have support worker. It would help the support worker understand better, how the diagram is."

One participant benefited from their lecturer giving written text descriptions to diagrams. However, in the case of another participant, they relied on their note-taker to go beyond their job description to help them access such diagrams.

"I think because so many of my lecturers use diagrams, or sort of scan in pages from books and make them their slides, so it reads it as an image and I can't convert the PowerPoints. So what my note-taker does at the minute, when he writes up my notes, he essentially writes up the slide, and does diagram description, and copies out the text and things like that. So I have got access to the slides as well as things relating to them. Because with all the stuff going on I would really struggle with connecting the two."

Two participants shared that the lecturers would make special provision in practical sessions – in one case by providing special equipment and in the other showing them how to use the equipment on an individual basis:

“Yes, when I am doing something practical, they are always showing me the practical afterwards [...] They are really good, I just have to ask, and they show me.”

During lectures, the lecturers would make further adjustments such as using a Dictaphone, asking the student if they were able to follow lectures sufficiently, and providing verbal clues to help the student know when they were moving onto the next PowerPoint slide.

7.1.2 Common adjustments made by the student

The most common adjustment made by the students was to take responsibility for getting an electronic copy of the lecture presentation. They would typically do this by going to the institution’s VLE and downloading a copy from the module page. Where necessary the student would make their own modifications to these documents to enable them to access them easier, or they would access them using their assistive technology:

“Yeah, quite good actually, a lot of lecturers have put their PowerPoints up beforehand, have put their PowerPoints up on the internet, the university Moodle site beforehand. I get them and have a look through, and if they are particularly small, if the lecture slides are small, the writing, the text, I could take my laptop. But most of them are big, because obviously we are in a lecture theatre.”

Two participants said they would spend time before or after the lecture reviewing the lecture notes. In one case the participant found that it was very difficult to follow the lecture at the time, and therefore it was necessary to review the notes afterwards to consolidate his learning:

“Lectures and seminars are not the easiest method of learning. I tend to find I don’t learn so well in lectures and seminars as I do in just my room with my lecture notes. I usually go to the lectures, I will sit through them, I will understand some of the start, but by the time I get a few minutes in, I find they have pointed out an equation, and I will follow bits, but the moment they point at an equation and say ‘this equation’ and then suddenly I am slightly lost. Or they quickly read an equation out, and then they start discussing this equation, I am trying to hold the equation in my head, while doing the next calculation. It’s not very easy. So once

you have lost your way, with quite so many stages in the theory, you find you are sort of left out. So, I probably, I do get stuff from the lectures, but mostly I learn from the lecture notes, which I then go back and read, having been to the lectures. Next year, in the coming year, I am planning to try and make sure I read the lecture notes before going to the lectures, meaning that I will probably be able to understand what is going on in the lectures better.”

Four participants said that they would print off the lecture slides in advance of the lectures

“I tried to print most of the, most of anything they gave off so I would have a written copy in front of me, instead of the PowerPoints because it would have been too hard for me looking up and focusing down, especially when some of the classrooms were so big, it was quite difficult. So I would either print it off before or after a lecture and then refer to the written copy that I had instead of the PowerPoint.”

Two participants described how they would explain their needs to lecturers and other staff, and give detail of the adjustments that they required. In both cases they had concluded after the first year on the course that this was a strategy that they needed to adopt moving forward in their courses:

“So what I will probably do next year is I will probably email them beforehand, just explaining that I am visually impaired and if you have the policy where you are not going to make your lecture notes public to everyone, then could you email them to me beforehand, if possible.”

Other strategies the participants would employ include sitting near the front in lecture rooms, leaving lectures early to make sure they can get to their next lecture in time and asking for help from other students.

“And in labs we have... there are screens and stuff which have stuff on them, but they don't tend to be particularly important things that are on the screens. If it is I just get someone to read it out for me, and then there is also, for each bench in the lab there is a PhD student who will kind of be a demonstrator and explain what you have to do, so I never had any problems accessing information in

the labs, because also we have lab books which has everything that we need as well.”

7.1.3 Responsiveness of lecturers

Twenty three of the participants when talking about their experience of accessing learning material highlighted the responsiveness of lecturers – 18 of them spoke positively, whilst a further 5 spoke negatively.

Those who spoke positively of the lecturer’s reaction to the adjustments that needed to be made largely described how the lecturers would make these adjustments without protest or hesitation. One participant was grateful that the lecturer responded in a subtle way. Another participant described how the lecturers would start anticipating adjustments that she would require:

“Yeah, the lecturers have been really nice. Most of, I have got to know most of them, so most of them are familiar with what I need, and have got better with anticipating my needs more. Most of them would just send me stuff ahead of time, automatically, without me having to ask, at the end.”

As part of the case study work, the project researcher witnessed lecturers giving a student moral support when they knew she was having problems in getting accessible copies of text via the library, and made it clear that they would support her in the adjustments she needed. Another participant described how one of her lecturers had put in a considerable amount of work looking for ways in which to make a specialist piece of software more accessible for her:

“I mean, fair play, I was really impressed with my tutor last week. She’s not dealt with us before this year. And I went to have a meeting with her and she was like “I always work the first year so I know who is coming up, so I knew you were imminent!” So I was like “oh right ok!” And she’s gone on and was like “I have done some research and I know that SPSS isn’t accessible, so I have been thinking about writing it in syntax because you can use that. But if you don’t want to learn it in programming language there’s another piece of software that I have heard about, and I have read about it, and apparently it works with Jaws which I believe is what you use.”

The fact that so many of the participants spoke positively about their lecturers indicates that on the whole, the academic staff understand the need to make reasonable adjustments where required. Our interviews with disability link tutors as part of the case study work indicate that the main issues faced when supporting students with visual impairment are firstly a lack of knowledge of what adjustments to make and secondly a limitation of time.

However, there were examples of lecturers who responding negatively to being asked to make the adjustments that the participants required. For example, one participant described how her lecturer before she even requested any adjustments said to her that he was not prepared to make any additional adjustments, because that was what her DSA was for.

“Whereas one of my lecturers, told me point blank at the start of the semester that he wouldn’t be altering anything for me, because I have DSA and stuff, they should be doing it for me, which it just makes, it’s just un-encouraging isn’t it [...] I mean it’s not even the fact, I can understand where he is coming from, but it’s more the way that he sort of addressed it as well, just saying ‘no, you have got your own people to do it, you go and do it’. If he had just sort of approached it in less of a sort of, I don’t know, unpleasant way, it’s not very encouraging”

Another participant described how his lecturers were quite dismissive when he tried to explain to them what he needed:

Researcher: “I know you probably had a lot of lecturers, were you able to talk to any of them directly?” Participant: “Yeah, that’s what I had to do, because a lot of them weren’t aware.” Researcher: “And how did they respond to that.” Participant: “Oh..ok”, was usually the answer.” Researcher: “Oh ok, so not too enthusiastically...” Participant: “No! You can’t blame them, it’s difficult things, they don’t really understand it.”

Finally, another participant described how she was having difficulties in accessing a certain aspect of a lecture. She went to the lecturer and suggested different ways of overcoming these challenges, but was met with a very negative response to each (all three to the researcher seemed reasonable adjustments). Instead she had to go to a more senior member of staff, who then ensured that adjustments were made. This demonstrates the importance of students with visual impairment

being able to self-advocate, but also reveals an additional barrier that they could face, which is a negative response to requests for support. Thankfully this student had the confidence to take the matter further and stand up for herself, but for some this may have knocked their confidence making them reluctant to raise problems in the future.

7.1.4 Problems encountered in accessing lecture and seminar material

The participants were asked to describe any challenges that they encountered in accessing lecture and seminar material. Several participants reported that they did not have any problems at all. This tended to be those participants who only needed quite basic adjustments, so on the rare occasion when there were some minor complications (such as material not being made available online), they did not consider it to be sufficiently serious to describe it as a problem. The responses of those who considered themselves to have experienced more significant problems are summarised in the following table:

Table 28: Problems encountered in accessing lecture and seminar material

	Total (N)
Learning material not in an accessible format	12
Visual element to course	8
Unable to access virtual learning environment	3
Delays in receiving material	4
Unable to follow practical sessions	3
Volume of lecturers	2
Material not made available online in advance of lectures	2
Pace of lecture	2
Based in more than one department	1
Inaccessible content of the course	1
Inaccessible software	1

The most common problem reported was not having received lecture notes in an accessible format. Of most concern, in three cases, at no stage in the course, module or seminar were the students given accessible materials. One participant described how difficult it was to participate in seminars when she was not given accessible copies of the material:

“I have a seminar and it was, the task set was having to read three previous essays, but it was like, none of them were enlarged, there were a limited number of copies so they had to be swapped around when people were done, and it was reading three of those in the space of an hour, which wasn't very much, and that, yeah, and they didn't really have a note-taker either, so it got really stressful.”

Of particular note in two of these cases the students ended up having to re-sit the first year, whilst in the third they are appealing their final degree classification.

In other cases the problems that they faced were more intermittent:

- Three participants found that whilst in general their lecture notes were accessible as they had the option to view them electronically, there were specific aspects of the notes that they could not access. In two cases this was because they have visual content, whilst in the other it was because the lecturer had colour-coded some information, and used colours that were very difficult for the participant to see
- Two participants were sometimes sent material in a PDF format which they could not access (presumably because they were sent in picture form)
- One participant was given paper copies of notes for a module and found that the print was too small (despite it being documented in her support plan that she required pt 16 as minimum)
- Two participants who relied on downloading electronic notes sometimes found the notes were not put up on time
- Two participants described how whilst generally their lecture notes would be accessible, on occasions the accompanying documents would not

Despite these problems, responses from these participants indicated that overall they were happy with the adjustments that had been made, with them apparently accepting that the lecturing staff had a difficult task, and that there would inevitably be occasions where they would face these challenges.

Eight participants had problems due to visual elements of the course. Whilst generally the staff would try and make some compensation within the lecture, the adjustments they made weren't sufficient to overcome difficulties for the participants in trying to understand the visual elements

of the course. For example, one participant found that in general whilst he was able to follow most of the lecture due to the lecturer talking through what they were writing on the board, this was not a sufficient adjustment when working with diagrams:

“Diagrams are the worst thing, because if someone is dictating facts about something, properties of materials, they will dictate processes and things, and that’s fine because you are listening to what they say, you write it down, I mean it’s not great but it’s doable. But then they will come to do a diagram or explain how to do this equation maths thing... you need it visually, you can’t just listen to that and go ‘oh yes!’”

One of the eight participants described how they had problems when the lecturers relied on visual cues when describing visual content:

“It depends on the lecture. If it’s just a graph or whatever it’s fine. If it’s a picture, particularly I find in like, I don’t know, biological things where you have got pictures of the brain, they have got them on the board, and it’s a lot easier to point and go ‘this bit here’ and then ‘below that is’. So that’s quite difficult, but I think... particularly this year, it’s not something that I need to know, so long as I know the name of the bit, and what it does, I don’t need to point it out in relevance to everything else, so... It would be interesting to know, but it’s not going to make me fail.”

Three participants spoke of how they were expected to access the course notes via the VLE, but unfortunately they found it not to be accessible, which in turn meant they did not have accessible notes for their lectures:

“Most of the things were set up on Blackboard by the university, and that was sometimes really difficult to get onto it... They have a no paper policy, so that made it really, really difficult to try and access the information sometimes, they would post things online and they would do that last minute, so I couldn’t adjust it, or they provided it in a certain file that disagreed with the software added onto the laptop for me, so Zoomtext couldn’t agree with the file. So things got difficult, and it meant I had to rely on the note-taker quite a lot, and I didn’t really have much time to set up equipment, so I had to rely on listening quite a lot for a lot of the lectures.”

Three participants had problems with accessing practical sessions, due to the equipment that they were using. One participant reports that after the decision was made that he would need to repeat the year he sat with the DSO and a departmental lead where these problems were discussed. It was only at this point the departmental lead informed him that there was some different equipment available which would have been more accessible to him, to which he responded: “and I was just thinking ‘why didn’t you say this when I was actually doing it?!’”

Six participants spoke of experiencing delays in receiving the accessible lecture notes, so they did not have them in advance of lectures (either because they had not been sent to them directly, or because they had not been uploaded onto the virtual learning environment), whilst two participants had difficulties because of the number of lecturers that they were working with, which made it more of a challenge to make contact with lecturers and remind them of their support needs:

“On one of my modules last year, we had like a different lecturer every week, so it was a bit of a nightmare trying to get the work. But mostly it’s fine.”

Similarly, another participant faced more of a challenge because they were studying a joint honours course, which meant they were based in more than one department:

“It has been a little bit difficult, because you have got to keep on top of two different lots of people, instead of one. So, and the departments use different methods of doing things, like they both use different referencing systems, and both use different, they like you to use specific resources which are completely different from each other. So that’s been... it’s been extra, additional to everything else. But my all my lecturers in both departments have been really helpful. So it’s not been as stressful as it could have been.”

Two participants reported struggling with the pace of the lectures, whilst in another case the researcher when shadowing a case-study participant who was following their lecture notes in braille, observed them struggling to keep track with where exactly the lecturer was:

Lecturer moving through slides very quickly, and she didn't seem to realise that they had moved on. Seemed to spend a lot of the lecture working out where she was. (Researcher's notes)

Finally, one participant had problems with seemingly inaccessible software that was being used extensively as part of their course, and another participant reported that there was one particular module where it had been concluded that no adjustments could be made for practical aspects of the module. Instead it had been concluded it was not worthwhile the student attending those particular lectures:

"I just spoke to the lecturer and said "is it worth it" and most of the time we decided that I just wouldn't bother going."

This module proved particularly problematic for the student and their department, due to its unavoidably visual content (something which was accepted by the student). However of most concern, it appears that no suitable adjustments were offered to the student, and in the end he was expected to take the exam:

"Ah, well that's one of the ones that I have got to do my first sit for next time. They spent me copies of all the lecture slides, and the library have finally managed I think to get me a copy of the book...So it's like ok, fine, do a crash course and then hope for the best I guess."

7.2 Use of electronic material

A recurring theme amongst the participants has been how they have been able to use electronic material to be able to access lecture notes, and that typically if these notes were made available in advance of lectures, no further adjustments would be needed (with the exception of note-taker support in some cases). In the summer 2015 interviews this was investigated further through the following question:

"Many participants have spoken of receiving lecture material being made available to them in advance in an electronic format. Is this true in your experience? Could you tell us more about this?"

An overview of their responses is provided in the following table:

Table 29: Use of electronic lecture material

	Total (N)
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Electronic lecture notes benefited student	15
Electronic lecture notes the only adjustment required	4
Electronic notes part of institutions inclusive practice	3
Electronic notes required transcription first	2
Would access notes using a tablet computer	1
Would store notes on the Cloud	1

Of the twenty four participants interviewed, in their response 15 of the participants spoke of some way in which they would benefit from their lecturers making the notes available electronically. For example, one participant responded saying:

“I get on really well, because they put all the lecture slides on their website, so I can access them from anywhere, I can get my own print outs, if there is anything I missed within a lecture I can go back and find it in my own time.”

Another participant described in detail how it benefited him, particularly because his method for accessing the lecture notes was so similar to that of the other students:

“It just meant that I could... when we were sat in the lecture if I couldn't get close to the front, I didn't have to be sat close to the front, I could sit wherever I liked and could keep up with what was being said. That was quite beneficial [...] A lot of people took laptops to lectures as well, so it wasn't like in school where you are the only one, it's just normal at uni”

This idea of inclusive practice was identified by two other participants:

“The one thing that I did like was that they did it for everyone, not just me, so I didn't feel like I was being singled out.”

Two participants who benefited from using electronic documents noted that they still needed to be transcribed first before they could use them. In both cases they were braille/screen-reader users:

“But if it's a PowerPoint or something, I can't read it, so I will ask transcription to sort it out. But in terms of getting the files, it's brilliant.”

One participant highlighted how she would use her tablet computer to access the lecture notes, and how this meant she could still access the lecture notes, even if they were put up only a short time before the lecture:

“That’s then the problem when you get a really disorganised lecturer who doesn’t put the slides up until two minutes before the lecture. But actually with my iPad that’s not a problem because I can download it there and then. Otherwise it would be a pain because I wouldn’t be able to print it.”

Similarly another participant described how she liked working electronically as she could then save the documents on the cloud, and then access them from a variety of devices:

“Yeah, most through email, reading chapters which was really good because I could put them on Dropbox and read them on various devices.”

These reports demonstrate how beneficial it is to students with visual impairments to have access to electronic lecture material, particularly prior to the lecture beginning. It can enable them to work more independently (which this research has continually demonstrated they want to do). However, there is still evidence that for students with more severe visual impairments who are reliant on screen reader software or braille, lecturers are not producing lecture material which are accessible by using their assistive technology, and so an extra step is required before they are able to make use of the course notes.

7.3 Virtual learning environments (VLE)

Linked to the use of electronic lecture material, there has been continuous reference to the participants’ use of VLEs. The participants were asked to evaluate how accessible they found the VLE to be. Fifteen of the participants considered the VLE to be accessible, whilst ten found at least elements of them to be inaccessible.

7.3.1 Accessible VLEs

Whilst most of the participants who described their VLEs as accessible simply reported that they have no problems in using them, some provided further details of how they would go about accessing them:

“Yeah. It’s very accessible, I can read it, with the computer you can zoom in if the text is too small. Yeah, it’s fine, I’ve never had any problems with it.”

“It’s quite easy because I’ve got Zoomtext on my laptop, I can just make it bigger if it’s too small, just zooming in, making the writing bigger for me.”

One participant spoke of some inbuilt accessibility features in the VLE that he used to ensure that he could use the site:

“Because the good thing is you can choose what colour you want in terms of... but basically you get your own personal settings like you know, where you want things to appear, where you want your icons, and you can also... the resolution, things like that. So I’ve changed the colour so I can see it, and font size, because basically you get a home page and then you get things like timetable, results, you know, lecture times, things like that, so it’s kind of up to you how you set it up, but there is only a certain amount you can do.”

Another participant who struggled in using the PC version of the VLE, found a version available via an App to be more accessible:

“I have the app which is useful. I have a Blackboard app which is the main body for typing in your uni details.”

7.3.2 Inaccessible VLEs

One participant reported that he did not use his VLE at all, having tried it prior to starting his course. Instead he would receive all relevant information (for example lecture notes, timetable, reading) directly from staff:

“Yeah, some blind students do use it, but I tried to use it before even coming to [institution name] and it was just horrible, so I just gave up on it, and they just give me things if I need to look at stuff. I need to have MS Word files as much as possible - that type of thing.”

Another participant described how she found her institutions VLE incredibly difficult to use:

Participant: "I just find it really difficult to use. It's not very clear for me, or anything..." Researcher: "So what is available on Blackboard?" Participant: "All the readings, all the coursework, all the stuff to enter your coursework. It's kind of a nightmare."

Three of the participants identified specific aspects of the VLE which were not accessible to them. One participant who has no vision described the way in which she would 'get by' in using the VLE:

"It can be done, you have got to change your cursors, pick which things you use, you have to use the mouse a bit for some bits, which I end up doing because my computer is a touchscreen, so I can do it that way. But it's not straightforward, accessibility doesn't work quite the way it should..."

Another participant described how she would struggle in accessing her emails, although using her iPad made it easier:

Participant: "The emails from there aren't very accessible, but hey." Researcher: "So have you had any problems with that then?" Participant: "Yeah, but my reader will help me read it if not." Researcher: "I assume you use Jaws to access that as well?" Participant: "Yeah. Or my iPad." Researcher: "So you are using the Voiceover." Participant: "Yeah." Researcher: "Is it easier on the iPad would you say?" Participant: "Yeah, it's easier on the iPad. Everything is easier on the iPad!"

The third participant spoke of how she would struggle in entering some key information when submitting assignments via her institution's VLE:

"...if I am trying to hand things in, it makes things difficult, because I can't always see what I am doing, and then I can't always make it clear that there is a support agreement there."

Finally, two of the participants described how all students found the VLE difficult to use, due to it being poorly structured. Whilst this is likely to affect all students, it could be suggested that it is likely to impact a student with vision impairment more:

"I think if you ask that question to anyone at the uni, they would probably say it's awful! But, again, I don't think it's any different in

terms of I can't access it visually. I think I'm fine doing that, but the actual site on its own is all over the place. You are looking for something this year, and you end up going down something for next year, something like that. It's not really set out very well."

7.3.3 Adjustments to the VLE made by the institution

One participant described how as a group they were shown how to use the VLE:

"Oh that's fine, because it wasn't just me, it was the whole of my tutor group, we all received training on how to upload assignments. They taught us everything on that, so that was cool."

Whilst a further participant reports that whilst the main template the institution used for the VLE was not accessible, he was given his own template for accessing it which he was able to access:

"They just made it accessible, they made a template for me to use, put it up online for everyone to use, and it's my default template and hey ho, it works like a dream."

7.4 Accessing libraries and other reference materials

The participants were asked on multiple occasions about their experience of accessing reference material, such as books from the library and journal articles. In their responses they presented a number of problems that they encountered, as well as describing adjustments that they and staff would make. These are presented in turn.

7.4.1 Problems encountered by the participants in accessing libraries and reference material

Thirteen of the participants said they had regularly being unable to access such learning resources. In five cases, the participants did not have access to their key texts for significant parts of the first year:

"By November I still didn't have the core books in order to at least get the general overview of everything. I had essays both summative and formative due in December. I asked for help. No one gave me any help. No one did anything."

Four participants who struggled in accessing these materials reported not knowing how they should go about getting accessible copies of text.

In one case, the student was relying on a reader to access books, whilst in the other three cases, they did not have access to them at all. One of the participants had not engaged with the disability support office after his first induction meeting, so it is possible that there were systems in place which he could have benefited from. Another of the participants had been given an electronic version of the book but he could not read this with his screen reader, and he had not informed the support service of this. The final participant had simply not been informed of how to get accessible copies of text, despite regularly meeting with the DSO.

“I had support, but I only had about four hours of that...It took too long. Especially [course], quotes, notes and dates, what people had said which was important, just allowing time to get through, process it and write it down. Somebody reading it to you, you say can you go back, read that again, you can't just read, obviously, and the note-taker doesn't necessarily know the subject, and they can't say 'oh yes, this bit is relevant'...You have to read through, scan and all that, but it's quite time consuming.”

Researcher: “What tends to happen is the library would request it from the publisher, and they should be able to get you an electronic copy” Participant: “This is the thing - no one has explained it to me.”

Two of the participants who were reliant on receiving accessible copies of text via the publisher spoke of delays in receiving these:

“Everything just got too rushed, because they didn't have enough time to get them from the publishers, because the publishers can take a week or something to respond”

“It's generally quite good. Sometimes the publishers are quite slow to give permission or whatever they have to do, but normally it's fine.”

There were particular problems therefore for those who did not have copies of book lists in good time to arrange for accessible copies of text to be delivered. The researcher when shadowing one of the case study participants saw how she was restricted in a seminar where a chapter of a key text was being discussed. Despite it being several weeks into term she still did not have an accessible version. Another participant described how she ideally would have had electronic copies of the text

so she could make adjustments that way, but instead she enlarged the text via the photocopier as she knew she would not have the text in time. Whilst this thankfully was a suitable alternative to her, it would not have been suitable for students with more severe vision impairment:

“Because to get a modified book that’s ages, and we don’t really find out until the beginning of the term, so I realised that I wouldn’t have the books until week 5 or 6. They are so specific the books”

A participant who does have more severe visual impairment spoke of the problems that she had in her second year when the book lists were not made available in sufficient time:

“...but it was very much like, yeah, they hadn’t even compiled it, it wasn’t just that they didn’t send it out, they didn’t have one. And a load of lecturers were new, so they hadn’t decided what they wanted, and it all just sort of, I don’t know, fell apart a bit.”

Four participants described their frustration at being restricted in working as an independent learner, because they faced situations where it was impossible to access the text without having to look to others for help:

“It’s very good because I can just go online, grab a PDF, and if I can’t read it, I will send it to transcription and they will fix it for me. But it is frustrating when the article isn’t online, and it has to be scanned and stuff before I can read it. I don’t really understand why the PDFs aren’t accessible, it would be nice if they were, but there we are. It’s frustrating not being able to walk into a library and pick up a book, but you know.”

“Well, the issue with it is that they put their E-books on the database, and all the stuff that they put on there are PDFs, and all the PDFs are the ones that are just like a picture, not the text ones. So they are pretty much inaccessible, but I don’t know why they can’t make them in Word for me, like they do my textbooks. But they argue that they need to go to the publisher to ask for permission to do these E-books. I am not really sure why it is, because it’s the same issue, it’s still inaccessible, and it’s not the most effective way of doing it, because you can’t really get an idea of what is in an article very well, just from the title, so I am just going off the title at the minute and saying ‘oh, that sounds good’

and putting it on the list, and then hope it's useful. You can't browse, it doesn't give you much options."

Two participants reported receiving lower grades for their assignments due to the lack of references – something that they attributed directly to their visual impairment:

"I got my assignment back, and I got a 2:2, but my tutor said that it was basically, it was the external resources that like held my assignment back, so we need to sort of work out a way of really being able to do that more efficiently, so yeah, I am not sure how to go about that exactly."

The responses by four of the participants indicate a general reluctance to use the library, and the students trying to 'get away' with using the resources which they could access most readily:

"Usually I stick to, if I can, trying to use resources on an e-library, I find that more easy to access, but if there was someone available to help me, I could go into the library and see what was available."

"For the last two years I have been able to get away without having to go into the library. I am going to have to use it slightly more this year, finding, scanning, interpreting thing comes out of my research assistant grant."

"I don't know the right word to use... It's almost, not daunting, but I don't really want to go to a library and find all the right indexes or whatever, that would take twice as long as going online."

Finally, two participants spoke of struggling with the volume of reading that they had as part of their course (especially one student who was given responsibility to convert the text into an accessible format herself) whilst another found that the amount of reading caused eye strain, which in turn meant it took longer to read the texts:

"It's more difficult, I had to scan them in which was obviously time consuming, because I would have to scan them in, say there was a picture, convert them into pages to read on my iPad, save it as a zip file, convert them into Word then take them out of the read only setting so I could edit them, put them in a zip, save them again,

delete the picture, delete the zip file, go back into the word document and read it.”

“It took me longer to do the work because I would normally have to break it into intervals because it would start to hurt my eyes reading the books. I could only do maybe an hour, an hour and a half and I would have to take a half hour break and come back, so it took me longer to do the work. When I was writing essays as well I found it a bit difficult because I would be writing and having to take breaks or go and do something else, so not to strain my eyes continually reading.”

7.4.2 Strategies the students would use to access libraries and reference material

The participants suggested some strategies that they would use in order to access books and journal articles. The most common adjustment was to access the material in an electronic format, using their assistive technology, or by making basic adjustments, such as magnifying the page when using PDFs. When finding electronic articles, they would tend to use a particular online catalogue that they had found to be accessible:

“Not specific sites I suppose. What I do is I go through the university library catalogue system and there are certain sort of tip offs that I have learned to sort of recognise to have an idea of whether they are going to be accessible or not. If there’s stuff like it says full version underneath, then it’s probably going to be accessible, and if it doesn’t, then it probably won’t. Just little things like that.”

“A lot of it I tend to do online. I find it has got a bit more accessible, which is nice. I use google scholar and things like that.”

One participant was particularly reliant on their tablet computer in order to access these texts:

“I used a lot of e-books and stuff, again with my iPad, which means that instead of having to scan a page I can search it with the search tool. Pretty much most of my eyesight problems I have these days, I solve with the technology that I have around me.”

As previously mentioned, one participant would enlarge all required textbooks using a photocopier, whilst another would use both a combination of electronic resources and photocopies:

“Yeah, so when we have done essays and lab reports, I have accessed library books a little bit. I tended to find them in the library, find the bit I needed, and just photocopied it and take it back with me. Which actually, I have got sort of a printing and photocopying allowance from the DSA to help cover that. And then I have used journals and stuff online. Most of them are accessible online, I use my uni login to access them, and that’s all fine, I can zoom in and download and all that kind of stuff.”

7.4.3 Adjustments made by the institutions staff to make reference materials accessible

Nine of the 30 participants reported receiving library support to enable them to access books and journal articles. These staff would tend to meet them in the library, and work with them in finding the resources that they would need for their assignments:

“I also get library support as well. Every week to come and use the library, so I can access all the books that I need.”

“I think my experience personally has been quite good, because I have had, any time I needed to access journal articles and things and any library based services, I have had a support worker from the disability office that was provided, and they helped me with doing the research.”

One participant was not able to access this support during her final year in HE, due to staff shortages. She spoke of the difference this made to her studies:

“I would say the biggest problem came with the dissertation, where I needed the help and support, and I didn’t receive it. I also lost a lot of time trying to catch up on notes that I didn’t get from note-takers, and trying to chase up that situation. It was basically just wasting a lot of time.”

In a different approach, one participant spoke of how he would email his library assistant and inform them of what assignment he was working on, and ask them to search for specific topics on his behalf. Whilst it was no

doubt helpful to this student to have such support in place, it does raise the question of whether he was truly engaging with what it means to be an independent learner in HE.

As well as having their lecture notes transcribed into accessible format, several of the participants also had books, journal articles, and other relevant materials transcribed into their preferred format:

“And then if the journal article wasn’t accessible, it would be converted into a different format either by the office or by the support worker I was with at the time.”

Four participants who did not have dedicated library support spoke of receiving assistance from a librarian:

“The main library has got most of the material that I need, I go in, check out the books, and if I need to, the librarians in the past have helped me find books, or they have photocopied so it’s easier for me to read.”

Finally, one participant reported how he would be helped by his lecturers by being directed to specific chapters of relevance in books, or recommended articles to obtain for his assignments. This student is registered blind and reliant on a library assistant to access some content, so this was judged to be an appropriate reasonable adjustment:

“My library assistant, basically my tutors will be very specific, they will send him all the chapters which are listed very clearly in the module information packs, and all they have got to do is ping them off to [library assistant] and he will go hunting for them.”

7.5 Working alongside students with vision impairments: perspectives of Academic Staff

As part of the case study work we spoke with five members of academic staff who had responsibility for overseeing the implication of reasonable adjustments and the student’s support plan on a course level. We asked these staff to discuss:

- what exactly their role entails
- what experience the department had of working with students with visual impairments and disabilities more broadly

- their experience of working with the Disability Support Office
- preparations that they would make for supporting a student with disabilities
- their procedures and experience in making reasonable adjustments

7.5.1 Interviewees role within the department

The five staff who took part in the academic staff interviews all represented different institutions. They had a range of job titles, including:

- 2 x Disability link tutor
- 1 x Course director
- 1 x Head of first year for course
- 1 x Department based Disability Support Officer

In four of the five institutions, it was standard for a disability link tutor to coordinate the support for students with disabilities. However, in one of these four cases, a different member of staff had taken responsibility due to the volume of adjustments that needed to be made for the student. In the final institution, due to the size of the department, they had their own dedicated departmental based Disability Support Officer. This meant they were able to focus specifically on supporting students, rather than in the case of the other four staff, who were carrying out the role alongside their teaching and research commitments.

“My role here at the moment, well I have quite a few roles, but one of the main duties is the first year tutor, heading up the first year. I would be first port of call for welfare issues within the first year, I sign off any extenuating circumstance forms, and I also liaise with the central support services and administration here, for supporting students that have extra needs in terms of their studies. I am also admissions tutor as well, so I am quite busy!”

For the two disability link tutors, this was their first departmental responsibility, having only recently started working as lecturers within the institution. When describing their role in working with the disability support office, three of the staff described it as a liaison role between the DS office and the department, whilst one member of staff described his role more as one of implementation:

“It’s kind of coordinated centrally through the disability support office, and then each of the departments has a link tutor, which basically just liaises between the disability support office, and then the academic members of staff in the department.”

“So broadly what happens is that they draw up a specification of support needs, and then my role is to make sure that the department implements those.”

7.5.2 Experience of academic staff in working with students with disabilities

The academic staff were asked about their department’s experiences in working with students with visual impairment, and more broadly, students with disabilities. The department based DSO reported that they had supported a number of students with vision impairment in the past, which we would have anticipated as they worked for a very large institution.

“Definitely, it’s not a problem at all. We usually take them for a tour around the lab, make sure they have got all the equipment they need, and if they need to get anything else put in place. We had one guy who was albino, and he really really struggled seeing, and we bought in specialist equipment, we did all kinds of things for him.”

In contrast, three of the other academic staff reported that to the best of their knowledge, they had not worked with students with vision impairment in the past. However, they had worked with students with other disabilities:

“Every year we have a number of students that have extra support, and therefore we liaise with the central support services, seeing how we can implement those kind of plans as it were. There’s always conversations going on, and liaising going on.”

Whilst they had not worked with a student with vision impairment before, one of the interviewees described a situation where they had previously supported a student who needed a comparable amount of adjustments, whilst another interviewee reported that they had never had to provide support at such a level before:

Researcher: “So I was wondering is, have you had anyone where you have had to make adjustments to the extent that you have had to with [participant], or is it new to you?” Academic: “[Participant] is more than all the others put together, in terms of support needs.”

7.5.3 Academic staff experience of working with Disability Support Office

The staff were asked to discuss their experience of working with the DS service at their respective institutions. Generally, as has also been explained by the disability support officers, a support plan would be developed within the DS office, and then this would be forwarded to the department for implementation. However, in the case of four of the academics we spoke with, the decision was made to set up meetings between the department and the DS service (and on some occasions the student would also be invited to attend). This decision was based on the extent of the adjustments that needed to be made. In the case the remaining participant the DSO did not need to meet with the students department, as the necessary (minor) adjustments were already covered by the institution’s inclusive education policy:

“There’s quite a lot of students that are covered by our inclusive teaching policy. This is something that the DSO are hoping to run out across the university, and it’s something that has been created. So things like copies of lecture notes in advance, quite a lot of student support packages are covered by that. We just put those at the bottom of the list, say that the students are registered with [DS office], but are covered by the inclusive teaching policy.”

The four other academics were all supporting students who have severe visual impairments. They all described a lengthy process of working with the DS office in determining how best to support the student.

“Oh, very good. Proactive, they are proactive, and we were proactive, so it was very useful. They arranged risk assessments and so on, even though we had fairly extensive ones ourselves. Accommodation, linking up for his arrival, made sure that [student] was able to come, because we invited him to come prior to the start of term, so he could meet everybody else. We had a couple of group meetings together, so that was very good. We set the foundations for his arrival, quite thoroughly.”

In reflecting back, one academic identified how important it was that they had had an opportunity to meet in advance:

“Because it was new, we had to do things, we had to meet beforehand and work out how things were going. So for us it’s been a real learning experience actually.”

One academic in particular spoke of how beneficial it was to meet with the student, to understand how they thought they would approach the course, and to be able to learn first-hand what they were capable of doing:

“When I met [participant] I actually felt really positive, because she was really a case of, I have just got to get on with it, this is my thing, you know, and treat me the same as everyone else, I will come if I have got problems otherwise don’t bother me, I don’t want you to make a big thing about it. I just thought ‘this is great’. I really liked that attitude, because there was no feeling of... actually, there was nothing about having special treatment, even though we wanted to help her, I suddenly thought ‘this is going to be good, she will work with us on this’, which is good, rather than you know, want everything perfectly like this, this and this, and then we are bound to fail at some point’. So yeah, that was really positive.”

Whilst the DSO would suggest an appropriate support plan, there was a strong emphasis from the academics that they wanted to have ultimate control in terms of the support provisions that would be made. One academic spoke of the challenge faced in what he judged to be unrealistic expectations from the DS service:

“I said ‘look, I am going to be honest with you here, I really want to be supportive, but I know what can and can’t be done, academic staff won’t do these things, so you have to work with us.”

The student in question eventually decided to work directly with the department in negotiating arrangements, and bypass the DS service altogether, which on a lecture to lecture basis appeared to work. However, unfortunately they have had some broader challenges such as not being able to access specialist software, delays in receiving accessible textbooks and problems with examination arrangements which at the time of last interview had not been resolved.

Another academic spoke of the importance of the department being involved, as the DSO would not have the necessary understanding of the course and the challenges that could potentially be faced:

“To some extent, that’s just inevitable in this case. But this is a highly unusual case, we’ve not had a student like this before. We are facing problems of how to disseminate the mathematical material, that the disability service haven’t encountered.”

One academic spoke of a desire to be supportive to students, but at the same time he and others highlighted the challenges that are imposed on academics in terms of their workload:

“You talk to most staff and they would say ‘yeah, yeah, of course we want to support’, but they are busy, and they don’t like to be told that they have to do a lot of extra work, it’s more things that they don’t want, and most are really accommodating, but if it’s a lot then people will dig their heels in and just say ‘no, I’ve just finished creating my slides, I am not going to go through them all and do them again or anything like that, there must be a middle ground of what we can do to support’.”

7.5.4 Preparation made

The academics were also asked about any preparations that they made at a departmental level, ready for the students arrival. They spoke of meeting with the student in advance to address specific issues in relation to the course:

“In September we met with [participant] as well, beforehand, just to talk through really what the issues were for her, and then how we would kind of deal with those, or how we would try and deal with those, and then have quite a fluid situation so she could give feedback as well, see if interventions are actually working.”

In one more complex case, the department spoke with a Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment to get some specialist advice on how best to make the course accessible the student.

One academic also described how he early on established a relationship with the student, to ensure him of their willingness, but also to help ensure he had realistic expectations:

“And that was before he even applied, through UCAS. I tried very hard not to sell the course to him, but to let him know that we were really willing, I the course leader was really willing, to kind of push ourselves into directions that we weren’t familiar with, to try and make it work for him. To make it very clear to him, that it might be, that we might need his help, because we might stumble along the way, that we would have to, in a sense he would be putting himself forward as a work in progress, as we tried to develop ways of working with him, to make the most effective learning experience for him, and enjoyable learning experience for him, whilst he is here.”

He also spoke of making it clear to the student that it would need to be a learning experience, and therefore any support plans would need to be flexible:

“Like I say, there was kind of an acknowledgement, right from the beginning that we wouldn’t be able to map out, and we were quite clear about this, I was quite clear about this, and [participant] was clear about this, that we would come across, there would be a case of adjustments as things developed, because we wouldn’t be able to pre-empt and plan for everything.”

As support plans were agreed, one of the departments arranged a meeting between the academics who would be teaching the student, and they collectively planned for his arrival:

“So we had a very long, collective discussion as academics, because also with people that could help us with the technology, with, you know, requiring extra resources, necessary resources, and with, you know, actually thinking ourselves about the training that we might need. So we had several planning meetings. And also, also with making adjustments in terms of where he is going to be accommodated and so on, we got a little bit involved in that.”

One academic described how they did not meet with the student to make these preparations, due to resource restrictions:

“I think, it’s one of those things you were so busy, you tend to do things nearer the time, and actually, frankly I wouldn’t want to put any resources into something unless I knew someone was coming, you know. Because time is so precious, even a half hour chat/conversation, if it’s redundant because they are not going to come, I would much rather wait until we know that they are coming. By the time that they have got their results in mid-August, until the time that they start, is a good six weeks or so, so it gives us plenty of time to get moving.”

However, on reflection they were considering whether they should have done more early on to ensure a smoother transition:

“The thing I would say, on a personal note, is that looking back I feel like, I feel a little bit like, I could have done, or maybe should have done, more for her. So we have this meeting now, and maybe I should have arranged it a bit earlier. But I have been really busy. And I don’t know where she is in terms of her work, I haven’t spoken to her in quite a long time.”

This particular student did have a very difficult transition into HE. For example, her reading list was not available in advance, which meant she did not have accessible copies of text until several weeks into term. Additionally there were some parts of her course which were very challenging to a non-sighted learner. It could be argued that by spending more time in discussing the adjustments that could be made in order for the student to access those aspects of the course (or even making the decision that in this event it was not possible to make adjustments, and therefore concluding an alternative was needed), the student would have had a far better transition experience.

Interestingly one academic spoke of how the support plan that they received from the student’s DSO did not really provide guidance for support on an academic level, and therefore this was something which they had to consider themselves at a departmental level:

“We did look at the support agreement, but we saw that as kind of, I think we were mainly concerned with making sure academic adjustments were in place. The support agreement kind of looked like it would take care of itself. Again, we felt we were doing plenty of, you know, plenty to accommodate the support agreement. We didn’t really treat it in the technical sense. Again, we were

concerned about how would we adjust to his requirements, and understanding those requirements, so yeah, it didn't really, it didn't play a major role. We weren't looking at the support agreement right at the forefront of making our adjustments."

Finally, one participant spoke of how despite early preparation there was still some confusion from academics on how support would be delivered:

"...we have had issues... because there's issues with the reproduction of resources in formats other than the ones that they are published in. You know, if something's published as a PDF, to reproduce that as a Word document, not to just scan it, it's a different copyright, copyright regulations. So I know there's been, [participant's] not been able to access some material, because there has been some confusion about whether we had the copyright to convert them. I know that that particular one has been resolved, but I imagine that it won't be a perfect arrangement, I imagine there will be occasional problems like that."

7.5.5 Reasonable adjustments made by academic staff

The academic staff members were asked about the reasonable adjustments that they had made for the individual students they were involved in supporting. One challenge that was highlighted was that of ensuring content was accessible for the student. An academic stated that there were some parts of the course that it was not possible to make accessible, whilst another academic spoke of how frustrated one member of staff was with copyright regulations:

"I think they put a huge amount of time trying to make tactile pictures and things like that for it. It's really difficult isn't it. So one thing she can't do, she can't use SPSS. The screen reader just won't deal with it, it's a complete nightmare. So, you know, what do you do? So we can adapt it a little bit and say we will give you data, you can write it up, look at the output, as long as you know what the output means then we can go from there. There's no other way around it really, because you couldn't even have someone pressing buttons for her, because she's not aware of what the buttons are."

A further challenge came about when specialist equipment which was being used to make braille copies of lecture notes broke down:

“...the printer broke, we had to send that away and it’s only just coming back, so that’s been really hard, we have been using an alternative one in the library, participant doesn’t like that as much, so that’s been hard.”

One academic spoke of the importance of managing the students expectations with regards to the support that he could realistically expect to receive:

“And so, the basis that we worked on here was that, and this is actually one of the things that we worked on the most, is that [participant] has to in some sense learn that academics actually are, as well as being group players in the university, being responsible for the courses, they are also independent researchers, you would be a researcher if you moved around HE, so we have talked about what an academic is, and it’s enabled [participant] to understand that you can’t simply place demands on an academic and expect to get the same answer”

Once support arrangements are agreed, the consensus amongst these academic staff was that it should be seen as the individual lecturer’s responsibility to ensure that reasonable adjustments are met. It would also be the student’s responsibility to alert staff if they were not receiving these necessary adjustments. In one case it was also seen as the student’s responsibility to ensure that the individual staff were aware of their support plan:

“It would be the lecturer’s responsibility to... the inclusion plan says that the students responsibility is X, Y and Z, and the staff, academic staff responsibility is X, Y and Z. And it says in the inclusion plan that, one of the things that it always says in the inclusion plans that its student’s responsibility to make staff aware of their requirements, as detailed in the inclusion plan.”

One academic also emphasised again how important it was to see it as a learning process:

Researcher: “It sounds like you have given it a lot of thought”.
Academic staff: “Again, it came out in practice, rather than theory, beforehand as it were, in planning. How’s this going to work? Oh yes, we are going to need a practical system. So that’s the way it worked.”

Two academics spoke of changing their lecture style having spoken to the participant, and being challenged to rethink the way in which they would deliver their lecture. In one case the link tutor also shared his planned adaptations with other staff with the hope they would make similar changes, whilst in the other it was in direct response to being challenged by the student.

“And as I was doing that, I did a couple and I saw [participant] there with her helper, and I thought ‘oh no, what am I doing, she can’t do this, she can’t see it!’ So I started reading it out as well saying ‘this is the question, these are the four answers, which do you think. You have got this, actually the answer is this’. It’s just articulating actually what was on the screen. That’s something I have to remember. I caught myself a couple of times, and once [participant] came up to me and said ‘you still forget don’t you!’ and I said ‘yeah, I do a bit’. And actually, when she’s not in lectures, I can always tell as she sits near then front, then I tend not to do that.. But yeah, that was something that I hadn’t thought about until she was actually there.”

However in general it seems there was little guidance received by the departments in terms of how to make their lectures accessible to a student with vision impairment:

Researcher: “Did the disability department provide any guidance for you and other lecturing staff, in terms of thinking how to make lectures more accessible?” Academic staff: “Erm, no, not really. No. I think it’s just a case of using our common sense. The notes were sent off early, and she got them printed off so she could have them there.”

“No, there was not any kind of, yeah, there wasn’t any specific guidance. The inclusion plan would make reference to [participant’s] condition, and it would say that these are the reasonable adjustments that staff much make, but they largely related to provision of materials, so there wasn’t like a guidance on, because it’s quite visual, so there wasn’t any guidance on how to rethink your lectures. Pedagogically it’s quite a big think to rethink that. It’s not just a couple of sentences really, it’s more involved. I am consciously aware in my lectures, usually too late, of how much I am moving towards slides, do you know what I

mean. I guess the short answer is no, not really. I have not had kind of bespoke guidance, no.”

Finally an academic described how in terms of delivery of lectures, they would tend to respond to the student raising issues, rather than in advance consider how best to make the lecture accessible to them:

Researcher: “Is there any opportunity maybe for staff to get together, and discuss any general concerns that they might have, or share ideas about ways that they could make things more accessible?” Academic staff: “Is there any opportunity? I guess, no there is no formal kind of... there is no requirement, and it won’t happen unless staff decide that we need to do it, yeah. I guess I would be the person that would make something like that happen. We certainly haven’t had that happen in the past. I guess [student] can speak to me, or disability support, and say that she was having a lot of difficulty, I would make sure that I then spoke to her about what we would do, and then again make contact with staff in the department. But I guess, if you are asking is that going to happen, there are no plans at the moment.”

8 Accessing examinations and assessments

In this section we present findings in relation to the participant's experiences of examinations and other assessments. Focus is given to the adjustments that were made, how these adjustments were coordinated and how in practice they went. We also provide an overview of the students who were delayed in completing the academic year (or failed to do so) and present the various reasons for this.

8.1 Access arrangements for exams

The most common form of assessment for the participants was through exams, although a small number of the participants were assessed primarily through coursework and practical assessments.

8.1.1 Exam access arrangements

We asked those participants who had taken exams what adjustments (if any) had been made to help facilitate them in taking those exams. Their responses are summarised in the table below.

Table 30: Exam access arrangements

	Total (N)
Extra time	19
Modified papers	17
Separate room	14
Reader/scriber/support worker	9
Use of laptop (and assistive tech where applicable)	9
Breaks	5
Able to adjust room	2
Changes to exam questions	2
Use of specialist equipment	1

The most common adjustment the participants spoke of was extra time. The amount of extra time given varied, ranging from 20% to 100%. Of particular note was one participant who had been used to having at least 50% extra time when at school, but was only allocated 20% through her support plan, which proved to be a struggle to her. Participants with severe visual impairment all tended to receive 100% extra time.

The second most common adjustment was receiving modified papers. The participants received their papers in a range of formats including

electronic papers, braille papers (some of which were outsourced), enlarged papers and papers printed on coloured paper. It was also common for the participants to be given separate rooms.

Nine of the participants were allocated reader/scribes. In one case this was not something that was discussed with the person, and was automatically allocated to them:

“You automatically get a reader and a scribe, and I was like ‘oh, ok, I am not sure I want you, but you can come and sit and entertain yourself for a couple of hours, that’s fine!’”

Nine participants report that they were able to use a laptop for recording their answers, and in some cases reading the exam questions. In some cases they were able to use their own laptop, whilst in others they were provided with a laptop by the institution.

“...they gave me a bland computer which had no internet, basically no way that I could cheat, but they gave me some of the exams on the computer. That was great, I could do what I want with it, I could chop up bits, move them away or something, or could enlarge without going to the photocopying room, so I did like that, and again it was just a bland computer that they provided with nothing on it really.”

Five of the participants who had large amounts of extra time were given rest breaks, where they would be able to put the pen down, have toilet breaks and leave the room for short periods:

“I was permitted breaks throughout my time, because six hours is quite a long time. I was allowed breaks whenever I needed them, and including lunch. I was permitted to leave the room during lunch.”

Two participants spoke of being able to make some adjustments to the room they were using, including adjusting the blinds, and moving their seat so they were sat in a place with good lighting.

“Just allowing me, in some circumstances, allowing me to sit in a place where there is relevant light”

Two participants reported that the content of their exam papers was altered in some way. In one case due to the potential length of time of the exam with the added extra time, the participant was asked to answer fewer questions in order to make the exam shorter. In the other case a question had to be substituted due to its very visual nature.

“It was decided that because the exam’s at uni, it would have gone on for six hours each exam, what they decided to do was say rather than do 4 questions, I could do three, but rather than have 6 hours of time, I would have 4 ½ to do three questions.”

Finally, one participant spoke of being allowed to use some specialist equipment in order to access his exams:

“I was permitted to use my own calculator, and take my braille in.”

8.1.2 How were the exam access arrangements coordinated?

Exam access arrangements were coordinated in a variety of ways. Initially the adjustments were discussed as part of the student’s support plan meeting with the DSO at the start of the year, and then these would continue with the student throughout the time at HE, unless there was found any reason to change them.

The amount of responsibility placed on the student prior to their exams varied greatly from institution to institution. For example, at one institution it was the student’s responsibility to provide confirmation of the adjustments that they would need for each individual exam. One of the participants attending this institution described at the end of her first year how problematic this was:

“Yes, they sent me a form saying give details of what exams I had, when I had them, and what I would need for them. And then, they provided some of the things, they generally gave me the details on what things would need to be done really last minute, so I wasn’t able to change things if I needed to.”

In other institutions the support was put in place independently of the student, but they were contacted on an individual basis with regards to these adjustments (primarily where they would be based for each exam). For one student this proved a problem as he did not receive this message in time:

“I had an email saying that I could go into sheltered conditions so I could work separately, and because I replied to that late, because I never actually saw that message, and stuff like that, I just went to the exam as normal, with everyone else. So email is not very convenient for me. They talk to people through emails every single time. There no text message, no phone calling and stuff like that. So sometimes that’s not a really good idea”

Finally, in one institution they have incorporated these exam adjustments into the central systems. The participant attending this institution described how she would receive her exam timetable in the same way as the other students would, but that it would have marked on it the separate room she had been assigned, and it would also have the adjusted times recorded:

“Yeah, they put that in automatically. I am pretty sure how it works is that you are put on a list somewhere if you have got a DSO, if you have got a DSO arrangement you get put on an exams list, and I get an email about four weeks before any exam season to say ‘just to confirm you are still on the DSO exams list, so you will get these alternative arrangements’. And then when it comes to getting my exams, they automatically factor in the extra time. So it will say start time and end time on these tab in [intranet], it will automatically factor in my extra time, and automatically puts me in one of the alternative rooms.”

8.2 Experiences in taking exams

At the end of each year of the participant’s time in HE, we have asked them about their experience of taking exams. There is particular concern with regards to the number of participants who have experienced problems with their exam arrangements – and sometimes in multiple exams, and across multiple years. These problems are discussed below.

Of the 24 participants we spoke with who had taken examinations, 12 reported having problems with the arrangements which were supposed to have been put in place.

Three of the participants report not receiving all their papers in an enlarged format. In two cases they were able to work around this, but in the third it caused considerable difficulties for the student:

Participant: "Yeah. It was meant to have everything provided in Arial 18. But yeah, that wasn't done at all." Researcher: "How many exams was that the case for?" Participant: "All of them." Researcher: "How many exams did you do?" Participant: "I think three." [...] Researcher: "Obviously they must have been aware the first time that it hadn't been provided in the right format, so I am just wondering how it happened the second exam that it wasn't right as well? Did you know anyone you could speak to so that it was right for the next one?" Participant: "I did, I was told it would be fine. Like always they said "oh, we'll do that". Then for some reason it never actually happens."

Another student reports that whilst the papers were modified, they were not modified sufficiently. Additionally there were diagrams and other material that she was supposed to use, but these had not been modified at all:

"There were a couple where they didn't enlarge the paper enough, and they said they thought it was because I was going to use the computer, and they didn't really give me the extra time they were supposed to, so I don't think they looked at the support agreement again. And then one I had quite a lot of difficulty because they printed tables and diagrams straight off SPSS and didn't modify them in any way, so I couldn't read those."

A student with severe visual impairment described her frustration at being given an exam paper that she could not access:

Researcher: "I remember seeing something on your Facebook that you had had a bit of a nightmare with some exams." Participant: "Oh god, yeah! I went to the [...] exam, it was four hour, huge, and they gave me the wrong paper in picture PDF form. And I had a bit of a meltdown because I was so nervous. It was so frustrating because I have been there for two years now, and it's such a basic thing. It's on every... it's on my inclusion [support] plan, or whatever it is, it's like the first thing that is on it, that I need stuff in Word. It gets sent to everyone. I tell people, I tell everyone, it's one of the first things I say if I am talking to someone, one of my tutors, or just anyone, that this is a requirement, that I need stuff in Word, I can't do picture PDFs. It's such a basic thing."

Two participants who received their paper in braille described having problems with these. Firstly, one participant found that the mathematical paper was written using a slightly different braille code to what he would normally work in, whilst the other discovered that there were inconsistencies between the student's braille copy of the paper and that of the reader/scribes.

“I think that there were occasionally errors. However, most of the time I thought I spotted an error, it was because it was in the version of braille that I have used from when I was young, all the way up to finishing sixth form. The version of braille I now use, is the version of braille that the braille strip produces when reading Latex, and is a hybrid of a few different braille codes, that means that suddenly I am trying to work out why there are brackets, when they are not brackets, they are a different symbol. So I had a bit of confusion there, but it was stuff that I could very easily sort out, particularly with the scribe there. And it was stuff that is probably more my fault than anyone else's.”

“I was given my own exam, actually they still didn't produce the braille paper properly, the braille paper didn't match the paper copy that my scribe was given, so we had to pause the exam half way through, go and get another print script, and I was like 'actually if I have done badly I am going to go and complain about it', but then I didn't, it didn't really seem worth the energy.”

Three of the participants spoke of having problems with the assistive technology that they were due to use. In one case the student arrived to the exam and discovered that the assistive technology that was detailed in her support plan had not been set up:

“My first exam I got there and, it was really funny, they were trying to put Magic on for me, which is like a magnifier! And because I had to do it on a PC, because I wasn't allowed to do it on my own laptop, I was trying to say, this is just a magnifier, 'no I need Jaws', and he was saying 'are you sure you don't need Magic?' and I was saying 'no, it is Jaws!'. 'Oh we can't see Jaws on it, what does Jaws look like?' 'I don't know, I don't know what it looks like! It probably says Jaws on it, I don't know!'. And then they were convinced that Jaws wasn't there, and we had to get the IT man to check on it, and all it was, was they didn't know what the icon

looked like, but the icon was right there and it said Jaws underneath it and everything!”

The second participant had experienced problems with her DSA provided laptop, so instead took along her personal laptop, but was told that she could not use it as it did not match what was written in her support plan.

“...so I went in with my Mac to have a laptop to write on, and they turned round and said that I couldn’t use it because your [support agreement] says you can use a Windows laptop, so I wasn’t able to use my Mac because it’s not Windows.”

The third participant experienced technical problems in his exam which meant he lost some time in the actual exam. This institution’s response to compensate for this was to let him resit the exam:

“The only time that it went wrong was, [...], there was a technical hitch, and basically that sort of ate up a bit of the time, but they didn’t add on time to the end. But luckily they agreed to let me resit the exam which I did last week.”

One participant had problems with the scribe he was given, as they did not have the necessary specialist knowledge:

“The other person attempted to do a physics exam on a laptop, without actually a working knowledge of physics, or physics symbols, so any time I tried to dictate an occasion with a Greek symbol, or some physics symbology in, she would have to check on a crib sheet on her iPad what the symbol look liked, and then go onto a laptop to find the appropriate symbol, and then I could continue dictating the rest of the equation, which was not easy.”

One participant spoke of her confusion of not being allocated the full amount of extra time that was detailed in her support plan:

Researcher: “How much more extra time did you get?” Participant: “I think it was 20%.” Researcher: “And how much did you get when you were at school?” Participant: “100%” Researcher: “Do you think that the 20% is sufficient?” Participant: “I am supposed to be provided with the same amount. I don’t know why they didn’t do that, actually.”

This participant had multiple problems with her exams throughout her time in HE. When asked on one occasion whether she had considered appealing her grades, she responded:

“It’s basically taking the case to someone in the department, but it would, at the time it would mean a resit, and I just didn’t have it in me to do another exam, because I have had that many.”

Finally, one participant had problems having been given an exam room which was in a noisy area, and disrupted his exam, and another participant found that by the time she had used her extra time, the exam finished a lot later than she would have liked.

“Only thing was exams started at one, and because the exams went on for so long, I was leaving at 7.30 in the evening. The latest they started was at 2, four and a half hours plus breaks, so sometimes it was 7.30...I would rather start early and leave early.”

Two participants also experienced problems with during the exam period with regards to their VI, but these were outside of the institution’s control. Firstly, one participant when they woke up in the morning discovered that they were having a problem with their vision. Positively the institution was able to arrange for a reader for her exam at short notice. A second participant had an urgent operation on his eye during the exam period which affected his preparation and ability to take his exams.

8.3 Assessed coursework, written assessments and referencing

The participants were also asked about the experiences with written assessments, and asked about any arrangements which were put in place for these. In particular, we noted from earlier interviews that some of the students with more severe visual impairments were having difficulties with formatting and referencing essays, and therefore a specific question was asked about this as part of the summer 2015 follow interviews.

8.3.1 Special arrangements for written assessments

The most common special arrangements that were put in place for the students in completing their written assessments were extensions to their work. Seven participants reported requesting for extensions. In

some cases they were requested for individual pieces of work, whilst in others it was because the student had found themselves so far behind in general:

“It was ok, because after the first time, I needed extensions really, because if I hadn’t had extensions I wouldn’t have materials in time for the deadlines, I was really dependent on those extensions. So after the first time it got easier, because I was doing it for [course], they were aware of my circumstances, so it was ok.”

Another student who received multiple extensions in her first year described the implications of these:

Participant: “Yeah, yeah. I had ridiculous amounts of extensions. I think in the end I submitted them on the day they went to the external board.” Researcher: “And how was it in terms of balancing everything in the end. Because the problem with getting extensions is everything is due at the same time.” Participant: “Yeah, that’s the problem I had. The problem was that so much had mounted up that wasn’t my fault. I was doing, come April, I was doing stuff that was due in November. And it was actually, I was so far behind, I went through a phase of ‘I am so far behind does it really matter’”

One participant reported that he requested an extension, but his application was lost:

Researcher: “Did you get any extensions on your coursework, bearing in mind...” Participant: “No, and this is another thing. I requested for that, and it never got sorted out.” Researcher: “So was it a case that it was denied, or did they just not sort it?” Participant: “It was lost.” Researcher: “So did you just hand it in at the normal time? Or was that the ones you gave up on?” Participant: “I just handed it in at the normal time. To be fair, everything was completed, but... it’s like my exams, I have the extra time, but I usually finish before, but that’s not the point, it’s when I do need it.”

Another participant reported that he would have benefited from an extension, but failed to arrange this in time:

Participant: “I was offered that, but never got around to arranging it with my lecturers, because apparently I had to arrange that before we got assigned the assignment, but I kept on forgetting to do that, which I may do that next year.” Researcher: “Do you think that you could have done with that?” Participant: “Yeah. It was my fault, but I was rushed for some things.”

One participant had the opportunity to discuss his assessments specifically in relation to his vision impairment when having regular meetings with his tutor:

“Yes, everyone had a check-up meeting on how they were doing, within the assignment, and they just kind of included it in that, they kind of said is there anything that you are particularly struggling with, regarding your visual impairment, things like books, have you been able to access the books that you need in the large font. And if not they gave me the e-books for them, and things like that.”

Of those who reported that they did not receive any adjustments for their assessments, one participant felt that he would have benefited from some form of adjustment. He was studying a practical course, which required using some technical equipment:

“I think if they could have gone through it separately with me, and slowed down, writing down the information as they were saying it, taught me what the buttons did so I could memorise it without actually having to look at them.”

8.3.2 Formatting and referencing in written assessments

Eight participants who are severely sight impaired were asked about their experience of formatting and referencing written assessments, and whether they received any support in doing so.

Four of the participants reported that they were assigned members of staff who assisted them with this:

“...she helps me source books from the library, and once I have got an assignment, then she helps me format it, in terms of making sure all the fonts are the same and I am referencing correctly in terms of putting the footnotes... just how it looks. She’s not allowed to help me with the actual content, just how it looks.”

One participant reported that they had a proof reader who would help them with certain aspects of this, but that they had also found some software which helped assist them:

Participant: “Well, I am quite lucky because I have got this awesome writing program which I bought myself and it uses formatting templates. So if it’s a straight forward essay I can generally just compile it in this program and it will format it how it’s supposed to be formatting. Referencing is just a case of learning the right order basically. I have recently discovered that you can use google scholar, you can use the citations, it’s really good.”
Researcher: “Do you know the name of that program?” Participant: “It’s called Scrivener.” Researcher: “Interesting – I haven’t heard of that.” Participant: “I adore it!”

One participant either received assistance from their note-taker, or they had an acceptance from the department that the referencing would not be done correctly.

“But a couple of my lecturers have said ‘you know what, it is really very visual, knowing where to put in italics and everything – make sure you have everything in it that you are supposed to have, if you can do put it in the right order and we will accept it and we are happy enough to say don’t worry about the formatting’”

One participant reports that he has not had to submit any assignments which required specific formatting, or referencing, but this was something that he would be shown how to do in the next academic year.

Finally, one participant did not receive any official ongoing assistance in this area, and reported struggling with this:

“It’s really difficult... note-takers were helpful with that, it took me a long time to get used to Harvard referencing. It’s quite difficult to learn, it took a very long time”

8.4 Delays in completing the academic year

During the course of the interviews with the participants in HE, it has been noted that a number of the participants have been delayed in completing the academic year for a variety of reasons, including:

- Students who retook a year of their course due to problems with curriculum access

- Students who had to take exams for the first time over the summer 'retake' period
- Students who due to problems faced during the academic year were given long extensions on written assessments

Here we present an overview of the participants who have been affected in these ways, and the reasons behind these delays. As we were unable to interview two participants at the end of their first year, this is based on the experiences of 30 participants.

Students who retook a year of their course

Four students have made the decision to retake the first year of their course, for reasons outside of their control, but for problems associated with their visual impairment:

- One participant had problems throughout the first year of the course having not been provided with material in an accessible format, not receiving the non-medical help that he was due to receive through DSA and having not being given accessible copies of exam papers in his final assessments
- One participant did not receive her equipment through DSA until towards the end of her first year, and had considerable problems with keeping up with the course as a result. The institution advised her to repeat the year
- Two participants did not receive any accessible copies of lecture material throughout the first year of the course. The institutions both acknowledged that they had not met the necessary reasonable adjustments and agreed to refund the fees for that academic year

Students who took exams during the summer period

Three participants were unable to take their exams during the normal exam period, and instead their exams were delayed until the time of the summer retakes.

- One participant had technology problems prior to their exam, and was advised to sit the exam for the first time at a later date
- One participant had to take multiple exams in the summer, due to a variety of reasons, including: having delays in receiving course notes leaving insufficient time to prepare for the exam; equipment problems; and problems with an inaccessible exam
- One participant took his exams in the summer having had an unavoidable operation on his eye during the academic year

Students who were given long extensions for written assessments

Four participants were given long extensions for their written assessments, which meant they were unable to complete the academic year until later on in the summer:

- One participant had a delay in receiving their equipment through DSA and as a result got behind in their assessed work
- One participant had equipment problems, and was unable to do any work for a significant period of time. As part of his course he had regular assessments, and therefore this had a knock-on effect during the rest of the academic year
- Two participants had multiple challenges during their first year, including not receiving accessible copies of course notes, not receiving accessible copies of textbooks and equipment failure. As a result they were given extensions for multiple assessments

These eleven cases demonstrate how the different challenges that the students face as part of accessing HE can have long term implications. For a student with vision impairment, the amount of time required to participate in a course often would exceed that of a sighted student, as they are often having to work at a slower pace and follow a longer process in getting accessible copies of text. This means that once the student is delayed during the course of the academic year, it becomes extremely difficult for them to catch up. Whilst it is inevitably frustrating for the students to still be completing assessments when their course mates have finished for the academic year, this had significant implications for the students:

- Whilst those students who have retaken the first year of the course have had their course fees refunded, it has still been necessary for them to take out another year of student loan, and also for DSA to fund their non-medical support and general allowance for an additional year
- As will be discussed in the next section, students with vision impairment tend to continue living in university-owned accommodation for all years of their course. As this accommodation is typically only available during term time, they would likely have an additional expense of finding accommodation during this time period
- Research evidence emphasises the importance of work experience for young people with vision impairment in ensuring successful transitions into employment. Our research to date has shown limited opportunity for students with severe vision

impairment in getting such experience when in school, although some of the students have been able to find work experience during the summer break of their courses. Obviously those students who were still taking assessments during this time would be more restricted in doing so.

9 Mobility training and orientation

In previous reports we have investigated how well the participants have felt they are able to get about independently, and looked at the mobility training that they have received whilst in compulsory education (e.g. Hewett et al, 2013). In this section we present our findings around the mobility support that the young people received once they got into HE, including who funded it, who provided it, and what it covered.

9.1 Provision of mobility support

Table 31: Have you received mobility training/orientation whilst in higher education?

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	15	52%
No	14	48%
Total	29	100%

Just over half of the participants reported receiving some form of mobility training or orientation whilst in HE. Of the 14 who said they had not received mobility training, one participant received assistance from her note-taker when moving between lectures, whilst another student who before going into HE thought that she would not need mobility support later changed her mind. This student withdrew from her course part way through the first semester having experienced a number of problems in accessing the course. She will be moving to a new institution, and has arranged to receive mobility support at the start of the academic year.

It is important to note that not all students will necessarily require mobility training, this will depend on the nature and severity of their vision impairment. Unsurprisingly there is a strong association between the severity of visual impairment and whether the participants received mobility training/orientation, with all participants who are registered blind having some form of mobility training. The remaining 12 (of 14 participants who did not receive mobility training) report that they did not require it.

Table 32: Who funded the mobility training/orientation?

	Total (N)
DSA	9
Institution	5
Guide Dogs	3

Nine of the participants had their funding for mobility training/orientation provided by DSA, five by the institution and three through Guide Dogs. In one case Guide Dogs provided funding at the start of their time in HE, whilst in the other two cases the participants received funding for mobility training/orientation through both DSA and Guide Dogs, as they were allocated a guide dog part way through their time in HE. All students who registered severely sight impaired/blind had their training funded by either DSA or Guide Dogs.

Table 33: Who provided the mobility training/orientation?

	Total (N)
Disability Support Office	7
Social Services	2
External agency	4
Guide Dogs	3
Unsure	1

There was considerable variation in terms of who provided mobility training/orientation for the participants. The most common provider was the DSO. This tended to be for those participants who did not receive funding through DSA, and those who did not require ongoing/extensive support. In these cases the provision was for orientation around the campus rather than mobility training (which would require a qualified rehabilitation officer). In terms of those with more severe visual impairments, two received their mobility through someone (presumably a rehabilitation officer) based within the local authority social services department, and four through external agencies who were identified by the institutions' DS service. Three received mobility training/orientation through Guide Dogs – one at the start of their time in HE, and two part way through HE once they had been matched with a guide dog (whilst they had already been taught routes through other providers, they needed to learn them specifically with a guide dog).

9.2 Arranging mobility training/orientation

In the summer 2015 interviews the participants who had received mobility training/orientation were asked about their experiences of arranging this, and asked to evaluate how well it was coordinated.

Who took responsibility for coordinating the mobility support varied from institution to institution. For example, in some cases the DSO took

charge of this, whilst in others the student themselves were expected to make contact with the person who would be supplying the training. One participant found the whole process to be particularly confusing:

Participant: "I rang someone who put me in touch with someone else, who then put me in touch with the mobility support. It was all a bit strange." Researcher: "So do you know who they worked for?" Participant: "I am not entirely sure. I think one of them was related to the RNIB, the first one, and then he put me in touch with [city] support, and then he put me in touch with someone... I am not sure the exact structure I went through." Researcher: "It sounds a bit messy." Participant: "It was a little bit messy." Researcher: "But it seems to have worked out?" Participant: "Yeah, trying to get back in contact with them was a bit awkward as well, but yeah."

Another participant described how beneficial it was being able to have orientation provided by the DSO, and how flexible they were:

"...most of my mobility was if I had a room that I needed to get to and I said 'ok where's this', I would just text them and say can you show me, and they would say 'yep, yep, we're on our way' and then they would say 'you need to go this way and just show me'. It was kind of progressive"

One participant only started to receive mobility support at a crisis point during his first term in HE. Prior to that the DSO were not aware of him and the fact he would need orientation around the campus:

Participant: "Yeah, I kind of went to pieces when I went to the accommodation, and the women from accommodation sorted it for me." Researcher: "So what happened there?" Participant: "I had a really bad morning, I got lost, and I kind of broke down. So she sorted it all out for me."

Whilst all of the participants eventually had positive tales to share with regards to their mobility training and orientation, almost all had some obstacles which they had to overcome at first.

Firstly, two participants who both received their mobility training through social services had considerable problems in getting this arranged in time for the start of term. In both cases they had also applied for DSA a

long time in advance of their courses starting, and therefore found this delay particularly disappointing, which in part may reflect confusion about the roles of DSA and social services. One of the students was very upset at being accused of leaving it until the last minute:

“And then last summer I rung up, and I then got blamed for apparently leaving it until the last minute, which I felt really upset and really patronised about because I had done the opposite. I knew full well that that was not the thing to do. And I had made sure. My parents had made sure. You know [DSO] had made sure. We had all made sure that it was done well before the last minute. So we did that, that happened, and then there was, [DSO] had to have arguments the councils, [institution city] Council, [home city] Council, about who was to provide the mobility. It meant that I did not get it until September which I was really annoyed about, because it meant that I had to rush through it too... how it impacted on my studies, rather than it being nice and relaxed, and it was awful. So it was a bit yuck really, that situation. It was ok in the end, but talking about being told that I had left it too late was not right, because we had all made sure that things were in place.”

The other student was unsure where the fault lay after being given conflicting stories between the DS services and social services:

“My mobility, there was an issue with the funding, but the social services in the area didn’t know that I was going to be there, they had no... they weren’t aware of me...it was me and my parents who got in touch with them in the end and they just didn’t know that I was there.”

In fact, young people who will require mobility support at university should apply both for DSA funding and also advise their home local authority social services department, which then has the responsibility to notify social services in the LA of the institution (see RNIB guidelines for further information: RNIB, 2015) Usually, DSA covers mobility training on and around the campus and social services provides mobility training outside the campus.

Another student described how she had to rely on note-takers to get around between lecture halls as she did not have mobility support sufficiently early. This was also true for another student who was unable

to move into her institution-owned accommodation as early as she would have liked:

“Well, I wasn’t able to move into my accommodation early to get some orientation and mobility and stuff, because of construction work in the campus happening. I didn’t start getting mobility until a month after I started.”

One participant who was able to have mobility support in good time found that there was too much information to absorb in a short space of time, and therefore initially she really struggled in learning routes around the campus. She was however very grateful at having the opportunity to start the mobility training early:

“Personally I really struggled at first, just because everything was so stressful and really coming at once. I was struggling to maintain the information. It was fine. I was really lucky. I had it straight away, I think it was the third day I had been there, and I was having mobility training, and I know my friends, they had to wait like months sometimes, which would be a nightmare, so I was really lucky.”

A student who generally was positive of the mobility support he received spoke of his frustration of having to constantly learn new routes due to building work which was taking place, whilst a further student found that despite having orientation, she still had to spend time learning additional routes herself:

“I’ve kind of learned my way around, but it did take a while, because I had to learn a lot of things on my own. I had to learn shortcuts – they took me all the long routes, they didn’t show me the short cuts I could use.”

Finally, one participant described how because her institution employed someone from a specialist agency, they travelled a considerable distance to get to her, which meant that a lot of her budget was spent on the trainer’s travel time:

“The thing that did annoy me was that this guy lived quite a way away, and on the DSA sheet that I had to sign, he would sign three hours or whatever when we only had two. So he was taking away my hours for his travelling, and that bugged me”

9.3 Scope of mobility support

The participants who received mobility training/orientation were also invited to discuss the scope of the mobility support they received, both in terms of what they mobility training/orientation covered, and also in terms of whether it was sufficient.

As would be expected, the priority tended to be to ensure that the students could get to and from their lectures, and to other key buildings such as the library. The support that was received beyond this tended to differ from individual to individual, with many participants describing limitations in the mobility training/orientation which they received.

9.3.1 Limitations on campus

Six participants spoke of limitations in the mobility support which they received around the campus. A common theme which emerged in the course of interviews was the students not being shown more recreational aspects of the campus:

“Not really, there’s probably, they should have shown around the actual union bit, because especially when you are out, you have no idea where going”

“It covers the route to the student union and the student shop, but it doesn’t cover the inside, so things like there is a café in the main building, so I can get mobility to the café, but I can’t get mobility in the café. So, I mean, my mobility officer has been in there, in the café, not doing official mobility, just sort of walking around, so I have an idea of it, I have a pretty good idea of it. It’s just that you can’t put that down as official mobility.”

Three participants described how they were either not able to get independently to buildings on campus, which they considered to be central to their learning experience, or alternatively whilst they could get to the buildings, they were not shown how to get around them.. For example, one participant did not know how to get to the institution’s DS service, whilst another student did not know how to get around the library. At the end of her time in HE, a third student reflected on how there were some services she would have accessed if she had known how to get to them:

“I think the building that had the library, there are lots of different sections to that building, like courtyards nearby that I would have really liked orientation training with there. Also just showing me different offices where if I needed help with one thing I could go to that office, and things like that. I never knew where they were.”

A further participant highlighted how she was given insufficient hours for mobility support to learn all the routes that were needed:

Participant: “That was the thing which they didn’t seem to give me that many hours of. There were a few things that they kind of underestimated how much I would be using them. Either that or I underestimated it.” Researcher: “How did they come about on the figure of mobility hours, did they talk it through with you?” Participant: “I’m not sure. They kind of did. We guessed that I would need a certain number of hours, and they gave me enough, but I got through them quite quickly.”

9.3.2 Limitations off campus

Eight of the participants also expressed their frustrations and spoke of the limitations of not receiving any mobility support external to their institution – for example in the city centre, or the areas where students would typically live when not in university-owned accommodation.

Researcher: “What kind of things did your mobility training cover?” Participant: “Just campus. Which is kind of annoying as it means I have been in [city] a year and don’t know any of [city]. But I can’t complain.”

Two participants spoke of trying to arrange off campus mobility, but encountering problems:

Researcher: “So what did your mobility support cover?” Participant: “All around the campus, and it would have been off campus as well until the council starting kicking off again, being funny again [...] I have managed to work out enough of it myself to get by. I was very reluctant to pursue the council again, I kept running into brick walls.”

One participant reported that he had been into town with friends, but that this had not proved helpful in getting to know to get around the town independently.

“I have got into town a bit. Generally in groups where I am being guided. When I am being guided I don’t generally absorb much about the route I am on, I am taking, I just follow where everyone else is going, or I am guided where everyone else is going. It’s only when I am walking myself that I think about where I am going, that I actually learn a route. So I have been into town and wandered around a bit, between pubs and stuff, and I have wandered through, I have gone to events at people’s houses, picked up at bus stops and stuff. But apart from that, I have not really investigated town much.”

This particular student had received extensive mobility support in the past which has given him confidence in exploring places independently. This however is not true for all students, as in the case of this participant:

Researcher: “I know before you said that you hadn’t got to know the town. Have you managed to get to know that at all?”

Participant: “No, because to get to the town you have to go down to the train station, and I don’t know where the train station is or anything.”

Researcher: “Are there any other routes you would have liked your orientation support to have covered?”

Participant: “I would have liked to have been down to the bus stop, the train station, if I knew where they were if I needed them, but I wasn’t.”

We note an association between some participants’ lack of off campus mobility and their decision making in continuing to live in institution-owned accommodation, rather than moving into private accommodation. This is explored further in the next section.

Interestingly, three participants who required off campus mobility support did have this provided by the institution’s DS service. One participant spoke very positively about this, and highlighted how he knew it was not something that all students with visual impairment receive:

“I had a bit of mobility training, so I had a couple of sessions where [name removed] my support worker would just show me around the campus, and the local area as well. I have heard a lot of stories about people going to university and saying that if they wanted mobility outside of the campus, then the university was quite stingy about that and they wouldn’t do that because... it’s quite, it’s very

relaxed at [institution] and they are humans at the end of the day. If I ask them would you be able to show me to Costa Coffee across the road, then they would say that's no problem, they would take time out of their schedule to do that, and they are very friendly in that sense. They would have no problem in doing that."

Two participants living away at HE who were matched with guide dogs spoke positively about how they would shortly be able to receive off-campus mobility training through the Guide Dogs service.

9.4 Accessibility of the institution

In the summer 2015 interviews, we asked those participants who sometimes found getting around independently a challenge how accessible they considered the institution's environment to be. The responses were mixed, with some participants highlighting positive aspects of the institution, whilst others identified some particularly negative areas. Inevitably their overall experience was linked to the severity of their visual impairment.

9.4.1 Positive experiences

Eight participants spoke positively about the accessibility of the institution. One participant described how the design of the buildings helped him be able to get about independently:

"I think they take into account visual impairment and disability as a whole really. Each floor is a different colour, even little things like that help, you know where you are, everything is a different colour, everything is signposted up, and all the room numbers are quite big as well in terms of font size, I can see those quite well. I don't think I have ever struggled getting around really. It's quite self-explanatory really."

Another participant who is a long cane user spoke of how across the campus there are tactile markings in place:

"Brilliant. There's tactile paving, tactile lines. They are great."

A final participant acknowledged that there were problems, but described how they would be quickly resolved when identified:

“I emailed him [university estates] and said about a step, and I went down the step the next day and it had been fixed. I hadn’t been on campus in two days, by the third day he had fixed it.”

9.4.2 Negative experiences

Seven participants reported more negative experiences around their HE environment.

One participant who attended an older institution experienced problems with the design of the buildings:

“It’s quite an old university so it’s quite difficult sometimes, because it’s old buildings and it’s not always logically designed, so it’s a bit difficult. Usually I just need to be shown the first time, and after that I will remember where it is, it’s not a problem.”

Another participant experienced problems with poor lighting and hazards across the campus:

Researcher: “And how are you finding getting around the campus, now it’s darker and things.” Participant: “I don’t like it.” Researcher: “What is it in particular that you are not liking?” Participant: “It’s just very hard because there are potholes and manholes all over the place.”

Two participants identified problems with the tactile markings on their campuses, whilst in the case of another institution, the participant reported that they struggled with there being very little tactile marking in general:

“I had an issue with the...the tactile paving on my campus is just really random. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to where some of the tactile paving is, it makes no sense. My mobility officer in the first year, she requested that they move some of them around during the summer whilst I wasn’t there, which they did, but what they did was they moved... basically what it was, was none of the tactile pavings were aligning, so you had a tactile paving on maybe one side of the zebra crossing, but on the other it would be to the side of the zebra crossing. So it would throw you off, because you had to walk on a diagonal. And then sometimes there would be tactile paving on one side, and nothing on the other side. There seemed to be no reason for it being there.”

Another participant reported:

Participant: "Oh god, it's appalling! ...There are all these car parks where you spend twenty minutes trying to find other routes so you don't have to walk through... all the route up to the [building] is big open things, with all the planters and funny posts and everything in the middle. And you just think 'oh gosh'. ... For a white cane user it's awful." Researcher: "So what's particularly bad about it" Participant: "The wide open space, with no sort of lines or anything to follow. If there's a straight line down the middle, a lot of the time they put things in the middle that you have to walk around."

As reported previously, one participant had problems with the amount of construction taking place across the campus. This meant that he needed to learn new routes to get to the same buildings:

"It's just sort of a general, the kind of confusion that's sometimes around, because obviously as I say, the sizes of the routes are really big, so it's sort of confusing, and again with the landmarks changing all the time, it's more confusing."

Finally, one participant had difficulties with the signs on buildings, which meant they often had to ask for help:

Participant: "...it was the signs on the buildings were so bad. If it was a new room I nearly always had to ask someone where I was going, I could never find it by myself." Researcher: "Could you find the buildings ok, was it more once you were inside?" Participant: "Buildings I had to memorise, I couldn't do those on my own either, I had to memorise where they were. The only one that was really clear to me was the science building, and that's because it looked so different."

10 Living independently in Higher Education

In this section we explore the participant's experience of living independently whilst in HE, including the choices that they had available to them, the appropriateness of the accommodation they were in, and any lessons which may be learned from their experiences.

10.1 Accommodation choices

Table 34: Type of accommodation in first year

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Institution-owned accommodation	23	72%
Private accommodation	2	6%
Lived at family home and commuted	7	22%
Total	32	100%

Almost three quarters of the participants spent their first year living in institution-owned accommodation, two participants lived in private accommodation (one because his HE institution did not have any accommodation options, and the other because he had concluded that the institution-owned accommodation was too expensive), whilst seven lived at their family home and commuted. For six of the participants their decision to stay at home seems to be linked more toward financial and practical considerations rather than their visual impairment, however one participant did link this decision to the fact that her mother acted as her carer.

Table 35: Accommodation in subsequent years

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Continued in institution-owned accommodation	10	31%
Moved into/continued in private accommodation	14	44%
Lived at home and commuted	6	19%
N/A Didn't continue into second year	2	6%
Total	32	100%

In their second year, ten of the participants decided to continue living in institution-owned accommodation, 14 moved into or continued in private accommodation, and 6 continued living at their family home and commuting. Two of the participants did not continue into the second year as discussed elsewhere in the report.

We were particularly interested in those participants who decided to continue living in institution-owned accommodation, and the reasons behind this decision.

Table 36: Registration type by second year accommodation choice

	Continued in institution-owned accommodation	Moved into private accommodation
Registered severely sight impaired/blind	8	2
Registered sight impaired/partially sighted	2	7
Not registered	0	2
Participant does not know if registered	0	1
Total	10	12

The table above looks at the participant’s second year accommodation choice by their registration type. We note that of ten participants who are registered as severely sight impaired/blind, only two moved into private accommodation, and their responses to further questions suggests that living off campus presented a barrier for these students, as discussed below.

10.2 Barriers in moving into private accommodation

Those participants who decided to continue in institution-owned accommodation beyond their first year in HE were asked in the summer 2015 follow up interviews to discuss this decision further.

10.2.1 Themes identified

Concerns about travelling independently

Two of the participants had concerns about needing to use public transport in order to get from private accommodation to the institution:

“I think that there is student accommodation nearby. One of the difficulties of moving out, transport to and from lectures would be harder, maybe I would be ready for it by then, I don’t know.”

“I thought about it this year actually, because my flat mates who I did end up getting on with, moved off, but yeah I did consider it, but I thought overall it would be better to be campus, because if I am struggling to get to lectures and things, it would mean I would have the bus ride to contend with. If I am already feeling a bit tense I don't want to have to deal with that as well.”

Another participant was concerned about being able to safely navigate his way to the institution:

Researcher: “I think before you were saying that you wanted to stay on in halls. Would it have been nice to move out with your friends?” Participant: “It makes it more difficult. Halls is really the only option because of how close it is. Having a house just makes it... travelling across roads and stuff, more difficult.” Researcher: “Is it more the traveling aspect that is putting you off then?” Participant: “Yeah.”

Desire to stay closer to lecture halls

Two participants simply felt that for them it was easier to remain closer to their lecture buildings:

Researcher: “Can you tell me more about your decision to stay on campus rather than go into private accommodation?” Participant: “Again, it was based on the proximity to lectures and things, and also the friendliness of the campus. The campus is outside of town. There's less hassle in terms of traffic and things.”

“I have actually chosen not to move off campus for the third year, because... well I have got a nice room on campus. I have got... it's just so much easier to be on campus. It's where I need to be. It just seems to be unnecessary fuss to have to get up an hour before lectures just to get in on time, where I can get up an hour before lectures, have a nice breakfast, possibly have a shower before going off to lectures, you know nice and relaxed, or get up an hour beforehand, spring to catch the bus, stand at the bus station for 20 minutes, and then be sweating as I just get to the lecture on time.”

As has been highlighted throughout this report, students with visual impairment in HE can face considerable challenges in accessing their courses, and therefore it is understandable that they may choose to take an 'easier' option in being closer to their lecture halls. This was identified

by one participant who felt that moving into private accommodation was an additional stress that he did not want to have:

“It’s just easier in my opinion. Having a house would have been too stressful, and I would have had to have learned all the layout again, my house in relation to everything else, in relation to a familiar point of reference. Sometimes students don’t mind doing that and that’s fine, but for me personally that’s my view.”

Lack of suitable accommodations

Another participant felt that moving into private accommodation was not a viable option to her, as there was not suitable accommodation available:

“It’s not necessarily through choice, I have no choice because there is no disabled accommodation. It doesn’t exist. So it’s always Halls.”

Shared accommodation with a guide dog

On a practical note, two participants were concerned about having their guide dog in a shared house, and the arrangements that would need to be made:

“It’s easier in terms that there is already a pen on campus for [guide dog]. I am quite happy in the room that I have got, I am happy having my own kitchen, my own space, you know. [Guide dog] gets so much attention, I did think about that, if I were to move into a shared house, I wasn’t sure if... it’s not that she wouldn’t get any peace, but if people would be able to leave her alone enough. So yeah, I am quite happy staying in my room.”

Lack of friends for house-share

Finally, two of the participants discussed how at the time at which people were choosing their off campus accommodation they had not managed to get to make friends that they could potentially live with. One of these students had had considerable difficulties in the first year with mobility support and her course, which in turn caused a barrier for her in making friends with her peers. This is something which is discussed further in the Section 12.

“I would have liked to if possible, but I didn’t, I didn’t make sort of a good group of friends, I didn’t get into a group until quite late on in

the year, so it was a bit late to think about moving in with them or anything, because most of them live off campus and have already got a house.”

Researcher: “Do you know if any of your friends are going to be staying on as well?” Participant: “No, they are in houses.”

Researcher: “Is that something you would have liked to have done?” Participant: “Yeah, I would have liked to have done, but I didn’t really have anyone to live with. But actually it might have worked out for the best, if I am going to be getting a guide dog now, so it might be good.”

These findings mirror those of the Futuretrack research study, which tracked the experiences of a number of students through their time in HE (Purcell et al, 2009). They found that students with disabilities were less likely to move out of institution-owned accommodation after the first year of their studies, and that this was particularly true for students with visual impairment. In the Futuretrack study, only 12% of all students lived in institution-owned accommodation after the first year (17% of students who had lived in institution-owned accommodation in the first year). In contrast in our study 33% of students lived in halls of residence after the first year, and 45% of those who lived in institution-owned accommodation in the first year, continued to do so.

10.2.2 Implications of barriers in moving into private accommodation

With research evidence demonstrating that students with severe visual impairments are less likely to move out into private accommodation than their sighted peers, this raises two concerns. Firstly, it suggests that these students are restricted in engaging fully with the HE experience. Secondly, it means that these students are likely facing an additional expense to attend HE in comparison to the average student, as typically private accommodation is cheaper than institution-owned accommodation. This hypothesis was investigated further with two participants. One participant had decided to stay in institution-owned accommodation, but she informed the researcher that in staying halls of residence she was paying considerably more than she would have done if she had moved into a shared house:

“Yeah, it is much more expensive. You pay around £80 a week for a room in a house including like water bills and, about £80-90 a week, and I am paying £144.”

We also asked the student who moved out of halls of residence into private accommodation how much she was saving each month, which she estimated to be around £350. In this case, the student in her first year had received recommendation from the DSO to go into a very expensive hall which offered studio apartments, so she would not need to share facilities with other students. However, whilst she had been placed into this accommodation for reasons associated with her visual impairment, the accommodation was not subsidised in any way by the institution or by DSA.

Another student described how the accommodation which she was placed in was not really suitable for her, but she had no choice as it was the only accommodation that she could afford on the budget she had available to her. She was later disappointed to discover that students with visual impairment at other institutions were offered subsidies towards their accommodation:

“Well, [institution] is way too expensive, and it was the cheapest for what I wanted. Hence why the only reason I needed an en-suite bigger room is because of my disability, and it penalised me money wise, hence why being informed that I could possibly have had some money towards accommodation would have been nice, because basically I didn’t base my choice on my needs, I based it on what I could afford.”

10.2.3 Aspirations to move into private accommodation

Table 37: Aspire to live in private accommodation

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Yes	5	42%
No	7	58%
Total	12	100%

We also asked the participants who had not lived in, or arranged to live in, private accommodation, whether they had any aspirations to do so during their time in HE. Five informed the researcher that this was something that they would like to do at some point during their time in HE.

“I would like to, at some point at my time at uni I would like to possibly move out of halls, I don’t know if I will or not because I

have the option to stay through all of degree, but I could be tempted to move out, it would be an interesting experience.”

One of the participants who is registered severely sight impaired had already started putting plans into place to move out in the third year, and seemed confident that this was something that he would do.

10.3 Institution-owned accommodation

As previously identified, 23 participants lived in institution-owned accommodation in their first academic year, and 10 made the decision to continue living in this accommodation beyond their first year. Here we present an overview of the type of accommodation the participants lived in, and present certain considerations and issues identified, which are specific to their visual impairment.

10.3.1 Types of accommodation

Some of the participants described the types of accommodation they were living in. These include:

- Individual room with shared kitchen and shared bathroom facilities (3)
- Individual room with en-suite bathroom and shared kitchen facilities (9)
- Studio with en-suite bathroom and individual kitchen (3)

“So I am going to, it’s a building of little studio flats. So I will have my own room, my own kitchen, my own bathroom. So that will be really cool.”

“It was like a corridor with individual en-suite rooms and the main kitchen.”

10.3.2 Considerations in relation to visual impairment

Choosing accommodation

The participant’s decision making process when choosing institution-owned accommodation differed according to whether they felt they needed to take their visual impairment into consideration or not. In Hewett et al (2015e) we explored whether the participant’s visual impairment affects them in living independently, with several of the participants indicating that they did not anticipate it affecting them. This was true for several of the participants in HE, who reported that their

visual impairment was not a consideration when choosing their accommodation.

“Not really, it was more just price and the same kind of criteria as everyone else – price and location and that kind of thing.”

However, for those with more severe visual impairments, there were a number of considerations to make, such as whether they would be able to share facilities or need their own bathroom/kitchen, whether the accommodation was in a suitable location for getting to their lectures, whether there was enough desk space for all their equipment, and whether the room was big enough for a guide dog.

Four of the participants described receiving recommendations to help them decide which accommodation would suit them best. One participant spoke with a friend who already attended the same institution, and also had a visual impairment. Another participant received recommendation from the institution’s DS service, and then went to view it himself before making a decision:

“No, that was really the only one that they recommended, and they showed us round and we decided to book a room there and then because it was quite impressive.”

Three participants reported that the options available to them were limited by the institution itself, as they were directed towards a specific type of accommodation. In two of these cases, the participant was disappointed with the accommodation they ended up in:

“It was just how it worked out. I put my first choice as self-catering, and then I got put in catered, and I got a phone call from someone in disability saying we think it will be easier for you if you go to catered, because it’s right next to the halls.”

Another theme which emerged from those participants who required specific accommodation for their visual impairment was that it was often one of the more expensive accommodation options that the institution offered:

“Of course it is an expensive part of accommodation, as accommodations go on campus I think it’s one of the more expensive ones on the campus, but you know, not that bad.”

Seven participants required larger rooms for reasons associated with their visual impairment, whilst another participant felt that she needed an en-suite room. Two participants shared that they were due to receive funding through DSA or the institution to pay for a larger room (the primary reason for this being they were expected to have a guide dog). In both cases, neither ended up having a guide dog in the first year, as they were not matched with one in time. Additionally, neither ultimately ended up being compensated for the extra money that they spent on having a larger room. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, although in both cases the students were confused about the procedures which should have been followed:

“I am annoyed because I picked a larger room which cost more, and I did that because I thought I was going to get a guide dog. I also thought DSA were going to cover the cost of the larger room, but they didn’t.”

“It was a bit confusing. I know we put in a request for it to be met, and then I was told that it had been, but I don’t think it was DSA that were meeting that, I think it was actually the university. It was all a bit confused, and I was never sure who was supposed to deal with that. So I spoke to the uni, and they said we are supposed to cover it, but the premise was that it was for the dog, which obviously you haven’t got, so if you haven’t got the dog, we won’t meet the extra cost. It was all a bit confused, and in the end it was easier to say ‘fine’.”

One participant who believed he would have benefited from a larger room due to reasons associated with his visual impairment was disappointed at not being able to afford the accommodation which would have best suited him. The institution in question did not discuss accommodation options with him, and it was also something that was not discussed as part of his DSA assessment (although he later learned it could have been):

“...it penalised me money wise, hence why being informed that I could possibly have had some money towards accommodation would have been nice, because basically I didn’t base my choice on my needs, I based it on what I could afford.”

Upon arriving at their institution he concluded that the accommodation was not suitable for him:

“Then when I got there, the flat didn’t really suit my needs, and when I asked them to do some things, they already had a list of ten things they needed to do, and I felt it was not fair to ask them to do more things, when I knew it wasn’t going to get done...it was like a box room with shared facilities, and for me that didn’t work.”

Finally, one participant said that she would have benefited from a larger room as it would have helped her overcome some challenges in keeping items better organised.

“Yeah, especially because you don’t have a lot of storage place in the room, so I had to get my own so that I knew where stuff was.”

In contrast a small number of the participants had positive experiences when arranging adjustments in relation to their visual impairment. One participant reports that his preference was prioritised by the accommodation services, due to his disability:

“Again the university prioritised my choice, because obviously having a visual impairment, having a disability they do that. That was fine.”

Additionally, two of the participants who decided to stay in institution-owned accommodation shared that the institution had offered them the same room for the next academic year:

“Yeah basically I have rebooked the same room. They allow you to do that, so I rebooked the same room.”

Practical considerations

Moving in early

The participants’ responses also highlighted some practical considerations which may need to be made. Firstly, several of the participants moved into their institution-owned accommodation before the majority of the other students, to enable them to settle in and start their mobility training and orientation. When asked what advice he would give to students, one participant responded:

“I would say moving in early and start familiarising yourself, make sure the room is big enough and that you have got enough space at a desk.”

Whilst in the case of one student this was something which was automatically offered to students with disabilities, two other students emphasised that you often need to ask for adjustments such as this:

Researcher: “You were saying that you went a week earlier. Did you move into your accommodation then?” Participant: “Yeah.”
Researcher: “How was that arranged?” Participant: “I had to phone up the accommodation office and say that I was coming a week earlier, and that was fine.”

“I think I could have probably asked, and they would probably have said yes, but I didn’t. I think in a lot of ways one thing I have realised is that most of the time you have to ask if you want something, or ask if it’s possible to have something, normally they don’t think to ask. Normally the policy is that you just ask if you want it.”

Another participant was very keen to move into her institution-owned accommodation early, but was told at this was not possible due to construction work:

“Well, I wasn’t able to move into my accommodation early to get some orientation and mobility and stuff, because of construction work in the campus happening. I didn’t start getting mobility until a month after I started.”

As well as allowing the students to have time to learn routes prior to their lectures starting, moving into the institution-owned accommodation early also allows the student to learn these routes whilst the institution itself is very quiet.

For those who moved into the accommodation earlier than other students, there was some confusion about who should take responsibility for paying for this. In some cases the institution met this cost, whilst in others they expected the student to pay.

Modifications to living space

Eight of the participants described modifications which were either made to their accommodation, or that they would have benefited from if they had been made. The majority of adjustments made were ones to the kitchen. These were made by someone from the institution, or in situations where this had not been discussed with the institution, by the young person/their family:

Participant: "Not by the university, but beforehand we went in the kitchen and put stickers on things. Numbers on the microwaves and things like that which were larger." Researcher: "Did the university ask if you would need anything like that?" Participant: "No"

Participant: "The room wasn't so much modified, it was more the living area, the lounge and the hobs and things like that. For instance, with the hobs, the dials were brailled, all the dials had braille symbols on them." Researcher: "Brilliant, and who arranged for that?" Participant: "I managed to arrange that with the accommodation management." Researcher: "Did they suggest that, or did you ask them to that?" Participant: "Yeah. I asked them because it's, they just didn't think about it, so I had to ask them."

One participant reports that she was not allowed to make any adjustments to her kitchen:

Participant: "No, I wasn't allowed to." Researcher: "What would you have liked to have done?" Participant: "Something different with the hob. It was one of those flat tops, halogen heated jobs, so you have got no way of feeling where the rings or anything are, and I wanted to either get someone to replace the unit with raised up rings, or draw around the edges of where they were, and I wasn't allowed to do that."

We would suggest that ideally in this situation, the young person would have taken this up further with the DS service.

Whilst several participants reported or suggested adjustments which could be made to kitchen equipment, one participant believed there to be no adjustments that could be made. In previous interviews we have identified that some of the participants are unfamiliar with adjustments which can be made to make equipment more accessible to them.

Researcher: “So what about in terms of the cooker, microwave, anything like that? Were you able to use those ok?” Participant: “They are hard to use, but nothing can be done about that.”

Common adjustments to rooms included extra desk space and storage, and adjustments to the lighting:

“My room... yes actually, because they put in my needs assessment, the second assessor, a desk plant, extra shelving because obviously our books are more bulky, things like that.”

“If someone asked, they would do it. They also changed the lights for me, because they are the wrong lights for my eyes, they were strip lights.”

Importance of self-advocacy

It has been identified in several places throughout this section how often it relied upon the student raising the need for adjustments. This approach from the institution assumes that, firstly, the student has the confidence to do this, and secondly, the student is aware of the adjustments that they needed. In Hewett et al (2015e) we identified that several of the participants felt ill-prepared for living independently, and were not necessarily aware of the adjustments that could be made.

Recommendations from participants

Five of the participants gave recommendations to HE institutions on how best to support students with visual impairment moving into institution-owned accommodation.

The most common recommendation was to ensure that the equipment provided was accessible for people with visual impairment:

“I would say that they would need to design equipment specifically for them. I have hardly used the microwave, I haven’t really used the microwave in the kitchen because I can’t see to do it. It has to be a talking microwave, and things like that, they need to put specialist equipment into the kitchen, microwaves and that. I don’t know entirely what is available in that range now, but they need to cater that kitchen for someone with a visual impairment. But with the number of blind students they have its more than likely not worth it.”

Another common recommendation was to ensure that necessary adjustments were made to the student's room to suit them and their visual impairment:

"...make sure the room is big enough and that you have got enough space at a desk. Don't to be afraid to ask for stuff like extra plug sockets, because I did – in my first year flat I needed one so I asked and I got. So don't be afraid to ask, no question is too much"

Two participants also spoke of the importance of thinking about the location that the student might need, and to make this decision in conjunction with the student:

"I think I'd say have the building in a location which is easy to point out from the rest. Like the way that the building is structured where I was is really confusing as nearly all the buildings are the same, so that area you could get really really lost in. And also at a place where... basically a place where you don't have to cross as many roads, go through car parks and such. The problem with where I was, was the fact that the lights weren't working, and I had to cross a bridge over water. There were no lights and it's incredibly dark, no fencing so I could have easily fallen in. I think that's one of the biggest things I'd say – make sure its somewhere they can find in the dark."

Finally, one participant gave a general piece of advice to all HE institutions:

"And ask a person what they need I guess. Be prepared to actually listen to the answer. And do that before they move in... a bit of it is... it's all business. Is it going to be cheaper for us to put you somewhere which is more expensive for you, and then we have to do less to it, or can we get a bit more money by saying 'you can get this, and this is the only way you can get it'"

10.4 Private accommodation

10.4.1 Overview of participants living in private accommodation

As previously discussed, two participants had lived in private accommodation during the first year of their courses, and 14 made the decision to move into private accommodation after the first year of their courses. Of the two participants who lived in private accommodation

from the start of their courses, one had been directed to this accommodation by his HE institution and was living with other students on his course (the HE provider did not own accommodation, so this was the main option taken by students on his course). This student did not require mobility support, but did rely on his course mates at the beginning to help him navigate the local area. The second student had decided against living in institution-owned accommodation due to how expensive he considered it to be, and instead had found a house-share close to the institution. He received mobility support through DSA which enabled him to get to and from the institution.

In the second year, all but one of the participants living in private accommodation had moved in (or arranged to move in) with friends that they had made during the first year of their course. All the participants described their accommodation as being a short walk or a short bus journey away, living in popular student areas.

“We sorted it out through the student union, we just found somewhere we liked and moved into it both years. That’s it really pretty much...It was located close to the centre of town, about three miles away so it was a bit of a trek, but they were both on bus routes so you could be on campus in 15 minutes, so it was pretty good...It was pretty straight forward, we were a minute away from the bus stop and the buses came every ten minutes so I didn’t have to wait around too long, and then just had to get on the campus and it would take me to campus.”

“The private accommodation we chose is closer to the main university building, and that’s primarily why we chose it, because it’s closer to the university. That’s what we went with, there were three of us at the main university building. So we went with what we could find with what is closest.”

10.4.2 Students with severe visual impairment who transitioned into private accommodation

As we have noted that there are several barriers for students with visual impairment in moving into private accommodation, it is particularly interesting to look at the experiences of two participants who felt that they were able to do this.

One of these participants found a good group of friends at his institution, and decided to move into a shared flat with them. As his institution is a

city based institution without a traditional campus, he was already used to travelling in the midst of the city to get to his lectures, and had received extensive mobility support in doing so. The other student attended a campus based institution, but tended to socialise mainly with friends that she knew outside of institution, which meant she spent a lot of time using public transport around the city. During case study interviews her mother described how as a child she strove to be as independent as possible (something which she had encouraged):

“[Participant] wasn’t, and never has been, a child who would just sit back in the corner and not venture around. [Participant] would do roller-skating, she was skiing, she would climb up the railing, up the trees. [Participant] has always been ‘well, I can do this, never mind that I can’t see, and never mind I can’t see what the dangers could be’. But no, I am going to do it. So there was no stopping her. If [participant] wanted to do something, she would do it”

In the autumn 2014 interviews, both participants reported that they were confident about living independently, although one felt there could be some challenges:

“Probably some stuff would be harder, because then I would have to cook for myself... well at the moment I cook for myself, and do everything myself, so in a sense I am living away from home completely independently. In that sense, yeah... I wouldn’t have the support there, any other person living away from home wouldn’t have, if a young person living at home, they would have their meals cooked for them, obviously that’s easier having my meals cooked for me because with a vision thing, its slightly more difficult, apart from that it’s ok.”

When asked about any consideration she gave to her visual impairment when moving into private accommodation, the student living on her own responded:

“To be honest I think because of the nature of the place I was living in in halls and stuff, I didn’t really...I don’t think I thought about anything that anybody else wouldn’t have done. It was like how my bills were going to be, and which company was going to be cheaper, who do I get internet with, and what colour shall I have my sofa. That was really how my thought processes went.”

Another apparent advantage these two participants had was the flexibility of the mobility support that they received. In both cases they spoke of how they could easily arrange additional mobility support, and how they had a positive working relationship with the person providing the training:

“...before I moved into my house, I met up with [mobility trainer] before I moved in, we had spare hours at the end of last year. I mean I signed my contract in February. So we used those last couple of hours to do the bus route, so I had the routes and everything done before I moved in.”

However, one of the participants did note that his visual impairment did not impact him in getting around independently as much as it would do some people. When asked about mobility to and from his new accommodation he responded:

“Luckily my eyesight in terms of mobility is not that bad, so I can get around pretty easy. But I can imagine for some people, for some with no vision at all it would be very difficult to do that.”

10.4.3 Considerations in relation to visual impairment

Those participants who had moved into private accommodation were asked about any considerations they made in relation to their visual impairment when choosing their accommodation, and with regards to modifications that were made to their living environment.

Their responses show that in general they gave little consideration to their visual impairment when choosing their accommodation.

“Yeah, well about the same as any other student living in a student house! There was nothing that came up that was related to my eyesight in that sense.”

Two participants acknowledged there would be/were challenges initially when moving into the different accommodation, but were confident of quickly overcoming these:

“Not necessarily, because obviously I would be with friends, or I would probably be with someone from my house, so if I did struggle to read a sign or something, because I kind of... in the first few weeks anyway, I kind of knew where everything was, so it

wasn't as hard as, say the first few days getting used to the area. But it's been generally alright. There are very few kind of traffic lights or signs to kind of read really."

One participant spoke of making some compromises, as he knew that it could be difficult finding a suitable property:

"No, not really, no. Desk space was... not a priority, because it's so competitive, you are just getting anything which is kind of nice, you can't... if I spent all my time worrying about desk space it would have been very difficult to find anywhere, you have to make sacrifices but that's fine. If I do struggle with desk space, I can always buy another desk."

However, one participant who does struggle more than some of the participants who have moved into private accommodation with regards to mobility, spoke of ensuring the property was in a suitable location for getting to their institution:

"It was more that my housemate was doing most of the searching and I went to visit several places with them to check them out, and that was one that I did find to be a good location, I thought that I could easily get from there to the university"

However, of concern is that she reports that she was refused accommodation by one agency because of the disability related benefits that she was receiving:

Participant: "One of the main problems that came up was that the agency for one place for some reason got a bit curious about what disability benefits I got, and the weird thing was that the other agency didn't ask for that. So that place was kind of left."

Researcher: "So they wouldn't take you because you are on DLA, is that right?" Participant: "Yeah. It probably wasn't in the best location anyway to get to. I think the place we ended up with is probably best."

10.5 Living in the family home

Seven of the participants lived in their family home and commuted to their institution. They would travel there using a variety of means of transport, including bus (4), train (1), tube (1), and taxi (1). In all cases other than the participant who travelled by taxi, these were routes which

they were familiar with already, which inevitably would have made travelling easier. Only one participant received mobility training to and from their institution. This student has a guide dog, and therefore received this training through Guide Dogs. The participant who travelled by taxi has a condition which means she needs to avoid being in situations which she could potentially get bumped about as this could lead to her damaging her vision further.

“Because I have a complex condition, my eye condition is, so I can’t afford to have any bumps, and buses when they are crowded you have to stand, and constantly people are coming, pushing you out the way, so it’s not an option for my eye condition.”

In the autumn 2014 interviews, several of the participants living away at HE had spoken of how they benefited from living more independently. Therefore one concern for these participants still living at their family homes is that they were missing out on this experience. However, those participants we asked about this, felt that they were able to live independently. In fact, one participant felt more independent in having to travel to their institution each day, rather than living close by in, for example, institution-owned accommodation:

“I just wanted to be independent – it was one train, only twenty mins, so it’s not really far. It’s the experience as well because I went for three years, I got used to it, and got used to it and explored near places...It’s just an experience and really being independent.”

“Yeah, I mean, I went to university from home... I mean it was just easier, even though I was living at home, I did feel independent. I feel like I am an independent person. If someone gives me an opportunity then I am the sort of person to take it. If it is a good opportunity for progression, to move on in my life, I will take it.”

10.6 Independent living skills

The participants were asked questions about their independent living skills in the autumn 2014 interviews. The findings from these discussions have been presented in Hewett et al (2015e). Here we consider some issues around independent living skills which arose during the course of the HE interviews.

10.6.1 Cooking and cleaning

The majority of participants were able to cook for themselves. One participant reported however that she did not have the skills needed to cook for herself, and this was something that she knew that she would need to develop in time – instead she would eat out a lot:

“I need to learn, that’s the big problem, living at home you have it all done for you, I didn’t have time to do it at [specialist school] because I was working so hard. I don’t have the confidence”

In contrast, another participant who was enjoying being able to cook and clean independently at university spoke positively about the independent living skills she developed whilst at specialist school:

“I think being at [specialist school] for two years has really helped with that kind of thing. I think I’m a lot more prepared for that side of things going into uni, than I would have been if I had stayed in mainstream to do my A-levels, because independent living skills was part of the curriculum at [specialist school], so, you know, I can do stuff now that I couldn’t do two years ago. I could barely make a cup of tea two years ago. But, you know, I am perfectly comfortable cooking, doing my washing, a lot more comfortable with independent travel, internet banking, stuff like that. So, in terms of stuff like that, yeah, very prepared for that side of life.”

One participant reported that whilst she was able to cook independently, she felt very uncomfortable doing so around her flatmates:

Researcher: “Are you happy with how the kitchen is?” Participant: “No because I don’t like cooking around people. I have to cook when everyone else is in there...”

10.6.2 Shopping

Six of the participants spoke of going shopping independently without any real challenges. They would walk or get the bus to their local supermarket. One of these participants felt that the only real difference was that sometimes she would need to concentrate more when choosing products:

“I don’t think I have found anything more tricky because of eyesight that I can think of. Things like shopping, have to pay more attention to finding the food, that kind of thing.”

Participant: "That was alright actually. I would go into town quite a lot to go to the supermarket, or pick things up. That wasn't a problem." Researcher: "So did you use public transport, or was it walkable?" Participant: "Yeah. You could walk, but it was quicker to get public transport." Researcher: "How did you find that?" Participant: "It was easy, yeah. It's a university town anyway."

In contrast, one participant reported that she was unable to shop independently, and instead her parents would regularly drive over to take her to the supermarket:

Researcher: "How would you get about outside of lectures, say for example, if you had to go to the supermarket, go into town, something like that?" Participant: "My parents would take me shopping, so that's a non-issue thankfully." Researcher: "Is it something that you would be able to do on your own?" Participant: "Not really."

Another participant who would sometimes go to the supermarket with friends. If he were unable to do this, he would either go to the supermarket in a taxi, or use an on-campus shop:

"The other really helpful thing is, they have got a student union shop which is on campus, and that's got most things, that's on the campus, and they have got most things."

Four other participants reported they would use the campus shop, but more out of necessity, and one of these participants would have preferred to have been able to shop somewhere cheaper, with more choice:

"Generally there was shops on campus, SPAR, and a student union shop that I visited regularly, and did most of my shopping. If I went home, I would occasionally bring food from home, but usually it was from SPAR. If I were given a bit more mobility around the areas around the campus, just outside the campus, then I would probably do shopping more off campus, its significantly cheaper, and more choice and more variety, it's just better."

Three of the participants reported that they would at times do their shopping online, and had found this to be a positive experience. Another participant was also considering doing this in the future:

“I am getting Tesco delivery at the minute. I did it once last term, because it was a four week term, so I did a shop when I got there with my parents, and I got Tesco delivery half way through the term, and that worked out fine, they go to campus and the main reception, and then reception calls me and directs them to my halls, and I meet them at the door and they bring everything into my room and they read out the like substitutions list or whatever they have got. So that worked out fine last term. I only did it once, but it seems fine.”

It is interesting that none of the participants referred to Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payment in relation to shopping. Paying for travel to and from the supermarket is the type of provision which these benefits are intended to make.

10.7 External services

Those participants who had indicated that they had some challenges in living independently in HE were asked whether they had drawn on external services to help them with this.

Two participants said they had or were planning to make contact with the local Social Services to arrange for a concession pass for the buses:

“I will have to talk to Social Services to get my disability registered in order to get free transport, like they do in [home city]. To get a free bus pass, you get free travel here, and I said ‘is there one in [institution city]’ and they were like ‘yeah!’”

Two participants were receiving more extensive services through their local Social Services, and had found this very beneficial:

“Yeah, in my first year, because I spoke to my social worker in my social services at home, about the possibility of getting someone to help me do the laundry and some shopping every couple of weeks, so they arranged that and it was someone from the local care agency that would come out and help me every couple of weeks.”

Participant: “I use direct payments. I had it before I came to university, so I wouldn’t have to spend all my time... I wouldn’t have to rely on my parents to do things, I could be more independent. When I came to university I’ve used the direct payments to get around town, for cleaning...” Researcher: “What difference does it mean to you having the direct payments support?” Participant: “You don’t have to worry about cleaning, if I need to go round town for something I have that help. I can also have more of a life.”

However, several participants were unaware that these services were available, even though they may have benefited from them:

“No, because I didn’t know that it was available. I find on the whole they don’t make things easy for people with a visual impairment, the government as a whole doesn’t make things easy for people with a visual impairment. They try to shut us out.”

Those participants who required mobility training outside of the main institution were asked whether they had spoken with Social Services to

see if they could arrange this. Two participants who were aware that this was an option had received negative responses when discussing this:

“When I first had my mobility from [agency], the guy told me there is no point applying to [local] Council for more mobility, because the waiting list is too long. So eventually I applied with Guide Dogs instead.”

One participant expressed his frustration that off-campus mobility support was seen as separate to the campus mobility funded through DSA:

“That just seems totally wrong, personally, but you know. That is not my industry, but to me that seems totally wrong that they should be saying... we will pay for you to go to university, good luck finding your way, start running now you might just get there on time. It just seems wrong. “Oh, we will show you how to get to your lectures, very specifically to your lectures, but nowhere else”. Because again, it’s very deliberately saying we are going to give you this much help... we could give you more help, but we aren’t going to because we don’t have to. And that again just seems totally wrong.”

10.8 Guide Dogs

At the time of the last data collection, three of the participants had been matched and were working with guide dogs, one participant was shortly due to start training with a guide dog, and another participant was on the waiting list. However, none of the participants were matched with guide dogs prior to starting in higher education.

All of these participants associated mobility away from their institutions with being matched with a guide dog, and when asked whether they had contacted Social Services for further mobility support, responded that they would wait to be given the support by Guide Dogs instead:

Researcher: “So have you looked into how you could get mobility to cover [institution city] in general?” Participant: “Yeah, I am looking at guide dogs. I might be getting a guide dog in September anyway, so it won’t be an issue anymore.”

One participant who had already covered the majority of routes on campus did most of her training with the guide dog off campus:

“Yeah, most of my mobility with Guide Dogs was done in the actual city, not on the campus. All I had to do was adjust a couple of things, where I had done it with the cane one way and I had to do it slightly differently with the dog. So we covered that in the first week or so of training. We did the rest in the city itself.”

Once they were working with their guide dog, the participants identified a number of benefits of doing so. Firstly, one participant found that it helped her a lot socially:

“Because I think having the dog makes me feel a lot more independent, which makes me feel a lot more confident, and then the confidence impacts on everything else, so yeah...”

She also found that she could learn routes more quickly and easily, for example, one participant spoke of the difference of campus mobility as a white cane user, compared with working with a guide dog:

“Actually, it was really weird, walking through it, today was the first time I have been there with [guide dog], and actually having a dog makes it so much easier. There are all these car parks where you spend twenty minutes trying to find other routes so you don’t have to walk through... all the route up to the [building] is big open things, with all the planters and funny posts and everything in the middle. And you just think ‘oh gosh’. It was so weird being able to take a normal route to places. For a white cane user it’s awful.”

However, the participants did identify some limitations, such as being restricted sometimes in going out (when not able to take the dog with them) and not feeling like they could move into shared accommodation:

“Freshers, you are there for freshers, to meet people, to enjoy yourself, everyone is in the same boat. Ok, things are more awkward generally, everyone is in awkward, no one knows their way, no one knows each other. I wish I had used freshers more than I did, but I will this year... [although] maybe not because I have got my dog...”

The participants also spoke of some practicalities which need to be considered when a guide dog owner. It was necessary for example to ensure there was a ‘spending pen’ in a suitable location:

“I have looked that the accommodation building I am going into next year is accessible for a dog, and stuff. And there is a spending pen on campus, so I have been made aware of where that is.”

Researcher: “Have you spoken to them about how you are going to be having a guide dog?” Participant: “Yes, because they have to do a risk assessment. They are going to have to erect another pen as the one which is there at the moment is on the other side of campus, so I can’t go over there to take the dog to the campus, so hopefully they will be doing that and we will see where they put me. I am not holding my breath.”

One participant experienced a quite negative response from staff at the institution:

“I was told very strictly that if they noticed any dog mess around campus, I would... the finger would be pointed at me kind of thing. They treated it as if, the way they talked to me about it, they made it sound like they were doing me this massive favour in doing me this pen, like I should be really grateful that if I wasn’t going to use it after they had gone to all this effort of building it... I don’t know what they were going to do, but they were not very friendly about it anyway.”

As previously mentioned, two of the participants in their first year arranged to have larger rooms, as they were both on the waiting list for a guide dog. However, in both cases they were not allocated a guide dog before the end of the year, which meant they ended up paying a lot more for their accommodation than they would have done otherwise, but for no real purpose.

Additionally it was necessary for the students to speak with lecturers to inform them they would have a guide dog in their lectures:

“I had to make them aware obviously that I had a dog with me. I had to make the accommodation aware that I would have a dog, and I had to inform all my tutors that I would bring the dog into class. But they have been much more accommodating with me having the dog than they were when I had the cane, if anything.”

Three of the participants spoke of the challenges of being on the waiting list for a guide dog, both in terms of knowing when was the most appropriate time to be matched with a dog, and also in terms of not knowing when they would be matched with one:

Researcher: "I remember you saying before that you were possibly getting a guide dog?" Participant: "Yeah, not yet... Still waiting."
Researcher: "Have you had any updates from them?" Participant: "No."
Researcher: "So how long is it now that you have been waiting, since you were put on the list?" Participant: "I have been thinking about this. I think it was 2012...So it's a long time."

Two participants who had been on campus during lecture time with their guide dog spoke of some unhelpful reactions from other students:

Researcher: "I know someone else who has been in college with a guide dog, they, I am trying to think, I think it might have been Guide Dogs came in and did an awareness session with the staff. Did they do anything like that?" Participant: "Yeah. And then the uni decided that when everyone was calling the dog over and stroking her and stuff, which was getting really annoying, so the uni made posters and stuck them around."

"I was getting ready to go out one day and I was just in the door way and I had the dog and harness and everything, and I had forgotten something so I went into the room and she just sat in the door way waiting and two girls came round the corner and saw her and one of them just ran away just proper screaming. The other one was like "I'm so sorry, she's scared of dogs, she doesn't like dogs""

In contrast, however, one participant found that students were more receptive of her now that she had a guide dog:

"And then people react to the dog a lot better than they do to the cane. They come up and talk me, whereas before no one would approach me. So that's made a difference as well."

11 General life in Higher Education

In this section we look at the participant's general life in HE, including extra-curricular activities, relationships with peers, part time employment and particular challenges that the participants have faced which have impacted on their overall life in Higher Education.

11.1 Extra-curricular activities

As part of the end of first year interviews, the participants were asked whether they had joined any societies or sports teams. The responses were mixed – some participants had engaged with the vast range of societies their institutions offered, whilst others chose not to join any.

11.1.1 Types of society joined

The participants joined a variety of societies, typical to those the average student would get involved in. These include:

- Sports (e.g. hockey team, mountaineering, judo)
- Special interest (e.g. Christian Union, student media such as radio or newspaper, debating)
- Music (musical theatre, orchestra)
- Academic societies (specific to course)

11.1.2 Problems in accessing societies

Two participants reported having problems in relation to their visual impairment in accessing societies. One participant was interested in being a member of the skiing society, but the society organisers were unsure how to cater to her as a young person with a visual impairment:

“I went to a couple of ski meetings, and then we kind of put it on hold, because they were looking at how that can be made accessible. It can, I have done it, but they wanted to do some risk assessment and health and safety stuff, and they didn't get back to me, so I guess that's something I will follow up in September, maybe.”

Another participant wished to participate in societies, but was not confident enough in going to campus at night on her own:

Researcher: “And how's university life besides from the course situation and things?” Participant: “I haven't really had it really, because I stay at the top... because of the hill I just stay in the

accommodation.” Researcher: “So haven’t you had the opportunity to get involved in any groups, or anything like that?” Participant: “Most of them are on campus, and I don’t feel safe being on campus at night.” Researcher: “Is that for safety reasons, or for mobility getting around, or both?” Participant: “Both really.”

11.1.3 Who participated in societies

It is interesting to observe that with the exception of one, all of the participants who are registered as severely sight impaired/blind took part in societies. One of these participants, as part of the case study interviews, described how before coming into HE, he took some time to consider the type of societies he might enjoy, and had a specific strategy of attending these societies as a way to meet other people. Another participant when asked what advice she would give to students with visual impairment in getting to know others when in HE recommended joining societies:

“Get out as much as possible, even if you think you are going to find yourself in a difficult or vulnerable position. If you are going out or whatever, if the worst comes to worst, you get lost, make sure you have enough money, get a cab home. You are never stuck. Just take a leap of faith if you like, go out. Join loads of societies. People said to me not to because you waste loads of money, but I don’t agree, most aren’t too expensive, some are more... they had taster things you could go to anyway just to meet people. I went to the ‘bloomin’ quidditch’ one, just for a laugh.”

The one severely sight impaired participant who did not engage in any societies was one who was commuting to their institution each day from their family home. This was typical of students who had these living arrangements, as they often had existing interests at home which they continued to enjoy.

11.2 Relationships with peers

In the end of year interviews, the participants were also asked about their relationships with other students; how others had responded to them as a student with a visual impairment, and how well they felt they had been able to develop friendships during their first year in HE.

11.2.1 Challenges faced

Several of the participants identified challenges in getting to know other people. Four of the participants found that it was hard to get to know people on their course, due to the large lecture groups:

“Yeah, I mean... again it’s one of those, because we are such a big group, and all of our lectures were the whole group, it’s really hard to meet people.”

Another participant felt restricted in lectures as they had to spend time speaking with their note-taker afterwards:

“I haven’t really got to know anyone on my course. We are into the lectures straight away, and we have to stay to sign the note-taker’s log sheet to prove that they have been there, so everyone kind of gets up and walks off.”

Two of the participants found that they were restricted because of their ability to get around independently off campus:

“It’s been isolating, it’s quite difficult to know your way around yourself. I am ok around campus, but you know, you want to go off campus. The first few weeks things are going on, but after that I want to get out and move around a bit more, but I just couldn’t. I got the bus with people I met from uni, but it was a bit awkward because I was, you know, they could just walk off, I struggled a bit.”

Similarly, other participants found it difficult in social contexts as they might lose the people they were with:

Researcher: “How did you find the more social aspects of getting around? You were saying it was hard at first because you didn’t know the union, how did you find...” Participant: “This was a big problem to be honest. Like, you don’t know anyone, so I would go and meet new people, and then when you’re in the union bar and you go to the toilet or whatever and come back, you just cannot find them. So it was like that every night. I have got friends now who know. The problem is you can explain it to these people the first time you meet them, but they don’t really get it.”

One participant felt that he missed out on opportunities to get to know people as the training associated with his Disabled Student Allowance took place during Fresher's week:

"Yeah, actually. I got my equipment really late in August, which meant that I did not get my training until September, and I had to do it mid to the end, the dates were so scattered, they were a week apart some of them. It impacted on my time at Freshers, and there was really, I was a bit, I am not terribly happy about that, because I had to miss a social afternoon with my course to do some training that would affect my studies. I really wanted to embrace the whole social thing, but I had to sacrifice it for training"

Another participant described how as a result of many challenges she faced during her first year, her confidence became very low, which meant that she found it harder interacting with other people. Before leaving for the summer break she was struggling with anxiety:

"People wise... I don't know really. I am having some counselling over the summer to try and boost my confidence a bit more again. Because at the moment I am feeling very apprehensive and quite anxious about going back to university, and I ended up having quite bad anxiety issues, because of what's gone on this year. Quite stressed and stuff."

After she had had the opportunity to have counselling, she reflected back on how it affected her first year in HE:

"By the end I wasn't really helping myself either, because I got these anxiety issues, so I would hide myself away, I pushed people away more, then people wouldn't approach me, by the middle of the second term."

Three participants had problems in knowing how to best disclose their visual impairment, and ensuring that their friends understood and remembered that it was something that affected them:

"...the main things were... in terms of socially learning to tell people you were visually impaired because I didn't have any of that experience ...[because of] going to a specialist school where everyone was visually impaired, my friends were visually impaired, so I didn't have to tell anyone. I didn't have any experience of

telling anyone that I was visually impaired. Obviously asking for help in a professional environment, that is fine, so if you can't find anything I would find it very easy to go to someone and say I was visually impaired, can I have help with this. That compared to telling your friends is... it's not that I am embarrassed, I just don't know how to do it. So that's definitely something that I would need more practice and I think it's a common problem that a lot of visually impaired people struggle with, and I don't think it's spoken about much unfortunately, so I think it needs to be talked about more."

11.2.2 Reactions of peers

The participants described a broad range of reactions from their peers, to the fact that they had a visual impairment. Ten of the participants reported that they weren't treated any differently. These tended to be those with less severe visual impairments:

"Yeah, I think fine. Because just wearing glasses, it's not particularly obvious there is much wrong. So obviously my flatmates know that my eyesight is not very good, and they tend to keep it quite light, and that's fine, and that's all ok. People tend to, my friends that know that I need help, if I ask them to read something out, they will. But it's not really a big deal, it's just one of those things you get on with."

"Everyone has been good about it really. Most of my group know that I have got a visual impairment, but they don't treat me any different or anything."

Ten of the participants described ways in which their friends would help them overcome challenges that they might face in relation to their visual impairment, such as helping them read something, helping them with their shopping, or helping them get from one place to another. In the case of four students, their peers helped make some adjustments to the group work they were doing together, to ensure they were able to access it:

"Yeah, I had my friends around me, so it was all good, it's such a big uni, so it's not getting crowded, can take different routes and get to a different building."

“Yeah, because we were mainly using stuff provided by the lecturer on the Moodle site, and we had to do a PowerPoint presentation as well, so what I did, I wrote my own part of the presentation, and I made some points, and I just sent to one of my group members and asked them to fit it on the PowerPoint. Because I don’t know how to use PowerPoint that way. I know how to use it, but I know now how to make them. So asked them to fit it into theirs and they did, so that was fine.”

In contrast, five of the participants spoke of people reacting negatively to them as a person with visual impairment. Generally they described these people as acting awkwardly around them, but in two cases they were treated unkindly:

“I haven’t really socialised much with the people in my halls. I had issues with people who knocked on my doors and then ran away, and stupid stuff like that.”

“Mostly fine. They have been taking me in. I found some of friends, especially my flatmates, a bit resistant because I think for whatever reason, I think people seem to be slightly fearful of people with sight disabilities and things.”

“I think mostly it was acquaintances. I think it’s also that people are a bit afraid. As I said earlier, they are afraid of making faux pas, but they still don’t want to make general insults and quips, in the same way that people were at school. I always define my friends as people who I was happy to insult, or happy to insult me.”

One participant found that they were ignored by their classmates in a seminar. This, they felt, stemmed from the fact that they were unable to participate in these seminars as they did not have the core text available in an accessible format until several weeks into the course:

Participant: “But with English I thought it would be a bit easier, because we have seminars twice a week, so I thought a smaller group would be easier. I had a couple of incidents where we were put into groups, and my group have either just ignored me, not acknowledged me, or just been really patronising. And then I have got either annoyed, or upset, yeah! It hasn’t gone very well.”

Researcher: “Did it get any better over the year?” Participant: “Yeah, I guess, I guess people have got used to me. I think the

initial thing was people just didn't, people didn't know how to approach me. I guess it was just ignored I guess. It got better once I put myself forward a bit, once I participated in seminars, and I actually came out with, showed I knew what I was talking about, then people warmed to me more?" Researcher: "I guess it's really hard because you couldn't read your text!" Participant: "Yeah, that's the thing, in the first term I couldn't say anything because I didn't know what they were talking about half the time!"

Five of the participants indicated that they had not made any strong friendships during the first year of their time in HE. One of these participants instead spent time with friends outside of the institution so was not entirely isolated, but on reflection she wished she had got to know people at the institution better. Another participant described how she would keep herself to herself:

Researcher: "How has it been in terms of getting to know people whilst you have been at university?" Participant: "I haven't got to know many people really, I just kept [to] myself." Researcher: "How do you feel about that?" Participant: "I am naturally a loner anyway."

Another participant was disappointed because although his course mates had supported him in terms of his visual impairment, he had struggled in getting to know them socially outside of lectures:

11.2.3 Facilitators

The participants also identified several facilitators in getting to know other people. As has been explored earlier, several found attending societies helpful, as they were then able to meet with others with similar interests. One participant found attending an induction for disabled students a helpful way to get to meet other students at the start of the academic year:

"I have also got to know a couple of people from a "moving on up" weekend, that we did before started, which is for disabled students. I got to know a couple of other students which is great. I am finally starting to get to know people. I am still a bit nervous in talking to new people."

Two of the participants benefited from using befriending services. These were student volunteers who helped them access societies on campus, by going along as a 'buddy':

"They have set up a new scheme, like a peer mentoring system, so I have got a buddy to come with me to one of the societies, because it's like a volunteering society, so I have got a buddy coming there to support me when I am volunteering, and then I am going to two societies that I was going to last year, the [academic related] ones. So I have plenty to do during the week, and the buddy thing is really helpful."

"The only person who has really... I mean, I have got to know people through societies and things like that, but it's kind of the... my befriender has been really good with me. She's a really good friend, she's like my big sister, she's really close."

One participant who struggled in getting to know people in the first year found it much easier in the second year when she was allocated a guide dog. As well as helping her get to and from social events, she felt it also made her more approachable:

"Yeah, I got her [guide dog] in January, and that's made a big difference in terms of like my social life. It's been difficult in some ways getting used to it, but then when it's working well it's a lot easier for me to go to clubs and societies now, because I can get there on my own, and it's so much quicker learning routes with a dog. Yeah, especially on my campus, because it's such a small campus. And then people react to the dog a lot better than they do to the cane. They come up and talk me, whereas before no one would approach me. So that's made a difference as well."

11.3 Part-time employment/voluntary work

The participants were also asked whether they had had any part-time employment, or work experience through voluntary work, during their time in higher education.

Seven of the participants said they had had paid employment. In two cases this was regular work, with one participant working in a children's nursery, and the other working in a restaurant. The other five participants had casual work around the campus, including helping out at open days and working in promoting events to students.

“I don’t have like a, I have a lot of kind of casual type things. So I am rep for a couple of different companies on campus, I am a student ambassador, and I do like odd job type things to get money. So this kind of thing, taking part in surveys I do. I don’t have an actual proper job, I just do casual things. That’s just what I prefer, it’s not because I can’t... I have had part time jobs before.”

Four participants were involved in voluntary work, which was helping them gain some work experience. Interestingly all four of these participants have severe visual impairment. They were helping with charities, and in two cases, with charities related to visual impairment.

“What I have done, as an organisation we pick a few charities to support every year, and they focus on those set number of charities. We are going to be doing a sleep out for a local homeless shelter in December. There’s a charity for disabled children. And I think we are going to fundraise, you can get a Christmas box for a child, so we are going to do that, fundraising. And we are doing a couple of events for Movember, we are going to be in the student union printing moustaches on people and stuff! And they are going to support Guide Dogs as well, so I am going to be, everyone sort of picks a charity, so I am going to be leading a project with Guide Dogs, fundraising and stuff.”

Several of the participants had taken, or were due to take placements as part of their course. These placements took a variety of forms:

- Full year placements (2)
- Placement throughout time on course (e.g. day per week) (2)
- Short placements (e.g. one month) (2)

Thirteen of the participants reported that they had not done any form of work, paid or otherwise, during their first year in HE. Six of these participants had not looked for any work previously, but expressed that they would do in the future:

“I have tried to pursue it this summer actually, but next year, I will look into possibly getting a part time job actually for the university, or through the university, but it will have to fit in with my times, because of what we are doing for the course I’ve already got a lot of plans for next year.”

Four participants who wanted work had looked, but could not find anything, or had been unsuccessful in their applications:

“I have looked, but because it’s a small town, it is very difficult, but I’ll keep looking.”

One participant simply had not thought about getting part time work, whilst another two felt that they could not fit it into their schedule, due to the pressures of their course:

Researcher: “Have you looked into getting a part time job or anything whilst at university?” Participant: “No, I wouldn’t have time. As it is, if you look at how many hours, contact hours, and how many hours out of contact that I am supposed to be doing, I worked it out, I am meant to be doing about 60 hours a week of work, contact and not-contact.” Researcher: “So not realistic.” Participant: “It’s not realistic.” Researcher: “Plus you have got to spend more time than the average in going over those notes before and after.” Participant: “Exactly. Also, what could I do as a student worker. I would love to be able to work in a bar, however pouring drinks is not my speciality.”

11.4 Anxiety

Finally, two of the participants had difficulties with anxiety. In one case, this had been an ongoing issue, prior to them going into HE, whilst in the other, this was something which developed during their first year on the course after experiencing significant problems with accessing their course, and in turn had impacted on their life in HE in general.

“By the middle of the second term things had got so bad, I had lost all motivation to even keep going.”

“I had a panic attack in my room and my boyfriend was there at the time and he went and got... well I’m not entirely sure of the situation because obviously I was having a panic attack so it’s quite hard to concentrate, but people came into my room in my flat and they decided to call an ambulance, I don’t know why.”

One of these students had counselling during the summer break, which gave her the confidence to return to HE. The other was advised to take a break from their course, and return the following academic year.

The student who received counselling described how others assumed that she would not return after the summer break, but her stubbornness helped her to keep going:

“But I am quite a stubborn person. A few people said before I left in June, they were questioning whether I would bother coming back in September. That made me more determined to go back, because I don’t want to prove people right!”

She reflected back on her experience, and attributed it directly to the negative experience that she had in transitioning into higher education:

“I don’t know. I guess the only thing I can sort of say is that... I don’t know. It’s really hard but you have got to keep pushing. That’s what I have learned from this year. You have got to keep pushing yourself, and pushing other people, otherwise it just won’t happen. It’s not fair what happened, the lack of preparation that was in place for me at the start of the year. That shouldn’t happen to anyone, and I know that there are three potential VI students starting at [institution] in September. So I really hope that they don’t have the same experience.”

12 Existing data on the experiences of students with visual impairment in higher education

In this section we present data and evidence from other studies on the experiences of students with visual impairment (and general disabilities) in higher education and look at them in the context of our research findings. We also look at data available on the destinations of students with visual impairment, once they have completed their courses.

12.1 How many young people with visual impairment go into Higher Education?

The statistics in the following four tables are taken from tables published by the Higher Education Statistics.

Table 38: Applications through UCAS by disability

Disability type	2009 Applications (N)	2009 Applications (%)	2014 Applications (Total N)	2014 Applications (Total %)
No disability	512,670	94.19%	527,925	91.29%
Total known to have a disability	31,615	5.8%	50,380	8.71%
Learning Difficulty	17,130	3.15%	24,845	4.30%
Blind / partially sighted	895	0.16%	610	0.11%
Deaf / partial hearing	1,520	0.28%	1,060	0.18%
Wheelchair/mobility	970	0.18%	1,410	0.24%
Autistic disorder	1,165	0.21%	3,180	0.55%
Mental health difficulties	1,730	0.32%	7,095	1.22%
Unseen (eg diabetes, epilepsy, asthma)	3,565	0.65%	4,830	0.84%
2+ disabilities / special needs	980	0.18%	2,060	0.36%
Other disabilities / special needs	3,660	0.67%	5,290	0.91%
Total	544,285	100.0%	578,305	100.0%

The table above provides a breakdown of the number of students who apply to go into Higher Education, identifies the applicants who declared disabilities as well as those who did not, and presents applications according to disability type. Of particular note, we see that the proportion of students with who are recorded as being blind/partially sighted fell between 2009 and 2014 (from 0.16% to 0.11%). As similar patterns were identified for students who are deaf/partial hearing, this was investigated further by researchers at the UK based charity National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS). They discovered that in 2010/11 the UCAS application form changed so that students were no longer asked to identify themselves as “blind/partially sighted”, and instead as “blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses” (and in the case of students who are deaf/partial hearing, they were instead asked to identify as “deaf or a serious hearing impairment”). This could therefore explain to a large extent the apparent fall in students who have a visual impairment. These statistics show that 610 students who would consider themselves to be blind or have a serious visual impairment applied to enter HE in 2014.

Table 39: Applications through UCAS - students with disabilities only

Disability type	2009 Applications (N)	2009 Applications (%)	2014 Applications (Total N)	2014 Applications (Total %)
Learning Difficulty	17,130	54.2%	24,845	49.3%
Blind / partially sighted	895	2.8%	610	1.2%
Deaf / partial hearing	1,520	4.8%	1060	2.1%
Wheelchair/mobility	970	3.1%	1,410	2.8%
Autistic disorder	1,165	3.7%	3,180	6.3%
Mental health difficulties	1,730	5.5%	7,095	14.1%
Unseen (eg diabetes, epilepsy, asthma)	3,565	11.3%	4,830	9.6%
2+ disabilities / special needs	980	3.1%	2,060	4.1%
Other disabilities / special needs	3,660	11.6%	5,290	10.5%
Total known to have a disability	31,615	100.0%	50,380	100.0%

The table above looks specifically at applications made by students with disabilities. We observed that from 2009 the proportion of these applications made by students with visual impairment fell from 2.8% to 1.2%. As discussed above, this is likely to be primarily due to a change in definition, although we do note that the number of applications by students with disabilities increased overall from 31,615 to 50,380, with particularly high increases among students with mental health difficulties and autism. Nevertheless, this table highlights how low incidence visual impairment is in Higher Education. This creates a challenge for academic staff, and disability support officers who likely will have limited experience in working with students with visual impairment, and in particular, students with severe visual impairment.

Table 40: Acceptances through UCAS - students with disabilities

Disability type	2009 Applications (N)	2009 Applications (%)	2014 Applications (Total N)	2014 Applications (Total %)
Learning Difficulty	13,320	55.1%	18,950	49.4%
Blind / partially sighted	690	2.9%	470	1.2%
Deaf / partial hearing	1,150	4.8%	780	2.0%
Wheelchair/mobility	745	3.1%	1,085	2.8%
Autistic disorder	960	4.0%	2,610	6.8%
Mental health difficulties	1,165	4.8%	5,190	13.5%
Unseen (eg diabetes, epilepsy, asthma)	2,650	11.0%	3,550	9.3%
2+ disabilities / special needs	740	3.1%	1,565	4.1%
Other disabilities / special needs	2,770	11.5%	4,160	10.8%
Total known to have a disability	24,190	100.0%	38,360	100.0%

The table above looks at the number of students who were accepted into HE, through the UCAS system, by disability type. We observe that the same proportion of students with visual impairment who applied through UCAS in the corresponding years were eventually offered places on courses.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency records there to have been 1,040 first year students with visual impairment across the different levels of study (i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher degrees) in the academic year 2013-14. The data which applies to the 2014 applications (i.e. the 2014-15) as the proceeding tables was not available at the time of writing.

**Table 41: First year students by level of study and disability:
Academic year 2013/14**

Disability type	Undergrad (N)	Undergrad (%)	Postgrad (N)	Postgrad (%)
Learning Difficulty	30,040	48.6%	7,670	48.1%
Blind / partially sighted	795	1.3%	245	1.5%
Deaf / partial hearing	1,535	2.5%	570	3.6%
Wheelchair/mobility	2,165	3.5%	715	4.5%
Autistic disorder	2,140	3.5%	275	1.7%
Mental health difficulties	7,845	12.7%	1,765	11.1%
Long standing illness or health condition	6,390	10.3%	2,040	12.8%
2+ disabilities / special needs	4,835	7.8%	1,120	7.0%
Other disabilities / special needs	6,100	9.9%	1,550	9.7%
Total known to have a disability	61,845	100.0%	15,950	100.0%

The table above shows the number of students who were in the first year of their courses, according to level of study and disability type, for the academic year 2013-14. We observed that there were 795 students who declared as having a visual impairment in undergraduate study (including full and part time courses), whilst 245 were in postgraduate

study (including postgraduate research and postgraduate taught courses).

12.2 Futuretrack

Futuretrack is a longitudinal study which has been conducted by researchers working at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research, who have been tracking students' entry into HE, experience in HE, and employment outcomes after they have left HE. As part of their work, the researchers looked at the experiences of students with disabilities, including identifying points of particular significance in relation to students with visual impairment. Here we present some of their findings which are relevant to this study.

In 2006 Futuretrack researchers conducted a second survey with their participants, and had usable responses from 49,555 young people. The researchers found that around 7% of the participants in their study had "long-term illness, health problems or a disability which restricts (or may be seen to restrict) their ability to do academic work", which agreed with statistics collected by Higher Education Statistics Agency. Of these students with disabilities, approximately 3% identified themselves as being blind/partially sighted (approximately 100 respondents).

Futuretrack found that students with disabilities tended to be older on entry into HE than students without disabilities. In our Transitions study we have observed 'churning' amongst the participants which has meant that they have spent longer in FE than some students, having repeated years of their courses and taken additional qualifications at the same level. This has meant that entry into HE was delayed for several of the participants, as presented in the following table:

Table 42: Age at which transitions research participant first entered Higher Education

	Total (N)	Total (%)
18	26	81%
19	3	9%
20	1	3%
21	2	6%

It is difficult to make a direct comparison at present as in the case of Futuretrack 25% of the disabled students who entered HE were aged 26 or over (and in the case of this report, the oldest participants were aged

21). We do however note that 10% of the participants were aged 20-21 when entering HE, and also two participants who had left their courses during the first year will be re-entering HE this year, aged 22. Other participants in the study who have taken other pathways have indicated that they would like to go into HE at some stage, so it will be interesting to continue monitoring this in the future.

Futuretrack also found that students with disabilities were slightly more likely to have left HE during the first year of their course (5% compared to 3% of non-disabled students). In the case of our study, two participants left HE during/after the first year of their studies, due to problems that they experienced with accessing their chosen courses. A third student left during the first semester, having not enjoyed the course that he had chosen (he did not take part in the end of year interviews, and therefore only his experiences of applying for university have been included in this report). This means that 9% of the participants in our study who entered HE withdrew during the first year of their course.

When compared with their non-disabled peers, Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were less likely to view their experience in higher education favourably. Interestingly, however, students with visual impairment (along with students with autism) were more likely to view the experience favourably than students without disabilities. When considering the experiences of our participants, as presented in this report, this is somewhat surprising.

Table 43: How happy are you with your plans [to continue in HE] for next academic year? (Birmingham transitions research participants)

	Total (N)	Total (%)
Very happy	15	63%
Happy	7	29%
Quite happy	2	8%
Quite unhappy	0	0%
Unhappy	0	0%
Very unhappy	0	0%
Total	24	100%

At the end of their first year, 24 of the participants in our study who were continuing in their courses were asked about how happy they were with their plans to do so. As shown in the table above, none of the participants reported being unhappy with their plans to continue in HE,

indicating that overall they were happy with their first year experience, despite the challenges that many of them faced. Throughout the course of the interviews, and in particular the case of students with more severe visual impairment, there has been a sense of acceptance that making the adjustments required is challenging, and overall they are appreciative of what the institutions do for them, even though it does not always go right. Futuretrack also found that students with visual impairment were more likely than average to state that they found that the standard of work required was higher than expected -this is not something which was explored in our interviews, although the challenge of the amount of required reading was identified by several of our participants.

Futuretrack found that students with disabilities were less positive about the information and support available for new students, and about the range of extra-curricular activities available to them, although the researchers noted that students with visual impairment were more positive. We have noted that many of our participants have engaged with extra-curricular activities, and that many of those with more severe visual impairment have used this as a way to get to know other students – particularly as it can be such a challenge getting to know others in large lecture halls.

Mirroring our research findings, Futuretrack found that students with visual impairment were notably more likely to continue living in institution-owned accommodation beyond the first year of their course compared to other students (including other students with disabilities). They were also more likely to have experienced problems in arranging their accommodation in the first and second years in comparison to non-disabled students. However, positively students with visual impairment were more likely to view the accommodation as appropriate to their needs.

They found that students with disabilities were less likely to have had paid employment during their first year, in comparison to their non-disabled peers. This was especially true for students with visual impairment, and again mirrors our own research findings. Similarly, they also found that a large proportion of students with visual impairment took part in voluntary work, and in the Futuretrack study found that the students with visual impairment were more likely than non-disabled students to have done some form of voluntary work.

They also found that the ideas of students with disabilities for graduate employment stayed relatively consistent during their time in higher education, although students with visual impairment were more likely than on average to have changed their ideas during the course of their studies. This is something which could be explored further with our participants as they move towards the end of their courses. Students with disabilities were observed to be more likely to continue with study of some form after completion of their current course. The researchers could not draw any conclusion for why this might be, and recommended that a qualitative investigation into this would be valuable.

Finally, the Futuretrack researchers noted previous research evidence which suggests that students with disabilities were more likely to be deterred from HE due to the financial obstacles, and a lack of confidence that they would gain the employment necessary to repay their student loans. In the Futuretrack study, students with disabilities were more likely than their non-disabled peers to be concerned about paying off their student finances. However, of interest, on average students with visual impairment were less likely to have such concerns. They also found that students with disabilities were more concerned about paying for course books and materials, accommodation costs, covering their routine day to day living costs, paying for their travel costs and paying for leisure activities, in comparison to students without disabilities. During the course of this report we have identified several examples of additional costs incurred by students with visual impairment in comparison to their peers. For example, we have observed students who have repeated years, or restarted at university (meaning an extra year of student loans), we have observed students feeling unable to move out of institution-owned accommodation, which is typically more expensive than the alternative private accommodation, and we have heard of how those participants who have not had mobility training away from the university environment are often forced to shop at more expensive on-campus shops, for at least some of the products that they require.

12.3 Destination of Leavers survey

As a primary purpose of the Transitions Study is to identify the factors that enable young people with visual impairment to make a successful transition into the labour market, it is also important for us to investigate data which is available on the young people with disabilities when they leave HE. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) regularly publish a 'Destination of Leavers' (DLHE) survey, which presents an

overview of what students go on to do following their HE courses, and contains useful data on outcomes of participants with disabilities. Using this data, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) have published a series of reports entitled “What happens next” which look specifically at the destinations of students with disabilities (e.g. AGCAS, 2012).

In 2010, 355 graduates who had previously identified themselves as having a visual impairment completed the DLHE survey. This took place 6 months following graduation. Their destinations as identified by AGCAS in their 2012 report are presented in the table below, along with the destinations of all disabled graduates and non-disabled graduates for comparison. When making comparison between the outcomes of the graduates with visual impairment and these larger groups, these small sample sizes should be recognised.

Table 44: Destinations of Graduates with Visual Impairment: 09-10

Activity	Visual Impairment (N=355)	Disabled (N=20,450)	Non-disabled (N=191,690)
Full-time paid work only (including self-employed)	40.6%	45.5%	49.0%
Part-time paid work only	13.2%	12.0%	12.0%
Voluntary/unpaid work only	3.1%	3.1%	2.0%
Work and further study	5.0%	7.1%	7.3%
Further study only	17.9%	15.3%	16.5%
Assumed to be unemployed	14.6%	11.4%	8.8%
Not available for employment	4.5%	3.9%	3.3%
Other	1.1%	1.6%	1.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table produced using data presented in AGCAS, 2012 and originally taken from HESA Destination of Leavers Survey, 2010

- 40.6% of graduates with visual impairment entered full time paid employment. This is a considerably lower than non-disabled graduates (49.0%) and also than all disabled graduates (45.5%).
- Students with disabilities (including students with visual impairment) were slightly more likely to be in voluntary/unpaid work following graduation than students without disabilities (3.1% compared to 2.0%).
- A greater proportion of graduates with visual impairment were assumed to be unemployed in comparison to both the disabled graduates, and the non-disabled graduates. This is consistent with both anecdotal evidence which prompted our transitions study in the first place, and previous studies such as Network 1000 (e.g. Douglas et al, 2009) and secondary data analysis of the Labour Force Survey, which found that although having a degree increases the likelihood of people with visual impairment being in employment, employment levels are still lower than for the general population with a degree or above.

AGCAS also noted some important findings in relation to the employment destinations of these students (as mentioned above, it is important to bear in mind the relatively low number of respondents with visual impairment when making these comparisons):

- 7.7% of the employed graduates with visual impairment went into manager and administrator occupations (compared to 7.3% of non-disabled graduates)
- Positively, 27.7% of employed graduates with visual impairment entered professional occupations (compared to 25.9% of non-disabled graduates)
- Only 59.1% of the employed graduates with visual impairment entered graduate level employed (compared with 63.3% of all disabled graduates)

13 Conclusions

In reviewing the experiences of these young people in transitioning into Higher Education it is very apparent just how complex a process it is, and how many have encountered challenges, quite often outside of their immediate control. However, despite the fact that many of the young people have had problems, it is important to highlight some of the positive stories which have emerged from the participants' transition into Higher Education.

- A good proportion of the participants were successful in achieving the qualifications required to get into HE. Only one participant did not achieve the grades to get into her first choice institution (although a small number did miss their target grades, but were still given places).
- All the participants who completed the first year of their course were at least “quite happy” with their plans to continue in higher education.
- Twenty-eight of the participants (out of 33) successfully completed the first year of their courses the first time of asking and progressed into the second year. [Note: Of real concern, four participants failed to complete their first year because of access issues linked to their visual impairment. This is discussed below.]
- The participants found the support available through DSA to be invaluable, with several of the students describing themselves reliant on the funding available through DSA to be able to take their courses. This re-emphasises the importance of this scheme and demonstrates just how valuable it is to these young people.
- Where material was available in accessible formats, the majority of the participants had the necessary skills to be able to independently access information, including their lecture notes, books, journal articles and resources on the internet.
- Many of the participants were living independently while at university. Where mobility training was put in place, those participants who required this support were able to embrace it and learn new routes to and from their lecture rooms. The majority of the participants were able to cook for themselves, and take responsibility for cleaning and washing.

However, we do note that many of the young people had extremely difficult times in their first year at university – they survived rather than thrived:

- Of real concern, four participants failed to complete their first year because of access issues linked to their visual impairment. Similarly, others had to delay the completion of their assessments, having experienced barriers linked to their visual impairment throughout the year.
- The students who previously were not in specialist settings did not receive any specialist guidance prior to making the transition into HE. Very few participants received any specialist guidance in preparing for their DSA assessments, or in preparing for meetings with the DS service.
- The problems encountered by the participants who experienced delays in getting their DSA assessment processed, demonstrate just how important DSA is to these young people. This is particularly true for those who are reliant on specialist equipment to be able to access their courses. Several of the participants started HE without their equipment being in place, or having received training in using it, despite applying very early on in the DSA application process.
- Participants who have more severe visual impairments were often limited in what support they could be allocated due to the budget restrictions imposed by DSA. There was evidence of the DSA assessors working to budget, rather than assessing what the young person really required. This worked both ways:
 - one participant being given the funding to have an en-suite room in the institution-owned accommodation, something which he told the researcher he did not really need;
 - in contrast, participants who were told by their institution they needed to have an en-suite room as it was considered unsafe for them to share facilities had to pay the extra expense this entailed.
 - additionally we observed that several of the participants were given laptops which were apparently not fit for purpose, or of poor quality. For those who were reliant on their laptops to access their course notes, this caused considerable problems, and there appears to have been no real contingency in place in the event of this happening.
- Despite research evidence showing that there is mainstream equipment available which can benefit people with visual impairments this is not covered as part of DSA assessment of needs.
- There is a lack of specialist guidance in Higher Education. Disability Support Officers are taking responsibility for guiding

lecturers on how to facilitate students with visual impairment, but as visual impairment is very low incidence this is very difficult for them to do, especially as many of the challenges faced are course specific.

- Those participants, who are reliant on mobility training to enable them to get about independently, were restricted by the fact that DSA only covers mobility around the immediate learning environment. Whilst off campus mobility should be funded by their local social services, very few of the participants had been informed of this, and none of the participants had successfully drawn on this support. This has caused an inevitable barrier for some of the participants in their confidence to be able to move out of institution-owned accommodation, as well as limiting their opportunities to live independently in their new towns and cities.
- In previous interviews we identified a group of participants whose visual impairment was such that they were able to get about independently in their local area as it was so familiar to them. This meant they had received minimal mobility training (it is unclear whether this was their decision or their sensory support services decision). Once they were in their new environment in HE this proved to be problematic, as they were lacking in confidence to use public transport and to navigate new areas.
- Considerable problems were experienced by the participants in accessing information. This included lecture notes, textbooks, reference material, virtual learning environments and examinations. A lot of the challenges faced seem to stem from the HE providers general approach to responding to problems when experienced, rather than creating inclusive environments from the outset and making anticipatory adjustments.
- The requirement to work independently exposed gaps in the skillsets of some participants, such as navigating documents and websites with their assistive technology, or having alternative methods of accessing information when their usual methods were inappropriate.
- A stumbling block for several of the participants was the responsibility placed on them by the HE provider to firstly self-advocate for themselves, and secondly, to take responsibility for the organisation of their support. This proved particularly challenging for those students who experienced problems with DSA or the accessibility of their course, as they were already overwhelmed with catching up on missed components of their courses. Of particular concern were two participants who reported

that they did not receive the non-medical support they were allocated through DSA as a result of staff shortages within the agency their institutions were working with. Unfortunately neither felt confident enough to persistently challenge this.

- There are many examples of how young people with visual impairments in HE face additional costs when compared to their sighted peers. For example, we have observed how these young people have been placed in more expensive accommodation, and then felt unable to move into cheaper, private accommodation. They have also been limited in shopping away from their institutions, which has resulted in them buying food from more expensive campus-based stores. They have also faced additional living costs as they have been at their institutions for longer, firstly to receive mobility support at the start of the year, and then to complete their assessments at the end of the year.

Despite many of the participants encountering considerable challenges and obstacles along the way, they have remained focused on their courses, and displayed great resilience and positivity for the future. However, it is clear that much is needed to improve the transition experiences of these young people – both in terms of providing them with the necessary skills to live and work independently, and with regards to Disabled Student Allowance, the attitudes, knowledge and overall accessibility of HE Institutions.

14 Future Plans

This publication is part of a series of reports from the Longitudinal Transitions Study, which is following the transition experiences of over 80 young people with visual impairments. The project commenced in autumn 2009, and we have been working alongside the young people since 2010. Funding has been received in two phases:

- Phase 1: 2009-2011 - Royal National Institute of Blind People
- Phase 2: 2012-2015 the Nuffield Foundation

We are pleased to report that funding has been secured through Thomas Pocklington Trust to continue the research into a third phase. This comes about as the participants continue their transitions into adulthood and employment, and look to start living more independent lives. Thomas Pocklington Trust's interest in the research came about following their own scoping study (Blood, 2015) which found that the likelihood of success for a young person with visual impairment making a positive transition into living independently was strongly linked to their employment status - thus concluding that a key way to help young people with visual impairments to be able to start living independently is to help equip them for work. Such findings also serve as a reminder that in looking to support a young person with visual impairment into employment, we need to think simply beyond the skills that they need in education, and instead look to the broader skills that they are going to need to live independently.

As the project continues, we intend to keep speaking to the participants at regular intervals to continue tracking their transition experiences and in particular their experiences as they try to enter the labour market. We will pay particular focus to those participants who leave Higher Education over the next few years, exploring the support and guidance that they receive as they look to make this next transition.

15 Appendix

Diary of a typical day at University: Participant Guidance Notes

Thank you for agreeing to complete a diary account of your day at university. We are hoping to use this diary to get a more detailed picture of a typical day for you whilst at university.

We would really appreciate it if you could complete this diary as comprehensively as possible, even if a particular detail may seem insignificant to you.

For each entry you make into the diary (i.e. each activity you carry out through the day), there are four headings under which we request you to provide more information. These are: time; details of activity; any equipment used (specialist or otherwise); any assistance received; and detailed notes. Each heading is discussed in turn in the table below, and further details given of the type of information that we are hoping you will provide. An example diary is also given for you to review before commencing your own diary, so that you can see examples of the type of information we are interested in collecting.

We are particularly interested in finding out more about your day to day activities, particularly including the following areas:

- travel;
- access to information;
- use of equipment;
- your interaction with peers/staff;
- life outside of lectures (e.g. cooking, cleaning, shopping, socialising).

Please be mindful of these when completing the diary.

Heading	Further details
Time	Record the approximate times that the activity took place
Details of activity	Give further details about the activity you are involved in. Examples could include(although not exclusively): travel to and from university; travel between lectures; lectures; seminars; visiting the library to access books; personal study time; meeting with friends; lunch/coffee breaks; meetings with tutors.

Any equipment used (specialist or otherwise)	Give details of any equipment that you use during this activity, regardless of whether it is some form of specialist equipment or not. Examples could include: mobility aids; laptop; desktop computer; tablet; computer; braille note; accessibility software; photocopier; scanner; Dictaphone.
Any assistance received	Give details of any assistance that you received. Examples could include: help from a sighted guide; note-taker present in lecture; modified material; receiving lecture notes in advance; a friend helping read something on the whiteboard; help from librarian in finding a book.
Detailed notes	Give a more detailed account of what happened. If there were any challenges faced, explain what these were. If anything particularly helped you, please explain how.

If you have any questions about completing this diary, please contact Rachel on 0121 414 4394 (available roughly between 9am-5pm Monday to Friday) or via email at r.g.hewett@bham.ac.uk

Please forward your completed diary to Rachel as soon as possible.

An Example Diary for University Students

Name: AB

Date: 30th September 2013

Key points of interest: Your day-to-day activities at university including: travel; access to information; use of equipment; your interaction with peers/staff; life outside of lectures (e.g. cooking, cleaning, socialising)

Time	Details of activity	Any equipment used (specialist or otherwise)	Any assistance received	Detailed notes (including relevant background information)
Example: 8am – 9am	Travel to university for lecture	Symbol cane	Taxi provided to campus	Taxi which is supplied as part of DSA arrived 10 minutes late of pre-arranged time, and as a consequence was 5 minutes late arriving to lecture.
Example: 9am-9.55am	Lecture	Laptop with speech software. Dictaphone placed on lecturers desk	Lecture notes provided electronically before the lecture Note-taker present in the lecture	Some delay in being able to focus on the lecture, due to arriving late, and waiting for laptop to start up. Note taker was there as scheduled.
Example: 9.55am-10am	Walked from lecture room to library	Symbol cane	None	None

10am – 12pm	Personal study in library	Laptop computer with speech software Photocopier	Librarian helped locate books and enlarge materials	Went to the library to work on an essay, and look for some information in textbooks. Worked using laptop computer and speech software. Used library support to locate books that were needed. They also helped by using a photocopier to enlarge relevant material in these books.
12pm – 12.55pm	Lunch with friends	None	Friend helped read menu	Met friends for lunch at university café. Unable to read menu on the back wall, so asked friend for help
12.55pm-1pm	Walked from café to next lecture	Symbol cane	Walked with friends who helped act as sighted guides when needed	None
1pm-2pm	Lecture	Laptop with speech software. Dictaphone placed on lecturers desk	Note-taker present in the lecture	Lecture notes had not been made available before the lecture, which made following the lecture a challenge at times.
2pm-3pm	Travel from university back home	Symbol cane	Taxi provided back home	Walked to agreed pick up point for the taxi, and they were there as arranged.
3pm-6pm	Reviewed lecture notes	Laptop with screen-reader and Dictaphone	Notes received of previous lecture via email	Reviewed lecture notes received from note-taker from lecture the previous week ensuring that they made sense. Listened

			from the note-taker.	back to lecture recording. Some minor issues with the notes not being quite right as the note-taker is not a specialist in the area.
6pm-7pm	Cooked dinner	PenFriend and microwave	None	None
7pm-9pm	Met friends in pub	Symbol cane	None	Walked to pub with housemates

Please forward this completed diary to Rachel at r.g.hewett@bham.ac.uk as soon as possible. We would like to also arrange a time to speak with you to clarify any questions we may have after reading this. Please indicate in your email when would be a suitable date and time.

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