

R N I B

Northern
Ireland

See differently

Your Future, Your Choice: Bridging the Gap

Supporting your transition
from school to college,
university and work



N. Ireland

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Section 1a

Who is this guide for?

This guide is aimed at young people with vision impairment, to help you prepare for your future after school. It includes information about a variety of possible pathways including sixth form, further education, higher education, apprenticeships, training, volunteering and employment. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the main information that you will need, and to provide you with links to more comprehensive guidance if required.

The guide will also be helpful as a reference for parents/carers and professionals supporting you through these transitions.

We've looked to bring the guidance to life by including quotes and case studies of other young people with vision impairment. These have been taken from findings of a research study run by Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research at University of Birmingham, with support from RNIB, which has been following the experience of young people with vision impairment as they've made their way through various pathways after school.



Section 1b

What is transition?

Think about your time in education. You'll be familiar with the staff who support you and the adjustments that are made to ensure you can access your subject materials. You may have worksheets and textbooks provided in large print or braille, specialist programs on your computer – or perhaps you have a teaching assistant who takes notes for you in class. Also during that time in education you will have learnt lots of skills including mobility and the use of access technology, and hopefully built up confidence in how to communicate to staff and peers.

At school, both you and the staff are aware of the support that you need to ensure that your vision impairment, and any additional needs you may have, don't interfere with your learning. But have you thought much about what happens when you leave school and go on to college, university or work?

Think of your transition from school and beyond as a series of journeys from one location to another. For example:

- school to employment
- school to college to university to employment
- school to vocational training, apprenticeship or employment

The journeys that get you from one location to another are what we call your points of transition. It's important that you, and the different agencies that support you, plan for these times of change well in advance of them happening. This will ensure that your move from, let's say, sixth form to university is smooth and effective and that you're fully aware of what support you'll get and who will be responsible for providing it. Careful planning is also very important for practical reasons, for example to make sure that you have access to assistive technology, such as screen readers or magnification software, from the outset of your course.

There is a lot of support out there, but you may not be aware of it. Knowing what help is available enables you to take control of your future and allows you the freedom to make informed choices about what you want to do next.

Section 2:

Planning for your future while still at school

There are many options which may be available to you once you finish your GCSEs:

- staying in school if your school has a sixth form,
- moving to a local sixth form or further education (FE) college and taking a course there
- going into training or an apprenticeship

The support that you will receive will depend on whether you have a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). There is more information on Statements on the Northern Ireland government website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/special-educational-needs-statements, but in short this is a document which outlines the support that you should receive in education. A significant part of the transition process for students with a Statement of SEN includes Transition Review meetings which take place in Year 10 and Year 12. The purpose of these meetings is to help consider your ideas for what you want to do when you are older. Northern Ireland has a dedicated Transitions Service which employs Transition Officers who take responsibility for coordinating the advice and support that you receive. More information about this service is available at: www.eani.org.uk/parents/special-educational-needs-sen/education-authority-transitions-service.

What happens in Year 10 if I have a Statement of SEN?

Before your Year 10 transitions meeting you should:

- Talk to your subject teachers and parents about your strengths and which subjects you are best at and enjoy most.
- Meet with your Careers Adviser to discuss which subjects you are enjoying and achieving good grades in, which subjects you plan to take for GCSE or vocational options and your aspirations for life after school.
- Talk to your Careers Adviser and your parents about what you may want to do after completing Year 12.
- Attend information evenings organised by the Transition service at your education and library board.
- Think about any areas of concern you may have in school so that you can talk about these at the meeting.

Young person describing their review meeting:

"Yeah they were quite helpful, they brought together teachers from the school, people from the disability service, and then from the learning support base at school. So it brought together all who were looking at my needs and helped set my targets, and developed strategies to ensure I was successful."

The onus is on the school to invite relevant professionals to the transition plan meeting. In attendance may be:

- your careers advisers from the career service,
- class teachers
- your sensory support teacher

Your parents will also be invited to attend the meeting. If you feel shy or nervous about raising things at the meeting, it is a good idea to talk through any issues with your parents or a member of staff beforehand.

“Martha” was assigned a key worker to help her prepare for the meetings:

“I was about 14... she was basically there to advocate for me, so I worked with her a lot, I went to see her a few times before every annual or interim review. We made like a mind map of things I was concerned about, things I wanted to discuss, or things I wanted brought up, things that I wanted to say or have said, and we worked on things that, things that I thought were important to me, and where I wanted to see myself in 5 years, things like that. She was there, she could have either supported me to express views myself if I wanted to, or she was able to speak on my behalf if wanted to as well.”

After the Year 10 meeting:

A transition plan will be written which summarises everything you talked about. Your parents will be sent a copy and you can read through it to check that you are happy with it. If you think anything has been missed out, talk to a member of staff about it. Review meetings will then take place every year up until you leave school.

Remember, it’s your plan for your future so it’s important that you feel it says what you think it should.

You can find more information about the Transition Plan at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/your-transition-plan-preparing-for-the-future



What happens in Year 12 if I have a Statement of SEN

Year 12 review meeting:

At this meeting, there will be discussions about the support that you've had through school and the support that you are likely to need at sixth form, college or wherever you are moving on to. You should come to this meeting with a list of things that you want to find out. Here are some example questions:

- Who is my key contact person should I have any questions around transition?
- If I leave school in Year 12 and go to college, who will give the information around special requirements to the college?
- What is the timeframe for the actions agreed at my review meeting to be done – who is going to do what by when?
- What happens if I change my mind at a later stage after the review meeting?

After the Year 12 meeting:

Your plan will be reviewed and amended and will outline your plans for after Year 12 indicating:

- the support you receive at school at present
- the support that you will need at sixth form or college.
- your level of capability in relation to mobility, orientation and independent living skills and IT skills.

Copies will be given to you and with your consent to; your parents, school staff, careers adviser and staff at the sixth form or college you are planning to attend, with your consent. A consent form for transfer of information needs to be signed by the young person for this to happen. Again, make sure you read through the report after the meeting to check that you are happy with it.

What if I carry on to sixth form?

If you carry on to sixth form, your needs will be taken into account by the school and discussed with the education and library board. You may continue to get support from your school.

What if I leave school and move to a local college?

If you leave and decide to move on to FE college or if you are going into a work-based learning programme such as Training for success or Modern Apprenticeships, then your Statement will cease. You will still get support but it will be provided by the support staff at the local college. Link in early with the college learning support staff.

The support that you can get at college varies and it's really important that you go and visit before you apply. Even if you are not sure that you definitely want to go, it's a good idea to arrange a visit because it may help you make up your mind. It may take more than one visit to find out everything you need to know. It would be useful to compile a list of questions for your visit.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Money to Learn Education Maintenance Allowance

Money to Learn Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is a means-tested fund for students aged between 16-19. The purpose of the allowance is to provide funding to assist students with some of the additional costs of studying, such as travel costs, books and equipment.

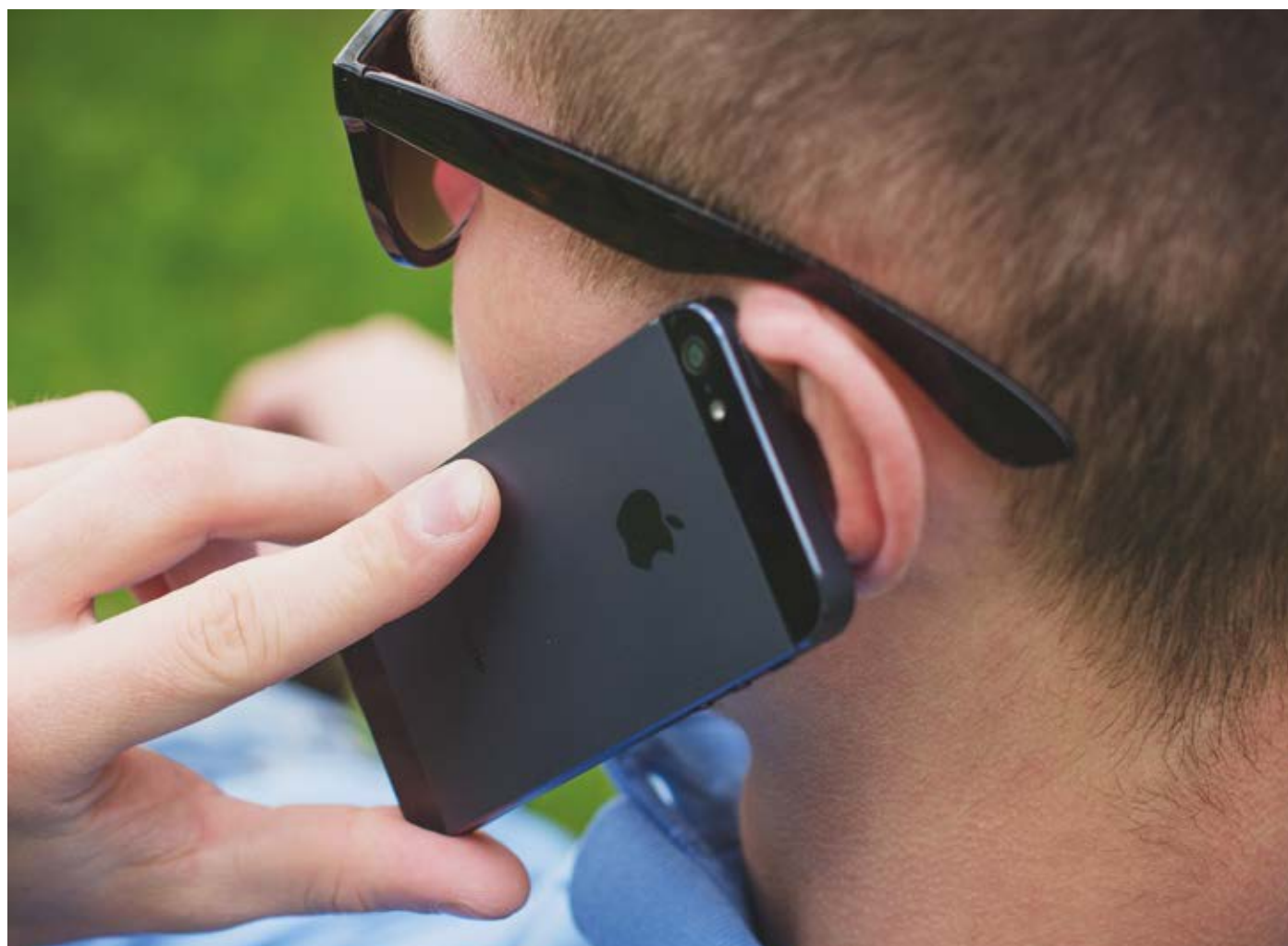
Training for Success Education Maintenance Allowance

Participants on the Training for Success programme (discussed further in Section 3) automatically qualify for a non-means tested EMA of £40 per week.

Further information on Education Maintenance Allowance is available at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/14-19-education-employment-and-training-options/education-maintenance-allowance

Learning from others

Many young people with vision impairment find that it is helpful to talk to others who have been or are going through the same experiences as them to share stories and to learn from one another. Consequently many local sensory support services and voluntary organisations put on special events, and in particular ones to help you start to make decisions about what you want to do in the future. There is further information on different organisations in Section 11.



Section 3:

Moving on to college or vocational training

The support that you can get varies between colleges and so it's really important that you visit before you apply. It is a good idea to arrange a visit even if you are not sure that you definitely want to go, because it may help you make up your mind.

Finding the right college

There are lots of ways to find out about a college. Gathering information from lots of sources will help you to get a good picture of the support they offer before you think of applying. You can:

- Check out their website – every college has one.
- Talk to other people who have been there and ask how they got on.
- Make contact with the student services team or the disability adviser at the college well before you apply to check out what specialist support is available.
- Visit the colleges you are considering as soon as possible. You'll be able to meet the support staff there and ask questions, for example about what assistive technology they have got and whether they have supported someone with vision impairment before and what adjustments they would propose making.

What support should I get at college?

You will be taught by a new team of staff at the college and you may not see your QTVI any longer. This is because colleges and schools are funded differently. Colleges get money from their funding body in order to provide reasonable adjustments and make sure you have the support you need, with support being provided by internal Student Support Services. There is a variety of support and equipment that a college might offer and they should look at what works best for you.

Assessment of your needs at college

College staff should liaise with you and your school in advance to decide what support you will need for all the different aspects of your course. This includes lectures, classes, practicals, field trips, work experience placements, course assessments and exams.

Remember that your course and the college environment will be different from school, and sometimes the support you need will also be different. Some examples of support are:

- mobility training so you can navigate your way independently around the college
- a support teacher or worker, or a sighted guide
- materials in alternative formats such as braille or large print
- assistive computer technology, for example closed-circuit television, and training in how to use it
- computers with speech synthesisers and magnification.

"I had an interview with the course tutor and that was going through things like what my GCSE grades were and stuff, so then I spoke to learning support and they spoke to me about how they could produce a book for me, and how I would access a lab and stuff. Each week I get two hours of subject specific support... what she does is given me support with stuff which is specifically related to the subject, like I need help with say diagrams or stuff, because she's got the subject specific knowledge".



Section 4:

Working while you study

Some courses offer you the opportunity to work and gain qualifications at the same time. These options are worth considering, especially if you prefer to study a practical course rather than an academic one.

Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship is a great way to learn on the job alongside experienced people while studying for a nationally recognised qualification. It means you get the opportunity to do a real job, in a real workplace, and earn money at the same time. You can do an apprenticeship in many different areas ranging from accountancy to textiles, engineering to veterinary nursing, business administration to construction. They are available at three levels:

- Level 2 (intermediate – equivalent to GCSE level)
- Level 3 (advanced – equivalent to A-level)
- Higher Level Apprenticeship from Level 4 upwards (equivalent to foundation degree level and above)

Getting on to an apprenticeship

Apprenticeships are very popular and sometimes employers, colleges or training providers ask for qualifications including GCSEs. If you require additional support to be able to undertake an apprenticeship, this will be coordinated by a specially trained support provider.

"There were a good few months where I didn't fully know what I wanted to do. College was all well and done, but I don't think I was getting all that I could out of it. I am definitely sure that I made the right decision to get my apprenticeship. I just think university, I don't think, was too right for me. Maybe one day I will go."

For more information on apprenticeships

- visit the government guidance at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/apprenticeships
- visit the RNIB website: www.rnib.org.uk/young-people-starting-work/apprenticeships

Training programmes

Training programmes can bridge the gap between education and employment by providing the opportunity to develop some of the important skills you will require in the workplace. There are various programmes available in Northern Ireland.

Training for Success

The Training for Success programme is designed to help young people gain the skills and qualifications they need to progress in their chosen career. The qualification covers four areas:

- personal and social development
- employability skills
- professional and technical skills
- essential skills in communication, application of number and ICT

The programme is open to young people with a disability until the age of 22, with Disability Support Contractors providing additional support to people with a disability. Further information is available at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/training-success

Other training programmes

Other training programmes include:

- Bridge to Employment – a pre-employment training programme designed to help you find a job if you are unemployed
- Assured skills training programme – a pre-employment training programme designed to equip you with the skills required to compete for new employment opportunities
- Prince's Trust
- Steps2Success

Further information on these programmes can be found at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/looking-work/training-programmes

“Andrea” after college decided to go into a training course to help prepare her for the workplace. The course covered topics such as writing a CV, applying for jobs, interview skills and also included a work experience placement. She found the experience very beneficial and afterwards secured an apprenticeship.

“It’s normally 24 weeks, but it depends on the person, how they progress. It has a work placement as well...if the person has an inkling that the employer is impressed by them, then obviously they might take them on.”



Section 5:

Work experience and Volunteering

Work experience and volunteering are both great ways to find out about the different types of work you might be interested in doing. They also give you something to put on your CV to demonstrate that you have interests and have been reliable and hard working in your placements.

Work experience

Work experience is a crucial part of moving on and allows you to have hands-on experience of what it's like to work in different environments. It isn't just something you do towards the end of your time at school; it's something that you should look to do again when you are in college or university or potentially when looking for employment. Work experience is a great way of showing motivation and initiative on your CV and will help you decide if you would like to go into a particular area of work. It may form part of a course you do at university and can sometimes even lead to the offer of a job. It's really important to see work experience as something that you do not only in school, but after you leave as well.

Your school may have a work experience coordinator to support you in finding potential placements for work experience. It's important that you make use of available support. Arranging the placement will be your responsibility, but you may want to ask your parents/carers to help you.

If you are seeking employment and are connected to a Job Centre, this is something you may want to discuss further with your advisor. The government offer detailed advice on finding and preparing for a work experience placement at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/work-experience>

Young person talking about his work experience placement:

"Very helpful, because it's the first time I had been into work. The fact that I had never had a suit on before... well not a suit, a shirt and tie. Just feeling like an adult really, so it's a big step up."

Volunteering

Volunteering can add a great deal to your life and the lives of others. It offers you the chance to become involved with something you really care about as well as an opportunity to meet new and like-minded people. It also enables you to try out something new and can be useful in terms of determining whether you'd like a career in a certain area. Skills and experience gained from volunteering are another way to show potential employers what you can offer and can sometimes lead to the offer of a job.

Government advice on volunteering can be found at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/becoming-volunteer

Volunteer Now provide a lot of advice and guidance on voluntary work and a list of available opportunities. You can find out more by visiting their website: www.volunteernow.co.uk

There are lots of volunteering opportunities, including many with RNIB. To find out more, please phone **0303 123 9999**, email volunteering@rnib.org.uk or visit www.rnib.org.uk/volunteering

Assistive Technology

If you are likely to need assistive technology to be able to undertake work experience or voluntary work, it is important to consider in advance the

type of equipment you might need, and how you might access this, and learn to use it efficiently and effectively. While specialist equipment for the workplace can be funded by the government scheme 'Access to Work', this does not apply to work experience or voluntary positions, and therefore you will need to consider alternative ways of accessing technology.

One solution could be to use your own technology, for example by using your own laptop and any assistive technology you usually use. You could also consider using inbuilt accessibility options, such as the magnification tools which are built into the operating systems of Mac and Windows computers. If you need to use a screen reader, you could consider using NVDA, which is a free 'screen reader. You can find more information about this at: www.nvaccess.org. RNIB Northern Ireland may also be able to loan items that can be used for personal/work purposes.



Finding Volunteering and Work Experience opportunities

There are several ways in which you could identify volunteering and work experience opportunities. Some organisations offer unpaid internship which you may need to apply for as part of a competitive process. This is particularly true for competitive industries like media who often advertise positions online. Another option to consider is approaching organisations directly to ask whether they have any opportunities available by sending them a copy of your CV and a covering letter and explaining why you would like to work at their organisation. Finally consider using your existing networks such as family members or friends to find a suitable placement. The best approach will likely depend on the type of organisation you are seeking to work with, so you may need to conduct some research first or get advice from others.



"I chose to search for voluntary work upon graduating from university a couple of years ago. I did this as I felt it would boost my CV, teach me to be more independent and provide some much needed work experience whilst looking for employment.

There were services available to help me find voluntary positions which I was advised on at my job centre, however I found searching for myself to be more beneficial. Choosing locations I felt comfortable travelling to, I went into places that took volunteers and inquired after work. This worked well for me because I could get a general idea for the place and see if it was suitable for me and it made people who I could be working with aware of my abilities despite my vision impairment.

When I was called into the places I would be volunteering at, I was first given brief inductions, these were the best times to disclose what requirements would need to be met for me to work in the locations. We discussed the layout of the workplace, what jobs might be required of me and health and safety.

We couldn't be sure initially of all the requirements I would need, as voluntary positions can incorporate different types of work in the same place, so we agreed that I'd usually have a person (either a member of staff, or a more experienced volunteer) available for me to talk to should I require more assistance. If I did find that reasonable adjustments were not being made, I'd use quieter times to discuss the issue with a member of staff to see if we could figure out any more adjustments that could be made.

I have gained many benefits from my voluntary work. My confidence has been greatly improved and I feel more secure in my abilities in a working environment. My communication skills (especially in discussing my needs) have greatly improved which I can use in employment. Most importantly for me, I am more independent. I used to be quite anxious about the issues my vision impairment would cause whereas now I am more aware of when and what issues may occur and how to best resolve them."



Gap years

You may wish to take an extended period of time away from education or before pursuing your chosen career. Many young people take 'gap years' during which they may, for example, travel and work abroad, or save up to earn money before going to university. Taking a gap year can be a helpful time, particularly if you are unsure about you want to do next.

Several of the young people in the longitudinal transition study took gap years to do extended periods of voluntary work, including working abroad and had very positive experiences:

"... had a fantastic, fantastic gap year. I had three jobs at the end of it practically. Non-paid, all voluntary and all music related and enjoyable, and it was the best decision I ever made"

If you are interested in taking a gap year you may find **www.independentgapadvice.org** helpful. The website provides general advice for taking a gap year, as well as providing specific advice and case studies of gap years for people with disabilities.

You may wish to speak to a RNIB employment advisor to get more specific advice to the type of opportunities that you are considering.



Section 6:

Moving on to university

Once you have finished sixth form or college you may be considering applying to university. This is a really exciting time and may even involve moving away from home and living alone for the first time. Again, it's really important to plan well in advance so start thinking about this as soon as you can. It's important to think ahead to make sure that you choose the right course at the right university and, most importantly, that everything is in place and ready for your first day. This means you can start your course without having to worry about any issues to do with your equipment and support needs and concentrate on making friends and settling in.

"It's really fun, honestly. I have joined the ice skating society and that's fun, then I have friends I go out and stuff, that side of uni is fine, that's pretty perfect."

At university, the responsibility is on you to make sure that you are receiving the help you need. However, all universities have a disability or learning support team. This team can help with any issues and it's a good idea to meet with them before or when you begin your course. They will be able to talk about the support available and can help you with applying for Disabled Students' Allowance. It is important to be aware that disability or learning support teams will be looking for you to take more responsibility for your support needs than you may have taken in school or college, as illustrated in the quote from one university staff member:

"I think you have got to be aware that they are now 18, and they are coming to university, they are independent adults, we are going to treat them as an adult, and that works both ways, in that they have to let us know if things aren't right. And we will try and, you know, we will talk to them about that, try and change things if things are wrong, or work things out"

But remember that university is about more than your course – the social aspects are very important too. Try to get involved at Freshers' Week and think about joining clubs and societies where you can meet people and make friends. Again, if there are any problems, just get in touch with the disability or learning support team at your university.

"Social wise I have joined a few new clubs and societies and I have got 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".

Choosing a university

It is important that you choose a university that has the course you really want to do and that has support services in place to help you to succeed in it. It may help to:

- Discuss course options with your careers adviser, subject tutors, support staff and parents.
- Look at the UCAS website (www.ucas.ac.uk) for information on courses, institutions and entry requirements.
- Look at the university's website.
- Contact the disability adviser at the university to find out what support they can offer.
- Arrange a visit. There will be open days advertised on the website although you may want to contact the disability support service directly as you might be able to go and meet them at the same time. This is useful as you can meet the staff in advance and ask questions about the types of support you'll be able to access.

One young person explains what he considered before going to university: "[they] had a good disability department, one of the best that I have seen, from my experience so far it's been absolutely brilliant... they really do seem to know what they are doing, so that's good. And I had a friend who is also vision impaired who came up here and had a really positive time with the disability department and the course. Also I like the course structure that you have to pick three courses in your first two years, I think that's quite good, because it means that you can chop and change and switch."

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

The DSA provides funding that can be put towards the extra course costs you may face as a direct result of your vision impairment and/or other disabilities. It enables you to study and have access to course materials on an equal basis to other students. As part of the process you will be assessed for the type of extra support that you need and the funding will be allocated to cover it.

What type of things can my DSA pay for?

Up to date information about the DSA, how much funding is available to you and what you can use it for can be found at:

www.studentfinancenetwork.co.uk/types-of-finance/postgraduate/northern-ireland-student/extra-help/disabled-students-allowances/what-are-they

In 2018-19 your DSA could pay for:

- Specialist equipment – for example a computer, a screen reader, magnification software, braille notetaker.
- Non-medical help – for example readers or other non-medical assistants you need to benefit fully from your course.
- Other disability-related costs of studying

One young person discovered during the DSA process that there was a lot of new technology he 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.”

How do I apply for a DSA?

You will need to apply for DSA through Student Finance Northern Ireland. If you want to apply for student finance, you should do that before applying for a DSA. You will need to supply evidence

of your disability with your application and this could be a letter from your doctor or VI specialist. Guidance is available at: www.studentfinancenir.co.uk/media/1021/sfni_disabled_students_allowances_guide_1819_o.pdf. If you do not wish to apply for other financial support, such as maintenance and tuition fee loans, you should download the DSA1 application form at www.studentfinancenir.co.uk You can also get versions in modified formats by phoning 0141 243 3686.

You should apply as soon as possible and not wait until you’ve been accepted on a course. You can normally start the application process for DSA once applications open for Student Finance.



The DSA assessment

If you qualify for a DSA, you'll be asked to attend an "assessment centre" to work out what support and equipment you might need. The assessor should have received information about the support you have received at school or college and will take into account:

- the prognosis of your sight condition
- the demands of the course over the coming years.

You can choose your own DSA assessment centre. You may decide to choose a centre which is close to where you live, or your university may recommend a centre which they are used to working with. Some students find it beneficial to meet an assessor with specialist knowledge of vision impairment, while others prefer to use assessors recommended by their institution.

It is really important to consider in advance of your assessment the type of support that you may need once at university. There is more guidance about this on our Starting University pages.

On reflecting on their DSA assessment, one young person said:

"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."

For more guidance on moving on to university, check out our step by step guide. This will take you through the steps of choosing and applying for a course, arranging your support and making the transition to university:
www.rnib.org.uk/startinguniversity



Section 7:

Moving on to work

If you are thinking of starting work, visit the RNIB young people's pages at www.rnib.org.uk/startingwork

From choosing a career and interview tips to writing a CV and deciding how you'll approach discussing your sight condition with potential employers, there is lots of useful information for you. You can also read about other young people's experiences of starting work.

Careers advice

The NI Careers Service provide impartial, all-age careers guidance throughout Northern Ireland. They can help you:

- know more about your career options
- become more aware of the skills you need to achieve your career goal
- feel more confident making decisions about your career
- feel better prepared to achieve your career goal

They provide specific services for young people in school, college and training, including providing guidance on:

- choosing subjects for study
- career planning and career options
- further and higher education
- apprenticeships and training

In school you should be offered a face-to-face careers guidance interview which normally takes place in Year 12.

"I think the fact that it was a one-to-one session, so it could be a bit more specialised and there was more time to talk through certain issues, I felt the advisor was quite well prepared in talking about it."

Further information about the Careers Service can be found by visiting: www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/careers

When you are ready to look for work, check out the looking for work section of the RNIB website: www.rnib.org.uk/information-everyday-living-work-and-employment/looking-work

Employment support for people with disabilities

The government have comprehensive guidance on the support which is available for people with disabilities when in employment, this includes guidance on:

- Your employment rights
- Benefits you may be entitled to
- Support while in work
- Work schemes and programmes

Further information may be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/people-disabilities/employment-support

The Access to Work scheme

When you are looking for work it's really important that you know about the Access to Work scheme. It's a Government programme that can pay for things like:

- taxis to and from work – really useful where transport links are poor
- screen reader or magnification software for your work computer
- adaptations to work premises and equipment in the workplace.

The support that you'll get will depend on the job you are doing and your needs. You'll be assessed by an Access to Work Assessor who will discuss the support you are likely to need and look at the requirements of your job. But be prepared for the Access to Work process to only begin near or maybe even after your start date.

Employers often worry about the potential costs of employing a person with a sight condition because they think the equipment and support needed may be expensive. Many employers don't know about the Access to Work scheme, so it's a good idea to find out as much as you can about it.

For more information about the Access to Work Scheme visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work

Job and Benefits Office

Your local Job and Benefits Office will be able to help you look for work in your area. They advertise job opportunities online and also in the Jobcentre itself. Employment Advisors at the Job Centre can also provide information on Access

to Work. You can find information on your local office at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/jobs-benefits-offices-jobcentres-and-social-security-offices

Things to tell your potential employer

Talking positively about your sight condition

When you are applying for jobs you need to think about if and when you plan to tell your employer about your sight condition. There aren't any rules about this and you don't have to tell an employer if you don't want to. It is up to you to decide at what point in applying for a job you choose to discuss it.

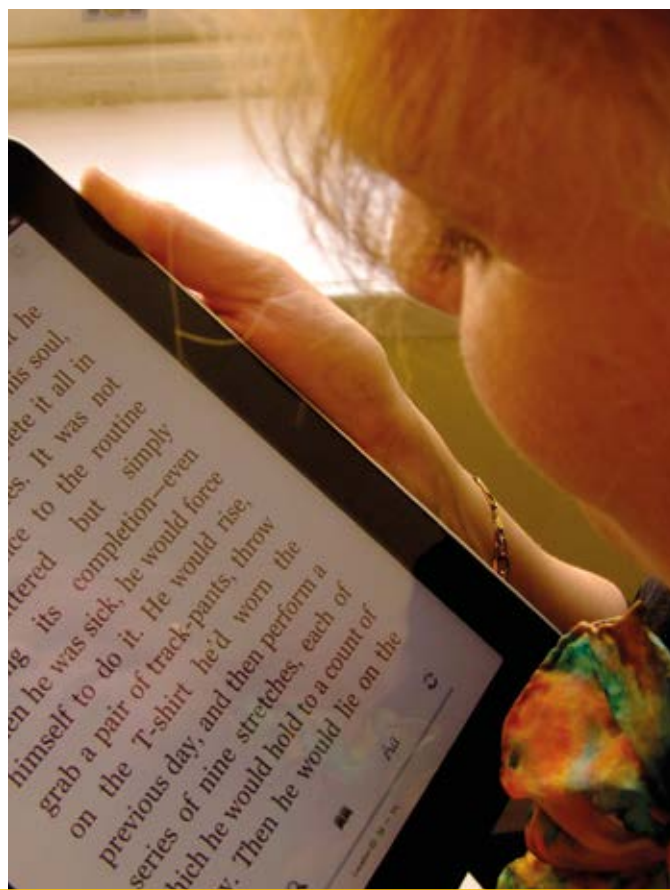
One young person described why it's important to be prepared in advance for disclosing your vision impairment:

"I am confident to talk about it, and I know how to talk about it in a way that advocates, not like 'I need help 24-7, help me!' I know how to explain what I need, but not come across in a bad way"

There are lots of benefits to talking to your employer about your sight condition. It means that you have the opportunity to approach the issue in a positive way and allows you to reassure the employer that your sight condition does not mean that you are unable to do the job properly by talking about the adjustments you will make. If you do decide that you want to talk about your sight condition to a potential employer you can design your own disclosure strategy. This means you plan exactly how and when you want to discuss this and you should think about this before going to job interviews.

There are many more reasons why talking to your employer about your sight condition may be a good idea. It is only when you disclose your disability that you have rights under equality legislation and that you become entitled to 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace.

"...the people at my work are really really good. They are really supportive of all disabilities, and for me with my vision impairment they have been really really good with that. So even just little things like when I got here they adjusted my computer screen straight away, stuff like the brightness level and the contrast. They are always checking in to make sure."



Interview skills: top tips

Interviews can be really stressful – but you can help yourself as much as possible by preparing beforehand:

- Arrange any adjustments you may need in advance. For example, if you have to complete a test you may need a large print version.
- Plan your journey, and know what transport links you need to catch to get you there a little early. You're unlikely to get the job if you are late!
- Make sure you know about the Access to Work Scheme, which provides you with practical support to do your job.
- Dress appropriately.
- Be confident and practise good posture.
- Research the organisation and content of the job.
- Re read your application form.
- Research and think about who is interviewing you.
- Use the job description and person specification to think about what questions you might be asked, and plan your responses using your past experiences as examples.
- Think about your how you talk about your sight loss (your disclosure strategy).
- Prepare some questions to ask at the end of the interview.

Section 8:

Preparing for Independence

Imagine you have just got your place at college or university – or that new job that you really wanted. You may be about to live alone for the first time in your life. Preparing for this ahead of time – learning how to cook basic meals, handle the laundry and shop independently – is really important, especially if you have relied on others to do these for you in the past.

Adjusting the way you work

Part of the role of specialist services, and education in general, is to prepare you to become an independent adult. This is also true for other students as the education system is structured to allow young people to become more independent over time.

It is important as you get older to be prepared to adapt the way in which you work to allow you to become more independent and to be able to adjust to the different settings you move into. For example, in your early years in school your teachers may provide you with materials which are in your preferred reading format. However over time they may instead focus their attention on teaching you ways in which to adapt learning material yourself, for example, by using assistive technology.

One young person described how during her time in college she experimented with different forms of technology to understand how she worked best:



"I developed an understanding of what technology works best for me. I am using different technology to what I used when I transitioned from [secondary school], and that's good, not because the technology that I used when I transitioned was bad...I have got it down to a fine art of what I need to use when, and what software works best and what kind of PC I want, you know I am investing in new technology just to experiment with myself and see if that can help me"

It is also important to be prepared to take responsibility for your own support needs and to challenge when reasonable adjustments are not being met. This may be daunting at first which is why it can be beneficial to start doing this when in a familiar environment like school.

Using Low Vision Aids

For some young people with vision impairment, magnifiers and other low vision aids can boost your independence by enabling you to read print you wouldn't be able to read otherwise.

They can be really useful for:

- reading ingredients, sell by dates and cooking instructions
- reading information on medicine bottles
- looking at the dials on the microwave, cooker and washing machine

Before you make a transition you should look into having an assessment with an optometrist to talk through your lifestyle changes. Low vision aids may be useful, for example, for reading course materials at university. Let's say, for example, that your lecture notes haven't been enlarged in time. A low vision aid could enable you to follow the session along with the other students. In fact, students often prefer to use technology such as computers and low vision aids compared to large print materials as it means they can be more independent.

"At primary school I found it a bit embarrassing because I wasn't the same as everyone else, and I had to use the big magnifiers to see everything, it was a bit embarrassing then, but as I got older, I just got used to it, I know I need them. At school I would try not to use them, I was struggling then, and I'd make myself struggle just so I didn't have to use the magnifying glass or whatever I needed to use, but now I just don't bother struggling, I know that I need it, I am just hurting myself if I don't use them. It's better for me if I do use them, use the magnifying glasses and things, whatever I need, I use it."

Low vision services

Low vision services can help you make the most of your remaining sight. Specialist low vision practitioners can assess your vision and provide support, advice and practical solutions for you. It is important to have a thorough low vision assessment before buying any magnifiers. A good low vision service will have a wide range of equipment including hand held magnifiers in a variety of shapes and handles (including those with in-built illumination) and stand magnifiers. They can also establish which low vision aids would be most useful for you. These may include other aids, such as large buttoned telephones, talking watches, and liquid level indicators to help increase your independence in your home. Low vision services in Northern Ireland are part of the hospital service. Further information, including how to contact an Eye Clinic Liaison Officer can be found at: www.rnib.org.uk/northern-ireland-services-rnib-northern-ireland/eye-care-liaison-service-rnib-northern-ireland

For further information download our guide "Starting Out: Making the most of your sight" at: www.rnib.org.uk/recently-diagnosed/take-action-and-next-steps

Using Assistive technology

Assistive technology such as magnification software and screen-readers may prove more important to you once in new settings. For example, many of the young people on the longitudinal study found that once they got to university there was a lot more reading required than they were previously used to. They found that while they had not benefited from assistive technology in the past once

at university it was helpful to reduce fatigue. So, learning to use assistive technology efficiently and effectively is very important for preparing for your future.

"It's definitely very important, because nowadays everyone uses... even now you are using a computer. You know everyone emails, reports whatever, everything is more technology now."

You may not know much about the wide range of technology that's on the market and, with technology advancing constantly, it can be hard to keep up. It might be a good idea to contact someone who can come and visit you to show you the latest products on the market. This is something which could be arranged by your DSA or Access to Work assessor. You may want to check out organisations and services such as RNIB employment service, Ability Net (www.abilitynet.org.uk) and Blind in Business (www.blindinbusiness.co.uk), which offer advice to vision impaired students moving into education or work including assessments, equipment supply, ICT training and employment services. You may also wish to visit an event like Sight Village where you will have the opportunity to explore the latest technology (www.qac.ac.uk/exhibitions.htm). If you aren't able to travel yourself, these events are attended by RNIB technology officers who are also able to provide advice.

"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."

RNIB has information on the latest technology at www.rnib.org.uk/technology.

Using Braille

Many of the young people interviewed as part of the longitudinal study found that they had moved away from the use of braille towards the end of their time in school. However once in new settings such as college and university they found that braille was extremely beneficial for certain tasks. Areas particularly highlighted included when revising for exams, when delivering presentations and when following notes during lectures.

"If I need to remember things I would probably use braille, because if a screen reader reads it I am like 'what... I won't remember that!' Having it literally written in front of me that's how I remember things. That's how I did my revision for exams."

Many young people enjoy using electronic refreshable braille devices, which allow the user to read electronic material in braille (and in the case of some devices, also take notes). You can find out more about these devices at www.rnib.org.uk/technology.



Speaking out

During your time in school you will likely have had people advocating on your behalf. For example this may have included specialist teachers advising your school on how best to support you in lessons or your parents/carers intervening if something was not going well. Once in settings like university and employment the expectation will be on you to advocate for yourself. For example, you may need to explain the adjustments you need, you may need to explain how your vision impairment affects you, or you may need to challenge others when reasonable adjustments are not met. The young people we spoke to as part of the longitudinal study identified several ways in which they felt better prepared to do this. These included: having had opportunities to self-advocate when younger (for example explaining what they needed in school or college); having a good understanding of their vision impairment and how it affects them; and having a good knowledge and understanding of available specialist equipment and support.

"I think I am confident about it because you know, it's 20 years of experience, so I had to learn my own way and had to learn it myself, but I know what I need and I know what I don't need, so I am happy, I am not stressed about it or nervous. I will just say this is what I need and this is what I don't need, but I had to learn it myself, I had figure it out myself, how to approach people about it in the first place."

Getting around on your own

Often young people with vision impairment are taught and learn to confidently get around independently in an area which is familiar to them. This is a very important skill which should be developed as much as possible at school. Even with these skills young people find that it is more challenging getting around independently once they move into a new area. If you are going into further education or higher education it may be advisable for you to request mobility support to help you familiarise yourself with your new setting. If you are moving to an entirely new area you may also wish to ask for mobility support from your local sensory support service. If you do request support, do this as far in advance as possible. If you are going to be using the train you may benefit from using the free rail assistance service.

One young person described how she is more confident travelling independently since using apps on her mobile phone:

"One of the most stressful things for me when I was younger was public transport and getting around and being able to see the timetables and all that kind of stuff. Whereas these days it's so much easier. I live in Manchester which is a big city but since I had a smart phone which could do maps and stuff which was in the first year, everything just completely changed."

Further guidance on travel and mobility, including details of the free rail assistance service and mobile apps, is available at: www.rnib.org.uk/cy/information-everyday-living/getting-around

Living independently

As you move into new settings such as higher education and employment you may also start living on your own for the first time.

Guide Dogs provide habilitation services for children and young people aged 0-25 across Northern Ireland. You can find more information on their wide range of services by visiting their website: www.guidedogs.org.uk/services-we-provide/children-and-young-peoples-services/

Thomas Pocklington Trust have published a guide on specific advice for people with vision impairment who are looking for a home: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/guide-finding-home-visually-impaired-people1 This advice is helpfully tailored for specific personal circumstances.

RNIB have advice designed for young people with vision impairment who are preparing to live on their own for the first time: www.rnib.org.uk/young-people/leaving-home

One young person explained how they were going to use their time living at home to prepare for eventually living independently:

"After university, I will get a place of my own. Until then I am still hoping to learn independence skills, in between now and then. Particularly this year... Things like cooking, probably the main one."



Section 9:

Know your rights

Rights in education

Children and young people with disabilities such as vision impairment have rights which protect them from discrimination in education. This means that children with disabilities have the right not to be subjected to disability discrimination by schools, colleges or higher education institutions. Further information may be found at:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/learning-and-your-rights

Rights in employment

Under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) it is unlawful for employers to discriminate against employees or jobseekers who have disabilities. Employers also have responsibility to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace to prevent a person with disabilities suffering from disadvantage. Further information may be found at:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/disability-discrimination-act-employment-rights#toc-3

What to do if things go wrong

These guidance materials outline the type of support that should be available to you. However, research evidence demonstrates that this is not always the case. If you are not receiving the support that you require and this is having a negative effect on the transitions that you are making, it is important to challenge this. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland provides advice if you believe you have been discriminated against under Disability Discrimination Act and RNIB offer specialist advice and guidance. For further information see: **www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/equality-commission-northern-ireland** or contact RNIB through their helpline on **0303 123 9999** or emailing **helpline@rnib.org.uk**

Section 10:

Benefits and financial help

As you move through your journey from school and beyond you may be entitled to different benefits and financial assistance because of your sight condition. The financial help you'll be able to get will depend on what you are doing and your circumstances at the time: for example, at university you may be entitled to Disabled Students Allowance and at work you may be entitled to funding through the Access to Work scheme. You may also be entitled to benefits such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payments (PIP) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Personal Independence Payments (PIP)

The Government is replacing Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people aged between 16 and 64 with a new benefit called Personal Independence Payment (PIP). You can find out more about the introduction of PIP and how this is likely to affect you if you are blind or partially sighted at www.rnib.org.uk/managingyourmoney and at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/personal-independence-payment-pip. DLA currently applies for anyone under the age of 16 www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/disability-living-allowance-children

Welfare benefits

Most full-time students can't claim welfare benefits. However, if you're registered blind or you get Personal Independence Payments (PIP), you may be able to apply for other benefits including Housing Benefit. The amount you can claim depends on your individual circumstances.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit is a benefit for people on low incomes. It will gradually replace many other welfare benefits – including housing benefit, income support and jobseeker's allowance. Recipients will also be assigned a Work Coach, with the objective of supporting the individual to prepare for work, start work, or earn more money.

For individual benefits advice it's best to speak with a welfare rights specialist in the student money advice team at your university or college, or try your local Citizens Advice Bureau.

You could also contact RNIB's Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or email helpline@rnib.org.uk and our Welfare Rights Advisors can help to resolve any problems you have in getting the right support.

You can also get advice from the Disability Rights UK on **0800 328 5050**, or visit: www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Section 11:

Useful contacts for more information and support

Blind in Business

Blind in Business is a charity working with blind and partially sighted young people to maximise educational and employment opportunities. It offers specialist workshops and training programmes and specific services to older pupils and graduates.

Telephone **020 7588 1885**.

www.blindinbusiness.org.uk

RNIB website

The RNIB website offers useful information for young people who are studying or looking for work. Use the website to get help with writing a CV, deciding how you'll approach discussing your sight loss with potential employers and to find out more about things like the Access to Work Scheme and to read other young people's experiences of transition. Visit our new Young People's section at www.rnib.org.uk/youngpeople.

RNIB Children, Young people and Families NI service

RNIB run a range of services for Children, Young people and Families in Northern Ireland. To find out more about current services and how to make contact with the team visit www.rnib.org.uk/northern-ireland-services-rnib-northern-ireland/children-family-and-youth-services

RNIB Helpline

Your direct line to the support, advice and products you need. We'll help you to find out what's available in your area and beyond, both from RNIB and other organisations. Whether you want to know more about an eye condition, buy a product from our shop, join our library, find out about possible benefit entitlements, be put in touch with a trained counsellor, or make a general enquiry, we're only a call away.

Telephone **0303 123 9999**.

Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Emotional Support Service (ESS)

Provides confidential support, information and counselling by telephone and online if you are experiencing emotional difficulties because of your sight condition. We can also put you in touch with counsellors and support in your local area. For more information, visit www.rnib.org.uk/emotionalsupport, call RNIB's Helpline on **0303 123 9999** (and ask to be referred to the Emotional Support Service) or email ess@rnib.org.uk

Angel Eyes NI

Angel Eyes NI provide emotional and practical support for parents of children with vision impairment, as well as some events for young people.

www.angeleyesni.org

Guide Dogs

Guide Dogs offer a Mobility and Independence Education Preparation and Support service for young people through critical transition stages such as school to further education and/or employment. Provision for those over 18 covers a wide spectrum of services in relation to orientation and mobility skills, independent living skills and communication skills.

www.guidedogs.org.uk

Thomas Pocklington Trust

Thomas Pocklington Trust advocates and provides support for people with vision impairment. They have a particular focus on supporting adults, and are growing their capacity regarding young people and offer a range of advice on topics such as housing and registration.

www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Sense

Sense is a national charity which supports people who are deafblind, have sensory impairments or complex needs, to enjoy more independent lives

www.sense.org.uk

VICTA

VICTA support children and young people who are blind or partially sighted and their families across the UK. They run many residential opportunities, including supported overseas adventure holidays

www.victa.org.uk

Other sight loss charities

There are many locally based sight loss charities or charities which focus on particular conditions.

Disability Rights UK

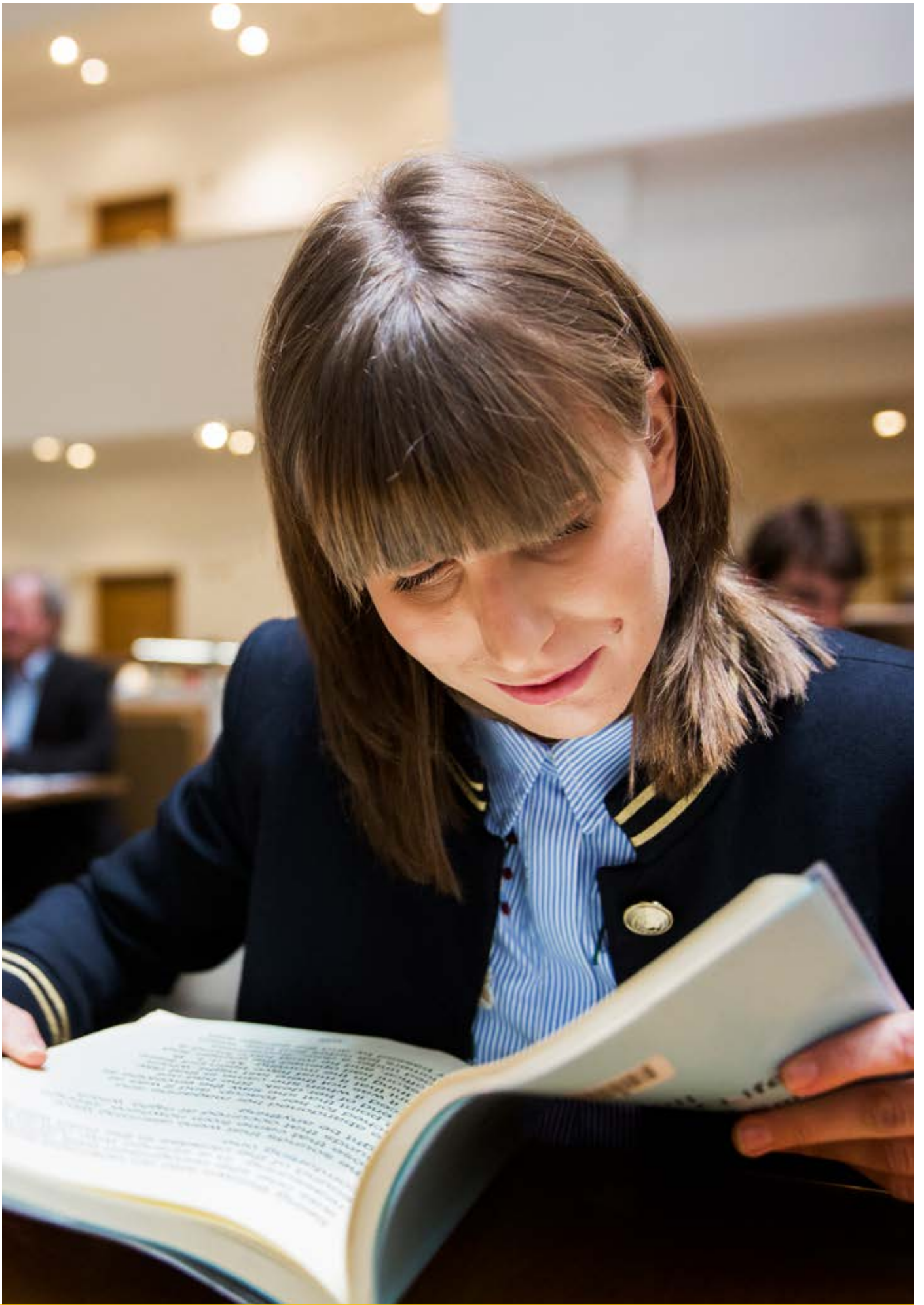
Disability Rights UK offers a wide range of information and advice to ensure disabled students have specialist support in making decisions about their education, training and employment choices after leaving school. This includes online information for disabled students, families and professionals, factsheets for disabled students and advisors and a helpline/email advice service. Call the students helpline on **0800 328 5050** or email students@disabilityrightsuk.org.

www.disabilityrightsuk.org/how-we-can-help/education-skills-and-employment

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