

2. AT and digital skills: from education to employment

The education system has a vital role to play in preparing disabled students with the digital and accessibility skills to enter and succeed in the workforce. Ensuring students have both ‘access to learning’ through technology and opportunities for ‘learning to access’ with technology is key and should be tackled at every stage of education⁸. This report focuses on the specific AT issues that occur directly before and during one’s transition into employment. In this section we explore the challenges that arise at the cross-section of education, employment, and AT, with a focus on careers guidance, work placements, and transitioning from the Disabled Students’ Allowance to Access to Work.

2.1 AT and careers guidance

Educational institutions, whether schools, colleges, or universities, are important sources of career advice. Having disability-inclusive careers guidance can help prepare students to navigate challenges such as deciding if and when to share details of their disability status with their prospective employer^{9,10}. There are a variety of reasons why graduates might choose not to notify an employer of their disability such as “fear of discrimination, the belief that they are asking for something extra and not wanting to appear ‘different’”¹¹. The commission heard evidence that within many education settings there is a lack of joining-up between careers and disability support teams, leaving disabled students ill-prepared for their first steps into the workforce.

The siloing of careers guidance and disability support can lead to significant digital accessibility problems. For example, career services often do not offer disability-specific advice to students, such as making them aware of funding for assistive technology support post-education¹². This would be overcome if all careers support included disability advice, with no prior presumption about whether the student does or does not have a disability.

There is another way in which support is siloed: submitted evidence highlights that there are technology-specific differences between what is acceptable in education versus employment. For example, one employer reported: “graduates repeatedly come to us expecting to use and ask us for Grammarly¹³, and it’s a flat-out immediate ‘no’” – often because this technology is cloud-based and does not meet the security standards of the business. Differences between the types of technology that are acceptable in the workplace compared to those used in the education system or at home, coupled with a failure to consider possible alternatives to education-specific solutions - can prevent students from being properly prepared to enter their chosen workplace.

⁸ McLinden, M, Douglas, G, Cobb, R, Hewett, R & Ravenscroft, J (2016), “Access to learning’ and ‘learning to access’: Analysing the distinctive role of specialist teachers of children and young people with vision impairments in facilitating curriculum access through an ecological systems theory”, *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, vol. 34, no. 2, p 177-195. Available at: https://research.birmingham.ac.uk/portal/files/27522171/Final_Manuscript_BJVI_March_13_2016.pdf

⁹ Birkbeck, University of London: Written evidence

¹⁰ University of Birmingham: Written evidence

¹¹ Birkbeck, University of London: Written evidence

¹² Commission evidence session

¹³ Grammarly is an “AI-powered writing assistant”. Available at: <https://www.grammarly.com/>

Good Practice

At Birkbeck, University of London, the careers team, Birkbeck Futures and the disability and dyslexia service work together to improve employment outcomes for their graduates by using a combination of specialist support and inclusive practices. Birkbeck's Ability Programme is a specialist course for students and recent graduates with a disability, neurodivergence or long-term health condition. Via the Ability Programme, students have access to a series of disability employment workshops, an e-learning programme, networking opportunities with Disability Confident employers, and funded work placements. Whilst the shift to remote teaching, learning, and working has caused difficulties for some disabled students, it has also had unexpected benefits for others. For example, offering the workshops online has resulted in a 46% increase in attendance compared to 2019/2020. Remote work placements have also proved very useful in removing barriers (e.g. a student with MS who would struggle to travel into the office each day).

Birkbeck recognises inclusive practices are key to supporting students' careers, whether they have declared a disability or not. As Head of Career Services Lucy Crittenden says:

“ we know from experience that many disabled students don't have diagnoses, and some who do don't share that information with the university. That's why we try so hard to make everything we do inclusive. We want to ensure all of our students are set up for success post-graduation. ”

Examples of inclusive careers practices at Birkbeck include providing captioning for all recorded content and highlighting disabled people and their career experiences to all students attending the annual Careers Fair.

2.2 Education-based work experience and AT

My apprenticeship took me 18 months longer than everyone else just because of all the paperwork. If I had assistive technology it would've made it so much easier. These things should just be more available to people¹⁴.

Work undertaken as part of formal education offers valuable opportunities for disabled students to:

- Discover which AT works best for them and gain confidence in their AT skills;
- Practice communicating with employers and colleagues about their AT;
- Demonstrate their skills and true abilities to prospective employers.

Education-based work experience can take a variety of forms, including apprenticeships, traineeships, supported internships, and T-level industry placements. Although there are significant differences between these routes, the one thing they have in common is that they are all more difficult for disabled students. This is because of barriers to the provision of suitable assistive technology for the workplace, including a low awareness of AT and AT funding for work placements and difficulties getting AT in place in a timely manner.

2.2.1 AT, funding, and expertise

At the intersection of education and employment there is significant confusion regarding the use of AT for the workplace and the routes to AT provision. In schools and colleges, these issues are due in part to a shortage of specialist-trained staff to assess and teach pupils to use the technology¹⁵. Education professionals also report that reductions in funding due to declining local authority budgets have prevented schools from providing pupils with the specialist equipment they need in recent years¹⁶.

Both education providers and employers describe guidance on AT and funding to be difficult to find and navigate¹⁷. Many rely on external services to offer specialist support to disabled students. This means they are dependent on the availability of such services in their local area and their knowledge of national offerings. We repeatedly heard that there is very low awareness of Access to Work funding for students on work placements, in part because education professionals turn to DfE for support and may be unaware or wary of DWP-led provision¹⁸. There is also evidence that many do not apply to the Additional Learning Support funding stream due to a combination of uncertainty about the eligibility criteria and the complexity of requirements around reporting the spending of funds¹⁹.

2.2.2 Timely AT and Access to Work

There is a significant mismatch between how long a student is on a work placement and how long it takes for Access to Work-funded assistive technology and training to be provided.

¹⁴ Anonymous: Written evidence

¹⁵ Policy Connect (2020), 'Outcomes briefing: UK EdTech at home and abroad'. Available at: <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/outcomes-briefing-uk-edtech-home-and-abroad>

¹⁶ University of Birmingham: Written evidence

¹⁷ Commission evidence session

¹⁸ Commission evidence session

¹⁹ DfE (2018), 'Exploring the funding and support for apprentices with additional support needs', p 9. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697649/Exploring_the_funding_and_support_for_apprentices_with_additional_support_needs.pdf

INFO BOX

Access to Work is “a grant to de-risk the recruitment and retention of disabled people for employers. The grant contributes to the disability related extra costs of working faced by disabled people and those with a health condition that are beyond reasonable adjustment, but it does not replace an employer’s duty under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments”²⁰.

Access to Work can be used to provide workplace assessments and assistive technology and training, amongst other types of support, worth up to £62,900 per year²¹. Once a support package has been agreed and approved by Access to Work, the employer purchases the products and services and claims back the cost from Access to Work.

The key milestones in the Access to Work timeline (with respect to technology) are:

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| 1. Making an application; | 5. Ordering technology and training; |
| 2. Receiving notice that it has been successful; | 6. Receiving the technology and booking the training; |
| 3. Undergoing a needs assessment; | 7. Installing the technology and receiving the training. |
| 4. Receiving a needs assessment report (that recommends technology and training); | |

Government has full control over steps 1 and 2; the organisations which hold government contracts to conduct needs assessments have control over 3 and 4; the subsequent steps are undertaken by employers, employees and technology and training providers.

To support employees during the Covid-19 pandemic, the government recently made changes to Access to Work, including:

- Funding for remote support services, such as video remote interpreting or British Sign Language interpreting;
- Remote workplace assessments;
- Digitized paperwork;
- Support to work from more than one location;
- Prioritising Access to Work applications from disabled people in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Group²².

²⁰ Answer to written question 143075.
Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-20/140735>

²¹ DWP (2021), ‘Access to Work: factsheet for customers’.
Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-factsheet/access-to-work-factsheet-for-customers>

²² Ibid.

A key problem with timelines is that an Access to Work application can only be started once a student has a work placement offer from a specific employer. While the government has set a clear target for workplace assessments to be completed within 8 days of receiving a referral from an Access to Work advisor²³, there are no such targets or data collection on how long it takes to actually provide assistive technology and complete training. (There is a similar lack of data on how many people use Access to Work for short term work placements)²⁴. However, employees, employers, and assistive technology and training providers report that this process can take many months^{25,26}. The length of time it takes to get AT and training sorted is much longer than the actual duration of short-term education-based work placements. For example, traineeships can be a minimum of 70 hours (approx. 9 working days) and T-level work placements a minimum of 315 hours (approx. 42 working days)^{27,28}. This means that in practice Access to Work-provisioned AT is useless for such work placements.

Disabled students who start work placements without their assistive technology in place are significantly disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers, even to the point of losing out on the opportunity altogether. We heard of one young person with visual impairment on an apprenticeship who “faced increasing pressure from her employer because of how slowly she was working while waiting for her equipment to be delivered, and eventually she lost the job”²⁹. Work experiences can be powerful tools for disabled students to build confidence and gain the skills they need to be competitive job applicants. Unfortunately, for some students who are not given the tools and support they need in a timely fashion, the experience can have the opposite effect - engendering self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in the workplace³⁰.

2.3 From the Disabled Students’ Allowance to Access to Work

For many disabled people, the transition from higher education to the job market coincides with the withdrawal of much of the adjustments and AT they had during university, meaning they are left unsupported at the very moment they need AT the most – to help persuade an employer to take them on. This loss of support is due to the lack of a formal pathway from the Disabled Students’ Allowance to the Access to Work programme.

²³ DWP (2021), ‘Access to Work holistic Assessment Provider Guidance’, p 25. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962930/access-to-work-holistic-assessment-provider-guidance-version-9.pdf

²⁴ DWP FOI request FOI2020/61963.

²⁵ Commission evidence sessions

²⁶ Hands Free Technology: Written evidence

²⁷ DfE (2021), ‘Traineeships: Supporting young people to develop the skills for apprenticeships, sustainable employment, and further learning’, p 16. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-young-people-to-develop-the-skills-for-apprenticeships-and-sustainable-employment-framework-for-delivery>

²⁸ DfE (2021), ‘T Level industry placements: delivery guidance’, p 9. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-industry-placements-delivery-guidance>

²⁹ University of Birmingham: Written evidence

³⁰ Commission evidence sessions

INFO BOX

Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs)³¹ are grants available to higher education students to cover extra costs they might incur during their studies due to a disability, learning difficulty or mental health condition. The grant can help with the costs of non-medical helpers, travel support, assistive technology and more. Unlike other support, if a DSA assessor recommends a new computer, the student must contribute £200 to purchasing this. See our report *Disabled Students' Allowances: giving students the technology they need to succeed*³² for more on this topic.

The Disabled Students' Allowance funding ceases when the recipient graduates and Access to Work is only available once a person has been offered a job or internship. For this reason, recent disabled graduates can find themselves at a significant disadvantage in the job market. For example, licenses for Disabled Students Allowance-funded software expire and IT help desk and repair support ends after graduation - leaving disabled graduates without use of the assistive technology they need in order to find, apply for and secure employment.

Even those graduates who have a job offer before graduating, and go directly into work, will experience a transition period of securing funding through Access to Work. Some assistive technology developers who use a subscription model of funding report choosing to continue providing access to their product during this time in an effort to support the needs of the disabled person. Sarah Todd from assistive technology provider Brain in Hand told the commission: "One of the biggest discrepancies we see is where a student comes from a background where Brain in Hand has been fully funded and they go into an employment setting where it is not fully funded and there is a contribution to be made either by the employee or employer"³³. Even though this student knew what technology they needed, were aware of Access to Work, and had started the application process once they received a job offer, they were faced with a period of months during which there was no funding for their assistive technology or related support. Our research also indicates that past assessments, in particular DSA assessments, are not being used to speed up the process of identifying appropriate AT for the workplace. This is true despite the fact that guidance states that advisors should take into account previous relevant assessments, and that further assessments are not always necessary³⁴.

The above illustrates the significant difficulties faced by disabled students who need assistive technologies as they progress from one stage of life to the next. The lack of a joined-up system of support and provision between education and employment settings, with public service professionals looking in different directions to different government Departments, creates additional barriers for disabled students during the already-challenging transition into work.

³¹ SLC (2021), 'Help if you're a student with a learning difficulty, health problem or disability'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa>

³² Policy Connect (2019), 'Disabled Students' Allowances: giving students the technology they need to succeed'. Available at: <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/disabled-students-allowances-giving-students-technology-they-need-succeed>

³³ Commission evidence session

³⁴ DWP (2021), 'Access to Work: staff guide'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-staff-guide/access-to-work-staff-guide>