

The Transition of Young People With Learning Disabilities¹ to Employment: What Works?

Abstract

Significant barriers have been identified in the transition from school and college to employment among young persons with learning disabilities (LD), though factors that appear to facilitate that transition have been also been identified. The current paper examines the transition from school of 87 young people with LD, with interviews occurring both in their last year of school and six months post graduation. The study also reports on the vocational advice given to students with LD by schools/colleges and external transition support organizations in their last year of school. Differences in the type of activity offered were found for schools/colleges and the external transition support providers. Logistic regression analyses revealed that work experience provided by the external support organizations, as well as work awareness training provided by schools/colleges were significantly related to subsequent employment. Implications for transition practice are discussed.

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Keywords

transition
employment
special education
intellectual disabilities
social services

The transition of young people with disabilities from school to adult life has been an area of great interest in the U.K. in recent years (HMI, 1991; Department of Health, 2001; Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). A subset of this group, namely those with learning disabilities (LD), constitute a significant proportion of those involved in formal transition processes. In the U.K., persons with LD are those "having a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning),

¹ *Editor's Note:* People with learning disabilities (LD) is used in the U.K. to describe those referred to elsewhere as people with "intellectual disabilities", "developmental disabilities", or "intellectual or developmental disabilities". The term describes a different group from that referred to as having "learning disabilities" in the U.S.

which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development" (Department of Health, 2001).

In the U.K., legislation requires Education Authorities to arrange and attend reviews meetings of the needs of students with LD, who must have a Statement of Special Educational Needs from the age of 14 years and onwards which provides the framework for transition planning (Education Act, 1996). The student with a LD is expected to play a central role in the transition process, and helps decide whether the post-school path leads to further education (e.g., college), work-based training, or employment (DFES, 2001). However, short-comings in the transition process have been identified (King's Fund, 1998; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2002), and there remains much to be done to successfully develop and implement transition pathways that meet the aspirations of young people with LD.

The preferred route emerging from transition planning is often a five-day college placement, which contrasts with post-school transition outcomes in the U.S. where sheltered and supported employment are predominant avenues for people with LD (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Woodruff, & Dixon, 2005). Employment is not frequently pursued as an area in its own right for transition planning, with very few young people with LD entering supported employment programs between the ages of 16 and 19 years (Beyer, Goodere, & Kilsby, 1996). When young people with LD do pursue employment, many still find that a lack of available personal support, limited transportation options, and welfare benefit regulations hinder the transition into the workforce (Heslop, Mallet, Simons, & Ward, 2002; Morris, 1999a,b; SSI, 1997; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2002).

While much of the U.K. research has concentrated on the problems related to the transition of young people with LD into employment, work from the U.S. has identified factors that increase the likelihood of employment upon completion of school in this population (Peraino, 1992). However, such studies also highlight the overlap in programs targeting adults with LD; the effects of these programs are limited due to the fact that programs have no single focus of service management and have highly restrictive eligibility criteria (Wittenberg, Golden, & Fishman, 2002). For people with mild LD, successful graduation from a high school can lead to higher employment rates (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006; Scuccimarra & Speece, 1990). Factors related to increased likelihood of employment after school among persons with mild LD include: being male (Peraino, 1992); having had a summer job or part-time supported job experience while at school (Hasazi, Gordon, & Rowe, 1985; Scuccimarra & Speece, 1990; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997); receiving vocational-technical training (Humes & Brammer, 1985); duration of community based training and age appropriate integration with non-disabled peers (White & Weiner, 2004); and use of a job coach (Howarth, Mann, Zhou, McDermott, & Butkus, 2006). On the other hand, Gray, McDermott, and Butkus (2000) found that job coaching was only effective in urban areas and regions with low or intermediate unemployment rates.

The current study builds on the literature on what works in helping young people with learning disabilities transition from school/college to employment in the U.K. context. It seeks to track what vocational inputs a cohort of young people with LD received from school and external organizations in their last year of school that might strengthen links to employment six months post graduation.

Table 1. Different approaches to employment in transition in the six study areas

<i>Approach to Employment Preparation</i>	<i>What was offered</i>	<i>Who it was offered to</i>	<i>Description of the Agency</i>
Whole life Transition Team linked to a Supported Employment Agency (SEA)	A small team of transition workers offering Person Centred Planning to young people and families to design their next steps, over all life areas, including employment. Referral to SEA for supported work experience possible. SE team work with young people in College of Further Education (CFE)	Transition Team: young people with LD in special schools. SEA: young people with LD in one CFE and in special schools	Team provided by Local Authority Social Services Department- Adult Team
Young person's employment service	Work awareness training, interest building experiences, and supported work experience in community jobs	Young people with LD in one mainstream secondary school	A voluntary sector agency mainly providing support to adults with all disabilities into employment
Employment focussed Transition Support Team	Providing supported work experience in community jobs	Young people with LD in special schools	Team provided by Local Authority Social Services Department- Adult Team
Training and work experience in a Social Enterprise	Placements over a few weeks, or sessions over a semester or a year, in a range of its own social enterprises or employment training projects (café, pottery, woodwork computer training etc.)	Young people with LD in special schools	A voluntary sector agency offering training
Youth Supported Employment Team	Finding, and supporting young people in, part-time evening and weekend jobs with provision of "buddy" support from non-disabled peers	Young people with LD in four CFE's.	A voluntary sector supported employment agency
Personal Advisors from a Careers Service	Providing support for further education and employment decisions through the Connexions' careers guidance model. Team specialises in students with special needs	Young people with LD in special schools	English "Connexions" company, providing careers guidance to all young people at schools in area

Methods

Setting

The research was carried out in six local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales. The areas were selected because they emphasized promoting employment as an option to students with LD leaving school through external transition support organizations. The approaches to preparing students for employment varied in each area, and are summarised in Table 1.

In the U.K., special schools cater exclusively to young people (aged 5 to 18 years) with special needs, including LD. A total of 14 special schools took part in this study, representing 29% of all special schools in the 6 local authorities. Mainstream secondary schools provide education to all youth aged 11 to 18 years, some of which have mild LD. Of the 8 mainstream schools in the relevant area, one took part in this study (13%). Colleges of Further Education (CFE) provide a range of courses from basic vocational training through to foundation degrees for any young person aged over 16; persons with LD are enrolled in separate courses but can integrate into mainstream courses. A total of five CFE volunteered to take part in two of our six areas; this represents 71% of CFE in the two participating local authorities.

In the U.K., vocational programs and qualifications are offered to schools and CFE within the National Qualifications Framework by accreditation organizations. The organizations most commonly mentioned in the current study include: Award Scheme Development Accreditation Network (ASDAN) and the Open College Network (OCN). Both organizations offer several curriculum programs relevant to employment among persons with LD, for example, courses on health and safety, time keeping, attendance, and working with others (ASDAN, 2007).

Participants

This study is part of a larger effort to understand the transition experiences of young persons with LD and their carers. Only information on the youth with ID are presented here; the experiences and views of carers are described elsewhere in this issue (see article by Kaehne and Beyer).

Young people (and their carers) were invited to take part if: (1) the young person had a diagnosed LD; (2) the young person with LD was in his/her last year of school or college; and (3) the young person with LD and/or his/her carer had received input from the target employment service in the area. If the young people with LD were eligible, informed consent was obtained from them and their carers prior to arrangement of home visits. A total of 89 young people were identified and 87 young people and their carers provided written consent to take part in the study.

The participants also consented to have the schools release some information regarding their schooling and receipt of other services. Finally, the young person with LD also had the option to participate, but to refuse to have their carer participate in the study—2 students declined to have their carer involved.

Information From Schools/Colleges, External Transition Support Organizations, and Carers

Schools/colleges provided information on the young person's age, nature of LD, as well as information on their carers. Schools/colleges also provided reports for each student on vocational activity (provided by the school/college and off premises) in each school term. Here, data included a basic description of the vocational activity, timing, duration, aim, and whether it was conducted in an individual or group setting. The same information was provided by our target

external transition support organizations on the vocational activities they offered (see above). Activities were categorised using the descriptions provided, and the duration of time spent in each category of activity was recorded, as well as the total duration of participation in any vocation-related activity.

Carers reported the young person’s score on the Adaptive Behaviour Scale (ABS) (Nihira et al., 1993). This scale has demonstrated psychometric properties among young persons with LD (Nihira, Leland, & Lambert, 1993; Schalock, 2004). In the two cases where students had vetoed their carer’s involvement, the ABS score was set to the average for their group (i.e., special school, mainstream school, or CFE).

Our dichotomous dependent variable was whether a young person was gainfully employed six months post graduation, be it full- or part-time. If the person was employed, we also asked who had helped them find the job.

Analyses

Descriptive data (% , mean and standard deviation) are used to characterise the study sample, and chi-square techniques are used to describe differences between student groups (i.e., special schools, mainstream schools, college) and between in-house education and external agency activity providers. Logistic regression was used to determine the relationship between independent variables (i.e., descriptive data on the young person with LD), and paid employment.

Results

Overall, 87 young people and their carers met the criteria and agreed to take part. Table 2 presents study sample characteristics. About 61% of the sample was male, and the average age was 17.8 years (*SD*=1.7). The mean percentile rank of the young people’s ABS as recorded through carers’ interviews was 77.7 (*SD*=16.8), equating to a group of people who would have “average” functioning (across self-care, sensor and

motor abilities, managing money, communication, use of number and time, independence in the home, vocational skills, active lifestyle, acting responsibly and interaction with other) compared to a normative sample of people with learning disabilities living primarily at home or in social care facilities. In addition to meeting the definition of LD, 9% were reported as also having Autism, 1% also had Asperger’s Syndrome, and 5% were reported as having additional emotional or behavioural difficulties. Approximately 63% had a

Table 2. Personal characteristics of sample and vocational activities offered by schools, colleges and employment support services

Personal Characteristics	Mainstream			All (n=87)
	Special Schools (n=43)	Secondary School (n=24)	Colleges (n=20)	
ABS Mean Percentile Rank	69.8	93.0	79.5	77.7
Age	18.1	16.2	19.6	17.8
Gender				
Male	58%	90%	19%	61%
Female	42%	10%	81%	39%
Additional diagnoses/ problems				
Autistic spectrum disorder	19%	0%	0%	9%
Asperger’s syndrome	0%	0%	5%	1%
Emotional or behavioural difficulties	9%	0%	0%	5%
Presence of a Statement of Educational Need	86%	22%	55%	63%
Receiving School Action or School Action Plus	2%	4%	10%	7%

Statement of Educational Need and a further 7% had School Action or School Action Plus status.

Differences in Provision of Vocational Activities Between Settings

Table 3 shows the time spent by young persons with LD in vocational activities offered (by schools/colleges and external transition support organizations), as well as the total number of hours spent in any vocation-related activity.

Significant differences were noted between the time spent in vocational activities provided by special schools, our mainstream school, and colleges ($\chi^2=44350$; $p\leq 0.001$). Within the *special schools* the highest input was in other activities (26.6%), which mainly included links or day release to relevant college courses, and visits to potential employers. There was also provision of general work awareness (25.1%) and work experience (20.8%), much of which was provided within the school (e.g. assisting in classes for younger children, helping the janitor, working in the kitchen). This was followed by qualification courses (15.2%) and vocational profiling (12.3%). The *mainstream school* had all (100%) of its school-based vocational activity done in the form of qualification courses. Differences in the types of vocational activities also existed within the *colleges*. Specifically, general work awareness training was most common (61.7%) (e.g. watching videos showing work, talking about presenting one’s self at work, health and safety instruction), followed by work experience (26.7%)—most of which took place in-house and qualification courses (11.6%).

Table 3. *Involvement in Vocational Activities by Providing Agency*

	Mainstream			
	Special Schools n=43	Secondary School n=24	Colleges n=20	External services n=87
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>				
% hours general work awareness courses	25.1%	0.0%	61.7%	6.2%
% hours on vocational qualifications courses	15.2%	100.0%	11.6%	15.2%
% hours work experience	20.8%	0.0%	26.7%	64.8%
% hours “other” (trips to colleges etc.)	26.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
% hours in vocational profiling	12.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%
% hours in practical project placement (social enterprise model)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.2%
Total hours vocational input	16300	5135	4243	6279

Differences in Provision of Vocational Activities Between Providers

Significant differences also existed between the provision by schools/colleges, and *external transition organizations* for a number of vocational activities ($\chi^2=4230$; $p\leq 0.001$) (see Table 3). For example, external transition organizations provided work experience (64.8%) much more often, which was primarily gained through jobs in the community (with or without a job coach). These organizations offered higher levels of practical project placement (10.2%) (e.g., café, sandwich-making, and furniture-making enterprises), similar levels of access to vocational qualification courses (15.2%), but lower levels of general work awareness courses (6.2%) than schools and colleges.

Factors Related to Employment Six Months Post Graduation

A follow-up survey six months after leaving school found that 18 (21%) of the young people with LD in the survey were employed, including 10 persons from mainstream schools (56%), 6 persons

colleges (33%), and 2 persons from special schools (11%).

A stepwise logistic regression was carried out, to identify the relationship between personal characteristics, level of activity input from different sources and gaining a full or part-time paid job after leaving school. First, correlations among all independent variables were examined (using Spearman rank order correlation coefficient) to test for multi-collinearity. No relationships surpassed $r=0.37$, and thus all independent variables were candidates for the final model. Next, bivariate logistic regression modelling was conducted to determine the relationship between each independent variable and employment

(Table 4). In fact, none of the variables were found to be related to employment on their own.

A stepwise conditional entry method for introducing variables was used to determine whether, in combination, the independent variables were related to employment (using a probability of 0.05 as the criteria for inclusion). Table 5 shows the vocational activities beta values and the significance of their contributions to explaining paid employment as an outcome when all are entered. In the end, only 2 variables were significantly related to employment. Persons that had work experience (provided by external transition support organizations) were

1.01 times more likely to be employed, and those that had had work awareness training (provided by the schools/colleges) were also 1.01 time more likely to be employed, suggesting that the overall effect is a weak one. The R Squared value for the model was 0.192, meaning that these two variables explained 19.2% of the variance in predicting employment post graduation. The overall accuracy of the model to predict who would and who would not obtain a job was 82%. Prediction within this of who would get a job was only 19%, suggesting that the logistic regression equation was useful in identifying associations between vocational input and the employment outcome, but was not adequate as a predictive model.

Table 4. Results of stepwise logistic regression for individual variable effects on paid employment as an outcome

Variables	Beta Score	Wald	p
Age	-0.424	2.309	.129
Gender	-0.450	0.297	.586
Employment Service led (SRV)			
Work Experience	-0.045	1.419	.232
SRV Vocational Qualification	0.005	0.284	.107
SRV Other Vocational Activity	-0.005	0.012	.911
School/College led (SC)			
Work Experience	-0.014	0.877	.349
SC Work Awareness Course	0.010	3.254	.071
SC Vocational Qualification	-0.004	0.150	.698
SC Other Vocational Activity	-0.001	0.002	.965
Constant	5.941	1.415	.234

Table 5. Logistic regression – final model

Variable	p	Odds/ Ratio	95% confidence interval	
Employment Service led Work Experience	0.014*	1.007	1.002	1.013
School or college Work Awareness Course	0.048*	1.007	1.000	1.013
Constant	0.000*	0.121		

* $p \leq .05$

How did Employed Young Persons With LD Find Their Jobs?

For the 18 young people who were employed at follow-up, 10 (56%) stated that they had found their job through the external transition organisation they had worked with while at school/college, while 4 (22%) people had found a job themselves or through family contacts, and 2 (11%) had received help through the government's employment agency (i.e., Jobcentre Plus). Two individuals (11%) were unwilling to answer the question.

Discussion

For those young people with LD that want to pursue paid employment after leaving school or college, there continues to be barriers to their achieving this. Employment is not universally considered to be a viable option for these young people by all professionals involved in transition planning. There appears to be a lack of personal support to help people try out jobs while at school /college, and too few organizations that can help find people jobs when they leave. While the U.K.'s Special Educational Needs Code of Practice identifies employment as a legitimate outcome of transition planning, there does appear to be a bias in outcome towards moving on to college for further education. Our data suggests that the involvement of external employment agencies in transition plays a positive role in promoting employment as a viable option to young persons with LD post graduation.

The study also tells us that there is great variability in what is offered in terms of vocational preparation for young people with learning disabilities while at school. The data from the colleges in this sample suggests this variability exists in that sector as well. There also seems to be significant overlap in what is

offered by schools/colleges and external transition organisation with employment expertise. However, not all vocational activities offered, by schools/colleges or external organizations, appear to increase the probability of young people with LD being employed post graduation. That said, we found that the combination of well-structured work awareness training provided through schools/colleges and supported work experience provided through external employment agencies in the last year of school does seem to have some impact on the likelihood of employment.

We also found that young people in mainstream schools represented over half of those who were employed six months after leaving school. Though they were, on average, the youngest group, they had the highest levels of adaptive behaviour. Young persons with LD in special schools had the lowest levels of adaptive behaviour, and they were the least likely to be employed post graduation. Though ABS scores were not found to predict employment (on their own or in combination with other factors), its relationship to employment should be further explored. It may be that assumptions about the person's abilities play a larger role in the transition to employment than the person's abilities themselves, given that professionals in special schools tend to offer limited vocational activities. More work is needed to understand the degree to which adaptive behavior may be influencing the types of vocational activities and opportunities in the different settings.

The external transition support organizations also had a closer relationship with employers in the community than did the schools, and this may also have led to differences in the rates of employment. Specifically, persons that had more contact with external transition support organizations (and thus more

work experience) may be more exposed to employers in the community, and thus have an easier time finding employment.

The results of this small scale study suggest that schools and external specialist (i.e., transition support) agencies should work more closely to ensure that the goal of employment of young people with LD is realized. The use of well-designed work awareness training with links to opportunities for more concrete work experience appears to be a potentially powerful combination in securing employment for young persons with LD post graduation. This, however, may not easily be translated to practice. In the U.K., many transition support/employment agencies are funded to work with adults, and find their eligibility criteria precludes them from providing the services needed to younger persons with LD still in school (O'Bryan, Simons, Beyer, & Grove, 2000). The schools themselves do not have sufficient resources to access these organizations, and while colleges do receive additional learner support funding to assist people with special needs, this money is largely committed within the college itself.

The findings from this study support recent efforts from government-sponsored organizations attempting to forge stronger links between the school system and employment services (Learning and Skills Council, 2006; National Assembly for Wales, 2007). With more funds dedicated to building such links, a higher rate of employment among recent graduates with LD may be entirely within reach.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the financial support of the Big Lottery and thank Shaw Trust for commissioning this work.