Thomas Pocklington Trust

Understanding International Approaches to Achieving Equality of Blind and Partially Sighted People

A study of practice in education, employment and wider society

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of international approaches to achieving equality of blind and partially sighted (BPS) people, with a focus on education and employment.

“As so many countries are facing very similar issues that face blind and partially sighted people it is essential that there is greater co-operation around the world. This report is an example of the lessons that can be learnt through such co-operation”

Charles Colquhoun – CEO
Thomas Pocklington Trust

In addition, examining BPS people in the world context provides an opportunity for reflection, for comparisons of best practice, and is most useful for those working in the vision impairment sector, or those advocating for the needs of BPS people.

Research team

The report was written and edited by blind and visually impaired people which added to the design of the methodology (see methodology section below), who already had some knowledge of the subject matter because of lived experience. Although the global aspect is a departure from the work carried out by Thomas Pocklington Trust, but this has proved a valuable and insightful process.

Research team: Beverley Duguid (Supervisor) Martha Foulds (Research Assistant) and Yanan Yu (Project Assistant).

Overview

The first two sections of this report highlight the diverse range of practice intended to achieve equality in employment and education. The final section examines the role of peer support structures and impact of anti-discrimination legislation – matters closely aligned with discussions of employment and education.

Objectives

- Envision how countries other than the UK respond to the needs of BPS people
- Investigate to what extent are countries' responses led by BPS people and/or influenced by lived experience of BPS people?
- Question to what extent BPS people are included into countries' labour markets? What employment support exists and by whom is it provided?
- To what extent are BPS people included in systems of education and learning? What education support exists and by whom is it provided?

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Key Conclusions and Findings

Peer support

This report found that BPS people face similar traits across the globe, such as low uptake in employment and challenges in transitioning from primary to secondary education depending on the path through the education system. Nevertheless, peer support provided by those with lived experience can function as a counterweight to obstacles and barriers.

Data collection

Data collection and analysis: a repeated theme throughout this study is a lack of robust data which hinders the undertaking of quantitative or qualitative analysis of BPS people's life experiences and outcomes. Data may be collected haphazardly or not at all, with differing definitions of vision impairment presenting a particular challenge.

These two important findings pose both opportunities and challenges to the vision impaired sector.

Key examples from employment and education

Australia: Employment assistance model

The Australian Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) covers ‘reasonable workplace modifications, work equipment, Auslan services and workplace assistance and support services’. This may include computer software, communication technology, accessible work equipment or modifications to work equipment and building modifications.

France: The provision of traditional rehabilitation training

Training on the use of Braille, assistive technology and the long white cane combined with job-specific training can be illustrated by the work of the Paul and Liliane Guinot Centre (L’Etablissement et Services de Réadaptation Professionnelle Paul et Liliane Guinot) near Paris.

Learning from supplementary education

This report makes useful comparisons with both vision and non-vision impaired extra curricula examples that have shown success in supporting its pupils. This section includes examples from other marginalised communities and how they have coped with discrimination and exclusion from wider society: Space Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students, Cardiff Sunday sign school, and black supplementary schools.

Beverley Duguid
July 2025

Introduction

This study seeks to understand international approaches to achieving equality for blind and partially sighted (BPS) people, with a focus on education and employment.

The first two sections of this report highlight the diverse range of practice intended to achieve equality in employment and education, providing readers with opportunities for learning and reflection. The final section examines the role of peer support structures and impact of anti-discrimination legislation – matters closely aligned with discussions of employment and education.

The findings of this study may be most useful for those working in the vision impairment sector or otherwise advocating in the interests of BPS people.

Methodology

This study utilised a scoping report, desk-based research and semi-structured interviews to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do countries other than the UK respond to the needs of BPS people?[1]
- **RQ2:** To what extent are countries' responses led by BPS people and/or influenced by lived experience of BPS people?
- **RQ3:** To what extent are BPS people included into countries' labour markets? What employment support exists and by whom is it provided?
- **RQ4:** To what extent are BPS people included in systems of education and learning? What education support exists and by whom is it provided?

An Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) was established to work alongside the research assistant and research supervisor to provide guidance on developing the study, identifying appropriate research methods and verifying its approach.

An initial scoping review was conducted to explore existing literature and scholarship as it relates to the experiences of BPS people across a sample of nine countries[2]. The sample was chosen to reflect diversity of development and economic status and minimise the negative effects of Western bias and Eurocentrism that can otherwise mask important findings. It was anticipated that a similar sample would be utilised for the full study, with the practice of specific countries examined.

The review identified a range of positive practice across the sample but that barriers and challenges persist for BPS

people. To fully identify international practice, and based on the advice of the EAP, this study's methodology was amended to examine themes rather than specific countries. For instance, examining the impact of reserved occupations in Japan and other countries utilising formal and informal reservation rather than Japanese approaches as a whole.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The examples of practice examined in this study were selected following the scoping review and further literature review. To be included:

- Practice may be formal or informal
- Improve (or seek to improve) BPS people's access to employment or education, or equality in wider society
- Relate to BPS people, all disabled people including BPS people or other groups facing barriers to full participation in employment or education, or full equality in wider society.

The initial inclusion criteria restricted consideration of practice that relates to BPS people or disabled people more widely. However, several measures that relate to other groups of marginalised people were recognised as presenting useful learning for those interested in the subject of this report the criteria were amended. No specific exclusion criteria were employed.

Definitions and language

This study notes differing approaches to the definition and language of vision impairment.

Medical definitions include the five categories of vision impairment outlined in the International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 2019), the distinction between blindness and vision impairment of the German Statistics on Severe Disability (Schwerbehindertenstatistik) (Finger et al., 2012) and US social security legislation (Social Security Administration, 1980) which defines only legal blindness.

Personal identities observed by this study include blind, partially sighted, visually/vision impaired, deafblind and person with sight loss. For consistency, this study refers to blind and partially sighted (BPS) people, meaning those who have an eye condition which seriously affects their daily lives, and the subject of vision impairment. When quoting directly, we use the language of the author or participant.

Acknowledgements

This study has benefited greatly from the contributions of the EAP. It is with thanks to Abi Fitzgibbon, David Aldwinckle, Dr Ahalya Subramanian, Subhash Suthar and Yanan Yu that this study was completed.

Abbreviations

ACB	American Council of the Blind
BPS	Blind and partially sighted
CFVI	Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
EAF	Employment Assistance Fund
EAP	Expert Advisory Panel
ECC	Expanded core curriculum
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
NABP	Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted
NBPCB	National Blindness Professional Certification Board
NFB	National Federation of the Blind
QTVI	Qualified teacher of vision impaired students
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States of America
VDAB	Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training)

Access to Employment

This section explores a range of measures designed to improve access to employment for BPS people, including positive action, funding systems and models of training and rehabilitation. Similarities and differences between UK and international support systems are explored, with consideration of the historical and contemporary context.

Quota systems

Quota systems are a measure implemented by multiple governments to tackle the employment gap facing BPS people, requiring some or all employers to recruit a minimum number or percentage of BPS and/or disabled people. This section considers their previous use in the UK, as well as the nature of their implementation and success or otherwise in China, France, Germany, Japan and India.

Examining quotas across England, Wales and Scotland from 1944 and Northern Ireland from 1945 until 1994 can provide insights for comparison. The Disabled Persons (Employment) Act (1944) established a Disabled Persons Employment Register, with employers of 20 or more employees required to employ people who were ‘registered disabled’. The 1944 Act was abolished with the passage of

the Disability Discrimination Act (1995); Thornton and Lunt (n.d.) propose that the quota system was not successful in promoting the employment of disabled people because of the system's complexities, with many employers not aware of their duties under the Act. Thornton and Lunt further contend that the focus on enforcement and 'policing the quota' (p. 11) rather than tackling the structural nature of disability discrimination in employment harmed disabled people's employment opportunities.

In several countries examined by this study, quota systems continue to exist. China utilises a system under which organisations must employ disabled people and represent no less than 1.5 percent of all employees. In 'welfare enterprises' disabled people must represent at least 40 percent of all employees. Employers that fail to meet their quota risk financial penalties. (Huang, Guo and Bricout, 2008) However, in examining the country's responsibilities under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the United Nations (UN) concluded that the existence of a quota system did not effectively address the unemployment issue among disabled people or the deep-rooted causes of employment discrimination. (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2012)

However, there is evidence of other quota systems imposing financial penalties to non-compliance to achieve direct and indirect benefit. Chareyron et al. (2024) found that the risk of penalties encourages French employers to identify appropriate workplace adjustments to maximise employment of BPS people, measuring a difference in employment rates between organisations to whom quotas do and do not apply. In Germany, money raised through penalties is used to fund adjustments required by disabled employees (Brasse, 2021).

However, Hokari et al. (2023) report that disabled people in Japan are often employed only to meet an employer's legal requirements rather than as colleagues of equal standing to their non-disabled counterparts, and as such face barriers to promotion and advancement. In India, three percent of junior civil service vacancies at grades C and D are reserved for disabled applicants, of which one percent are specifically for BPS employees. Despite this, adjustments to working processes are not made consistently and BPS employees are forced to rely on colleagues from whom they also risk hostility. (Jose and Sachdeva, 2010; Jain and Sharma, 2017)

This study has examined the existence and mechanics of quota systems internationally; however, a scarcity of data prohibits full consideration of the extent to which they consistently improve the rate of employment amongst BPS people.

Reserved occupations

This study has identified diverse and distinct cases of employment reserved for BPS people with common results. The following section considers informal reservation through societal expectations and formal reservation through government policy and legislation.

In Japan, riryoka – the professional undertaking of acupuncture, massage and moxibustion[3] – is dominated by BPS people, though is not formally restricted as such. This history (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022) combined with the desire of BPS people to train in the field because of its strong association with positive employment prospects (Wong, 2004) means that the persistent expectation is that riryoka practitioners will be vision impaired. In turn, constrictive attitudes act as a 'ceiling'

(p. 39) over aspirations of BPS people, with low expectations internalised on an individual level (Sugino, 1997).

Reserved occupations may be associated with low expectations. In China, the State Council requires that 'government at all levels [undertake] further measures to boost employment for blind masseurs' and the 'semi-reserved' system limits opportunities for, and expectations of, employment elsewhere (Li, Xu and Hu, 2022). In Norway, employment in segregated workshops may be reserved for BPS and other disabled people. Though the rate of employment amongst BPS people is higher than that in the UK, the dominant nature of their employment in separate provision is linked with low expectations (Brunes and Heir, 2022).

An alternative to formal and explicit workplace segregation as applied in Norway, the US operates a system of priority[4] for BPS applicants in appointing contractors to manage vending facilities on federal property, including 'cafeterias, snack bars, and automatic vending machines' (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 2024). However, priority is not a guarantee of contract award (Allan, 2022, p. 77) and applications from BPS and sighted people are competitive. Accordingly, positive action in example is not associated with low expectations in the same way as previous models; Gashel (2013) submits that prioritisation moves away from traditional roles in segregated workshops focussed on limitations and moves towards 'enlarging economic opportunities' and 'achieving [...] maximum vocational potential'.

To note the UK context, some disabled people – including BPS people – in Britain were employed in segregated or specialist factories following the introduction of the 1944 Disabled Persons (Employment) Act, the majority

of which closed from 2012 onwards. In the report that led to the closure of Remploy factories established by the Act, Sayce (2011) identified limitations of a factory model when manufacturing is no longer at the heart of employment and as society moves further away from the historical view that disabled people should be hidden. Additionally, Sayce identifies the right of disabled people to secure roles across the whole economy rather than being restricted to segregated workplaces, including 'the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities' (United Nations, 2008).

Funding for practical support

The following section considers funding for the additional costs of employing BPS people, beginning with an examination of the UK context and implementation of similar schemes.

In 1994, the UK government introduced the Access to Work scheme to cover the additional costs of employing a disabled person, managed by the Department for Work and Pensions. The scheme is tied to ongoing employment and funds special aids and equipment, adaptations to premises or equipment, assistance with work-related travel and human support. Its introduction unified separate funding streams for different elements of support; for instance, a blind employee may have previously applied for both special aids funding and personal reader services but now applies only to Access to Work. (UK Parliament, 1994)

Inclusion London (2017) report that the scheme is 'a cornerstone of the movement for equality and civil rights for

Deaf and disabled people in the UK' but 'beset with so much bureaucratic incompetence and obstructionism in recent years that, in many respects, Access to Work is no longer fit for purpose.' Subsequent reports (Pring, 2024; RNIB, 2023) highlight that disabled people face increasing waiting periods for support and that lengthy waits are threatening jobs. Alongside this, the Centre for Social Justice (2017) also reports that only 25 percent of employers are aware of Access to Work and the support it can provide.[5]

Similar schemes exist elsewhere. In Germany, there are two main elements to employment support: the Integrationsfachdienst (integration service) and Arbeitassistenz (work assistance). This system is provided without charge and funded by the German social security system, differing from Access to Work by providing support before and during employment[6]. The integration service provides support in entering employment, providing career guidance and vocational training, while work assistance funding is used to employ personal assistants, such as guides, readers and drivers. (Bundesamt für Justiz, 2016)

The Australian Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) covers 'reasonable workplace modifications, work equipment, Auslan[7] services and workplace assistance and support services'. This may include computer software, communication technology, accessible work equipment or modifications to work equipment and building modifications[8]. As with the German system of funding, the EAF can provide support during and prior to employment: applications can be submitted by an employer of a disabled person, a disabled employee, a disabled self-employed worker and job seekers 'who require Auslan Level 2 assistance or who requires work related assistive technology or special work equipment to look for and prepare for a job'. (Australian Government, Department of Social Services,

2025) However, in a report on transitions between school and employment, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) (2017) note that 'the majority of young people who are blind or vision impaired and their families are largely unaware of the full range of services and programs that are available to assist students with disability with the transition to work or further study,' including the EAF.

The system used in the Flanders region of Belgium also supports disabled people in entering and retaining employment. Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (VDAB), the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training, provides job coaching, career guidance and assistance with job applications, as well as funding for assistive technology and adaptations.

Under the Flemish system, employers may receive wage subsidies to cover any additional costs of employing a disabled person and coaching subsidies to fund tailored support for employers and employees; for instance, screen reader training for a BPS employee and vision impairment awareness training for a BPS employee's colleagues.

Unlike the UK Access to Work scheme, VDAB do not generally assist with work-related travel. However, the Flemish system faces similar challenges to the UK; a lack of awareness among employers of support available, and long application processing times. (Soomers, 2024)

Vocational training programmes

This study has identified programmes that prepare BPS people for employment within specific fields, and their implementation across France and Germany are considered within this section.

The provision of traditional rehabilitation training on the use of Braille, assistive technology and the long white cane combined with job-specific training can be illustrated by the work of the Paul and Liliane Guinot Centre (L'Etablissement et Services de Réadaptation Professionnelle Paul et Liliane Guinot) near Paris, France.

The Centre provides training in web development, physiotherapy and customer relations to BPS people at varying skill levels, with some courses delivered in partnership with universities and businesses. Nait Kaci (2024) reports that many trainees subsequently enter employment, with or without further education, but that greater analysis is necessary to understand the impact, and extent of the impact, made by such training.

Similar training is provided by centres in Germany, including Berufsbildungswerk Soest in North Rhine-Westphalia which provides training in metal technology and construction, business and administration, and catering. The Soest model places BPS people in apprenticeships and thus, directly into workplaces – unlike the Guinot Centre which is largely separate from the day-to-day activities of employers. However, consistent with the concerns of Nait Kaci, this study has identified no evaluation of the programme.

In Hyderabad, India, the LV Prasad Eye Institute provides training for employment including banking and corporate skills development. They also provide assistive technology training and have been commissioned to carrying out data collection through their Research and development programme[9].

Wraparound vocational rehabilitation

A system of vocational rehabilitation provides support to disabled people in the US 'so that they may prepare for and engage in competitive integrated employment or supported employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency' (Rehabilitation Services Administration, n.d.). This section examines the role of such support.

Vocational rehabilitation is governed by federal law and delivered by state agencies, either an agency solely for BPS people (alongside an agency for other disabled people) or an agency for all disabled people.

In practice, this may include funding for higher education to improve employment opportunities, the provision of assistive technology required in the workplace and comprehensive blindness skills training. Such training includes the use of Braille, assistive technology and the long white cane, though approaches may differ between providers. For instance, some states use traditional methods[10] while other state centres[11] teach BPS people the structured discovery model.

Structured discovery model of rehabilitation

The structured discovery model was pioneered by the Iowa Department for the Blind and is defined by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) (n.d.) as a 'unique instructional service that is used to teach independence to individuals who are blind in a meaningful, robust, and life-long manner' that 'consist[s] of non-visual techniques, problem solving strategies, experiential learning, and confidence building experiences.' The model makes extensive use of Socratic questioning and is comprised of five elements:

- The use of non-visual skills wherever ‘sight is absent or faulty’.

- The use of problem-solving skills to ‘critically, strategically, and derive answers to unique problems’ faced by BPS people in the ‘visually oriented and ever-changing’ world.

- The development of personal attitudes, with training on positive attitudes to blindness that ‘empower greater confidence, self-esteem, and hope’.

- The management of public misconceptions, including examination of public attitudes and low expectations, and strategies for overcoming such barriers.

- The importance of giving back, based on the belief that BPS people can ‘contribute to the world in a meaningful way.’

To that end, structured discovery centres operate residential training programmes lasting mostly nine months. Training participants with light perception or any level of usable or functional vision are required to wear training shades – in practice, a blindfold that occludes any visual stimulus – to maximise the acquisition of non-visual skills. Further, the proliferation of blind staff within such centres and the length of training is designed to consolidate positive personal attitudes towards blindness; one research participant (Chamberlain, 2019, p. 120) remarked that ‘the blind role models [at a training centre] helped me to build my confidence and skills to be independent.’

Funding

As not every state operates a structured discovery training centre and some centres are not state-managed, the Rehabilitation Act (1973, as amended by the 1992 Rehabilitation Act amendments) provides that vocational rehabilitation clients have a right to informed choice and can select a programme most suited to their requirements with the cost covered by the client's state. In effect, BPS people may opt to attend a training centre other than the one managed by their state's vocational rehabilitation system.

Summary

This section has identified a range of measures taken by other countries to improve access to employment for BPS people. Some have been implemented with varying degrees of success within the UK. Alternative models of training and rehabilitation present questions and opportunities for those delivering and commissioning employment support. However, proper assessment of the measures explored in this chapter is hindered by limited or non-existent data. The differences in national contexts and economic environments make evaluation or comparison more challenging.

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Access to Education

This section explores a range of measures applied across education systems for the benefit of BPS people, including different approaches to schooling, the impact of Article 24 of the UN CRPD and the Salamanca Statement, as well as supplementary programmes. Similarities and differences between UK and international support systems are examined, with consideration of historical and contemporary context.

This section also relates to early childhood education, primary education, lower secondary education and upper secondary education[12]. This study does not consider post-secondary education, instead focussing on primary and secondary schooling because of its greater suitability for understanding broader trends. Unlike university-level education, schooling in some form is typically compulsory before the age of 16; the 2023 average requirement was ten years (World Bank, 2023).

Different approaches to education

This section identifies the variety of approaches to the schooling of BPS children and young people that exist internationally across a range of settings.

To first explore the history of vision impaired students' education in the UK, schools for blind children[13] were established in the 18th century and expanded in the 19th and 20th centuries. Significant change to the education of BPS children and young people began from 1920 onwards, and eventually both male and female students began to receive a free education to at least secondary level. The 1944 Education Act required local authorities to provide suitable education for any child with an impairment 'of body or mind'; principally, blind students attended special schools while partially sighted children attended mainstream schools. (French, 2006) The 1981 Education Act, influenced by the Warnock Report (1978)[14], required local authorities to compile a written statement of each disabled child's needs and increased the emphasis on integration of disabled children in mainstream settings (Morton, 1997). This emphasis has continued and is reflected in contemporary education policy.

To define key terms relating to modes of education, BPS students may attend a mainstream school, a mainstream school with specialist provision or a special school, or be educated at home. Mainstreaming is the inclusion 'of learners with special needs into general educational settings or regular schools' (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2021) On the other hand, a special school is 'specifically organised to [...] make provision' for disabled students (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015). In a combination of both models, mainstream schools with specialist provision for BPS students, such as a 'resource room' (Moyer, 2009)

or ‘additionally resourced provision’ (Children & Families Newcastle, 2024), offer concentrated instruction in Braille and other blindness skills within a mainstream setting. Data suggests that approximately seven in ten BPS children and young people in the UK are educated in mainstream schools (Keil, 2012).

The move across the UK towards the integration of BPS students, and disabled students more generally, within mainstream settings aligns with the international context. The Salamanca Statement (1994), endorsed by the UK, 91 other countries and 25 international organisations, affirms the principle of inclusive education and the importance of ‘work[ing] towards schools for all – institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs’.

A right to inclusive education is established in the UN CRPD (article 24, 2008), directing State Parties to deliver ‘an inclusive education system at all levels’. It is noteworthy that article 24 directs the education of blind, deaf and deafblind people to take place ‘in environments which maximize academic and social development’, thus permitting some use of segregated education in some instances.

Nonetheless, this study has identified that the CRPD has affected a transition from segregated to inclusive education for BPS students in countries including Canada (Gold, Shaw and Wolffe, 2005), Germany (2021), India (Abdullah and Waheed, 2023) and the United Republic of Tanzania (Kapinga and Aloni, 2023).

To that end, this study notes commonalities between education systems that have transitioned to BPS students attending, for the most part, mainstream schools.

Firstly, many students, regardless of country, experience social isolation and face barriers in interacting with sighted peers. The reasons are twofold: sighted students may hold negative attitudes and ideas about vision impairment and be limited in their acceptance of difference (Bossaert et al., 2013). This is compounded by the bubble effect, in which BPS students are physically separated from their sighted peers to access differentiated teaching, receive support from an assistant or utilise assistive technology (Metatla, 2017). Such isolation exists across systems, including Australia, with students describing feelings of loneliness, isolation and difference (Opie, Deppeler and Southcott, 2017) and Germany, with isolation increasing during secondary schooling (Giese et al., 2022). To this end, existing research indicates approximately 40 percent of Norwegian vision impaired children and young people experience bullying at school (Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted, 2015).

However, the extent of social isolation for mainstreamed BPS students may differ by system. Comparing socio-emotional development amongst blind primary students in Chilean mainstream and special schools, Rosas et al. (2023) found that those attending specialist provision 'show fewer problems' but that the differences are not statistically significant.

Secondly, this study has identified that across education systems, the conduct and attitudes of teachers are also a determinant of BPS students' success. This is particularly true in inclusive settings where teachers are balancing the needs of one or two vision impaired students in a class of up to 30 sighted peers Metatla, (2017). In Ghana, Odame et al. (2021) report that BPS students may be forced to rely on sighted peers for assistance with accessing the curriculum because of teachers' refusal to accommodate their vision impairment. Tripathi and Kiran (2012), investigating the experiences of BPS

students in India, draw attention to a lack of cooperation from school management with the arrangement of adjustments and hostility from teaching staff. Similarly, Giese et al. (2022) report that in Germany BPS students risk being confronted by teachers who are 'not willing to adapt to the situation [of vision impairment]' and 'became a barrier themselves'.

Common themes also exist between countries operating specialist provision. Firstly, as is the case with inclusive education models, social implications may exist. Zapata, (2022) argues that key to life satisfaction as a BPS person is the positive identity that can be gained through peer support. Consequently, it is suggested by some (Opie et al, 2017) and Geise et al, 2022) that BPS students attending special schools do not face similar social barriers or loneliness to BPS students educated in an inclusive setting. Other than the previously stated examination of social development amongst BPS students in Chile (Rosas et al, 2023) there is limited quantitative or qualitative comparison between the two groups of students.

Secondly, this study recognises the unique and serious risk facing BPS students attending residential special schools across education systems. Boarding schools and institutions represent an increased risk factor for sexual abuse and disabled children, young people and adults experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse at greater levels than non-disabled people (Kvam, 2005). It is identified that non-recent abuse of BPS students in residential schools, perpetrated by teaching, support and administrative staff as well as other students, has taken place and subsequently concealed by people in positions of power. This includes Ireland with 'a particularly high number of allegations in special schools' compared to mainstream settings (O'Toole, 2024), Norway (Kvam), Australia (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect

and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023), South Africa (Ubisi, 2024) and the United Kingdom (French and Swain, 1999; West, 2017).

Thirdly, in countries operating specialist provision, special schools are rarely the only resource for BPS students and students may move between types of school during their education. Castellano (2004) describes the US system under which a BPS student may attend a special school, mainstream school with specialist provision or a standard mainstream school. In Germany, a statistically significant number of BPS students begin their schooling in mainstream settings and transition to special schools at secondary age (Giese et al., 2022), and similar transitions occur in Japan for those wishing to apply to university (Nagira, 2019; Carpenter, 2020).

Supplementary Education

School-based supplementary education

Alongside the question of whether BPS students should attend mainstream or special schools, this study has identified that education systems may operate their own programmes of additional teaching – for instance, differentiated teaching to address barriers in accessing the mainstream curriculum as well as specialist content on matters such as orientation and mobility, independent living skills, technology and communication methods including Braille.

In the UK, the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) seeks to define 11 areas of 'specialist skills development and best practice support to promote equity, inclusion and personal agency' needed to support BPS students to access the mainstream

curriculum and develop the skills needed for independence[15] (Hewett et al., 2022). The CFVI endeavours to address the lack of a consistent, UK-wide approach for professionals and parents to support BPS students (RNIB, 2024).

The expanded core curriculum (ECC) approach used across multiple education systems defines the nine areas of instruction required by BPS students to be successful in education, employment and the community[16] (Perkins School for the Blind, n.d.). Similar to the CFVI, the ECC equips professionals with a 'common language and understanding for structuring assessments and planning educational programs'.

However, there is growing evidence to suggest that the ability of teachers to deliver specialist content – such as that outlined in the CFVI and ECC – is limited by the availability of appropriately trained teaching staff. For instance, Sapp and Hatlen found that some US teachers do not have adequate skills to deliver the curriculum, instead focussing on traditional academics (2010) while Opie (2017) describes a lack of qualified teachers of vision impaired students (QTVIs) to deliver the ECC in Australian schools despite their ability to deliver the content. This study also notes the use of the ECC in Ghana (Ntim et al., 2021), Turkey (Akbayrak, Bilgin andCihan, 2023), Nigeria (Abilu and Oladimeji, 2020) and Zambia (Simalalo, 2017), with a common thread of teachers' desire to provide additional teaching alongside the general education curriculum hindered by pressures on time, resources and funding.

External supplementary education

This study is also aware of opportunities for additional teaching outside of the formal education system. Firstly, pace Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students is

delivered by QTVIs at the US Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama for BPS students of any country aged between 9 and 16. The camp is for students with an interest in mathematics and science, providing new social and learning experiences. (Space Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students, 2025) Grounded in age-appropriate high expectations, students develop skills defined in the ECC on assistive technology, orientation and mobility, social interaction and independent living.

Similarly established with high expectations are two programmes of the US National Federation of the Blind (NFB), a blind-led organisation advocating for the interests of blind Americans. The NFB Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Academy is designed for BPS students between the ages of four and 12 and provides teaching in Braille and non-visual techniques[17] along with connections with other BPS children and BPS role models (National Federation of the Blind, 2024). Programmes for older BPS students exist; one example is the NFB's Project RISE[18] in Virginia with a focus on successful employment, including mentorship from blind professionals plus career education and training in independent living skills (National Federation of the Blind of Virginia, 2024).

However, there is limited evaluation of programmes existing outside of formal education structures. Furthermore, it is possible that other grassroots models like the Space Camp, BELL Academy and Project RISE exist but have not been identified in other scholarly work because of challenges in discovery or selection bias.

Outside of the vision impairment sector

Outside of the vision impairment sector are examples of UK grassroots movements delivering additional teaching for

other groups of marginalised people facing barriers to full education. Firstly, the Cardiff Sunday sign school was established by the hearing mother of a deaf child. The intention of the Sunday sign school is for deaf children and young people to learn British Sign Language, explore deaf culture and build a strong deaf identity alongside deaf role models (Darian, 2021). Similar to the barriers to learning the alternative techniques necessary to study, work and live in the community experienced by BPS people, language deprivation among deaf people has severe and long-lasting consequences (Rowley and Sive, 2021) and deaf students' attainment gap is higher than that of BPS students (National Deaf Children's Society, 2023).

Another example of additional teaching for other groups of marginalised people facing barriers to full education is the black supplementary school movement. Formed in the 1960s to resist the quality and form of education for black children, it established voluntary schools run 'mainly by Afro-Caribbean people in local neighbourhoods on Saturday mornings from makeshift classrooms in church halls and community centres' (DaCosta, 1987). At the time, Haringey Council declared that some black students were of a lower IQ than white English students on account of their ethnicity[19] and placed disproportionately high numbers of black students in special schools and classed them as educationally sub-normal. The Race Relations Board subsequently implied such placements breached the Race Relations Act (1968). Accordingly, voluntary schools operated as a system of 'self-help when faced with a national education system perceived to be prejudiced and inadequate for the needs of black children' by providing teaching in pan-African history, English and Mathematics along with building the self-esteem of students (The George Padmore Institute, n.d.).

Summary

This section has identified a range of measures taken by other countries to improve access to education for BPS people. Compared to the previous section on BPS people's employment opportunities, the greater role played by grassroots and non-governmental organisations is noteworthy. Moreover, practice outside of the vision impairment sector provides useful learning and reflection to understand how other marginalised groups are tackling inequity in education. However, proper assessment of the measures explored in the subject of education is hindered by limited or non-existent data.

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Creating a More Inclusive, Accessible and Equitable Society

This section explores a range of measures applied in various countries to achieve equality for BPS people across society, including peer support structures and civil rights legislation.

Support systems

As discussed previously, Zapata (2022) argues that key to life satisfaction as a BPS person is the positive identity that can be gained through peer support; accordingly, this section examines structures that exist to provide such support.

This study has identified several countries with representative organisations of BPS people that are separate from traditional charities or service delivery organisations because of their collective agenda to empower and advocate. For instance, Blind Citizens Australia, BCA, (n.d.) seeks 'to achieve equity for people who are blind or vision impaired, so that they can live their lives in any way they choose, in a place that respects, recognises and responds to their uniqueness and diversity.' BCA is led by an elected board supported by paid staff; full members must be 'people who are blind or vision impaired over the age of

18 years who live in Australia' with separate categories for those who identify with the organisation's aims but are otherwise ineligible.

Rehabilitation, habilitation and peer support for BPS people in Norway is available from the Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted (NABP), a national organisation led by and for BPS people. It is a democratic organisation, with its General Assembly meeting every two years at which delegates from across Norway elect the Central Board, including the chair and deputy – both of whom must be blind or partially sighted. NABP's decision making committees must consist of a majority of BPS people. (Norges Blindeforbund Synshemmedes organisasjon, 2022)

There are two significant consumer advocacy organisations operating within the US: the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the American Council of the Blind (ACB) which formed following a split in the NFB. Both organisations are led by and for BPS people and hold annual conventions but have distinct philosophies and ideologies. The NFB was founded in 1940 and its approach differed from other organisations serving BPS people, guided by 'the belief that blind people have an inalienable right to independence' and 'the premise that rehabilitation for the blind and public aid to the blind must recognize these characteristics of blind people, and that they must support the right of the blind to live independently and to seek remunerative employment' (National Federation of the Blind, 2015). NFB members who disagreed with the organisation's 'hard line [...] towards the hostile agencies of the blindness system'[20] split from the NFB and formed the ACB in 1961 (Matson, 1990).

This study has identified multiple examples of grassroots communities of deafblind people establishing support systems outside of traditional support agencies. In Australia,

Deafblind Victoria provides peer support, social events and information sharing; its work is led by, and for, deafblind people in contrast to traditional support provision. Its membership is open only to deafblind people who have lived in Victoria. For deafblind people, 'often marginalised from the wider disabled community and society' as a whole (Kramer, 2014), peer support and opportunities for socialising are important. In the US, Clark (2014) describes Seattle as having one of the largest and most active deafblind communities and is the centre of the ProTactile movement. ProTactile moves away from the domination of deafblind people's lives by sighted-hearing interpreters, instead centring autonomy and affirming the validity of touch and tactile methods of communication (Leland, 2022).

Civil rights

The Equality Act (2010) establishes a duty on organisations[21] in England, Scotland and Wales to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, including BPS people, and prohibits six types of discrimination against disabled people: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, failure to make reasonable adjustments, harassment and victimisation. It was preceded by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) which remains law in Northern Ireland following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 1998).

This study has observed anti-discrimination legislation in other countries. This includes the prescriptive model of the Americans with Disabilities Act which provides detailed instructions on compliance compared to the duty to make reasonable adjustments outlined in the Equality and Disability Discrimination Acts in the UK. Another model differing to that across the UK is the German system of arbitration that applies to discrimination complaints against

federal bodies, provided free of charge and with the aim of settling disputes by 'extrajudicial means' (Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, 2024). The Equality Act permits the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to provide legal assistance, bring legal proceedings in its name and intervene in court proceedings in England, Scotland and Wales but the EHRC's role does not extend to hearing and adjudicating discrimination complaints (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The Accessible Canada Act (2019) builds on the disability equality provisions of the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and establishes the role of the Chief Accessibility Officer. Its holder is also unable to take action on complaints of disability discrimination, instead 'report[ing] on progress made under the Act, as well as any challenges or impediments to success, and any emerging issues with regards to accessibility'. (Government of Canada, 2023) According to Slatin (2024), though the Act itself includes a complaints process and risk of financial penalties, the 'mechanisms for doing so are buried [...] a consuming and tedious bureaucracy, a less than robust formula for successful remediation.'

Summary

This section has identified a range of measures taken by other countries to achieve an inclusive, accessible and more equitable landscape for BPS people. Perhaps unsurprisingly this includes the central role of grassroots and non-government organisations in providing systems of peer support and advocacy, along with distinct and unique approaches of governments to dealing with discrimination. Again, proper assessment of the measures explored in this section is hindered by limited or non-existent data and a fuller conclusion is provided later in this report.

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Conclusion

Through utilisation of a scoping report, desk-based research and semi-structured interviews, this study has highlighted a diverse range of practice to enhance access to education and employment of BPS people, and to achieve equality in wider society. This ranges from legislative changes, such as the right to inclusive education enshrined in the UN CRPD and employment quota systems[22], to compensatory programmes including supplementary teaching,[23] to funding for workplace adjustments[24]. In identifying a range of practice, this study provides readers with opportunities for learning and reflection and may be most useful for those working in the vision impairment sector or otherwise advocating in the interests of BPS people. However, progress towards greater equality is slow and stalling; without appropriate action, the academic and career success of generations of BPS people will continue to be at risk. Alongside country-specific examples of practice, this study makes two overarching conclusions.

Firstly, peer support provided by those with lived experience can function as a counterweight to obstacles and barriers. Despite the widespread existence of anti-discrimination legislation and adoption of the UN CRPD, BPS students face similar barriers in each education system this study has encountered and BPS people around the world continue

to be absent from the labour market at a higher rate than non-disabled and other disabled populations. However, this study notes the range of scholarship on peer support and its role in improving outcomes. In education, Alzahrani and Leko (2017) describe the measurable positive impact of peer tutoring on academic achievement for groups of disabled students, while Bell (2010) reports a 'large magnitude of effect' in career decision self-efficacy following mentoring by BPS people who have achieved career success.

Secondly, data collection and analysis: a repeated theme throughout this study is a lack of robust data which hinders the undertaking of quantitative or qualitative analysis of BPS people's life experiences and outcomes. Data may be collected haphazardly or not at all, with differing definitions of vision impairment presenting a particular challenge for this study.[25]

However, some good practice exists in this area. Extensive data collection is undertaken by the US Rehabilitation Services Administration to monitor and report outcomes for disabled people supported by state vocational rehabilitation services to enter employment. Data collected includes service users' primary and secondary impairments[26] and exit outcomes relating to employment such as occupation, wage and length of role (Desai, 2017); according to Anderson and Pope (2020), such data allows determination of 'success' for service providers and funding bodies.

To greater understand the understanding of academic, employment and life opportunities, this study identifies several areas that may benefit from further research. Firstly, the Guinot and Soest models of vocational training. As highlighted by Nait Kaci, greater analysis is necessary to understand the impact made by such training, including the outcomes of direct placement into employment.

In education, the extent of social isolation and impact of external supplementary education require further consideration. Recognising the different findings of Rosas et al., Opie et al. and Geise et al. on social isolation of BPS students, investigation of the matter is recommended. This should consider the difference between students attending mainstream and special schools, and the impact on transitions[27] between life stages. Similarly, the difference in outcomes between those who attend programmes such as the Space Camp, BELL Academy and Project RISE and those who do not should be monitored.

Outside of the vision impairment sector, Deaf Australia developed and analysed the 2022 Deaf Census 'to better understand the access and inclusion experiences of diverse Deaf, Deafblind, Deaf disabled, and hard of hearing people who use Auslan and other signed languages in Australia' (Hodge et al., 2024). The Census provides robust information for future work of Deaf Australia and other organisations of deaf people, and presents a possible model for those wishing to better understand the demography of BPS people.

Endnotes

[1] This may include responses of central and local government (or equivalent structures), national and local charities, and organisations of/led by BPS people.

[2] Canada, China, Germany, Ghana, India, Japan, Norway, Tanzania and the United States

[3] Moxibustion is based on the theory of traditional medicine and uses burning moxa wool. It has been used to prevent and cure diseases for more than 2500 years. (Deng and Shen, 2013)

[4] Established by the Randolph-Sheppard Act in 1936 and commonly known as Business Enterprise Programs

[5] The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Eye Health and Visual Impairment has found that many employers do not have inclusive employment practices, the You Gov poll and report funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust is found here: New Polling Reveals Nearly Half of Employers Are Excluding Blind and Partially Sighted People From The Workplace - Thomas Pocklington Trust: last accessed 1st May 2025; see also Employment - VI Insight Hub report last accessed 1st May 2025.

[6] Access to Work only provides pre-employment support for deaf and hard of hearing people who require communication support during job interviews

[7] Australian sign language

[8] For BPS people, this may include screen reading software, Braille embossers, talking cash registers and alternative lighting

[9] Vision-Aid at LV Prasad Eye Institute: Advanced Training & Tech. Last accessed 4 April 2025

[10] Traditional methods include the Sequential Learning model, sometimes known as the medical model of orientation and mobility training, which 'requires consumers to memorise a route from one location to another prior to performing the activity' (Chamberlain, 2019)

[11] Alabama, Arizona, Hawaii, Iowa, Nebraska, New Mexico; not including the Colorado and Louisiana Centres for the Blind, managed independently of state structures

[12] ISCED 0 – ISCED 3, as per the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012)

[13] For the most part, specific provision for partially sighted children did not exist until the 20th century (French, 2006)

[14] Established 'to review educational provision in England, Scotland and Wales for children and young people handicapped by disabilities of body or mind, taking account of the medical aspects of their needs, together with arrangements to prepare them for entry into employment; to consider the most effective use of resources for these purposes; and to make recommendations.' (Warnock, 1978)

[15] Facilitating an inclusive world; sensory development; communication; literacy; habilitation: orientation and mobility; habilitation: independent living skills; accessing information; technology; health: social, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing; social, sports and leisure; preparing for adulthood

[16] Compensatory access; sensory efficiency; assistive technology; orientation and mobility; social interaction; self-determination; independent living; recreation and leisure; career education

[17] See Structured discovery model of rehabilitation.

[18] Resilience, Independence, Self-Advocacy and Employment, abbreviated to RISE

[19] Scientific racism: a 'system of misusing science to promote false scientific beliefs in which dominant racial and ethnic groups are perceived as being superior.' (Bonham Jr, 2025)

[20] In his 2023 convention address, NFB president Mark Riccobono described a vision industrial complex 'defined as a network of nonprofit, for-profit, medical, governmental, and quasi-governmental organizations that collectively benefit from perpetuating the vision-centred limitations falsely believed to be inherent to blind, low-vision, and deafblind people.' (Riccobono, 2023)

[21] This may include employers, private companies, transport providers and public sector bodies

[22] China, Germany, India and Japan

[23] US, Australia, Ghana, Turkey, Nigeria and Zambia

[24] Germany, Belgium and Australia

[25] The charity sector in the UK address the imbalance in the lack of data through funding of research and resources in employment and education see: Thomas Pocklington Trust funded resource Home - VI Insight Hub; Fight for Sight Research and evidence on blind and vision impairment last accessed 1st May 2025; RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool - statistics on sight loss | RNIB.

[26] For BPS service users, this may be categorised as blindness, other visual disability or deafblindness

[27] A recent report funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust highlights the need for further research in transitions and other topics. 'Several topics would benefit from greater research in the UK: largescale qualitative studies to understand how CYP with V I experience mainstream primary and secondary schooling...'; Education - VI Insight Hub last accessed 1st May 2025

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