

# Aspire2

inspired  
by 2012

Fulfilling Potential Making it Happen

Issue 3 · April 2014

## Getting into work

From education and training to  
careers and entrepreneurship



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## Getting to work...

For many young disabled people the hardest part of getting to work is not the morning commute – it is the journey to work that started many years before their first day in the job.

Work is important, not just to provide an income but because it opens many doors to meet new friends, to participate more widely in society and to promote independence.

In this edition we talk to disabled people who have forged successful careers. In some cases they have been disabled from birth, such as Lizzie Baily and in others, they have already worked before becoming disabled, like Katie Piper – in fact this group includes the majority of disabled working people.

It can be a big step from education to work, but it is important to remember that virtually everybody whether disabled or not, has some barriers or challenges to face that can make this more difficult. But there is help out there. If you are over 18 then it may be worth finding out more by having a chat with a Disability Employment Adviser at your local Jobcentre: <https://www.gov.uk/looking-for-work-if-disabled/looking-for-a-job>

We also look at what else the government, whilst working alongside young people such as the Young Ambassadors you met in the last edition of Aspire 2, is doing to help young disabled people navigate their journey into employment.

Finally, there are some helpful links for you to consider your next steps, whether you are still at school and thinking of part time work, are already volunteering and want paid work, or whether you want to turn a job you already have into a rewarding career and reach the top of your professional tree.

# Foreword | Simon Weston OBE

Simon Weston OBE talks about being a successful disabled businessman.



Simon Weston, OBE



I'm 52 years old – it's very different for young people today. When I left the army, after being injured in the Falklands War at the age of 20, there was very little support available for disabled people. Fortunately things have changed in the way society perceives disability. The respect I get from people in this country, rather than officialdom, being voted the most heroic figure in a public poll, having my portrait unveiled at the National Gallery. This means a lot to me. But there's still much more we could do. We need to unblock the pathways for young disabled people to harness their talents. We shouldn't be disregarding young talent on the basis of disability.

I was shy. Being in the army you learn to know your place - if you step out of line, you quickly get pulled back. But it's also a great place to develop confidence - it teaches you skills like decision making and self-reliance. Yes, the situation for returning soldiers has improved. But there are still significant issues, not least with mental health problems and post-traumatic stress disorder. The triggers for these problems can come years after soldiers have returned, but services aren't always geared up for this.

Some employers may be worried about employing ex-servicemen and women because of perceptions about PTSD, but the vast majority of people are fine and have huge amounts to add, those with problems can be helped with a bit of honesty and transparency.

I've only applied for two jobs in my life, as health czar for England, and I went through the early stages of applying to be a police commissioner. So I don't have much experience of applying for jobs. I think I'm an ambitious person, so starting my own business was a natural thing to do. Employers need to get rid of their fears and misconceptions about what disability is and what it will mean for them. Openness and transparency is really important for employers - I would say to employers, if you have a disabled person for interview, speak to them about their disability, break down the barriers, and get a real understanding of what adjustments you might to make, whether it be regular hospital treatment or making changes in the workplace.

As a young person looking for work, I would say explore really thoroughly what the prospective employer does and where you might fit in.

*I think I'm an ambitious person, so starting my own business was a natural thing to do. Employers need to get rid of their fears and misconceptions about what disability is and what it will mean for them.*

Invest in yourself and really find out what you can do. In this day and age, there are increasing numbers of jobs that disabled people can do. For example, my security business is looking to place disabled people in monitoring jobs for local authorities. Disabled people need to be more confident about their abilities - being disabled is just one element of you as person, there's more to me than just my disability. Don't believe in people who you say "you can't do that", they don't write the rules. Don't allow other people to make assumptions about you that cause you to doubt your ability to do the job.

I want to leave you with two thoughts. One - Believe in yourself and really develop your confidence and two, it's not what happened to you, it's what you do about it that matters.





## Interview | Katie Piper

# The Katie Piper Foundation

**Please tell the readers of Aspire a bit about yourself and your journey.**

I'm 30 years old; I work as a TV presenter, author, inspirational speaker, and charity campaigner. I am also a woman who has rebuilt her life after surviving a brutal acid attack in March 2008. This resulted in me spending years in and out of recovery and treatment for burns and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

**The vast majority of disabled people are not born disabled but become disabled and therefore have to adjust to changed circumstances. How long after you were injured did it take you to think about working again?**

I was physically unable to work for at least the first year but work was something I really missed. I longed for routine, normality and contact with colleagues. A lot of my lost confidence was due to feeling like I didn't have a role in society and it felt like work gave me that role. I wanted to return to work as soon as I could, but it was hard with the physical and mental problems I now faced.

**Have you faced any barriers with employers surrounding your disability when applying/looking for work?**

When I first went back to work, the environment was an office in a block of serviced offices amongst hundreds of other businesses that rent space there.



*I don't think a disability should hold you back from setting up a business - if you have a good idea, have recognised a gap in the market and have a sound business plan, then nothing should stop you*

At this time as part of my treatment I had to wear a plastic face mask 24 hours a day. I was conscious of the attention this drew but I was determined to get out of the house and back into the working world. In the beginning I found it hard to hold eye contact with people in meetings and to be assertive. The only way I could improve this was to continue to keep going. This massively helped my confidence grow in my personal life. I became more robust and strong as a result of having a job. My TV appearances sometimes require me to go to award ceremonies and events. These events are part of my work but can sometimes be intimidating and take some self belief and adjusting to when attending!

**What single change or adjustment would you have found most useful when you were looking for work?**

To talk about myself how I would like others to. To not let a lack of confidence cause me to under sell myself to potential employers or business partners. Fake it until you make it!

**Were difficulties in finding work a significant driver in you setting up your own business?**

No not necessarily, I do work for other people in terms of my writing and TV presenting. My drive to set up my charity was to make treatment available for other people and change the way society treats and views those with burns and scars.

**When setting up your foundation, what barriers did you face?**

Funding, my own limited knowledge, resources and that burns only affects a small percent of people in this country. Also my own health and continuing surgery put hurdles in my way.

**Were there many barriers to self-employment relating to your disability or just general issues which anyone setting up a business would face?**

Some physical issue with my eye sight, eating and breathing problems no doubt slowed me down and made commuting difficult.

**What advice would you offer to a young disabled person wanting to set up their own business?**

Exactly the same advice I would give an able bodied person! I don't think a disability should hold you back from setting up a business - if you have a good idea, have recognised a gap in the market and have a sound business plan, then nothing should stop you. I don't think a disability should come into it. I do understand first hand how disability and visible difference can affect your confidence. When trying to rebuild myself esteem and learn who I was after such a life changing

experience, I used reading as therapy, including a lot of affirmation books.

**What would you suggest could help you stand out when sending in your CV?**

I'm terrible at spelling and very bad with my grammar! So I don't think it hurts to get a friend to cast an eye over your CV for constructive suggestions and any mistakes! Using descriptive words and injecting passion into what you write really helps. Truly believe what you are saying, it's important to walk the walk as well as talk the talk!

**Would you advise a young person to say they had a disability before an interview?**

I think I would only mention it for the purpose of access problems into the building, or if there is a need for extensive time off for treatment breaks in the day for administering medication. I think it is personal choice really. If I wanted someone to know about my burns ahead of them meeting me for a face to face interview, I may put in my hobbies section of my CV that I enjoy mentoring and volunteering at my burns charity using my own life experience as burns survivor. I certainly wouldn't feel the need to mention it anywhere else if I didn't want to.

**Do you think at a job interview the interviewer makes a snap judgment about a person's looks rather than getting to know a person?**

It depends on the job, for example if it was a job for a model or actor then yes. I think in a corporate environment yes people judge us on our appearance in terms of personal hygiene and how we present ourselves, which I do think is

important on first impression. I would wear a smart outfit to an interview and ensure I looked my best but this isn't the same as being the most 'attractive' candidate. In a corporate environment I don't think that this would be something the employer graded someone on. If it was, they are probably not the sort of person most people would want to work for!

**Were you nervous about taking the step to be a public figure?**

Yes very because of the fear of public reaction and my own personal safety.

**Do you think by having a high profile, you've given encouragement to others in similar situations?**

I really hope so. I receive many letters, emails and tweets from people who have turned their life around but I am not the only person living with burns.

*Funding, my own limited knowledge, resources and that burns only affects a small percent of people in this country. Also my own health and continuing surgery put hurdles in my way.*

There are many other people worse off than me who have made huge successes of their lives and are achieving things that I could only dream of. Many of the people that attend my workshops through my charity inspire me with their strength, courage and dignity. I don't think it is me as one person who has changed or encouraged this, I think it is the movement of the charity and all the people who have become part of it – they are brilliant ambassadors for showing it's not what happens to you in life it's what you do with it afterwards that counts.

#### Who have you turned to for support personally or professionally along the way?

A number of people. My team of support consists of a psychologist, close family, my doctor, new colleagues and a small handful of trusted friends. Each of these different types of people helped me in individual ways and I wouldn't be the person I am today without their help. I don't believe there is any shame in seeking professional help and support.

#### Have you noticed a higher profile of disabled people in TV roles since the Paralympics? Is this being sustained?

I think Channel 4 did a superb job with the Paralympics and it was refreshing to see a wider range of role models to aspire to be like and to gain motivation from. I think Channel 4 in particular have continued to use disabled presenters for general subjects not directly talking about disability which is brilliant, it certainly hasn't felt like tokenism. But of course in media there is always a long way to go and

I do hope that this approach of equality in all aspects only continues to grow.

#### Would you like to say anything about the work you are doing now?

My charity, The Katie Piper Foundation, is now in its 5th year. It has grown steadily in fundraising terms and we are matching this with the services and support we provide to burns survivors. Having a scar means never having a day off. Whilst I am impatient to deliver as much change in scar management and burns rehabilitation in the UK as quickly as we can, I see every day what a difference the Foundation makes to other burn survivors.

Various aspects of our work will be presented at the British Burns Association Annual Conference. This is a great boost to our confidence and will hopefully reflect the increase in credibility we are developing within the burns community. One of our beneficiaries will be speaking at the Conference from the patient's perspective and sharing how the Foundation has made a difference to her.

Our workshop and social activity programme now stretches across the UK, and we are able to support those who require cosmetic tattooing and hair replacement systems following injuries caused by burns.

We are working towards launching an online forum for burns survivors so that they might talk to one another in a safe environment.

We are also looking towards developing more educational support following the success of Scar Academy UK, a 2 day course which provides information and training on scar management techniques used across Europe to UK based physiotherapists, surgeons and burns nurses.

So much more is on the horizon - it's an exciting time for the Foundation and I am so pleased with the development achieved so far. We have many challenges ahead but my team will tackle them and ensure that we will always strive to achieve a world where scars do not limit a person's function, social inclusion or sense of well-being.

Outside the foundation I am writing another book which is a follow up to my first autobiography entitled 'Beautiful'. This will go on sale in September this year. It's great timing as becoming a mum for the first time means I am able to do a lot of writing on my laptop during maternity leave!

#### What future challenges do you have planned?

Personally I am looking forward to joining the Tunnel 2 Towers 5k Run in July with a view to increasing my training to take part in the Royal Parks Foundation Half Marathon in October! The Foundation has places available in both these events so we hope to have 10 or 20 runners taking part in each one. I have taken part in both runs before and really enjoyed them. The Tunnel 2 Towers run will also have a number of fire fighters running on behalf of the charity which will be great fun.

In 2014, key fundraising events for the Foundation include the Virgin London Marathon and the Brighton Marathon, both in April and from which we hope to raise at least £7,500.

We have recently been a 'Give At Checkout' charity spot on 'eBay for Charity' which was really successful. In fact, if you make the Foundation a favourite on 'eBay for Charity', you will always have the opportunity to make a donation when you make a purchase.

We are the chosen charity of FitPro Show at Excel in London's Docklands this Summer. Not only will FitPro be matching any donations added to delegates on the purchase of tickets, but one of our beneficiaries will represent the Foundation by giving an after dinner speech at a dinner on 19th July and we hope to raise some additional funds through table donations and raffles during the evening.

Fundraisers and donors, corporates and individuals, trusts and grant giving foundations - all have helped the Foundation to reach the position we have so far. I can't thank them enough. And of course I am facing the biggest challenge of my life which is becoming a parent!

You can follow Katie at:  
[www.katiepiperandyou.co.uk](http://www.katiepiperandyou.co.uk)  
[www.katiepiperfoundation.org.uk](http://www.katiepiperfoundation.org.uk)  
[@KatiePiper\\_](https://twitter.com/KatiePiper_)  
[@KPFfoundation](https://twitter.com/KPFfoundation)



# Why is listening important

## Interview

## Caroline Waters OBE

In spring 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions set up a group to look at what needed to be done to improve the experience of young disabled people as they moved from education into employment.

I was delighted to be invited to lead this group because I believe that all too often disabled young people are held back by the limiting beliefs and low aspirations of the people around them. I felt that if we could help change attitudes and create the tools and practices that will allow young disabled people to tackle the things that hold them back and get the support they need we could empower those young people and their families and the professionals that support them to create more positive career and life experiences.



Louise Hunt

In order to understand how to make a difference to young disabled people's employment outcomes, the group felt that we needed to hear from disabled young people themselves. Louise Hunt, the tennis Paralympian who featured in previous issues, is also a DWP Young Ambassador, joined our Group and brought great insight and real passion to the issues facing young disabled people as they move through the education system and seek employment. We also involved professionals and experts from career advisers to teachers and older disabled people who had real experience of the current system.

The many inputs and insights we gained made it clear that while disabled young people start out with the same

hopes and career aspirations as everyone else, as they get older, they are more likely to be unemployed and to believe that no matter how hard they try, their efforts will have little effect on their chances of securing a job, let alone a career.

Some older people told us how they had to rethink their career plans, adjusting their expectations downwards not because they felt less competent or capable but because the people who should have supported them lacked ambition on their behalf and didn't know how to support their aspirations.

They spoke passionately about how important it is for young people to have parents, career advisers and medical professionals all focussing on what they were able to do and not what they will "never be able to do".

With all this evidence and insight from disabled people we realised that there was a lot that could be improved.





“Young disabled people also told us that it is hard to grow-up in a world dominated by 'role models' when none of those role models have "similar life experiences to you".

Feedback about the limiting impact of failing to prepare disabled young people for the same futures envisaged for their non-disabled siblings led us to understand that we need to get medical professionals, parents, educationalists, career advisers and the people who support them to understand that employment is a perfectly normal and achievable aspiration for the majority of disabled young people.

So, to help professionals and parents keep their ambitions on track we are working on a set of simple guides that highlight the importance of positive attitudes as well as pointing out a few, easy and accessible support mechanisms. These Knowledge Packs will be readily available in one place so that all young disabled people know where to go for help and to find signposts to the things that will help them move forward. This will be the GOV.UK Young Disabled People's Portal.

Young disabled people also told us that it is hard to grow-up in a world dominated by 'role models' when none of those role models have "similar life experiences to you". We know that the stories of disabled people such as the story that Katie shared are inspirational but so are the stories of young disabled people who have aspired to and achieved their career ambitions in everyday roles. Many tell us that their journeys were really tough and that they had to be determined and persevere, drawing on the support of those around them. They also told us that well informed and positive career advisers were critical. So we are collaborating with PLOTR, an on-line career information site to ensure that the site and others are rich in disabled role models at every level from trainee to Managing Director!

We are also working to make sure that career sites and advisers are clear about the link between job roles and the qualifications and experience needed to obtain them. We will continue to work to provide access to many different career paths for young disabled people. We are working to ensure that for those young people who are more practical than academic and prefer to learn by doing, career paths such as Apprenticeships are a real opportunity because extra support is being put in place.

Some of the disabled people who had already been through the system told us how important it is to support those who can reach the academic levels required but to find alternate routes to work for those who can't.

This helped us understand the importance of extending Access to Work support to Traineeship and Supported Internship Programmes as well as all the Government's work experience schemes.

Many young disabled people told us how tough it is to compete for jobs and how having a CV that includes some work history is really helpful. We want to work with employers to make sure that the Saturday and holiday jobs that can bring a CV to life and prove that disabled young people can take on everyday jobs just like anyone else are made available to them. We hope that seeing disabled young people carrying out jobs in every aspect of daily life including our high streets will help parents, professionals and employers see that this is just a normal outcome for every disabled young person.

Of course we also heard about the growing number of young disabled people who want to create and run their own businesses and we are exploring how a "challenge Prize" in assisted living will encourage STEM (Science, Technology,



Engineering and Maths) entrepreneurs unlock their potential.

It has been a great experience leading the Task and Finish Group. An experience that has left me inspired by the determination of so many of the disabled people I spoke to and optimistic about the simple steps that we can take to enlist the help of parents, medical professionals, educationalists, service providers and employers to materially improve the life chances of young disabled people and make your journey into the world of work just as natural an outcome as it is for everyone else.

“Many young disabled people told us how tough it is to compete for jobs and how having a CV that includes some work history is really helpful. We want to work with employers to make sure that the Saturday and holiday jobs that can bring a CV to life and prove that disabled young people can take-on everyday jobs just like anyone else are made available to them.





# Inspiring role models

## Seeing yourself succeed

Young people who spoke to us said how important it is for them to recognise themselves in the world of work, particularly in the everyday settings such as hospitals, children's centres, schools and colleges.

Seeing disabled people leading ordinary working lives, is something that should be an everyday expectation, not be seen as unusual.

DWP launched its Role Models campaign in December 2012. The campaign was produced with young disabled people, who provided advice and suggestions about the people who inspired them. So far, over 50 Role Models feature in a number of short clips on YouTube, talking about their

aspirations, the barriers they have faced, and advising young disabled people who are making early life choices. The Role Models can be found at this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/rolemodelsinspire/videos>



Read on as Lizzie Baily tells us a bit about herself and what motivated her to tell her story.



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# Interview | Lizzie Baily

"My name is Lizzie Baily, age 30. I have Congenital Muscular Dystrophy so use my powered wheelchair at all times during the day. I live on a smallholding in West Sussex with my parents, older sister and a variety of animals! I attended mainstream schools up to GCSE and went to my local college for A levels. I went on to the University of Chichester and did a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies: Early Years degree and graduated in 2005.

In my second year of the degree course I had a work placement at a nearby primary school working with the Year One class. I loved my time at the school, so after the placement finished, I volunteered to continue until the end of the summer term. On graduating, I wrote a letter to the Head asking if there were any jobs available for me. Luckily I was asked in for a meeting where we discussed what I could do and I was offered a part-time job (3 afternoons a week) as a Learning Support Assistant.

I have now worked there for 8 years, seeing children in all year groups individually and in small groups for literacy, listening skills and speech and language support.

I also work voluntarily as the Chair and Editor of Wellspring, West Sussex, an independent charity for families with children with special needs and disabilities. We produce two newsletters a year in which I write my own page as well as updating our website with current information.

In 2006 I set up my own craft club for local primary school aged children which I run on term time Saturdays in the art studio in my garden. Art and crafts are two of my great interests so I love being able to pass this on to all the children who attend. I receive funding through Wellspring West Sussex as part of our Creative Arts programme, which enables me to offer free places to children with special needs and their brothers and sisters.

I became a role model in February last year after being suggested for the project by a friend. I received an email asking me to answer some questions on film about myself and my work which was then put on the RoleModelsInspire channel on YouTube. I really enjoyed making the film as it helped me to think about all the achievements I have made since leaving full time education as well as the advice I would give to young people with disabilities.









# Work experience and volunteering

Good-quality work experience and experience of voluntary work are powerful tools for you to demonstrate your capabilities and work readiness to an employer...

...providing them with a proven track record which helps to dispel any negative attitudes they may have.

This experience can show employers, educators and providers what you can achieve.

If you are over 16, you may be able to get help DWP's Access to Work scheme. This provides support if you need an aid or adaptation in a paid job – there are no minimum hours so this can help in a Saturday job as well. This is a really important scheme to know about, because if an employer is worried – or if you think they might be worried, about the cost of an aid or adaptation that may help you, you can let them know there may be government help available.

There are plenty of organisations out there that can help you get work experience or volunteering experience – hear about how Community Service Volunteers (CSV) can help.

To find out more visit this website  
<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>



“Young disabled people who participate in the Whizz-Kidz work placement scheme tell us they feel equipped with the skills, motivation and aspiration to play a valuable role as employees and citizens. Removing the barriers for disabled youngsters to enter the workplace is also a vital step towards shifting perceptions about what disabled people can – and wish – to achieve

Ruth Owen OBE, Whizz-Kidz CEO

# Community Service volunteers

For 25 years, CSV (Community Service Volunteers) has enabled disabled people to participate as equal citizens in their communities, gain independence, and develop work-skills through community engagement, supported by volunteer mentors.

When CSV staff first met 17 year old Christopher Rump in 2013, he was a shy young man who avoided eye contact and answered questions with one-word answers. CSV was working with disabled students at Chris's school to develop volunteering and community activities with them.

The first group activity that the students developed was a coffee morning for residents of a nearby sheltered housing complex. Chris was a quiet member of the group who struggled to choose how he would contribute. However, after a couple of months of planning together, Chris, along with a couple of others, came up with the idea of performing the dance craze 'Gangnam Style'.

With encouragement, Chris agreed to perform the dance on the day of the coffee morning. This went down an absolute storm with the residents and Chris and the other

students received many complements and much praise. The school has continued this link and holds coffee mornings for the same group of residents every half term.

Following the success of his dancing, Chris then put himself forward to model as James Bond in the student organised charity fashion show. Several other students needed a great deal of encouragement to take part on the day but by now Chris had not only gained enough confidence to take part himself but also to encourage other, less confident students.

Chris was happy at this point to start to consider his own individual aims, and expressed an interest in working in a café in the future. CSV matched Chris to a volunteer mentor, and he has just started...



...a volunteering placement in the Olive Branch Community Café in King's Lynn. He is accompanied to his weekly sessions by his mentor, who provides support to both Chris and the café in setting and completing tasks and gaining independence in these. Chris's mentor also supports him to catch the bus back to his home afterwards, teaching him the crucial skills which will give him more independence and enable him to make informed choices about what he does after education.

Perhaps this will lead to a job in hospitality and catering – something which a fellow mentee, Lisa, achieved after being supported by CSV for 12 months to gain the key skills and work experience. Chris is currently considering attending college next year – perhaps a catering course.

What Chris's story tells us is that CSV's innovative whole-person approach, which identifies and builds on people's skills, experiences and networks, allows people to develop choices, increase their independence and aspirations and gain employment skills.



The project sees people matched to a volunteer mentor to raise their skills and independence through training courses, enhance their social networks and skills through participation in mainstream groups, and build CVs and work experience through volunteering. Both the volunteer mentor and the person supported benefit from the experience.

The needs of disabled young people have become a key government focus with the Support and Aspiration Green Paper and Progress Report, and the Department for Work and Pensions Disability and Health Employment Strategy both identifying that disabled young people may need additional support to consider mainstream training, work experience and paid employment.

CSV trialled this approach with eight London schools from 2009- 2012. After volunteering all of the students described the contribution they had made to their community and the development of their CV, speaking of 'pride' and 'new skills'. An independent evaluation identified that it provided a step towards employment which would be enhanced by individual one-to-one supported volunteering to develop employment skills, including accredited learning or ASDAN. This is now being carried out by CSV in Norfolk and Essex:

1. Working alongside schools and Transition Workers to mobilise pupils to initiate, plan, and execute group social action activities in the heart of the community.

2. Supporting disabled young people individually to volunteer in their community. Volunteering is matched to the individual's work experience requirements with a clear set of aims and objectives agreed with the young person, their mentor, and the placement supervisor.
3. Community mentors are recruited, trained and supported by CSV to share their life and work skills and experiences with the young people and provide one to one mentor support.

*CSV trialled this approach with eight London schools from 2009- 2012. After volunteering all of the students described the contribution they had made to their community and the development of their CV, speaking of 'pride' and 'new skills'.*

For more information, contact Jemma Mindham, Business Development Manager, CSV [jmindham@csv.org.uk](mailto:jmindham@csv.org.uk) 01223 728463.





# Vocational or Academic pathways?

Training whilst in the workplace is a great way to both learn skills and gain experience in a job role.

Gaining vocational qualifications can better showcase your talents and make you more attractive to employers. Some of the vocational schemes such as Apprenticeships differ slightly across England, Wales and Scotland, so depending on where you live, you need to visit different websites to find out more. Many schemes also attract Access to Work support for the in-work part.

The better qualified a person is, the more likely they are to be in work. Going to University and getting a degree can significantly improve a person's chances of getting a successful career. If you do decide you want to go to University you may be able to get financial help from the Disabled Student's Allowance at the following link.

<https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas/overview>



There are many guides to Higher Education and advice for both students and for those looking for work after they graduate – one of these is Trailblazers – part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, who set out what they have been doing.



## Trailblazers Young Campaigners' Network

# University Challenge

Good news from the world of higher education – the number of disabled students entering university is increasing.

Before we throw our mortar boards in the air in delight, it should be noted that campus life is still far from an easy ride for many disabled students. The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign Trailblazers are a group of 500 young disabled people from across the UK, who campaign together on social issues affecting disabled people. In 2009 the group released its first University challenge report, an audit of physical access and support services for disabled students across 100 universities and a snapshot of the experiences of young disabled people who were in or had been through higher education.

The picture was far from rosy; students told of the inaccessibility of vital facilities like lecture theatres and libraries, and how many institutions had failed to signpost important information, from details of accessible university accommodation to advice for wheelchair users on how to navigate the campus.

Last October, with a new batch of disabled students getting stuck into university life, the Trailblazers decided it was time to see whether universities had made progress. The group's University Challenge 2013 report was launched in the aftermath of Freshers' Week – a fresh 'secret shopper'

audit of top universities and a snapshot of 100 disabled students and graduates experiences – and their advice on making it through to graduation day.

Some of the results made for disheartening reading. Only half of universities confirmed that all teaching rooms, study rooms and libraries were fully accessible for students with mobility difficulties and half said that not all inter-campus transport was accessible. Frustratingly, communication is still a major issue – just a quarter of universities had considered providing any Freshers' Week information specifically for disabled students, and information on wheelchair-accessible social venues and step-free routes around campus was scarce. Sixty percent of respondents had struggled to find information on university websites about accessible accommodation.



While disabled university students and graduates described their time in higher education as being full of challenges, they also told how it was full of rewards. With thorough preparation, good advice and determination, a great university career is entirely possible. Trailblazer Mansoor Ahmad, who studied at the University of Kent, said: “My advice to anyone thinking about going to university is just do it. It can be a rewarding environment to be in, where you’ll get the chance to develop your social skills and become more comfortable dealing with new people. The more disabled people who go to university, the more we break down social barriers and increase people’s awareness about what disabled people can achieve.”

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## Trailblazers advice for disabled students

### Starting out

Transferring social care to a new local authority can be a lengthy process. Start planning early to ensure you begin your university career with the care you need in place.

Access challenges aside, choosing the right course for you is crucial – after all, this is the subject you will be studying for several years. The clearing system can put those with complex needs at a disadvantage, not allowing necessary time to arrange social care and any adaptations to accommodation that may be needed. However, don’t discount this option. It could help you get your hoped for place on your chosen course.

It is of the utmost importance to visit your university and get a feel for the campus, lecture halls and surrounding environment.

Should you decide to live on campus, make a list of all the equipment you will need in your room, kitchen and communal areas, and ensure that the accommodation and disability teams are aware of your needs.

### University life

An active social life is an important part of the university experience and joining societies and seeking out accessible pubs, bars and music venues offers opportunities to make friends and meet new people. University challenge 2013 contains examples of how Trailblazers developed confidence in meeting new people and found a balance between academic and social life.



Selvakumaran, said: “When I first arrived at university, the Disability Support team was really helpful with sorting out educational support and equipment. However, in terms of getting more involved in campus life, I wish I could have talked to someone my own age and got some practical advice on getting around uni and on accessible pubs and clubs in the city. I’m now involved with a Disabled Students’ Committee that offers just this. I have made some fantastic friends and have used my own experiences to try and improve university life for other students in the same situation.”

### Graduation – and beyond

Making the most of the opportunities offered by your university’s careers service could help put you on the path to employment. Services range from CV review, tips on job search techniques and interview practice, to advice on disclosure of disability, and guidance on the Government’s Access to Work scheme. Employment and work placements are also a valuable opportunity, and it is well worth taking advantage of these where available.

Lastly, your graduation is an opportunity for you, your family and friends to celebrate all that you have achieved over your university career. It’s never too early to find out about the venue for graduation ceremonies, how accessible the venue is and how inclusive the ceremony is. Don’t be afraid to challenge your university if access has not been considered.

Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) is a grant paid on top of other forms of financial support for students. The amount you receive depends on your individual needs and the allowance does not have to be repaid. DSA can help cover the cost of specialist equipment, note-takers and extra travel expenses. Trailblazers recommend applying for DSA as early as possible, to ensure financial support is there from your first day on campus.

Dedicated Disability Support teams are available at all universities. Make yourself known to them as soon as you apply. The team will be your first port of call should any problems arise and is there to help you with information and advice about accommodation, careers, care packages and getting the most out of university life.

Research whether your university has a committee or society for disabled students. University of Sheffield student, Mathy

University Challenge 2013 is available to download from the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign Trailblazers website: [www.mdctrailblazers.org](http://www.mdctrailblazers.org)





# Employment, Self Employment & Entrepreneurship

Last summer, the Prime Minister launched the Disability Confident campaign for employers.



The campaign is working with employers to remove the barriers disabled people face in employment, increase employer's understanding of disability and ensure that disabled people have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations.

Self-employment can be an excellent way to take greater control of your career. People with conditions which can vary – such as people with mental health conditions, can then have more control over their work patterns which can help them manage better or worse days.

Disabled people are more likely to be self employed than non-disabled people but young people are least likely to be self employed. A lot of people start off in employment before moving to self employment, but don't be afraid to consider it as an option. Explore what support there is for business start-ups – nationally or locally, and listen to one of our Young Ambassadors Rachael Johnston talk about how she took the plunge to become a young entrepreneur.



## Interview | Rachael Johnston

### Rachael, tell us a bit about yourself?

I'm Rachael Johnston, 22 and from Warrington. I am a Young DPULO Ambassador and love the work which I am able to do because of this. I have also started a Social Enterprise called "the Journey Back to Life" which is based around my experiences with having an unseen disability. When I was 14 I was diagnosed with mental health issues which led me down a rocky path, but I came out fighting due to the journey I had to go on and I was determined to make a difference to services. I am still under services but I'm dedicated and passionate about the work I do.

### What advice would you give to a young disabled person when applying for a job?

It's so important to be honest when applying for jobs. Having a disability is nothing to be ashamed about. Being honest and saying you have a disability means that they can make sure adaptations are there if you need them.

Apply for jobs which you know you can do, as an employer will ask what you can bring to a job. Know your strengths and weaknesses and don't be ashamed to say you can't do something.

### What experiences have you had of applying for work?

I've had both negative and positive, which I suppose is like many people. I have worried if I would be discriminated against due to my mental health issues, but employers have to make sure that they are following the Equality Act 2010 to make sure that they are not discriminating against anyone.







**What single change or adjustment would you have found most useful when you were looking for work?**

I have always wondered how much of a difference it would make if I didn't say I had an unseen disability. I worry about the stigma attached. It would be helpful to know if the company had any awards for employment of disabled people.

**Were difficulties in finding work a significant driver in you setting up your own business?**

It was the pressure of what a company wanted which is what made me want to set up something myself. Some jobs I did feel discriminated against, more so because you can't see my disability and there are still questions about mental health being classed as a disability. I would be really excited about starting a new job then a few months down the line would find myself back on a bumpy path.

**What would you say to somebody who would like to be employed but is facing barriers and considering self-employment instead?**

Take the plunge and do it! Seek help and speak to the people around you. I took such a big risk but it paid off. I was able to apply for a start up loan and this gave me the chance to start off with the basics. I'm now able to start applying for funding and have some volunteers who are a great help.

**Would you say that disabled young people need different qualities to be self-employed as opposed to being employed?**

No, definitely not! You work more on your strengths and you take the decisions.

**Please tell us what you would consider some of these differentiating qualities to be? Can these qualities be learned, or are they all inherent in an individual? Setbacks and frustrations are quite**

**common in starting any enterprise, how can young people prepare for this?**

Speak to the people around you. Start off basic and build your way up, don't expect to be bringing in loads of money straight away. It's looking at taking risks but sensible ones – there are good support networks around and it's using these to help you.

**Who have you turned to for support personally or professionally along the way?**

My parents have been great. I have also had support from staff at the Gateway in Warrington and the Citizens Advice Bureaux. A big help has been my old boss who has loads of brilliant contacts in the third sector and is great at funding bids. I also took advice from my old line manager, who was paraplegic, and was a great support and was setting up his own business. We looked at working together, sadly he passed away before he could do this, however he gave me the drive and determination to show that no matter what your disability is, concentrate on your ability.

Young people wishing to start out in business may have difficulty convincing investors they are a credible investment if they haven't got a track record to point to. How can you challenge those reservations? Show them you have done your research, prove what you want to do is needed and how you are going to go about it. I spoke to loads of schools to see if they would benefit from personal talks and all said how important they were. I did a couple of talks and got feedback off students and staff to take into meetings.

**If you could go back in time to give yourself one piece of advice, what would it be?**

Don't expect miracles over night! I was desperate for "the Journey Back to Life" to get bookings really quickly and felt disheartened when it didn't happen at first. There was a lot of emailing and contacting the press to let them know what I wanted to do and how I wanted to go about it.

**What positive changes have you seen in the world of disability employment over the past few years?**

For me the Equality Act was a massive step forward. More people seem to be more aware of the Access to Work Scheme, but the Equality Act still needs to have a bigger push and more employers need to be aware of it.

**Would you like to say anything about the work you are doing now?**

The Young DPULO Ambassador role has helped a lot with being able to speak to other young people and their journeys. The Journey Back to Life will I hope, inspire young people to be more open and share their stories.

**What future challenges do you have planned?**

I would love to do a conference at some point in the future and I'm also doing a Counselling Foundation Degree so I can incorporate this into my work. I hope to eventually be able to have people all over the country who would be able to share their stories and inspire more young people to do something positive.

See <http://www.journeybacktolife.org.uk> for more information.





# Get in touch...

We want this edition of Aspire and hearing from all our amazing interviewees to give you some food for thought. Choosing what sort of career (or careers) you want is a big decision – and sometimes you just have to try things out, but there is a lot of support out there and this magazine has only pointed to a handful of helpful starting places.

Nobody is pretending it is easy, but spending some time thinking about your future puts your destiny back in your hands.

If you have found this has made you think more about employment – and how to get there, we would like to hear about it. We would also like to know what you think of the magazine.

You can email us at: [fulfilling.potential@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:fulfilling.potential@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

Or write to: **Office for Disability Issues (Aspire2)**  
**Department for Work and Pensions,**  
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**6-12 Tothill Street,**  
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