



**Activity levels of blind and visually impaired individuals
of working age 18–67**

The National Institute for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Deafblind

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Introduction

The objective of the National Institute for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Deafblind (hereinafter called the Institute) is to increase opportunities for the blind, visually impaired and deafblind to engage and participate in all aspects of society. One of its roles is ensuring that blind and visually impaired persons have equal access to education, work and other types of engagement. The Institute also maintains an overview on conditions for blind and visually impaired persons and compiles data on matters relating to them (Act on the Institute for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Deafblind No. 160/2008).

The Institute has clients of all ages: children, seniors and people of working age. Most of the clients are seniors. During the early years of the Institute's operation, seniors and children received most of the Institute's services and fewer services were available for people of working age. Services for people of working age have been expanding, however, in recent years, and there seemed reason to assess the status of those services. A decision was made to assess employment, education and other types of activity among blind and visually impaired persons aged 18–67 who have sought the services of the Institute.

There is now a special working-age team at the Institute, made up of an employment counsellor, an education and vocational counsellor, a social worker and a psychologist. The role of the team is to assess the status of working-age clients and assist people to the best of their ability to become more active, whether at work, education or another form of engagement.

By examining the engagement levels of working-age clients, important information is collected on conditions for blind and visually impaired persons in Iceland that can be used in the Institute's work. An assessment of this type has not previously been conducted by the Institute.

Employment in other countries

Foreign research into the status and welfare of blind and visually impaired persons has largely focused on children and seniors, as the vast majority of blind and visually impaired belong to the latter group. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 285 million people are considered blind or visually impaired. 82% of the blind and 65% of the visually impaired are over the age of 50. Because the global population is aging, this group is expected to get larger (WHO, 2013).

There has been considerably less focus on the status of people of working age. There is a shortage of data on employment and activity among blind and visually impaired persons in other

countries, and some countries have either little or no information on the job market participation of blind and visually impaired persons (Berufsförderungsinstitut Steiermark, 2004). However, the authors were able to find several summaries on the topic from a variety of countries and areas, some quite new but others older.

First, a report by *Berufsförderungsinstitut Steiermark* (2004), an Austrian institution that specialises in vocational training/rehabilitation and continuing education for groups including blind and visually impaired persons working in the EU job markets, states that when the report was published in 2004, unemployment levels were high among blind and visually impaired persons in most countries where data were available. Unemployment was 69% in Denmark, 55% in Finland, 68% in Norway, 72% in Germany, 50% in Croatia, 77% in Hungary and 70% in Poland. At the same time, the general level of unemployment was much lower in these countries, or 2.5–20%.

There is Australian data available from a 2012 report by *Vision Australia* (2012), an institution that provides services to blind and visually impaired persons in Australia. A research project conducted on the status of blind and visually impaired persons in the labour market revealed that 64% of respondents were not employed, of which 59% were registered as unemployed and said they wanted to work. The general national unemployment level is 14%, so clearly, unemployment among blind and visually impaired persons is four times higher. One-third of participants that were employed wanted to work more than the hours that were available to them (Vision Australia, 2012).

Unemployment among blind or visually impaired Americans has always been high (Bell and Mino, 2013). *The Bureau of Labor Statistics* compiled data on blind and visually impaired persons in the job market in 2010. The data showed that 38% of blind and visually impaired persons aged 16–64 were employed, 13% were unemployed and 56% were classified as not in the job market, that is, neither employed nor unemployed. By 2012, labour market participation by blind and visually impaired persons in the United States had decreased to 31% (American Foundation for the Blind, 2014).

Bell and Mino (2013) researched the status of blind and visually impaired individuals of working age (18–70 years) in the United States. The purpose of the research was to ascertain the levels of employment, education, engagement and rehabilitation within this group. The research showed that higher education levels led to a higher likelihood of employment. Education levels also affected income; the higher the education level, the higher the income. Previous research has revealed similar conclusions (Bell and Mino, 2013).

Employment in Iceland

Only one study known to the authors has been conducted in Iceland on the status of blind and visually impaired persons in the job market, conducted by Olafia K. Gudmundsdottir in 2007 for the *Icelandic Organisation of the Visually Impaired*. She surveyed organisation members aged 18–67, asking about employment and education issues. She called every member aged 18–67 at the time, and asked about their status, including job participation, education and income. She received responses from 127 people. The answers of respondents indicated that 63% of organisation members were employed, 5.5% were in school and 31.5% were at home. The survey revealed that 79.5% had received no vocational training/rehabilitation, while 18.9% had received rehabilitation. According to the Convention of the World Health Organisation (WHO) from 1983 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment for Disabled Persons, all disabled people should have access to vocational training/rehabilitation (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1983).

Participants were also asked if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their position, and the answers were categorised by whether participants were employed, in school or at home. The conclusions clearly indicated that participants who were employed or in school were significantly happier with their position than those who were at home. Of those that participated on the job market, most were happy with their position, as 83% said they were either very or rather satisfied. Only 8% of respondents were very or rather dissatisfied with their position. The same applied to those who were in school, as 80% of those respondents were either very or rather satisfied, while no one, or 0%, was rather or very dissatisfied with their position. The situation was quite different for those who were at home, as over 31% of respondents were either very or rather satisfied with their position. 5% were very satisfied, while 26% were rather satisfied. Over 46% of respondents were either very or rather dissatisfied with their position. 15% were rather dissatisfied, while 31% were very dissatisfied. This indicates that those who are employed or in school are significantly happier with their position than those who are at home (Olafia K. Gudmundsdottir, 2007).

The University of Iceland Social Science Research Institute (2014) recently presented findings from the study *Disabled persons as residents of municipalities* in which the conditions and experiences of municipal residents who are disabled is examined. The research was conducted for the Organisation of the Disabled in Iceland. Among the study's conclusions: 49% of participants were neither employed, in school, seeking employment, nor attending a recreational centre or other resources. 20% of respondents were in the general labour market without support, 9% were in school, 12% in rehabilitation, 5% were self-employed, 4% attended a recreational program during the day, 4% were in sheltered employment and 2% were seeking employment. Research participants

were all registered as disabled with the Social Insurance Administration. The majority of blind and visually impaired persons are registered as disabled.

General labour participation levels in Iceland are quite high, and according to the most recent data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, on labour market participation in OECD countries, it is highest in Iceland, or 81.7%. This applies to all workers aged 15 to 64. Compared to other OECD countries, the difference is significant, as the average level of labour participation there was 65.3% in 2013. Labour participation among Icelandic women is the highest among all countries, or 79.6%. Icelandic men are in second place among the countries as regards labour market participation, at 83.7%. Only in Switzerland do more men participate in the labour market, or 85.2% ("Job market participation highest here in Iceland ", 2014).

Education in Iceland and other countries

Most of the information on the education levels of blind and visually impaired persons abroad came from the United States. According to 2012 data, 11.9% of blind or visually impaired Americans have college degrees and 29.1% have high school diplomas (Disability Statistics, e.d.).

There is no statistical information available on the educational levels of blind and visually impaired persons in Iceland, as far as the authors know, so this project aims to acquire this data. Not many blind or visually impaired individuals in Iceland have university degrees, but education levels of such persons have been increasing in recent years. Services for blind and visually impaired persons in universities was lacking for many years, but the situation is completely different today, with service levels increasing. The Institute's clients who enlist in university programs have increased significantly in number in recent years, thanks largely to improved access to educational materials and increased co-operation with university educational counsellors. Education is important, as the more education acquired by a blind or visually impaired person, the greater the likelihood of that person gaining employment and a good income in the future (Bell and Mino, 2013).

The importance of vocational training/rehabilitation

To ensure that disabled individuals recover physical and mental health after an illness or accident, it is important that they receive rehabilitation to allow them to once again become productive members of society (VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, no date^b).

According to a study by Bell and Mino (2013), education and vocational training/rehabilitation can have an effect on the job opportunities for blind and visually impaired persons. When participants were asked what the most important aspect of vocational training/rehabilitation was, their most common responses were assistance in acquiring appropriate education or training, support and counselling. Most believed that the vocational training/rehabilitation had increased their work skills, and 39% believed the rehabilitation had helped them gain employment. Most also believed that they were competitive with non-disabled people after the rehabilitation when it came to applying for jobs. 48.5% of participants were unemployed before attending vocational training/rehabilitation, while only 18% of participants were employed full-time. After receiving vocational training/rehabilitation, 37% of participants gained full-time employment (Bell and Mino, 2013).

A new law was passed by the Icelandic parliament in October of 2012, *Act No. 60/2012, on Vocational Rehabilitation and the Operation of Vocational Rehabilitation Funds*. The act is meant to ensure people with disabilities resulting from illness or an accident access to vocational training/rehabilitation. Provisions of the act include:

This act defines vocational training/rehabilitation as a process that includes counselling and assistance for persons with a limited ability to work due to loss of health resulting from an illness or accident, in order to increase their ability to work and promote their return to the labour market, whether part or full-time.

The new act ensures everyone's right to vocational training/rehabilitation regardless of their participation in the labour market.

Vocational rehabilitation:

...has the objective of providing an individual living with an illness or disability with the best available physical, emotional and social skills, and it includes all of services that promote a person's active participation in society.

(VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, (no date).^b).

VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund is a independent foundation that various participants in the labour market have organised; including unions, the Icelandic Confederation of Labour and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers. VIRK was founded in 2008 and handles vocational training/rehabilitation for people who no longer participate in the job market due to illness or

accident (VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, no date^a). This project also surveyed whether the Institute's clients had received vocational training/rehabilitation from VIRK.

Method

The Group

The group was comprised of 243 visually impaired and blind individuals aged 18–67 who are registered at the Institute. 55 participants were removed, thereof were 43 with multiple disabilities and visual impairment (MDVI). The reason they were removed is that they are to be studied separately at a later date. This applies to individuals who are developmentally disabled and/or have other disabilities, live in supported living or are in daycare. Twelve people were excluded because there was limited information available on them. This left 188 individuals of working age 18-67 in 2013. The group had 104 men and 84 women.

The following groups have the right to receive services at the Institute: the visually impaired, the legally blind and the deafblind. The visually impaired are medically diagnosed to have less than 30% vision in their better eye with regular eyeglasses and a field of vision less than 20 degrees. The legally blind are medically diagnosed to have less than 10% vision with regular eyeglasses and a field of vision of less than 10 degrees. The deafblind have both a visual and hearing impairment that limits their activity levels and prevents participation in society to such a degree that they require special services, an environment adapted to their needs and perhaps special technological equipment to meet their requirements (Act on the Institute for the Blind, Visually Impaired and Deafblind No. 160/2008).

Procedures

A decision was made to review the position of clients aged 18–67. Information collected included sex, age, visual impairment level, residence, employment, whether attending school or another activity, education level and whether the participant had received services from VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund. The information is summarised from information that was available in the registry of the Institute and is untraceable. Information on all participants was not available.

When clients are considered employed, they could be employed either part- or full-time in the general labour market or at a sheltered workplace. Clients enrolled in school could be receiving secondary education or attending university or another type of school, either part- or full-time. "Another activity" refers to an organised activity such as volunteering, recreational services, rehabilitation, societal or committee work. Regular athletic activity is also included as another activity.

Clients were classified into the following groups: employed, in school, attending activity or seeking employment. They could, of course, belong to more than one group, but each individual was only listed in one. If a client was employed, he was listed as such, and not as being in school or another activity. If a client was unemployed but attending school, he was listed as being in school and not another activity. People were only listed as attending another activity if they were active in some way but neither employed nor attending school.

First, activity levels of the whole group were reviewed, and then activity levels were reviewed by age group. Activity levels were also reviewed by gender and whether the client lived in the capital area or elsewhere in the country. In addition, education levels were assessed as well as whether people had received rehabilitation from the VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund.

Results

The variables that were looked at were age distribution, gender and visual impairment level. The age distribution of the group can be seen in Figure 1. It shows that in general, the oldest group is the largest and clients decrease the younger the group. There were more men than women, or 55.3% versus 44.3% (Figure 2). The proportion of visually impaired and legally blind persons aged 18–67 showed that 24.5% were visually impaired and 75.5% were legally blind (Figure 3). It was also determined whether the clients lived in the capital area or not. 25% of clients lived outside the capital area, and 75% lived within the capital area (Figure 4).

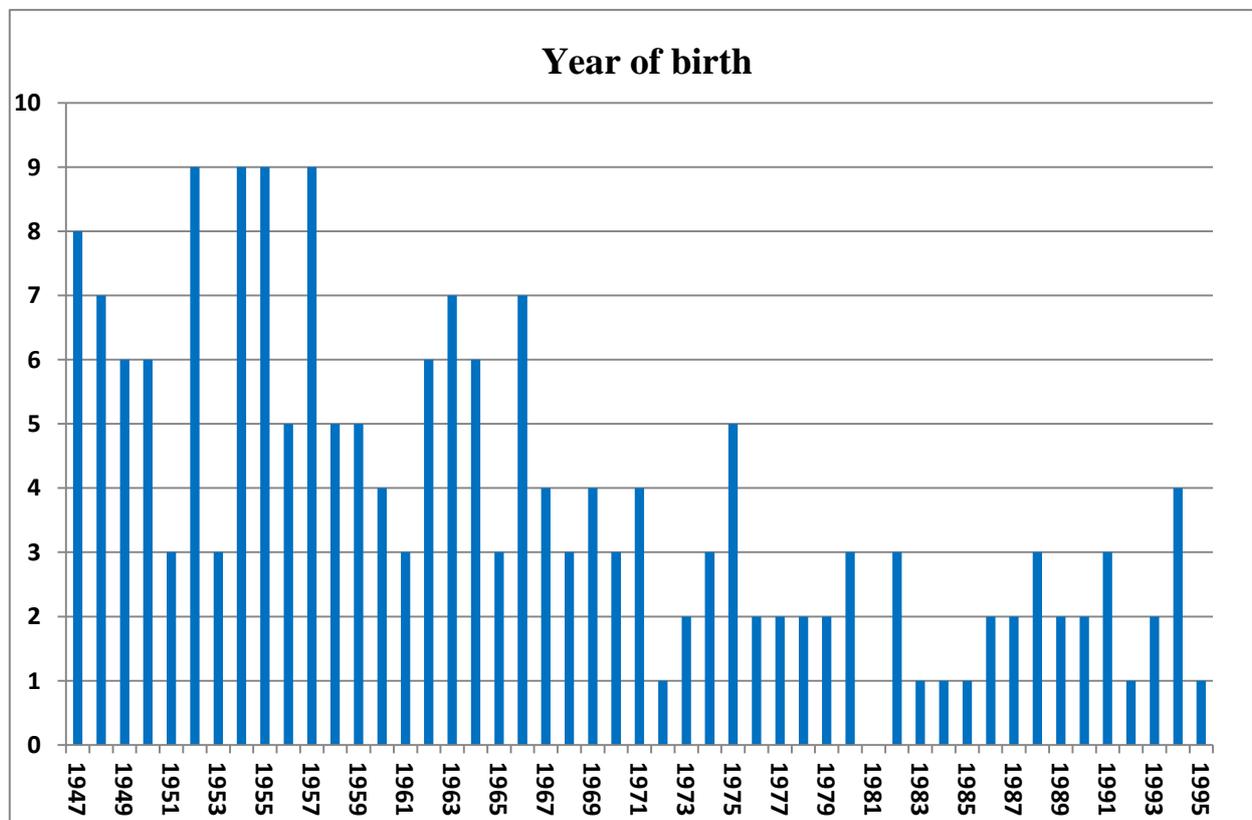


Figure 1. Age distribution of clients aged 18–67.

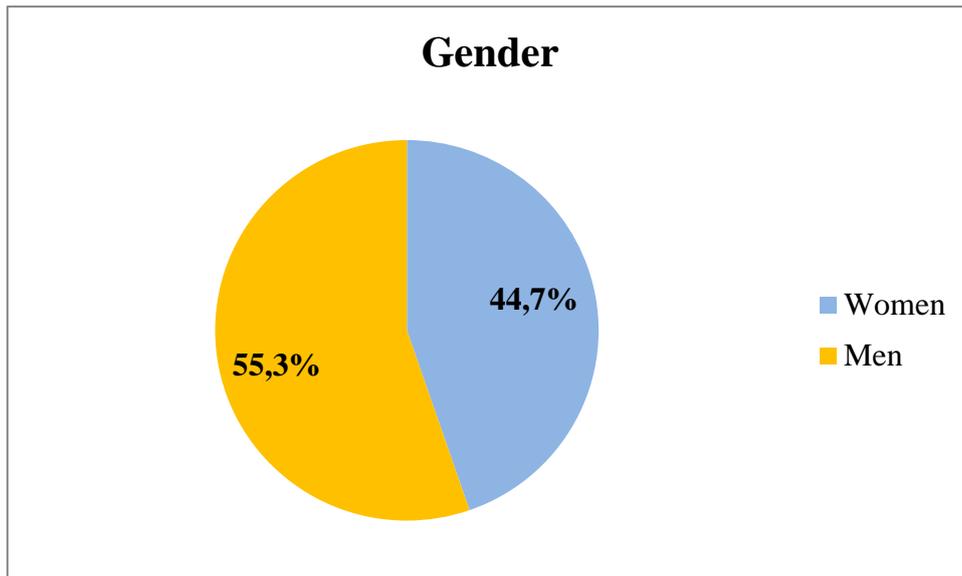


Figure 2. Clients of the Institution aged 18–67 by gender (%).

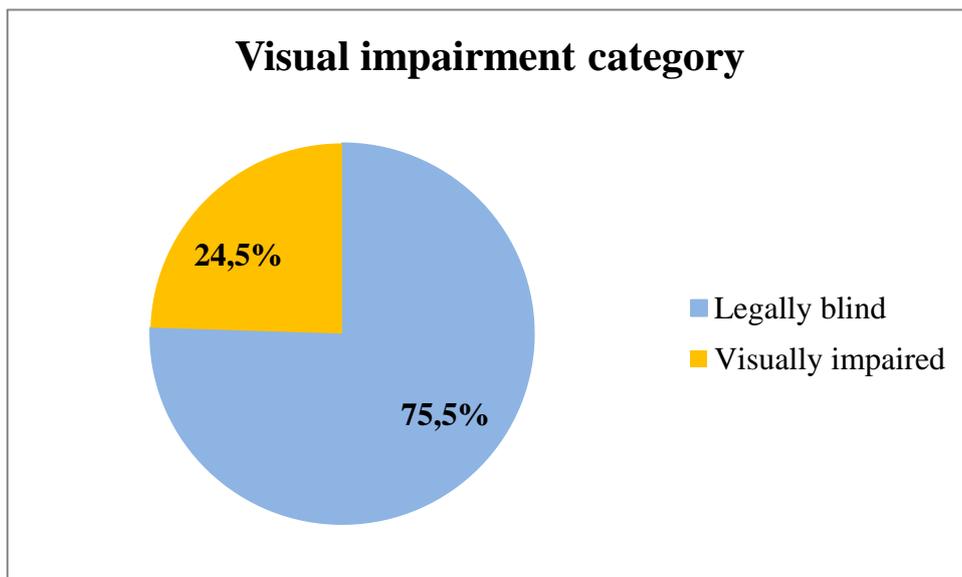


Figure 3. Percentage of visually impaired and legally blind persons aged 18–67 (%).

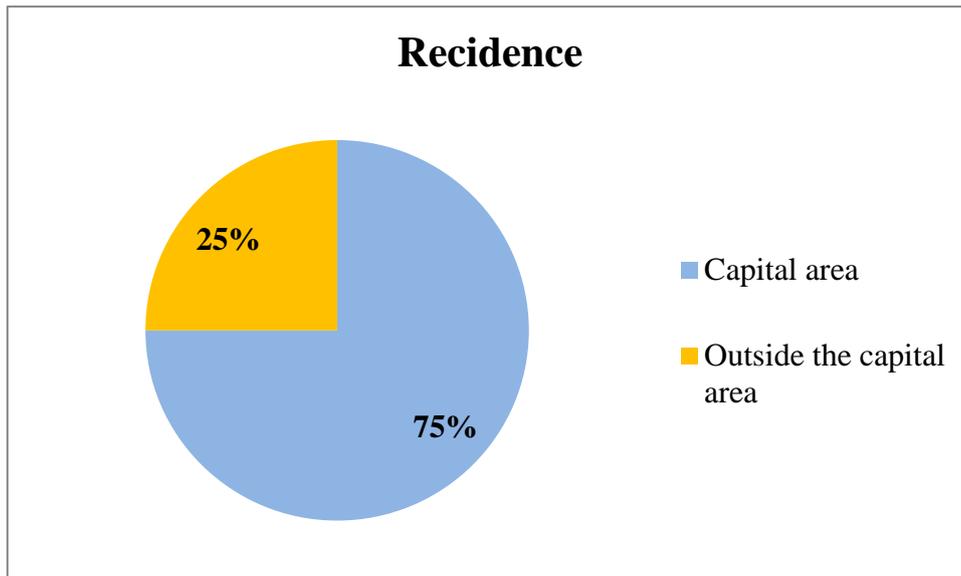


Figure 4. Residence of clients aged 18–67, capital area and outside the capital area (%).

Activity by age group

First, all activities were compiled for participants aged 18–67. 47.3% were employed, 13.3% were in school, 11.7% attended another activity, 12.2% were inactive, 2.1% were registered as unemployed and were therefore seeking work. Information was not available on the activities of 13.3% of clients (Figure 5).

The clients were divided into three groups according to their age. In the youngest group, aged 18–30, 16% were employed, 68% were in school, 8% attended another activity, 4% were inactive and no information was available for 4% of the clients (Figure 6).

Among clients aged 31–59, the following was found: 57.9% were employed, 5% were in school, 8.3% attended another activity, 2.5% were unemployed, and 14.9% were inactive. Information was not available on the activities of 11.6% of clients (Figure 7).

Among clients aged 60–67, the following was found: 35.7% were employed, 4.8% were in school, 23.8% attended another activity, 9.5% were inactive and 2.4% were unemployed. Information was not available on the activities of 23.8% of clients (Figure 8).

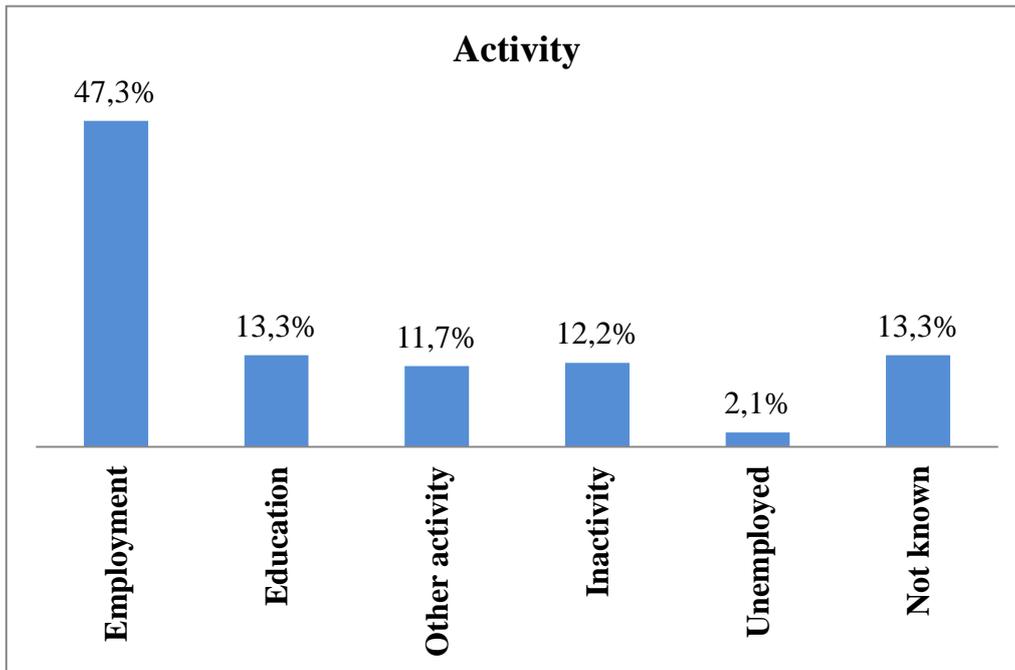


Figure 5. Activities of clients aged 18–67 (%).

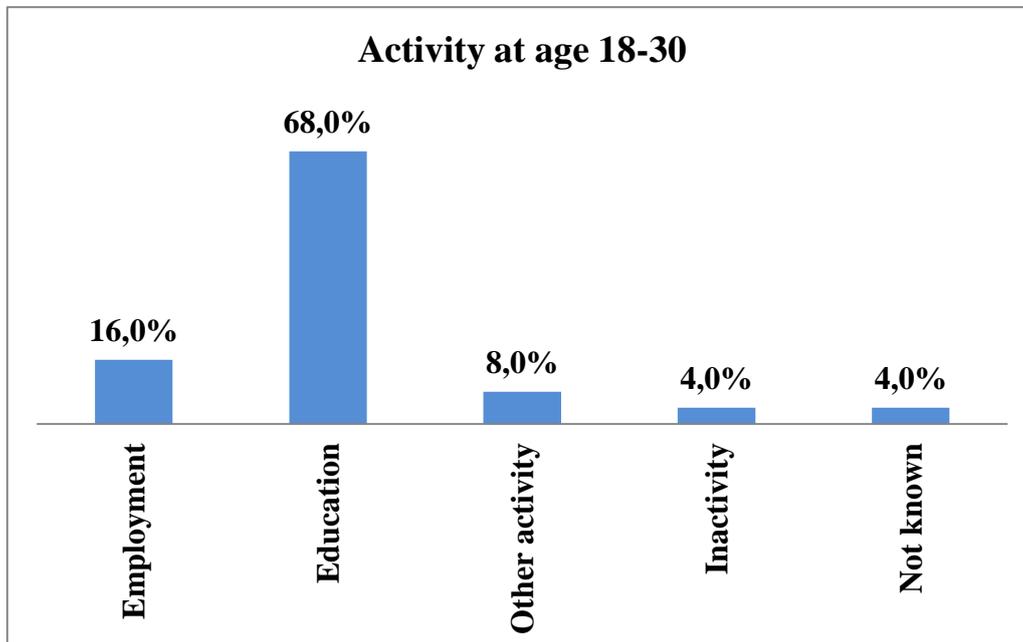


Figure 6. Activities of clients aged 18–30 (%).

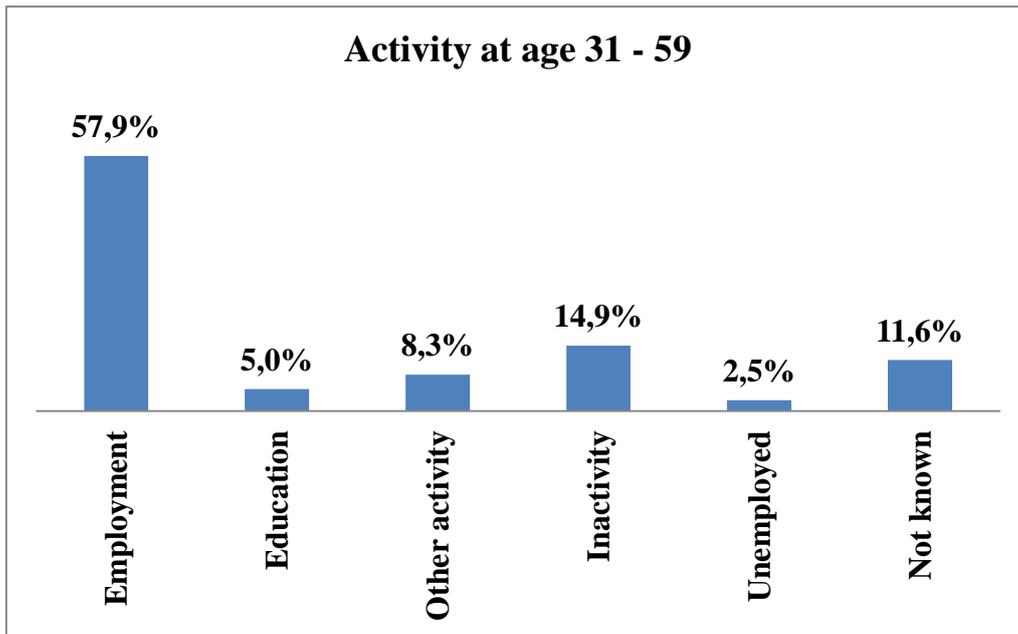


Figure 7. Activities of clients aged 31–59 (%).

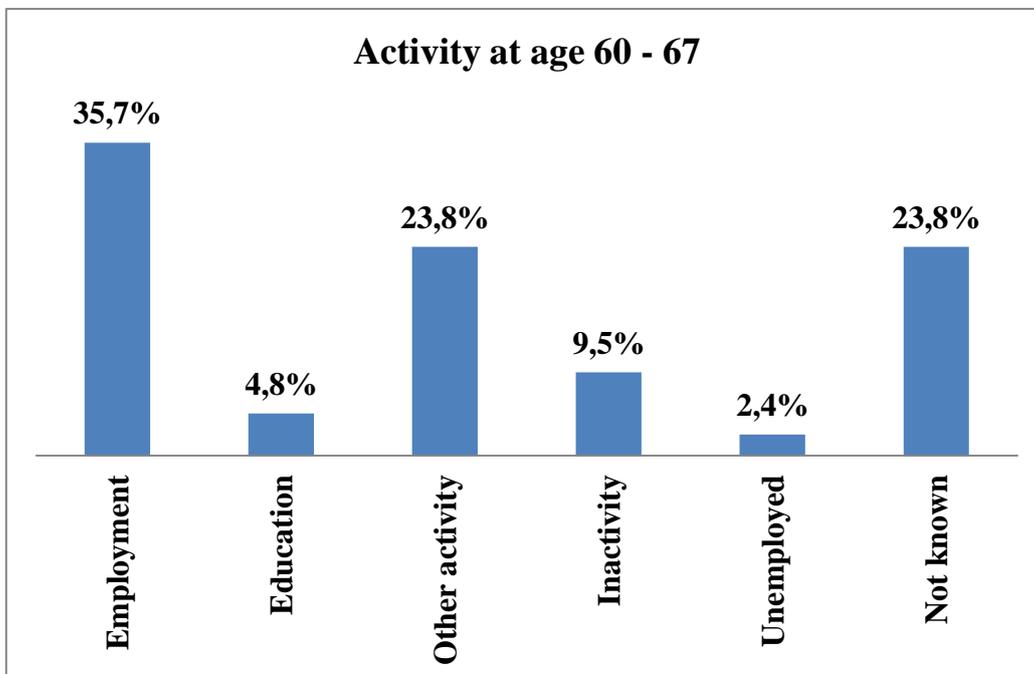


Figure 8. Activities of clients aged 60–67 (%).

Activity by gender

Activity was also compiled by gender. Among men, 59.6% were employed, 10.6% were in school, 9.6% attended another activity, 8.7% were inactive, 1% were unemployed and no information was available for 10.6% of male clients (Figure 9). Among women, 32.1% were employed, 16.7% were in school, 14.3% attended another activity, 3.6% were unemployed, 16.7% were inactive and no information was available for 16.7% of female clients (Figure 10).

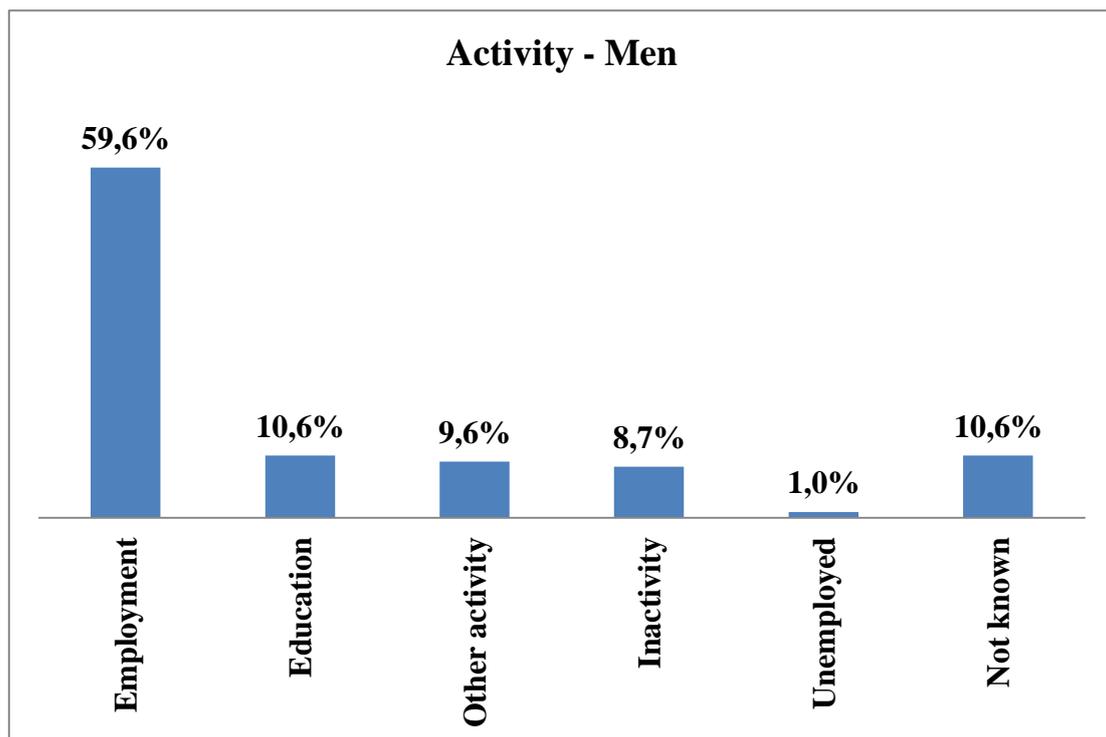


Figure 9. Activities of male clients (%).

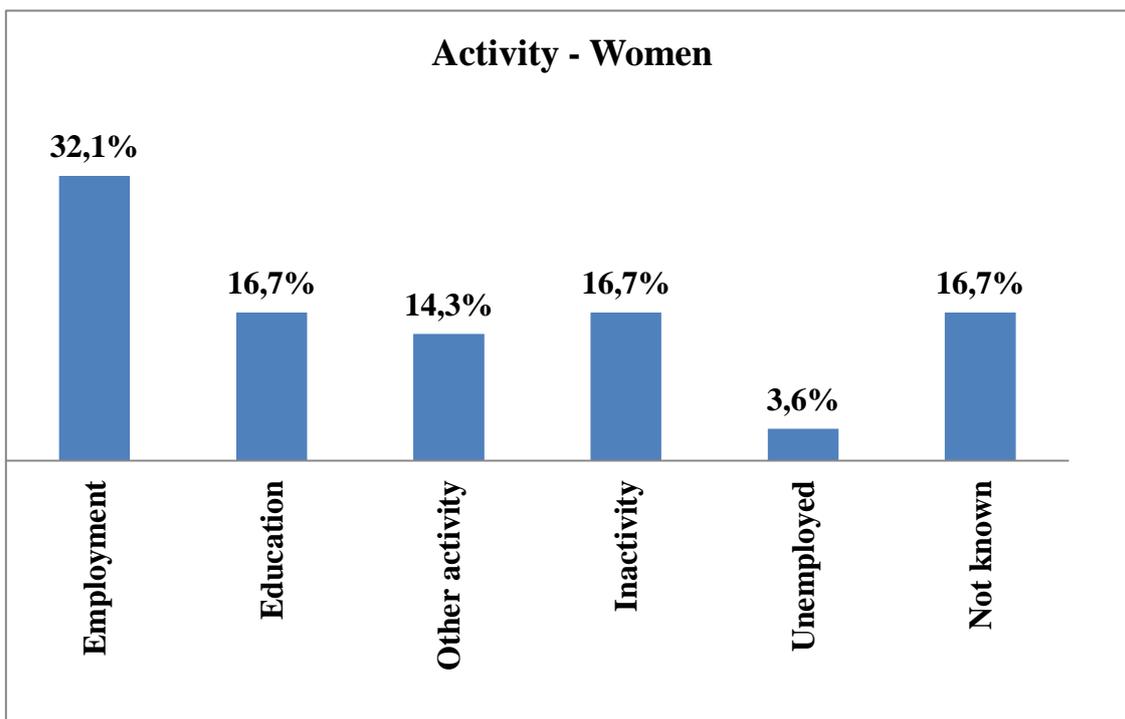


Figure 10. Activities of female clients (%).

Activity by residence

Activity levels were assessed for clients according to whether or not they lived in the capital area. Among clients in the capital area, 46.1% were employed, 12.1% were in school, 19% attended another activity, 4% were unemployed, 17% were inactive and no information was available for 19% clients (Figure 11). Among those living outside the capital area, 51.1% were employed, 17% were in school, 6.4% attended another activity, 12.8% were inactive and no information was available for 12.8% of clients (Figure 12).

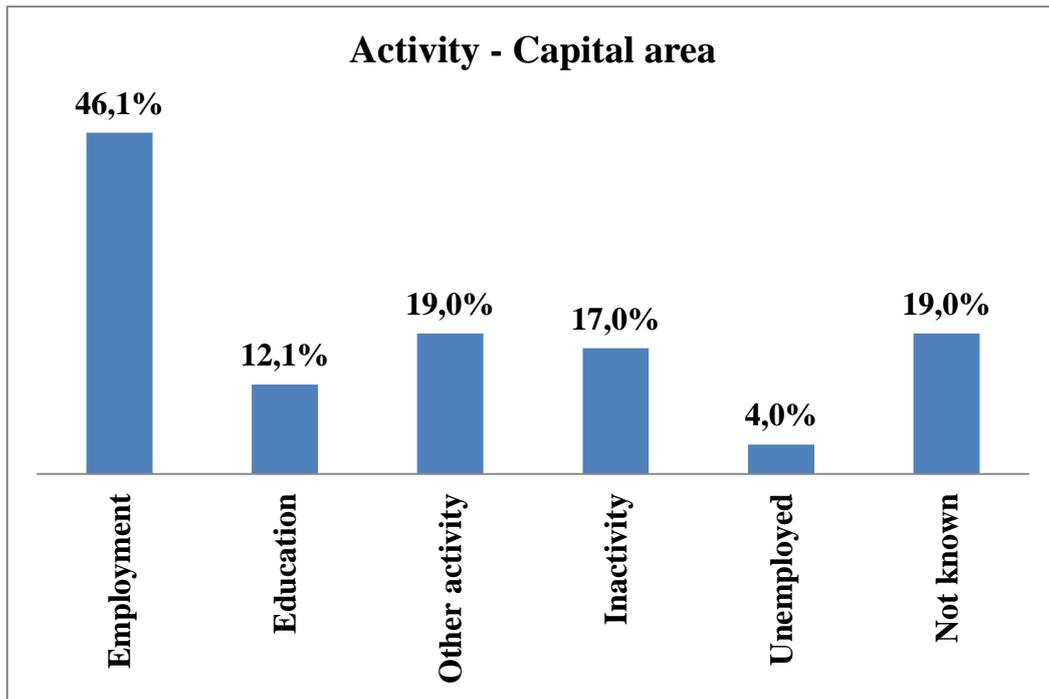


Figure 11. Activities of clients living in the capital area (%).

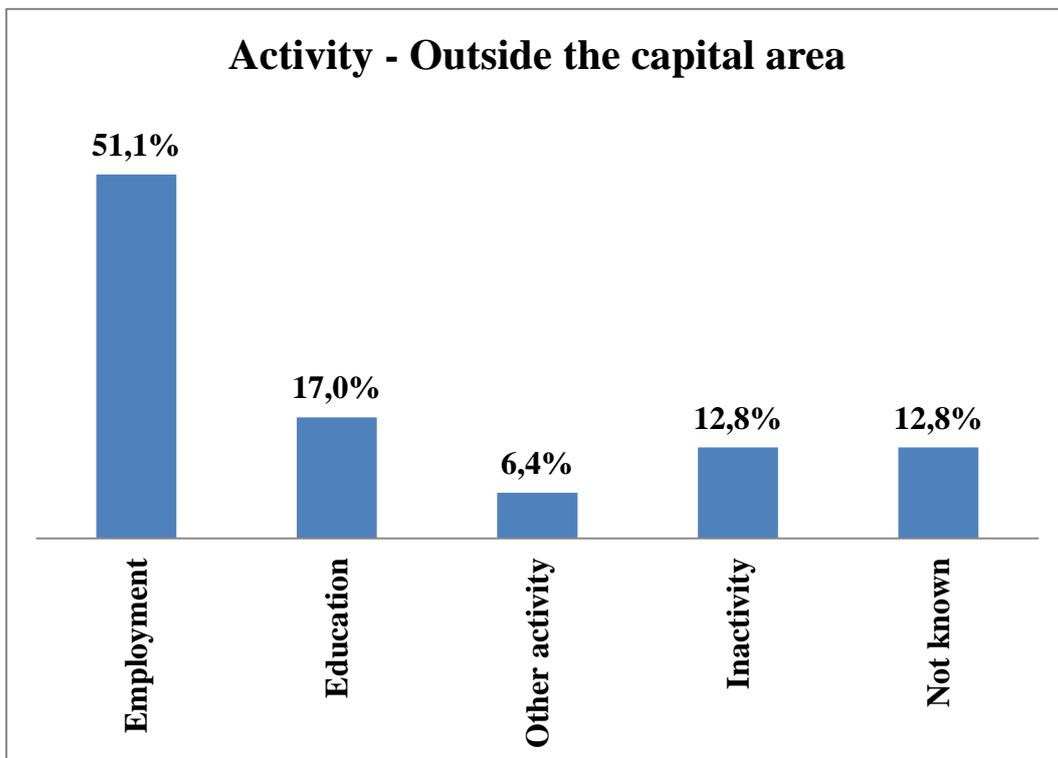
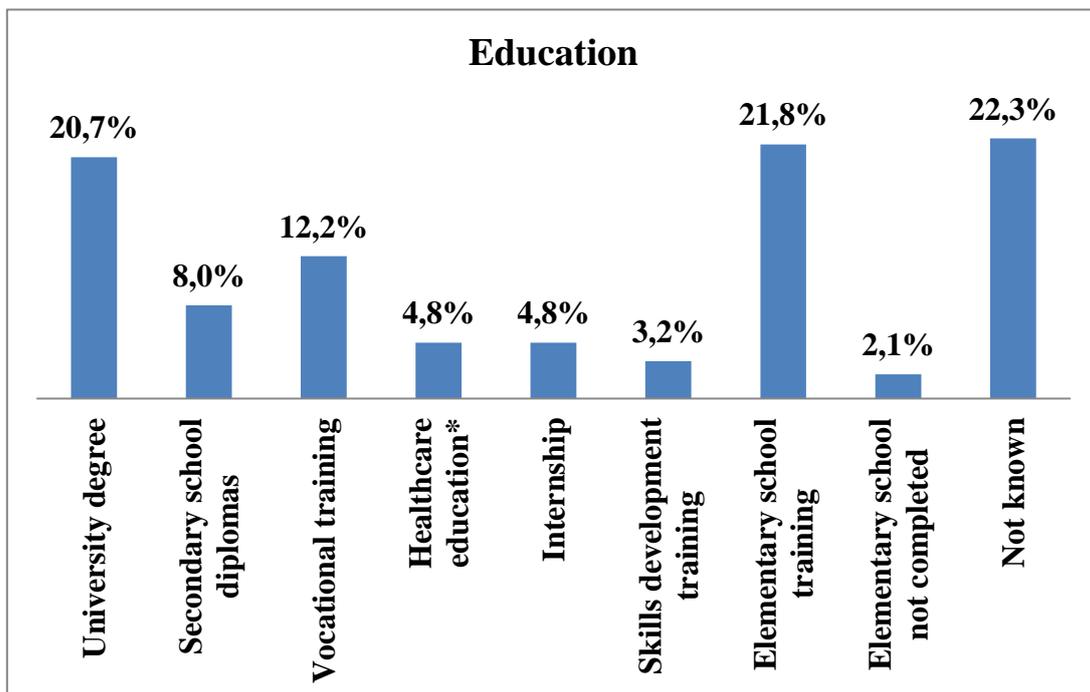


Figure 12. Activities of clients living outside the capital area (%).

Educational levels of clients

Education levels were assessed, revealing that 20.7% of clients had university degrees, 8% had secondary school diplomas, 12.2% had completed vocational training, 4.8% had completed health care training, 4.8% had completed internships, 3.2% had graduated from a skills development programme, 21.8% had elementary school degrees and 2.1% had not completed elementary school. There was no information available on the education levels of 22.3% of clients (Figure 13).



*Healthcare education in secondary school

Figure 13. Education levels of clients aged 18–67 (%).

Vocational training/rehabilitation

Last, it was determined how many had received the services of VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund. As can be seen in Figure 14, 2% of clients had received services, 44% had not received services and no information was available for 54% of clients.

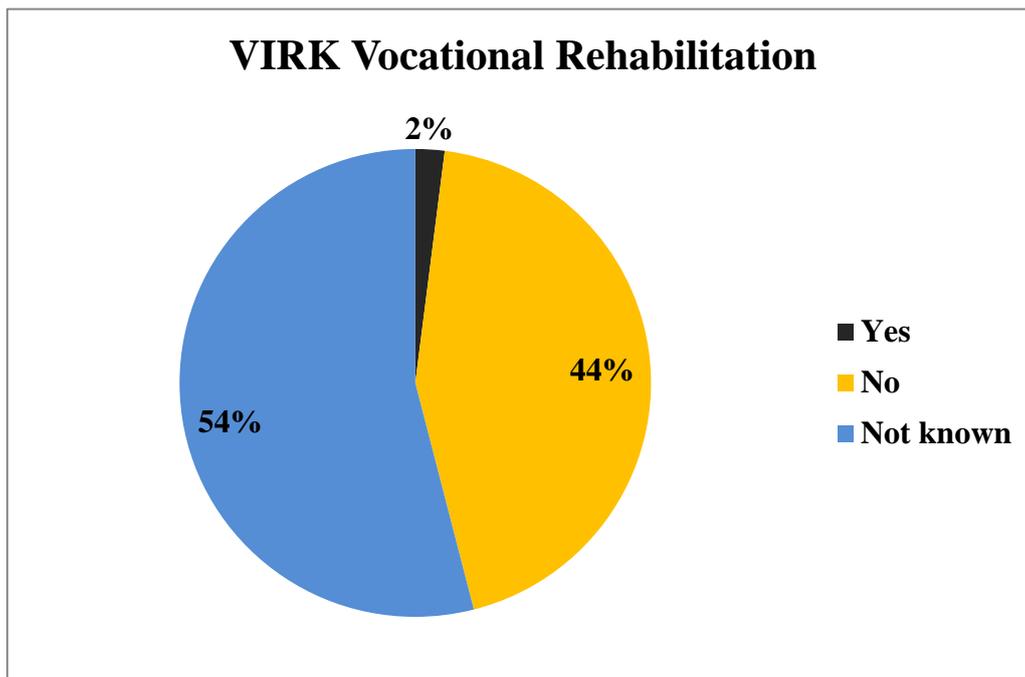


Figure 14. The proportion of clients who have received services from VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund (%).

Discussion

According to our findings, at least 47.3% of blind and visually impaired persons of working age in Iceland are employed, meaning that job market participation among this group is high compared to other countries. There is little information available about the job market participation levels of blind and visually impaired persons in Europe. The information that the authors were able to find was from 2004, and it can be assumed that job market participation among this group has changed somewhat in the last ten years. The data available does show that in all countries where data was available, unemployment levels were high among blind and visually impaired persons. For example, unemployment among blind and visually impaired persons in Denmark was 69%, and it was 68% in Norway in 2004. These are the countries we most often compare ourselves to (Berufsförderungsinstitut Steiermark, 2004). As previously stated, 64% of blind and visually impaired Australians were not working in 2012 (Vision Australia, 2012), and according to data from the United States, only 31% of blind and visually impaired persons of working age were employed in 2012 (American Foundation for the Blind, 2014).

Labour market participation among blind and visually impaired persons in Iceland is still somewhat less than Olafia K. Gudmundsdottir's 2007 study revealed on the status of members of the *Icelandic Organisation of the Visually Impaired*, which showed that employment was 63%. It should be noted that the 2007 study used different group of people and another methodology. Not all clients of the Institute are members of the *Icelandic Organisation of the visually impaired*. A rather large group, or 13.3%, is unknown yet included in the group, that is, they were included in our results despite no information being available as to whether they were employed or not. Clients that were known to have multiple disabilities (MDVI) were not included and that can skew the outcome. Therefore, the conditions are not in place to do a fair comparison between the 2007 study and this project.

Iceland generally has low unemployment levels, and job market participation ratios have always been high. This is partially due to the fact that the population is small and the work culture is strong. It is important to everyone to participate actively and contribute to society. Our job is part of our self-image, and of course most citizens want to participate in strengthening the community we live in; blind and visually impaired persons are no exception. It is important to increase the opportunities for this group to seek appropriate education and employment. This could be done through increased educational and vocational rehabilitation and added co-operation with the VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund. It seems that not many of the Institute's clients had received vocational

training/rehabilitation from VIRK. A likely explanation could be in part that VIRK was not established until 2008, so the program does not have a long history. In addition, the Act on Vocational Rehabilitation and the Operation of Vocational Rehabilitation Funds was enacted in 2012, and it is therefore understandable that not many clients have taken advantage of the services it offered. It should be assessed whether it would be beneficial to direct more of Institute's clients to utilise VIRK's vocational training/rehabilitation services.

As was previously stated, job market participation levels in Iceland are highest among the OECD member states, or 81.7%. Compared to our finding that at least 47.3% of blind and visually impaired persons are employed, we still have a far way to go in order to make job market participation among blind and visually impaired persons on par with the general level of job market participation. The share of blind and visually impaired persons that are employed could be higher than what is stated here, as information was lacking for 13% of the group. It is important to work with this age group, for example by advising more of them to attend vocational training/rehabilitation, as it has been shown that those who have received vocational training/rehabilitation are more likely to be employed than those who have received none (Bell and Mino, 2013). The results of the study *Disabled people as Residents of Municipalities* (2014) were rather striking in that it showed that 49% of the disabled that took part in the study were neither employed, in school, at recreational centres nor seeking employment. The findings of this study indicate that blind and visually impaired persons of working age are better situated when it comes to education and employment.

It would be interesting to determine what factors are preventing blind and visually impaired persons from participating in the job market. Reasons could include a lack of job opportunities, limited access and a shortage of vocational training/rehabilitation. Another factor may be that employers are reluctant to invest in aids for blind and visually impaired persons, as current legislation requires employers to pay for such equipment, including computer software, which in general is rather expensive. One factor that undoubtedly has a positive effect on the employment opportunities of blind and visually impaired persons is the taxi service run by the *Icelandic Organisation of the Visually Impaired* and several municipalities, including Reykjavik, Seltjarnarnes and Akureyri. It allows blind and visually impaired persons to get to and from work in a taxi for a small fee.

The difference in job market participation by men and women

The findings show that nearly 60% of men are employed, while only just over 32% of women are. It is unclear what the reason is for this difference is between the sexes. It may be that men more often are the breadwinners in the family and that women are therefore rather at home taking care of the home and children. It should be noted, however, that job market participation among Icelandic women in general is 79.6%, while it is only slightly higher among men, or 83.7% ("Job market participation highest here in Iceland", 2014). The gender gap in job market participation among blind and visually impaired persons is therefore much higher than the gender gap in Iceland in general. The reasons behind the low level of job market participation among women in this group should be examined, and subsequently, ways should be sought to increase the number of blind and visually impaired women in the job market. For instance, a topic of future research could be to determine whether blind and visually impaired women have for some reason fewer job opportunities than blind and visually impaired men, i.e. due to employers' attitudes or women's own attitudes toward work. It should be noted here that findings on the gap between the activity levels of the genders are somewhat in line with the findings of the study *Disabled people as Residents of Municipalities* (2014), which indicated that more women (51%) are inactive than men (43%).

The difference in activity by age group shows that the group that is most likely to be employed is aged 31–59, as could be expected (57.9%). The share of those aged 60–67 (35.7%) who are working has decreased, while there are more of those in the group who are involved in another activity; among the group aged 31–59, 8.3% attend another activity, while 23.8% of 60–67 year olds do. The age group with largest share of participants in school (68%) is the youngest group, aged 18–30, as was to be expected.

A larger ratio of blind and visually impaired persons living outside the capital area is employed compared to those living in the capital area, where a higher ratio of participants is in school. It should be noted that the share of blind and visually impaired persons living outside the capital area is 25% while 75% live in the capital area, whereas in general, 35% of Icelanders live outside the capital area and 65% live in the capital area (Statistics Iceland, no date).

Educational levels of blind and visually impaired persons

Our findings reveal that 13% of clients are in school, and the largest share of the youngest group (aged 18–30) are enrolled in some type of education programme, or 68%, which must be considered to be quite high. The Institute's clients who enlist in university programs have increased significantly

in number in recent years, thanks largely to improved access to educational materials and increased co-operation with university educational counsellors.

According to the findings of this project nearly 21% have university degrees, 33% have some sort of secondary school education, such as a university entrance exam, vocational degree, healthcare training, skills development training or vocational training/rehabilitation and nearly 22% have an elementary school degree. It should be noted that there is no indication as to whether the client received his or her education prior to or after the loss of vision. According to data on the education levels of blind or visually impaired Americans from 2012, 29.1% of have high school diplomas and 11.9% have university degrees (Disability Statistics, e.d.). The level of education in Iceland seems to therefore be higher.

Conclusion

Active participation in society is a human right that most of us value highly. In the wake of serious illness or accidents, people often stop working, and it is therefore valuable for people to know that everyone has a right to educational and vocational training/rehabilitation in order to help them get back on the job market. It is important that blind and visually impaired persons have the opportunity to be active, as those who are employed or in school are much more satisfied with their position than those who are inactive (Olafía K. Gudmundsdóttir, 2007). Those who are inactive are at risk of becoming socially isolated. All activities are good whether employment, education, athletics, attending courses, volunteering or being members of committees. Going out and meeting other people is healthy, as people are social creatures. The more active blind and visually impaired persons are in society, the more visible they become, which decreases prejudice. In addition, it is beneficial to have visible role models in the job market. After losing vision, people's ability to work becomes limited, but with the help of assistive devices and counselling, they can go on to live as normal lives as possible.

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***Please note:** *Some of the references are not available in English but their names were translated from Icelandic to English.*