

Careers, Employment and Education



Restricted Growth Association

Working to benefit people with restricted growth and their families



CAREERS, EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

This booklet is written primarily for people with a restricted growth condition who are making decisions about further and higher education, choosing a career and getting a job.

The booklet seeks to answer many of the questions people have when they are thinking about their education and employment:

- Should I go into higher education?
- How do I apply to a university or college, and how should I tackle the interview?
- How can I overcome other people's prejudices and preconceptions?
- What sort of work do I want to do?
- Should I mention my stature when making a job application?
- What help is available for finding employment?
- What are the benefits to registering as disabled?

Decisions we make about education, careers and jobs are some of the hardest we have to make during our life – but also some of the most important. What we decide will determine the direction our life may take – what we devote our energy to, our income and our self-esteem.

Many factors influence these decisions – what our interests are, what we feel we are good at, what we would like to do. One of the first major decisions is whether we want to spend more time in education or find a job straight away. These kinds of factors are the same for people of both short and average stature. If you have a restricted growth condition, however, there are other factors that will influence the decisions you make, such as aspects of a job that may be physically difficult for someone of short stature, environmental factors and other people's attitudes. This booklet looks at some of these factors and aims to give you an insight into how other people of short stature have dealt with them.

Higher education

For some careers higher education, i.e. studying for a degree, has long been an essential requirement, e.g. law, medicine or teaching. More and more professions are now moving to the point where a degree is the basic entry requirement, e.g. nursing, occupational therapy. If you have a good idea of the career you want to follow, then you can choose an appropriate vocational course. Other people go into higher education without a clear idea of what they will do at the end of it (especially in arts subjects!), but they are keen to make the most of the opportunity it affords for learning and self-development.



Nicholas Woodthorpe with fellow medical students at London Medical School

Recent changes in education mean that there are more opportunities than ever for people to go into higher education – i.e. take a degree course at a university or college. Taking a higher-level course is not just a useful basis for a career. It also gives you the opportunity to spend three or four years free from most responsibilities, other than to learn, among young people of similar interests and varied backgrounds. Many people of short stature also find university a useful half-way house between the security of home and the competitive world outside.

Choosing a college or university

If you are of short stature, your choice of college or university should be based on much the same criteria as for anyone else. You will look at the course, the options, the quality of the teaching staff, the reputation of the university or college, its location and the facilities it offers. Depending on the nature of your restricted growth condition and how it affects your mobility, you may need to take account of other factors:

- the layout of the place – Would life on a campus be less exhausting than in a university scattered throughout a city?
- accommodation – What sort of accommodation is available – either within the institution or private rented?
- transport facilities – How good or easy is it to get around? Would you need personal transport? Would that be a nuisance?

If questions like these are important for you, you will need to investigate them before you apply to a college or university. All colleges and universities should have a Disabled Students' Advisor and it may be worthwhile contacting them before applying to find out what information and details they can give you about life at a particular institution.

- 6 *My biggest challenge came with pursuing my degree in Architecture. The drafting table was bigger than me, so thank goodness for computers! If I've learned anything from my experiences it is that you should never give up on something, if it's what you really want. 9*

Other points can be raised at the interview or in exploratory chats with contacts at the institution. For example, if the course you want to do involves practical work, e.g. in a laboratory or workshop, you can discuss the question at interview. It is always important to be positive and stress your ability to deal with any problems that might arise – as you have been doing all your life.

6 *My tutor tried to talk me out of doing chemistry and pursuing a career in a laboratory, but that just made me more determined. On the first day I turned up with a stool and that was the end of it! I am now a successful industrial chemist. 9*

Application and interview

Your school should have advisers to guide you through the process of making applications. They can be invaluable in all aspects of making applications, including helping with the paperwork. Some people of short stature have encountered advisers with fixed ideas about what they could or could not do. However, a good adviser will be ready to fight your corner with you if you come up against blinkered attitudes in the college or university you want to apply to.

6 *One tip I got from a student adviser was to ask for an exploratory interview. This did two things. First, it got me a foot in the door and a look around. But second, and more important, it got me an interview with someone high up. In my case, first the person in charge of student admissions, but then, by my careful probing, an interview with the Principal himself. That meant that when I put my application into college, I was no longer just a name. They already knew me! That, in my experience, proved VERY advantageous! 9*

The interview is the time when you have the chance to show your abilities and display your personality. It is up to you to persuade the college or university that you would be an excellent candidate for a place. Many applicants of short stature feel that they need to do that 'little bit extra' to prove themselves, compared to average-height applicants. However, many applicants comment that discussing height gives them the chance to show the strengths of their personality and make a good impression.

- 6 During one interrogation at a teacher-training college I was asked how I would control disruptive children at the back of the class, when, because of my height, I couldn't see them! I replied: "In order to answer that question, I have to ask you one."

I was sitting where I could see round a corner but the interviewer couldn't. I said: "What can I see round that corner?" He said: "I don't know."

"Well, how would you find out?"

"I'd have to get up and go and look."

"Exactly – the way I would know about the disruptives!"

I won that round! 9

This successful interviewee has now been teaching for over 20 years and as he suggests, it is the personality of the teacher and the respect they are able to command that counts, not height. Another successful, short-statured professional describes how she exploits her size in a similarly challenging job:

- 6 As a social worker I have found that people who are often very aggressive to average-height colleagues are much less so to me. They have no need to try to be overpowering. They often calm down and become almost protective towards me – an attitude I can then use to advantage. I have known disruptive teenagers cross over the road to speak courteously to me, carry things for me and be generally helpful, much to the amazement of colleagues! 9

Some interviewers deliberately avoid asking any questions about height, but that may just mean they are nervous of voicing their concerns. When the opportunity arises, you may consider asking "Are there any concerns you have about my doing the course?". That may not elicit anything, but if it does, it gives you the chance to deal head-on with any concerns they may have.



Student life

For many – if not most – people in higher education, the chance to enjoy the different aspects of student life is as important as the course. Every college or university has a host of clubs and societies, offering opportunities to take part in sports, music, politics, drama and a myriad of other, often obscure, interests.

For students of short stature these opportunities can be vital for mixing with new people, for making new (often lifelong) friends, for establishing independence and building self-esteem. Many relish the chance to try public speaking, serve on committees or stand for elected office. These can all help to establish self-respect and status within the student community, as well as being a preparation for later life. The RGA **Lifestyles** booklet entitled *The Teenage Years* looks at many of the social issues relevant to young people starting life as a student.

Lifelong learning

Most people entering higher education do so shortly after leaving school – at about 18 years

of age. It is important to remember that opportunities for learning are available all through life. Many adults who went straight from school into work come back into education later on, some to get further qualifications in their area of work, others to do something completely new. The Open University, for example, allows you to do degree courses by distance learning. Other colleges and universities offer part-time or day-release courses – degrees and shorter courses.

“ I did my degree through the OU in my 40s. They were EXTREMELY supportive and helpful, and went out of their way to meet my needs at summer schools. If the confidence to go off to university is not there at 18 years, all is not lost. It can be done in a different way. ”

“ I trained for three years for my Diploma in Occupational Therapy, and have worked in various jobs including physical, paediatrics and mental health. Now I am in a management position in a Social Services department. Since then the OT diploma has become a degree course, so I took a BSc Hons in Health

*Sciences to keep up with the students
we now take on their placements. 9*

These opportunities can be especially important for many people of restricted growth, if they miss out on higher education, either because of lack of confidence or through late development (e.g. where medical problems interfered with education).

Employment

There are very few jobs indeed that are genuinely out of the question for people of restricted growth.

That being so, for most people of short stature the choice of career or job should be made on basis of "What do I want to do?" rather than "What can someone with my condition do?"

The range of jobs done by small people is huge, across the whole spectrum from manual through white-collar to professional, from sedentary to highly active, from support roles to customer-facing environments. As might be expected, many work in administrative or support roles – as accountants, administrators, IT specialists or secretaries – but there are also doctors, nurses, dental technicians, social workers, teachers, priests, business people, factory workers, engineers and mechanics, gardeners, watchmakers, librarians, shopkeepers, journalists, personnel officers, and many more.

Overcoming barriers

Too often other people are quick to see obstacles: 'How can a small person be a librarian? How can they reach the shelves? Or how can they work in engineering?'

These sorts of flimsy arguments are easy to shoot down. First of all, there is more to librarianship than putting books on shelves. Knowledge and skills in cataloguing, computer systems and dealing with customers are far



*Emily Ayres at work
in the lab*

more important. Light engineering, such as assembling electronic instruments, may seem unsuitable, but a high stool or a box to stand on can overcome the main obstacle. The same applies to any office or factory, where a mobile stool can make it possible to reach filing cabinets and equipment, or to ease the discomfort of dangling legs. In many areas of work advances in computer technology have made jobs less physically demanding.

If people show they are determined to help themselves, others are usually glad to cooperate.

6 I was one of the first women priests ordained in 1994. The local congregations have been tremendously supportive – the church building is littered with stools of various shapes and sizes! I get the parents to hold the child at baptisms and I am told by them that they feel more involved. 9

Joyce Willis, one of the UK's first women priests



It is, however, important to make sure the work environment takes account of any difficulties you may face.

6 I had an office chair made to measure and I would strongly recommend other people of short stature to consider this. If you are spending several hours every day sitting in the chair, it's vital that it is not only comfortable, but also supports your back. Too many people who work in offices end up with back problems through poorly designed furniture. 9

It may be possible to get financial help towards custom-made furniture (see 'Access to Work' towards the end of the booklet).

One problem that may crop up in jobs involving heavy machinery or laboratory equipment is

insurance. Employers may be reluctant to employ short people if they feel their health and safety may be at risk. On rare occasions there may be a genuine problem which needs to be addressed. Often, however, it is merely an

excuse from an employer who does not want the bother of employing a short person.

6 *Size alone does not make person a safety liability. I worked in a laboratory for 12 years. The Health and Safety at Work Act was not compromised in any way.* 9

Showbusiness not for all

Whenever small people discuss employment, somebody mentions showbusiness. Certainly there are some very successful entertainers among people of restricted growth, but it is a complete myth to think that that is the only available career. Those with real talent and inclination are free to pursue showbusiness, but most other small people go their own independent ways.

It is worth repeating, then, that people of short stature should seek employment according to interest and ability, rather than according to what other people think is suitable. Whether you want to be a brain surgeon, gardener or a mechanic, you need not feel barred from following the path you choose. At the same time, it can pay to remain

flexible. If you are finding it hard to land the job you want, and an opportunity arises in an unexpected area, it may be worth trying it.

Making the application

People of restricted growth seek jobs by the usual means: through job adverts in newspapers and journals, through agencies, through contacts. Because you are competing with many other suitable candidates, it is very important to make the best possible impression. Letters of application should be literate and legible, and if a statement of previous work is required, it should be neat and if possible word-processed.

You may find it helpful to consult professionals such as careers advisors or Jobcentres who can give you help with applications. There are also a number of good books which aim to help you hone your application and interview skills.

If you are called to an interview, practise answers to basic questions such as: 'Why do you want this

job?', 'Why do you think you can do it?' or 'What skills would you bring to the job?', as well as, more specifically, 'How would you cope in the office (factory or whatever)?' It can be a good idea to practise sitting in various sorts of chairs without being swallowed up. Above all, *be prepared, be enthusiastic and be positive*. This applies to anybody seeking a job, but for the short person they are perhaps especially significant.

Dealing with prejudice

Prejudice does persist among employers, and whenever short people gather together, many will be able to recount experiences of being turned down for jobs just because of their height. This sort of discrimination is sometimes blatant, for example if an application seems to be going well until the applicant's height is discovered. Of course prejudice can't always be held responsible – for example, you may be pipped at the post by a genuinely better-qualified applicant – but the lack of legislation has allowed employers to continue discriminating against applicants who differ from what they see as the norm.

6 In the interview I was not asked about my height but I raised the issue myself. I told them that I knew my height would be a surprise but I did not put it on my application form because there are many people who are prejudiced against people who are different. I might not have been given a fair chance. But I told them not to hesitate to ask me questions about my height and reassured them that it would be no hindrance to my ability to do the job. 9

There is no agreement among people of restricted growth as to whether you should declare your height before going to an interview. Some say you should prepare the interviewer; others say height should be irrelevant in such circumstances.

6 I'm a firm believer in not telling them I'm an LP in the application form. Yes, it means I have to suffer some pretty strong shock looks as I enter the interview room. But the toe is in the door then. From that moment on, it's me against them. If you tell them on the application form, then you are not there to fight your cause when they receive the information. 9

Employers who have taken equal opportunities on board may

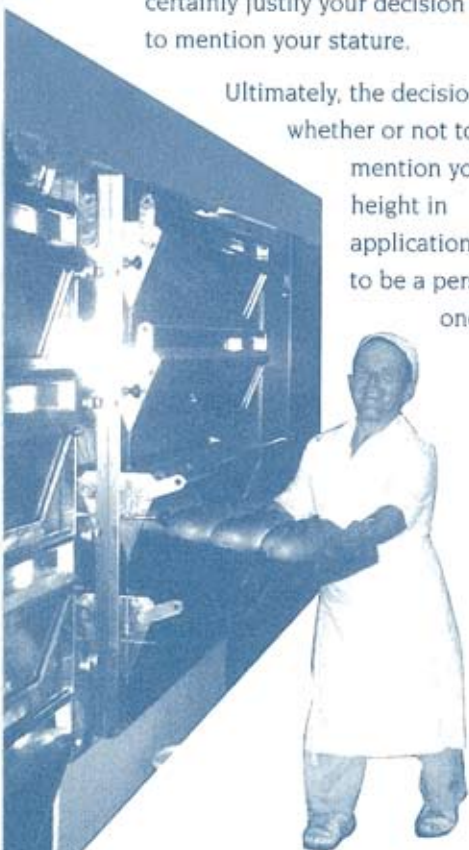
deliberately omit any questions relating to disability (as well as age, gender, marital status and ethnic origin). If you are specifically asked on an application form about any disability or condition that might affect your ability to do the job, you should always be as truthful as possible. If your view is that your condition is not a disability and does not affect your ability to do the job, you can certainly justify your decision not to mention your stature.

Ultimately, the decision whether or not to mention your height in applications has to be a personal one.

Employment Service and DEAs

The Employment Service, which operates Jobcentres, can provide support for people searching for a job. People who register as disabled with the Employment Service can enjoy advantages, such as being able to attend a job club immediately, instead of waiting for six months (the case with non-disabled people). You can also receive specialist advice and support from a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA), contacted through your local Jobcentre. The DEA will not only discuss options with you but is the gateway to accessing other sources of help. DEAs also have links with local employers which can be beneficial if you are finding it hard to secure a job.

Many people of restricted growth instinctively reject the idea of registering as disabled, seeing the main problem as being other people's attitudes rather than their stature. Others are happy to make the most of the help you can get by registering, seeing it as a weapon



with which to fight the negative effects of people's prejudices. Again, the decision whether or not to register as disabled is a personal one.

Employment law and disability

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995

One reason for telling potential employers about your restricted growth condition is that you can then claim protection under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This places a duty on employers not to treat disabled people less favourably than their non-disabled peers, if the 'reason' for their discrimination relates to your disability. So, if you are refused a job on the basis of your restricted growth condition and can prove this, you can make a claim at an Industrial Tribunal. If you do not declare your disability when applying, you cannot claim protection under the Act.

In any case, organisations employing fewer than 20 people are exempt from the provisions of the Act, so the Act does not protect you if you apply to this kind of firm

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 also places a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments to premises or working arrangements, in order to prevent your being disadvantaged. This could include acquiring or modifying equipment, altering working hours or allocating unsuitable duties to another person.

Access to Work (ATW)

If you are registered as disabled with the Employment Service, you may be eligible for support under the Access to Work scheme. It can pay for many aspects of support ranging from help towards transport costs to equipment, such as computer hardware or software or specialist furniture, such as a made-to-measure office chair. Employers are expected to make a contribution depending on the type of help provided (typically 20%), but ATW will meet the remaining costs. This is something that may be useful for countering employers' fears that it costs more to employ a disabled person.

Supported Employment

Another scheme which can help people of restricted growth through employment difficulties is the Supported Employment scheme. This is intended for people who find it difficult to maintain full-time employment because of their condition. It enables them to earn a full wage in an environment where their additional needs can be met more readily. Any shortfall in productivity resulting from the employee's disability is met by central government funds paid to the employer. Your local DEA is the point of contact for more information or to apply.

Good workers

Some young people of restricted growth find their first job easily, while others have many interviews before being offered a position. If you go through this phase, you need to be very determined and keep trying, without losing heart or becoming cynical. There is ample evidence that once people of short stature secure a job, they are as reliable and productive as everybody else (if not more so).

There may be a tendency for people of restricted growth to be less mobile than other people, not moving from job to job once they have found a comfortable niche. There is nothing wrong with that – people of average stature often make a career in a single company. At the same time there are many people of short stature who change jobs regularly or change direction during their careers – flexibility is one of the key words of the modern job market. For many people, this also means periods of self-employment – if you are fed up with being beholden to other people, being your own boss may be the path for you.

Useful sources of information

- Employment Service – For the address and phone number of your local Jobcentre and contact numbers for Disability Employment Advisers, look in your Phone Book under 'Employment Service'.
- RADAR (the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation), 12 City Forum, 250 City Road, London EC1V 8AF, tel: 0171 250 3222 – RADAR publishes a number of booklets and factsheets about employment, disability and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (contact RADAR for current price). These include:
 - *Into Work: A Guide for Disabled People*, by Martin Sissons, ISBN 0 900270 94 2
 - Disability Discrimination Act Factsheet 1: *An Overview*
 - Disability Discrimination Act Factsheet 2: *Employment*
 - Employment Factsheet 1: *Guidelines for Policies on the Employment of Disabled People*
 - Employment Factsheet 4: *Training for Disabled People*

This booklet was written by Hugh Hillyard-Parker with the help of the many members and their families who have contributed their experiences towards this booklet. Their contributions were compiled by RGA Information Officer, Ros Smith.

RGA would like to acknowledge the grants from the Department of Health, the National Lottery Charities Board and McDonalds which have made it possible to produce this booklet. The Wellcome Trust Medical Photographic Library has supplied many of the photographs.

The RGA encourages members to share information and sources of help.

Other RGA publications

What is...?

The **What is...?** series looks at particular restricted growth conditions or issues. The titles in this series are:

Achondroplasia
Hypochondroplasia
Pseudoachondroplasia
SED
MED
Diastrophic dysplasia
Rarer syndromes

Lifestyles

The **Lifestyles** series focuses on particular aspects of living with a restricted growth condition. The other titles in this series are:

Babies and the Early Years
Going to School
The Teenage Years
Having a Baby
Adoption
The Later Years
Driving a Car
Bikes, Trikes and Ride-on Toys
Sporting Opportunities
What Shall I Wear?



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