

* Title of Proposal

Maximum permitted length of title: 20 words

Please use **"Title Case"**, i.e., start each word with a capital letter and continue in lower case.

Do not use capital letters or lower case only.

Enabling employability: overcoming barriers to placement and work-based learning for higher education students with disabilities

* Proposal Provide a clear outline of your research question and your theoretical framework. Bear in mind that the European/international dimension is vital to the success of your submission.

(e.g. topic, **Length: up to 600 words**

research

question,

objective,

conceptual

or

theoretical

framework

...)

The participation and experiences of disabled students in higher education has been the focus of attention in recent years (HEFCE,2018; Equality Challenge Unit and the Higher Education Academy, 2010; Brewster, 2016) in the United Kingdom. Across Europe there is a recognition that inclusive education and associated best practice is needed to facilitate the study of students with SEN/disabilities (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016). Both the EU and national governments support and acknowledge the inclusion of under-represented groups in higher education and the active engagement of disabled people in higher education, supported by the European Disability Strategy and the United Nations convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Riddell, no date).

In a recent report in the UK, The Papworth Trust (Smith, 2016), a disability charity that provides services and campaigns on behalf of disabled people, concluded that:

- A graduate with a work limiting disability is more likely to not have a job compared to an unqualified person with no disability
- Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people. In March 2013, the unemployment rate for disabled people stood at 12%, compared to 7.6% of non-disabled people
- 53% of working-age adults with impairments experienced barriers to work compared with 30% of adults without impairments
- 33% of employed people with impairments are limited in the type or amount of paid work that they can do, compared to 18% of adults without impairments
- Adults aged 16–64 with impairments are twice as likely as their peers to experience barriers to education and training opportunities.
- The pay gap between disabled people and non-disabled people has increased by 35% since 2010

Since 2010 in England there has been a 42% increase of students with a known disability and 160% more students “with a known mental health condition”. Whilst some evidence exists with respect to employability and disabled HE students, there is “still much work to be done in levelling HE experiences for disabled students” (Cunnah, 2015).

However, our knowledge and understanding of their learning experiences beyond the lecture room is still limited. There is also an increasing emphasis across Europe on equality, diversity and inclusion, and on graduate employability both within HE generally and within this institution. Combining employability and disability presents specific themes and challenges; it requires more evidence-informed research and practice that will target significant gaps in our knowledge and develop our support for students.

This research is framed within the theoretical perspective of a social model of disability, as it looks at ways in which institutions can reduce or eliminate barriers disabled students may face when undertaking placement and work-based learning. The research develops our current knowledge about placement and work-based learning (WBL), through an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by disabled students. It places disabled students and their experiences at the heart of practice, ultimately impacting on support for students. It moves beyond the provision of guidelines which focus on legal equality compliance, to a greater understanding of the student experience. The aim is that it leads to the production of a richer set of support materials related to inclusive placement provision that provide a positive impact on future generations of students and on academic pedagogy and practice.

Research questions

- what are disabled students’ concerns and what potential barriers do they experience when looking for suitable placements?
- what are disabled students’ learning experiences while on placement?

- what information, advice and guidance do disabled students, their placement providers and academic tutors need, to maximise the benefits of placement learning for all?

* Methodology or Methods/ Length: up to 400 words
Research Instruments or Sources
Used

The project focussed on students on BA (Hons) courses in Education Studies, Childhood and Family Studies, and Special Education Needs, Disability and Inclusion Studies. However, a set of generic conclusions from the project is transferable to a range of disciplines and settings.

The research took a pragmatic mixed-methods approach to data collection, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools that provided elements of positivist and interpretivist paradigms. The aim was to arrive at a more nuanced approach to data collection (Cohen et al 2011).

Capturing the student experience and the experiences of a range of colleagues within the institution was important. A questionnaire was employed for students undertaking a second-year undergraduate placement module, focus groups were arranged for colleagues involved in teaching and supporting students and semi-structured one-to-one interviews with students who volunteered to participate.

A sample of 7 students was selected for interview and 90 participated in an on-line questionnaire. The staff focus groups were drawn from an employability support group within the institution and a group of academics that teach on the placement programme and/or the rest of the degree course. The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview design that enabled researchers to discuss key issues uncovered in the questionnaire and in the literature, whilst providing flexibility that encouraged colleagues to explore themes that they wished to raise (Denscombe, 2010).

The results were triangulated and coded to represent a series of emerging themes and conclusions. A process of thematic analysis was applied, known for its flexibility as a research tool, the aim was to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the data. The analysis followed an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge naturally. Through a contextualist approach, the analysis sought to acknowledge individual meanings but also consider the more expansive social context that the students operated within and that influenced meaning-making at an individual level. Analysis developed from the shuttling between data sets whilst coding the data, from which the themes developed. Through a constructionist perspective, the intention was to develop themes that helped theorise socio-cultural (Braun and Clarke, 2006) aspects around students' experience securing and undertaking a placement.

A mixed-method methodological triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative tools, was employed to establish greater validity and uncover emergent and convergent themes. Such an approach has been valued by researchers and can combine normative and interpretive techniques (Cohen et al, 2011).

* Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings Length: up to 300 words

The transcripts have recently been completed and the results are being coded, compared and contrasted. Initial analysis suggests a number of developing themes, including:

- Anxiety and how to cope with increasing anxiety levels
- Enabling students and developing their confidence
- How students manage their impairments both on campus-based and in work-based study
- Whether to disclose. The decision on whether to disclose or not is the responsibility of the student. Students face a moral dilemma regarding whether to withhold details of their disability to a placement provider, or whether to disclose in the hope that placement providers and employers are sympathetic to their needs.
- How health can impact on placement attendance, how strategies are employed to deal with challenges, work-life balance, but also the benefits accrued from being in a placement.
- Interviews with teaching and support colleagues revealed a range of themes, including: the importance of developing a relationship with students, the need to adhere to inclusive practice, the altruistic nature of support, how employer expectations might differ, dealing with complexity and meeting a diversity of challenges, clarity and ambiguity of support responsibilities and networks, strategic policies on employability, barriers and support structures.

References

Please list the most important references for your abstract
Length: up to 400 words

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77-101.

Brewster, S. (2016) 'From elitist to inclusive higher education.' Chapter 10 in Brown, Z. (ed) *Inclusive Education: Perspectives on pedagogy, policy and practice*. Oxon; Routledge.

Cohen, L. Manion, L. and Morrison, K. 2011. *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge. 7th Edition.

Denscombe, M (2010) *The Good Research Guide*. Open University Press.

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, (2016). *Inclusive Education in Higher Education. Conference Proceedings*, Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs.

Cunnah, W. (2015). Disabled Students: Identity, Inclusion and Work-based Placements. *Disability and Society*. *Disability and Society* (30) 2. 213-226.

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Smith, D. (2016). *Disability in the United Kingdom 2016. Facts and Figures*. The Papworth Trust.