Enabling Employability through inclusive placement learning

Final Report

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Background

Employability plays a significant part in most modern universities' policies and practices, with placements and work-based learning now forming a core part of the course menu. At the University of Wolverhampton employability forms a key component of its strategic plan, as do equality, diversity and inclusion. However, a graduate with a work limiting disability is less likely to have a job compared to an unqualified person with no disability (Smith, 2016) and disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people. While placement learning pays a key part in employability for all students, this may be even more important for disabled students.

The College of Learning and Teaching (CoLT) and the Education Observatory funded an exploratory research project to investigate students' potential barriers to a successful placement. Ninety-eight students on academic courses in the Institute of Education completed a pre-placement questionnaire, and seven participated in post-placement interviews. Staff were also invited to participate, selected for their involvement in placement learning, employability or disability support. Individual interviews and focus groups (11 staff) were conducted.

Summary of findings

Students' perspectives

- Most students have a clear idea before they start a placement how they will benefit from it, and what challenges may arise.
- Pragmatic concerns such as managing their time and other responsibilities were very common.
- Lack of confidence was also common; however, levels of anxiety were greatly heightened for some students with identified mental health concerns, for whom the placement presents a level of challenge well beyond that experienced on conventional campus-based modules.
- Disabled students have a variety of views regarding disclosing this to their placement provider, depending on the nature of their impairment/condition and past experiences.
- Students manage the process of their placement according to a sometimes complex array of individual needs and circumstances.

- Of the students facing additional challenges, the majority expressed a desire for further help in securing a placement, or additional support while on placement.

Staff perspectives

- The diversity of students and their placement experiences can raise complex issues, including for some, disability and its disclosure.
- There is wide variability in the processes associated with placements generally; although this is justified given the variety of courses, there is a perceived lack of clarity in terms of procedures and responsibilities.
- Communication, collaboration, and relationships between student, tutors and placement providers are vital; time, effort and skill are needed to establish them.
- Although the status of placements differs between courses (e.g. PSRB courses and those which do not lead to professional qualifications), their value is clear, with students often experiencing significant challenges but still succeeding.
- There can be significant resource implications in providing additional support.

Recommendations

- The way information, advice and guidance on placement is provided to students - in terms of format, timing, content etc. need to be carefully considered to maximise its effectiveness.
- Engagement with students regarding disclosure of disability/health conditions should be targeted, supportive and sensitive, and aim to increase students' willingness to disclose to their placement provider.
- Students should be made fully aware of what they are expected to take responsibility for regarding their placement – and why.
- Staff in various roles related to placement learning should be made fully aware of relevant lines of communication, responsibilities and support structures.
- Universities should recognise the potentially greater benefits of placement learning accrued by students at risk of underachievement, and provide appropriate resourcing to support this.
- Universities should support employers to develop positive and inclusive attitudes and environments regarding the employability of disabled people, and celebrate the unique contributions disabled students can make to a setting.
- Further research is needed to explore the perspectives of placement providers.

2.0   Introduction

2.1   Context

The University of Wolverhampton has a strong tradition of supporting vocational routes through education and strengthening the employability of its students. According to the 2017 *Destination of Leavers from Higher Education* report, 96.3% of its students are in work or further study six months after graduation, placing the University in the UK top 5 for graduate employability.

Work based learning (WBL) is a key vehicle for enhancing the employability of graduates (Blackwell et al. 2001, 270) and is arguably even more important for those at risk of disadvantage within the labour market. The placement as a site of experiential learning is of great significance to students, providing them with essential insights into the relevance of their academic study in relation to the 'real world', their transition into the workforce and therefore their employability.

We acknowledge that "employability" is a contested concept that can be manipulated according to different ideologies; for example, it is mostly determined by the labour market, rather than individuals based on their skills and experiences (Brown et al, 2003). However, for the practical purposes of this report it is seen as "having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, and gain new employment if required" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998, p.1).

Employability is embedded across the curriculum in all faculties. The Institute of Education offers a range of undergraduate courses leading to diverse careers within a range of educational, care, voluntary and statutory settings. These courses have an employability strand that runs throughout the three-year degree. The module *Enhancing Professional Practice on Placement* was the focus of our data collection; it is a core Level 5 module that forms a lynch-pin for several courses, including:

- Education Studies
- Special Education Needs Disability and Inclusion Studies
- Childhood and Family Studies.

Many students opt for placements in early years and primary school settings. However, students are encouraged to participate in a diverse range of placements, with many choosing to work in prisons, hospitals, charities, further education, international visits, special schools and secondary schools.

Since 2010-11 the courses above have seen:

- Over 1,500 students take the module
- Over 92,000 hours accumulated on placement
- 13,000 days in placement, equal to 2628 weeks, or over 50 years

Alongside the employability agenda, responding to a diverse student population through inclusive practice is increasingly prominent within the Higher Education sector generally and within the University of Wolverhampton. The [Disabled Student Sector Leadership Group report](#) indicates how HE providers can ensure that they are equipped to support disabled students (2017 Department for Education). This is within a context of increasing numbers of students disclosing a disability to their institution, but decreasing government funding through the Disabled Students' Allowances.

We too have observed increasing numbers of students disclosing sensory or physical impairments, specific learning difficulties and physical or mental health conditions. Good inclusive practice will go a long way to ensuring success for disabled students and also those facing myriad other challenges; however, there remains an important place for formal processes such as the Tutor Awareness Sheet (TAS) which indicates to tutors the individual adjustments and additional support some disabled students require.

It is within this context that the *Enabling Employability* project was conceived; it was felt that greater understanding was needed regarding disabled students' experiences of searching for, securing and undertaking a placement. In this report consideration is given to a wide variety of challenges that students may face when looking to undertake a placement, not only formally diagnosed and disclosed conditions, but other student concerns such as health or caring responsibilities that could impinge on their confidence or capacity to fully benefit from work-based learning (WBL). There is a sense that frequently information about these concerns is not fully shared with academic staff.

It was hoped that a greater understanding of students' experiences would lead to more responsive institutional support mechanisms that many within higher education and indeed in other sectors, can benefit from. This is particularly apposite, considering the wider employability challenges that disabled people and other groups face within society more generally.

2.2   Disability and Employability

In a recent report (The Papworth Trust, 2018), a disability charity that provides services and campaigns on behalf of disabled people, concluded that:

- Disabled young people aged 16-18 were at least twice as likely as their non-disabled peers to not be in education, employment or training
- The proportion of disabled people with no qualifications was nearly three times that of non-disabled people in 2015/16
- the proportion of disabled people with a degree remained lower than for non-disabled people.

The Papworth Trust (Smith, 2016) also stated:

- 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 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
- 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 2010-11 HEFCE have observed a 42% increase of students with a known disability and 160% more students "with a known mental health condition". Furthermore, The Institute for Public Policy Research analysis (Thorley 2017) concluded that nearly five times as many students as 10 years ago disclosed a mental health condition to their university. 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. Combining employability and inclusion 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.

2.3   Aims and Objectives

The research aimed to develop our current knowledge about placement and WBL, through an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by disabled students and others facing significant barriers. It placed disabled students and their experiences at the heart of the research and aimed to ultimately impact on our support for students. It therefore moves beyond the provision of guidelines which focus on legal equality compliance, to a greater understanding of the student experience. It is hoped that this will lead 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.

2.4   Research Questions

  I.   What are disabled students' concerns and what potential barriers do they experience when looking for suitable placements?
 II.   What are disabled students' learning experiences while on placement?
III.   What information, advice and guidance do disabled students, their placement providers and academic tutors need, to maximise the benefits of placement learning for all?

3.0   Methodology

A pragmatic mixed-methods approach was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The aim was to achieve a nuanced approach to data collection (Cohen et al 2011), which included:

- An on-line survey of Level 5 students beginning the placement module
- Individual interviews with Level 6 students with TAS's following their placement
- Focus group interviews with two groups of academic staff in placement or employability roles
- Individual interviews with staff in disability or volunteering support roles.

In the interests of including as many students as possible, on-line, hard copy and facilitated options for questionnaire completion were offered; potential interviewees could choose between face to face, telephone/skype or written participation.

3.1   Sample

There were 146 Level 5 (second year of their degree) students enrolled on the placement module. At the start of the module we invited all students to participate anonymously in the survey, irrespective of whether they had formally disclosed a disability or had a Tutor Awareness Sheet (TAS). We asked all students to consider whether they felt they faced barriers or challenges to undertaking a placement. A total of 98 students completed the survey.

We also identified twelve students at level 6 who had a TAS and had recently completed their placement; they were invited to take part in an in-depth interview, and seven did so. The aim was to explore the lived experience of these students with respect to finding and undertaking a placement. It was hoped that richer data would be recovered that could be triangulated with the on-line survey and provide greater insight.

We also asked a number of staff with a specific interest in or responsibility for employability, placement learning or additional needs; in other words our sample was purposeful. The focus group constituting academic staff (N = 5) taught several modules that involved students undertaking placement. The second focus group constituted a range of academic, management and support teams who met regularly as an employability steering group that promoted and raised the profile of employability issues across the faculty (N = 6). Finally, we invited colleagues specifically with a disability support and/or careers and volunteering remit to participate in one-to-one interviews to discuss the needs of students on placement (N = 4).

3.2   Data collection tools

The questionnaire survey utilised tick boxes, multi-choice, Likert scales and free text responses; the latter added a qualitative element to the data. Questions covered a range of themes including:

- Type of placement planned or sought
- Feelings about placement
- Personal circumstances that may cause difficulties

- Students' impairments
- Disclosure of disability
- University support
- Support from the placement provider
- Any other concerns students may wish to discuss.

The student interviews covered a range of questions relating to what challenges students expected and how they overcame them, how they felt about disclosing their disability, what extra support they could benefit from, and what benefits they experienced from the placement. Students were also invited to raise any other issues they felt were pertinent, but had not been raised in the interview schedule.

In both the staff focus groups and individual interviews colleagues were asked about their views on how students can benefit from placements, on the challenges that students face when seeking and engaging in placement, what support students are currently getting and if they think more is needed, and examples of practice. Colleagues were also given the opportunity to raise issues that had not been raised in the interview schedule.

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

3.3   Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research, with respect to disclosure and talking to students about their disability, care was taken to ensure students felt willing to participate without undue pressure.

The lead investigators also had a dual role as lecturers supporting and teaching some of the participating students. To avoid a potential conflict of interest (with interviewers also marking the students' academic work) third-party researchers, unknown to the students, were employed to collect data. Students completing the on-line survey also did so anonymously. The same researchers undertook the staff interviews. No identifying information is included in this report.

All participants freely gave fully informed voluntary consent. The research was approved by the Institute of Education ethics committee.

3.4   Approaches to Data Analysis

A process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was applied, for its flexibility as a research tool; the aim was to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the data. The analysis sought to acknowledge individual meanings but also consider the more expansive institutional context that the students and staff members 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 (Braun and Clarke, 2006) provide greater understanding of the student placement experience. Each item of qualitative data was independently analysed by three members of the research team; this resulted in high levels of concordance between analysts.

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).

4.0   Data Findings and Analysis

Level 6 students who had disclosed a disability to the University, and who had recently completed a placement were invited to participate in individual interviews (see 4.2). Also, the entire placement module cohort of 146 new level 5 students was asked to participate in an on-line survey (see 4.1). The research team also sought the perspectives through focus groups and interviews of colleagues employed at the University, whose roles and responsibilities were relevant to the research topic (see 4.3).

Participants	Collection Method	Number of respondents	Level/Job role
Students starting placement module	Questionnaire	98	Second year (L5)
Students completed placement	Interview	6	Third year (L6)
Student completed placement	Written response	1	Third year (L6)
Staff	Focus Group	5	Academic
Staff	Focus Group	6	Academic / Management / Support
Staff	1:1 interviews	4	Management / Support

4.1   Student Questionnaire Survey

The research team wished to obtain a snapshot of all students' views prior to entering placement in academic year 2018/19. During the first lecture of the placement module, students were invited to undertake an on-line questionnaire anonymously. A paper version was also made available for those with a preference for this format. It was known that within this cohort of 146 students, there were 17 (12%) students that had a TAS. However, the aim of the project was to take a broader perspective of what barriers students face, including those students who had not disclosed disability to the University. This survey included students with possible social barriers, for example caring responsibilities. A total of 98 students (67%) responded.

In the first part of the questionnaire (Section A), all students were asked to identify the type of setting they were intending or hoping for their placement, and to indicate what they were looking forward to or were most apprehensive about. They were then asked to consider any circumstances that may affect undertaking a placement. For those who identified no potential difficulties, no further responses were required. However, students who identified potential difficulties associated with a condition or with personal circumstances were invited to continue to Section B, in which questions were asked about this and about how their placement might be better supported or facilitated.

4.1.2 Placement status

Of the 98 respondents a significant percentage of students were still looking for a placement (43%). However, this did not affect the ability of students to reflect on challenges they might face

Answer Choices	Responses	
I do not have a placement yet and I'm still looking	36.73%	36
I'm currently in the process of securing my placement	27.55%	27
I already have a placement	20.41%	20
I intend to use my current job as my placement	9.18%	9
I do not have a placement yet and need help looking for one	6.12%	6
	Answered	**98**

*4.1.3 What type of placements were students looking for?*
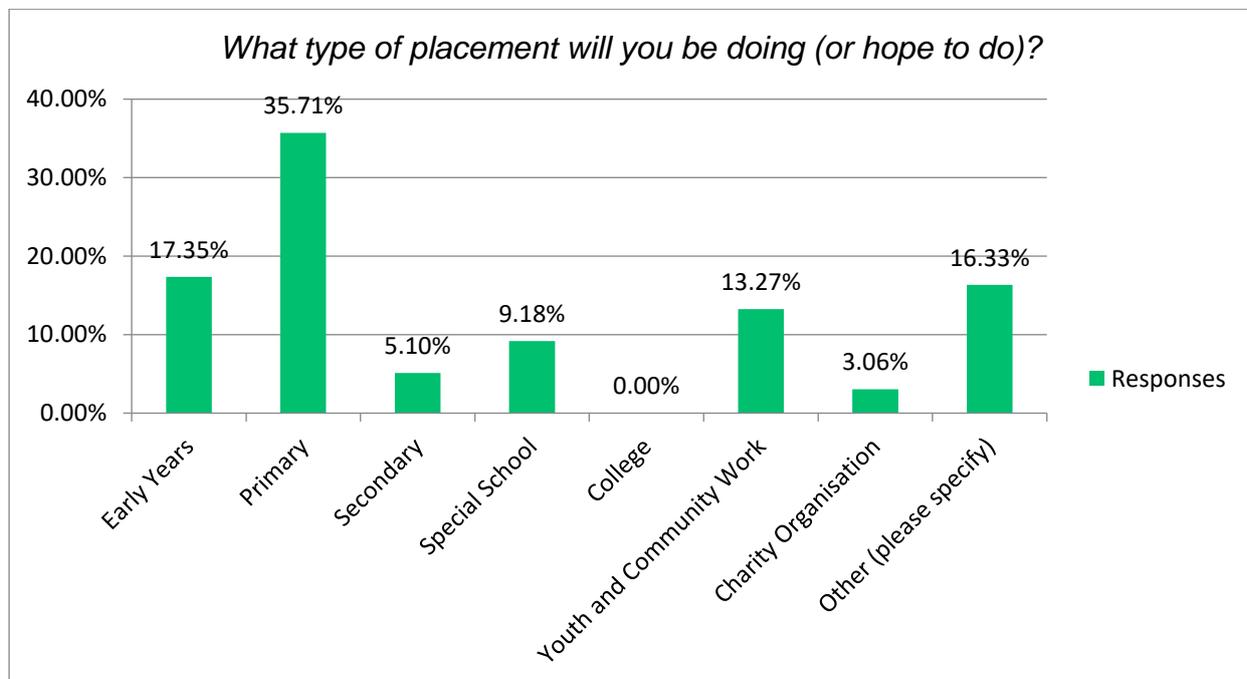
Primary school setting was the most popular response, followed by early years settings. A combined total of 33% included charity organisations, youth and community

work, and 'other' settings such as social work, respite centre, counselling, working in a prison, family support worker, and international placement.

4.1.4 What were students most looking forward to about their placement?

This required a free-text response where students were encouraged to write what mattered most to them. The responses were coded and categorised into a set of eight overlapping themes as follows.

Most looking forward to in placement
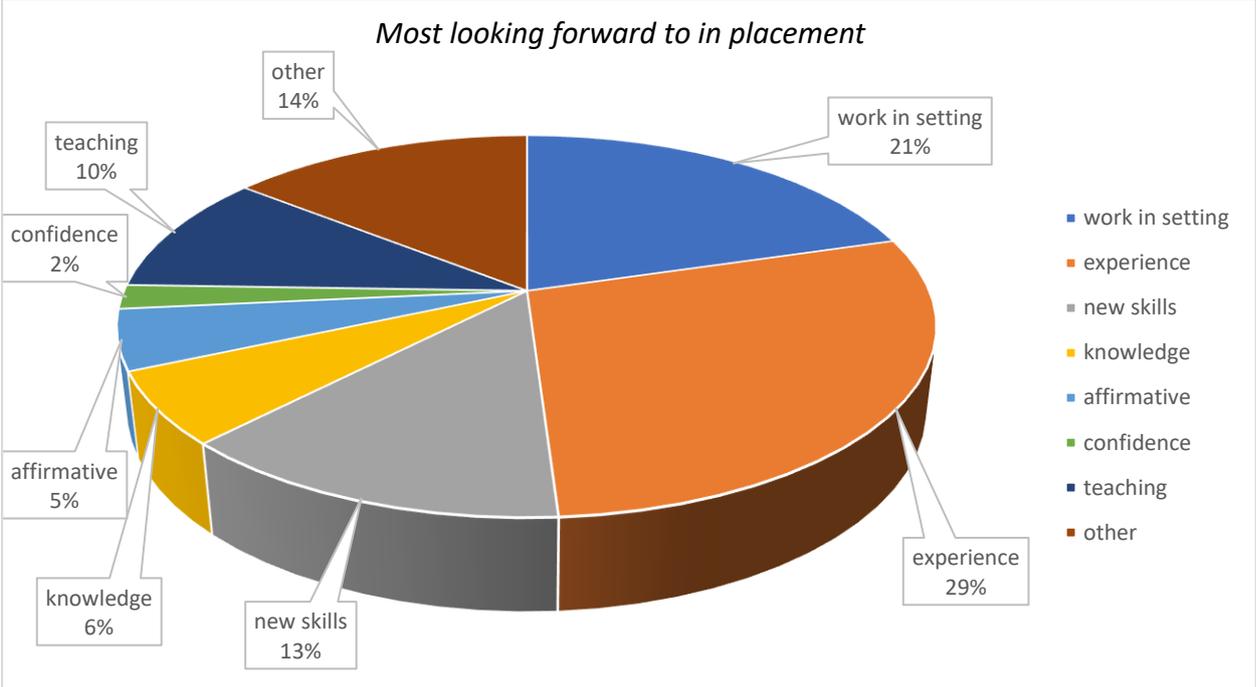
The most common response related to simply gaining more experience in the setting. This, combined with "knowledge", amounted to 35% of the responses. Some students specifically highlighted expanding their professional knowledge, for example learning different teaching methods, and understanding the challenges that some pupils faced in school. 13% of responses highlighted the gaining of new skills while on placement, either in their existing workplace, or in roles they had not undertaken before.

Some students' (21%) responses were categorised as "work in setting"; these responses related to a specific role or particular setting, but overlapped with gaining experience, skills and knowledge. For example, working with children with special needs, gaining insight into working with and observing children, working with an early years team, understanding children's learning, or simply working in a school environment. All these responses were specific to formal education settings such as school and early years

centres. These responses closely related to a similar category coded under the theme of "teaching" (10%). In this category students highlighted the specific act of getting involved in the teaching process, for example teaching ESOL, learning more about curriculum, educating young children, and learning about the role of teacher in a primary school.

The rest of the responses did overlap in some ways with the above, but with a slightly different emphasis. For example, some students commented on how they hoped that experience would help them find out which career path they wished to follow, explore a new career, or look at their job in different ways. This was coded as responses that were "affirmative" in nature. In addition, two students indicated that gaining confidence was something they were looking forward to. "Other" responses (14%) were varied, and included meeting new people, experiencing a different sector of education, undertaking mentoring, and helping and supporting people.

4.1.5 What were students least looking forward to about their placement?

A total of 75 students responded with open-text comments.
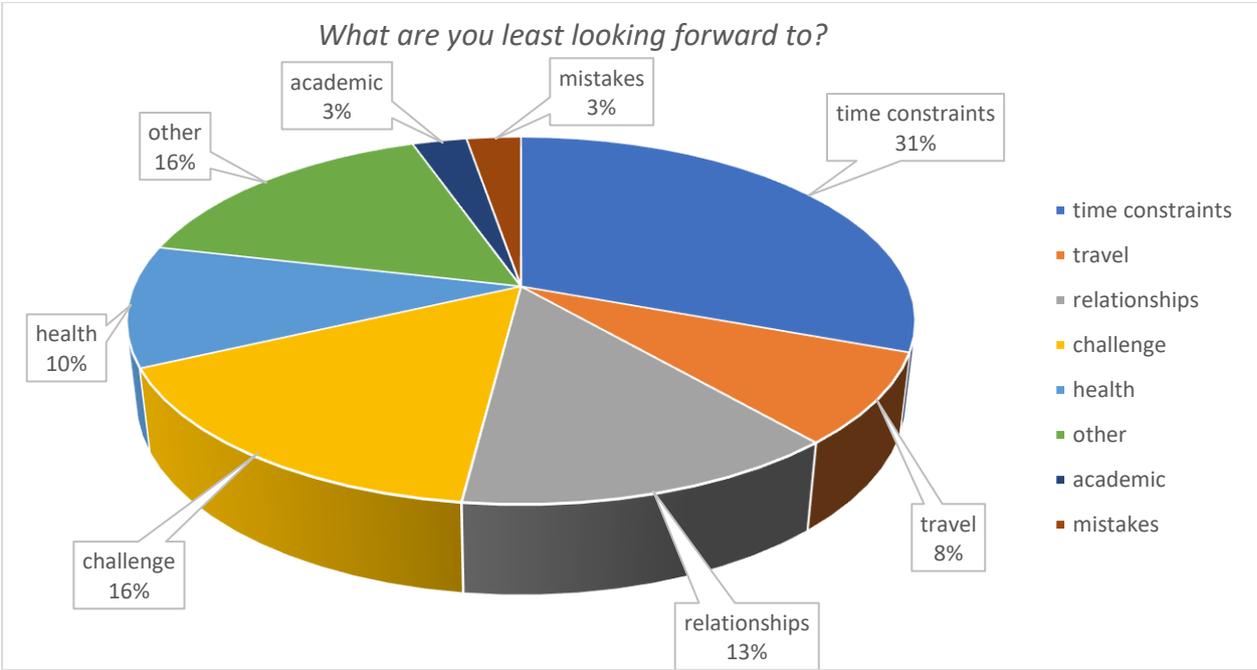
Many responses indicated pragmatic issues. For example, "Time management, getting time to fit all my other commitments in"; 31% of students were concerned about both time management and task management. This included balancing their time at university with paid work, and trying to fit in the demands of placements with other

responsibilities. A further 8% of students were concerned about other practicalities such as commuting, relying on public transport and travelling long distances, especially where the venue was difficult to get to.

16% of students cited some common "challenges", for example "going into the unknown", or being concerned that they would not like the placement. Being in an unknown situation and "out of the comfort zone" typically represented this category.

Only 10% of responses specifically related to "health" and "anxiety" issues. The most common response in this category related to anxiety (explored further below), or generally feeling nervous and being worried about settling in. Others were more specific, such as "Being nervous. Having bipolar and not being understood by people who don't know me", or "Mental/physical health getting in the way and feeling like I can't cope". Feeling out of place, feeling alone and worried about not fitting in were also highlighted.

Some students (13%) provided comments about professional relationships; for example, not knowing anyone, "not getting on with the manager", getting used to new people and having to ask many questions.

A small number of respondents suggested that they were either worried about making mistakes within the setting or felt that they were not looking forward to having to undertake the academic requirements of the module assignment. Finally, there were a range of responses (16%) that could not be easily coded or categorised into an emerging theme. This included comments such as "teaching children", dealing with challenging behaviours, planning for different types of children, and simply "not liking" the placement.

4.1.6 Students were asked whether any personal circumstances could cause difficulties and negatively affect them finding or successfully completing a placement

A total of 98 students completed this multiple choice question, providing a total of 120 responses.

Answer Choices	Responses	
No Issues	53.06%	52
Work Responsibilities	17.35%	17
Anxiety	14.29%	14
Travel Difficulties	11.22%	11

Care Responsibilities	7.14%	7
My Condition has been Diagnosed	6.12%	6
Health and Well-Being Issues	5.10%	5
A Specific Physical or Mental Impairment	3.06%	3
Other (please specify)	5.10%	5

Over 53% of students felt there were likely to be no issues negatively affecting their placement experience; these students discontinued the questionnaire at this point.

The next largest response indicated 'work responsibilities'. Nevertheless, nearly 29% of responses (representing 19% of students) related to health and well-being and/or diagnosed conditions, including health-related categories such as 'anxiety'. Despite the inclusion of "My Condition has been Diagnosed" as an option, it is not clear whether the anxiety referred to represents a significant impact on students' engagement with placement, or that anxiety levels are within natural and expected levels one might experience in day-to-day activities; neither is it possible to distinguish responses that refer to a diagnosed anxiety condition. Further investigation is required; however an analysis of those students citing health-related issues indicated anxiety as a key issue.

Of those that answered "other", two cited family responsibilities that may impact on their placement activities, including childcare. Another student indicated the condition of IBS, whilst a third cited the time constraints of working, attending university, and undertaking training to be a foster worker.

Section B

The data from this second part of the survey represents those students (N=47) who had specific concerns relating to placement.

4.1.7 Students were asked if they have an identified condition, impairment, or disability, and if they had a University Tutor Awareness Sheet (TAS).

Answer Choices	Responses	
Have an identified condition…	27.66%	13
Did not have an identified condition…	72.34%	34
	Answered	**47**

Only 12 people responded to the question about Tutor Awareness Sheets. In total, 7 students confirmed that they had a TAS, a figure far short of the 17 in this cohort known by the research team to have one.

4.1.8 Disclosure of disability

Those students who acknowledged an impairment were asked about whether they intended to disclose this to their placement provider, choosing one of the following statements:

Answer Choices	Responses	
I intend to talk to my placement setting about this	41.67%	5
Discussing this with my placement is not something I thought about	33.33%	4
My placement venue already knows about this	16.67%	2
I do not intend to talk to my placement setting about this	8.33%	1
	Answered	**12**

The low response rate has meant that it is difficult to extrapolate conclusions, but it does reveal diverse responses; while some had clearly decided to talk about their condition (N = 5), an equal number had not even thought about it or did not intend to discuss it. A more in-depth and qualitative response was provided by students who were interviewed about this issue (see 4.2).

4.1.9 What additional help could the University supply to help placement run smoothly and maximise student learning?

A total of 44/47 students responded to this multiple-choice question:

Answer Choices	Responses	
Additional help finding and securing a placement	43.18%	19
Talking to a placement setting about additional things they need to know about me or support with	36.36%	16
Additional support during my time on placement	25.00%	11
Other (please specify)	22.73%	10
	Answered	**44**

The majority of these respondents indicated that they would prefer further help finding a placement, reflecting students' initial comments about their current status with respect to placement. 36% of students indicated that it would help if the University spoke directly to the placement regarding the support the student required. Currently, no such mechanism exists, and this requires further exploration in order to achieve this in a sensitive and inclusive way. Whilst 10 people indicated 'other' possible answers, no clear trend or conclusion can be derived from these individual responses.

4.1.10 What additional help could your <u>placement providers</u> supply to help your placement run smoothly?

A total of 25 students responded to this open-ended free-text response question. Comments were varied and did not necessarily relate to any impairments or specific barriers students faced. There were some responses that related to flexibility, for example the student being given additional time to search for and complete the placement if needed; the provision of information was also deemed helpful. It was felt that explanation, support and reassurance would be helpful, for example having a clear explanation of what work was required; ensuring that the student would be treated equally as part of the team, being treated with respect and being welcomed were highlighted by individual students. A daily timetable and information about the placement was also suggested. Some students did refer to health-related issues, stating specific individual requirements, such as "Having regular breaks just to compose myself if things are feeling overwhelming … regular breaks to go to the toilet (and allowing me to go to the toilet as and when I need to go - due to my IBS)"; "a place where I can go if I feel overwhelmed or anxious, as well as blue coloured printouts". Overall; clarity, information and flexibility were common threads.

4.1.11 Students were asked if they had any other personal concerns that might affect their placement.

A total of 7 students responded to this question. The responses were diverse and no discernible pattern could be detected. One student cited childcare issues and fitting the placement in with parental responsibilities; another worried about their health and feeling ill during placement; a third student cited general problems with securing a

placement that met their "needs", although specifically what these needs were was not made clear.

4.1.12 Students who identified health-related concerns.

Finally, we filtered the data so that we could analyse the responses of only those students who had identified personal circumstances relating to health, and were therefore amongst those who completed Section B of the survey. This included any students that had cited health and well-being issues, anxiety, any specific physical or mental impairments, and those students that said their condition had been diagnosed (n=19 for all of these). In many respects their responses to the survey questions reflected similar answers to the rest of the sample of 47 that completed Section B of the questionnaire.

When these students were questioned about what they were least looking forward to, there was no clear trend in their responses that related to health issues, although students did comment about mental and physical health, managing their workload, being nervous and suffering from anxiety. In fact, 14 out of 19 cited anxiety as an issue. 12 out of 19 said they had an identified condition, but only 7 confirmed they had a TAS. 11 out of 19 responded to the question about disclosure, but there were no clear trends to students' responses; only three commented that discussing disclosure with their placement was "not something that had thought about". Only one person indicated that they had "no intention of talking to their placement" about disclosure, while 5 students said they intended to talk to their placement about their condition. 10 out of the 19 stated they felt they needed additional help in *finding and securing* a placement. Only 10 of the 19 students commented upon how the University might help their *placement run smoothly*; six of them said that talking to the placement setting about additional needs would be helpful; five students added that additional support during their time on placement would also be helpful.

Fifteen of the 19 students also responded to the question about what assistance the *placement setting* could provide. No discernible pattern in the data appeared, but some pointed to providing structure to the placement through a timetable, a schedule or breakdown of tasks, further information and clarity.

Finally, we asked those students who proceeded to the second half of the questionnaire (n=47) to rate how they currently felt about placement, where 1 = "I feel completely comfortable" and 10 = "I feel very worried". The results revealed that the average score for all respondents (n=44/47) = 4.02. However, when we filtered those students out that cited specific health-related concerns we found that these respondents scored an average of 4.87, compared to an average of 3.44 scored by all those students that had issues other than disability or health-related. Further research would help, but these results suggest slightly higher levels of anxiety about placement for those who had expressed health-related concerns.

4.1.13 Discussion and conclusion from the pre-placement student survey

The questionnaire achieved its aim to provide an initial overview of students' feelings about their upcoming placement and present a wider context to the research. Deriving data from a diverse spectrum of students, irrespective of any or no barriers that they may be experiencing, helped provide a broader picture of the placement landscape on these courses and this is discussed further in this report. However, the data also suggests that issues such possible increased levels of anxiety and the need for additional support (including for disclosure) are emerging themes that require further consideration. A narrower focus for data collection of a qualitative nature was realised by the individual interviews conducted with students known to have additional needs.

4.2   Student individual interviews

A total of 125 students undertook the module in 2017-18, of which 11 (9%) had a TAS. All 11 students were contacted to see if they would like to take part in the research following their placement and were offered the choice of individual or group interviews, conducted face to face or by phone/skype or to provide written responses. Seven students agreed, one of whom opted to provide a written response. The other six either undertook a telephone interview or a face-to-face interview on campus. The interviews were digitally recorded, with the agreement of each participant, and then transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and "topic centred", based on the following "starting points for discussion":

- Finding a placement

- Support within the placement process
- Disclosure
- A student's experience whilst on placement
- Reflections on having completed the placement

However, flexibility was built in to allow "unexpected themes" (Mason 2002, p.62) to develop; students were encouraged to elaborate and consider their own thoughts in more detail. The transcriptions were then analysed and coded.

4.2.1. Disclosure

There was clear evidence to suggest that the management of disclosure of a disability to a placement setting represents a significant issue that students and their educational institutions need to carefully consider. Even when a student has formally disclosed to their educational institution, that institution is required to keep that information confidential, leaving the student to decide what to share with a placement setting. Individuals also need to consider the timing of disclosure: whether to share information in advance of the placement or once it is underway.

Disclosure may be complex and not always follow a linear path. For example, one student chose to disclose a specific condition involving pain and stiffness, but chose not to disclose her depression, perceiving that mental health conditions are more stigmatising than physical ones. Having previously had a bad experience in employment, she felt uncomfortable releasing certain information. Students talked about how disclosure was managed and spoke of it as important but also a moral dilemma. One student (with dyslexia) disclosed immediately and found the placement provider to be very understanding and supportive. Whilst being apprehensive, she felt there were benefits to disclosing. However, in other contexts, such as applying for a job, she would "not tick the box". This type of selective and strategic disclosure was part of the complex management of the process; one student viewed the process as providing a "spin" to "dress it up". For some students, early disclosure helped reduce anxiety levels and avoid any embarrassment, because the placement setting was sympathetic. The initial contact with the placement provider was critical, understandably; it seemed that if the student felt that the venue would be sympathetic, then early disclosure reaped benefits in terms of increased confidence, reduced anxiety and greater self- sufficiency. Another student (with

anxiety) found the process problematic: she did eventually disclose, but found the process difficult and awkward, and struggled to find the right time to discuss it. This student felt in hindsight that it might have been a good idea to disclose at the beginning, as this could have prevented later complications. For some students with certain types of impairment (such as severe sensory impairment), disclosure was not optional, although they still needed to decide if it had to be discussed prior to arrival at a placement setting.

4.2.2 Health, wellbeing and special needs

Several students discussed issues around anxiety and depression, sometimes as a primary concern, but also as a secondary condition that was clearly still very important. Students discussed the sometimes stressful nature of finding and engaging in a placement, whilst also discussing confidence levels. Anxiety could begin at an early stage, for example not being sure about what the University wanted from placement. In acute situations anxiety, stress and/or depression can lead to an inability to attend placement (that adds to feelings of pressure, because of the course requirement for attendance for a minimum number of hours), and so addressing these situations at an early stage is critical in breaking a cycle. For one student, such was the intensity of this condition and its possible stigma, disclosure was highly problematic, resulting in feelings of guilt about letting others down. However, for another student with dyslexia and working in a school, the opposite occurred; she felt the need to disclose immediately to the placement provider, thereby reducing her anxiety levels. For one student, building confidence was key to managing anxiety. Something that added to the anxiety was securing a placement, by for example "phoning around". A lack of confidence and heightened anxiety levels also complicated the disclosure process, wondering when to disclose and finding the whole process problematic. For this student, greater communication between the University and the placement provider might help alleviate stress.

Feelings of anxiety can vary across the life cycle of the placement. For example, one student described high levels of anxiety in the early stages of placement whilst on a steep learning curve, gradually reducing as she settled into a routine. This student seemed pleased at having stuck with her placement, as it eventually led to significant learning gains and helped clarify her career aspirations. One student, who is blind,

expressed her initial anxiety regarding support and mobility in terms of getting to and around the placement venue. For this student regular communication with the University was important, as was preparation time and overcoming "red tape".

4.2.3 Managing the placement process

For all students, information about the requirements of both the placement module, and of the specific setting they are entering is crucial; and having this information at an early stage in order to minimise any struggle to get started, appeared to be significant for several students. Also, managing demands that may be competing with their placement was challenging for many.

However, for students with specific impairments or conditions, there is an added set of demands, requiring coping and management strategies, with different approaches being suggested. For some this started with taking ownership of the process of disclosure. Overall a life/work balance was considered important, with one student mentioning distraction techniques, self-awareness and deep-breathing techniques to manage stress. All students have to manage their academic assignments and placement demands, but in addition to this, some have to manage their health issues on top. For one mature student, the benefits of additional life experience, including parenthood, brought confidence and an ability to cope with the unexpected. Developing a routine also helped overcome anxiety; this provides stability and aids confidence. Knowing there was someone to speak to (at the University) and keeping communication lines open also helped for some students. A by-product of effective coping and managing strategies was increased confidence; confidence was raised for several students and a discussion of this is presented in 4.2.5 "Benefits".

4.2.4 University and Placement Support

Students discussed different aspects of support provided by both the University and the placement provider, with most of the discussion being about support for their study. Students spoke of both the positives of the support offered and what areas could be improved.

Anything to aid better preparation for placement was welcomed; any opportunity to do this in advance would be helpful in reducing anxiety. This could be in the form of guidance just before the module begins or in the preceding year, additional lectures, reminders and support form tutors and mentors. More advice on how to gain a placement was welcomed, especially for one student who did not have a social network of University friends. Structure and clarity, including regular contact with module tutors, was important for this student. Similarly, another student commented that improving lines of communication between the student and the university was important; this needed to consist of not just advice on lectures and assignments, but also on what to expect and experience during the placement process.

Paradoxically, other students felt that lines of communication and support were very open. For example, one student expressed positive feelings about the information, advice and guidance provided by the module. A mentor also helped support the process of contacting placement providers. A distinction was made by one student: on one hand she considered module support helpful, but on the other, wanted more help with the placement itself, to reduce the high levels of anxiety she experienced, especially in the early stages. That said, one student suggested that University support was good, including additional work provided by tutors, the volunteer unit, providing extensions on coursework deadlines and lecture content. As with others, this student emphasised the importance of taking the initiative to communicate with the University when help was needed. This student knew where to go if she needed advice and support and acknowledged the responsibility of the student to make the placement successful.

Student feedback on support provided by the placement provider was less clear. Much of the discussion about the placement venue related to comments about disclosure. It certainly helped if the placement venue was regarded as supportive: this aided openness and early disclosure, leading to reduced anxiety. Another student suggested better communication between the University and the placement provider might help overcome any struggles the student had. One student discussed the need for stability within the placement, since sudden changes tended to induce anxiety. This student also felt it was the placement provider's responsibility to create an inclusive placement experience but admitted this was helped by disclosure. Another student felt that venues needed to "put in the extra effort" but was concerned about venues trying to support students without funding.

4.2.5 Benefits

Students also spoke of the benefits that undertaking a placement conferred; chiefly, this related to an increase in confidence. Whilst one student spoke of significant anxiety entailed by the placement, she also acknowledged that the placement experience had increased confidence. Another student drew attention to how their placement prompted them to develop coping strategies. A mature student observed that additional life experience (including parenthood) provides confidence and the ability to cope with the unexpected. "It's all about confidence" commented one student; talking to people, confidence in "speech" and challenging oneself was seen as important. One student gained confidence and affirmation through experience; greater self-knowledge and confidence in abilities helped balance demands.

Students pointed to the gradual accumulation of benefits over time, as they reflected on their experiences. Several students valued the placement in clarifying their career aspirations, or refining their choices. The placement also helped students connect their academic course to a real-world setting.

4.3 Staff Interviews and Focus groups

The research also investigated the experiences of colleagues who play a role in supporting students and delivering the University's employability strategies, thereby comparing and contrasting the opinions of staff with the student voice. This was a purposeful sample of colleagues involved in teaching students on placement, delivering the University's employability strategy, supporting students in volunteering and finding placements, or with responsibilities for student well-being and disability support. Data was collected through a combination of four individual face-to-face interviews and two focus groups. Coding of data yielded a number of recurring themes:

1: quantity and quality of support, responsibilities and processes

2: communication, collaboration, relationships

3: purpose, role and value of placements

These sub-themes fell within the overarching theme of student diversity, disability and its disclosure.

4.3.1 Overarching theme: student diversity, disability and its disclosure

A prominent issue arising from the data was to do with additional support disabled students might need, in securing a placement, and ongoing support while on placement. Some participants commented on the lack of clear (central) institutional support in terms of administrative and specialist support for disabled students in finding placements. But others felt that the University recognised the need to provide extra support to help disabled students develop their employability. It was also felt that there may be inadequate support from placement providers for students with additional needs.

It was felt that some course areas have a less clearly defined process and support system in place for students with additional needs and that there was inconsistent staff awareness of how to support them whilst on placement. It was felt that this might directly disadvantage some students who may already be at a disadvantage because of their impairment.

Staff held varied views of placement providers. Some commented that certain placement providers are very good at making adjustments for students with additional needs. Indeed, a positive orientation to disability held by staff was thought to be shared by some voluntary sector organisations: disability was not seen as a barrier to placement. Generally, they felt that the University viewed disability and inclusion positively. Some staff commented on the benefit of the University having good relationships/partnerships with many voluntary organisations. Furthermore, academic tutors noted that placement providers can also learn how to accommodate disability through the experience of having disabled students. Also, one person noted "if they are able to make that adjustment, then other organisations could potentially follow suit and that increases accessibility for those who are not typically accessing certain placements". However, there was a concern or perception that some placement providers may have negative views of disabled students, and that they need to have clear guidance about expectations of support for students with additional needs. Indeed, good relationships between the University and the workplace can challenge negative views of disability.

While attitudes undoubtedly play a huge role in students' placement experiences, impairments can also give rise to practical issues. There was a discussion around health and safety and whether the limitations for those with impairments cause genuine barriers or are just perceived as doing so. Placements may help identify barriers although not

necessarily resolve them. It was suggested that the absence of PSRB (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies) standards on certain courses can make it hard to have honest discussions about students' suitability for certain professions. In some circumstances "reasonable adjustments" were not always enough to enable the student to succeed. This raised legal and ethical considerations.

Contrary to the above it was also felt that some disabled students have a unique advantage in terms of their life experience and capacity for empathy; for example one participant cited a student with autism: "she is now working with children with autism because she has a unique understanding of what that child's needs are". As one participant stated, "we don't ever see the disability as an issue or a barrier". "The students with disabilities… I think it gives them a unique opportunity to show what they can do rather than being written off before they even begin. I think it shows whether it is the job for them, whether it's something they can do, and they get an opportunity to use their unique skills and their understanding."

PSRB requirements were not relevant to the research population of student participants; however, they were clearly a consideration for some staff, such as those involved with health professions training. It was recognised there is a tension between professional standards and the flexible approach needed to support students with additional needs. For example, professional expectations regarding attendance have implications for some students with additional needs and challenges. Indeed, these standards must be met, regardless of any additional needs. "Sometimes you do have to have that very difficult conversation that certain career paths… are just not available … I think it is a difficult message and a difficult conversation you have to have sometimes". There was a discussion about the need for realism when counselling students about course and career choice and at what point this should happen. It is possible that such limitations may only come to light through going on placement and that the placement helps establish suitability for future careers. However, one participant noted that while experienced practitioners may continue with their job despite subsequently acquiring disabling conditions, a student with the same limitations may be barred from entry to the profession.

Disclosure of disability was discussed in a nuanced way, recognising both the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure. There was an understanding that for some students it might be beneficial not to disclose, especially where students feel they may

be treated less favourably as a result of disclosure. However, it was generally felt to be beneficial to disclose, so that reasonable adjustments could be made. The legal requirement to do this only applies to 'diagnosed' conditions. However, there is no obligation for (non-disability-related) challenges such as family commitments or travel arrangements to be treated sympathetically.

Staff saw the student as central: they need to take responsibility (with support from the University) to anticipate what the employer needs to know to support them. Nevertheless, disclosing disability could be "tricky", especially for those with mental health conditions. A discussion about disclosure might take place if staff members felt it was a potential problem or there were health and safety repercussions, but felt that the institution's perspective needs clarifying.

Mental health and well-being, whether it is part of a 'diagnosed' condition or not, was a recurring theme. Placements were viewed as challenging for students with anxiety but if they reduce the level of challenge that placement provides, they are also reducing their potential for learning. Furthermore, placement should be seen as "a safe place to fail" and that learning opportunities are not always taken full advantage of. This anxiety may be magnified by some students having to find their own placements (those on non-PSRB courses). It was argued that widening participation students are more likely to have additional difficulties in finding placements and that it is possible that placements "privilege those with privilege".

Another aspect of diversity that arose was in relation to students with English as an additional language or other language issues. It was felt there was a lack of staff awareness of support available to students with EAL. The University tends to treat such students as presenting challenges to academic writing; however, there may also be an impact on success in placement where this involves interacting with service users. There was a discussion around the need to be aware of students' language needs before they start the course. This example demonstrates recognition of the diversity of the student population and the range of differing needs that includes disability, social/emotional support, and academic support. "One size doesn't fit all. Students who have the same issues or difficulties or disabilities, they all come with their own particular needs".

4.3.2 Subtheme 1 - Quantity and quality of support, responsibilities and processes

Participants spent a significant amount of time discussing resources and institutional support systems/structures for students on placement. Support needs to be underpinned with good processes and monitoring, especially where there might be a need for additional input due to disability. Several key distinctions were evident in staff views.

Firstly, it was noted that whilst support is available at the University, both in general and for placements, once a student is off-campus then the University no longer has the same support responsibilities. It was suggested there needs to be more joined-up services between the institution and the placement provider, but that there is some confusion as to where responsibilities lie. It was felt that the University recognised the need to provide extra support to help disabled students develop their employability (although this was inconsistent), and placement providers did not always offer appropriate support; many placement providers needed to have clear guidance about what was expected of them. Clarification of responsibilities and communication between the student, the University and placement provider are essential, but data revealed a level of uncertainty and confusion around the processes in place for this. It was recognised that the level of monitoring and involvement should be proportional, given the nature of the course and purpose of the placement; consequently, support for students is often through email and visits on demand, rather than routinely provided. It was noted, however, that that there are significant resource implications to many of these issues.

Secondly a distinction was made between PSRB courses and others. The formal university procedures (e.g. fitness to practice, occupational health, suitability panel) applied to PSRB courses, are not always warranted for non-PSRB courses, where informal processes e.g. debriefing, counselling may be all that is implemented. Common to all courses, a balance of responsibilities was regarded as important. Students may require extra skills and resilience when going on placement but also need to take responsibility for accessing the support that is available.

The third distinction that was evident was between disability-related challenges that students might face, and other kinds of challenges. Only limited support is available for students with complex issues that are not disability-related: there appears to be less scope when responding to the widening participation agenda, but as one participant noted "if it is that they have come on to the course, they are a single parent, they have 3 kids, they've got no transport, then they have signed up for the course, so I'm afraid that's what you have got to accept". Students are made aware of the demands of the course before

they apply and are expected to take responsibility for their other commitments. If students cannot take the additional responsibilities, then it was felt they should reconsider their career choice.

For all students and all courses, the timing of information is important and needs to be ongoing or staggered to avoid overload. Certain needs may arise throughout the student journey that do not always exist at the beginning, when most information is usually given to them. The need for greater clarity and formality of both systems/processes and of the moral and legal obligations and responsibilities was endorsed by many participants, particularly regarding the relationship between academic departments and the volunteering department, to avoid confusion about who is responsible for providing what type of support. Mechanisms such as individual plans for placement were suggested to help pre-empt problems. Appropriate levels of external funding are important for some students but not always adequate, for example, for interpreters to accompany Deaf students on placement.

4.3.3 Sub-theme 2 - Communication, collaboration, relationships

This theme relates to how students, university and placement providers work together. For some staff, building and sustaining links between the university and placement organisations and nurturing those contacts is a priority, starting long before a student arrives in a workplace setting; this requires "upfront investment". Despite the importance of good working relationships and collaboration between tutors and placement providers, some academic colleagues felt this was not happening consistently. Such networks might be regarded as relatively formal partnership arrangements, assisted by clear structures, legal arrangements and responsibilities, or as simply strong communication links as part of supportive collaborative relationships between parties.

Communication between university and student was also emphasised; this should be based on building trusting relationships with empathetic and sensitive staff through regular contact and dialogue. It was acknowledged that this had resource and compliance implications. Getting to know and communicating with students to discuss their specific needs takes time; however, "the more staff can speak to students" the better. This is salient where the learning is happening outside the classroom in a work setting, where low confidence and low self-esteem (echoed in students' responses) is common. One

participant felt this needs "the right kind of person" with the qualities to support students who are sometimes distressed, or who are dealing with sensitive issues such as disclosure of disability to a placement provider. Interestingly, such supportive relationships were regarded by one participant as equally essential for students who are professionals undergoing CPD courses, because they can be reluctant to seek help. That students should share responsibility for communicating is key to successful placement experience, particularly if difficulties arise; "if we don't know, we can't address it".

Participants also drew attention to the relationship between the student and placement provider, and the role the university might have in supporting its development, through the provision of training and documentation for workplace mentors. Written and face to face interaction is mostly used at the moment, but one participant made interesting suggestions such as the use of "social media type things …you can have a twitter chat, set up these WhatsApp groups" as alternative ways of engaging with placement providers.

4.3.4 Sub-theme 3 - Purpose, role and value of placements

The University's commitment to supporting the development of employability is demonstrated through the role of 'employability champion' and other services such as careers advice, employability awards and volunteering support; these perspectives were well represented in the research. Staff also acknowledged the need for students to use placement experience to give their CV a competitive edge.

Participants generally regarded placements as an important component of university courses because of how they prepare all students for employment. Regarding disabled students, there was a mixture of perspectives although generally there was positive encouragement for disabled students to undertake placements and gain experience - with the caveat of the implications for resourcing that were regularly raised. Beyond the argument that disabled students should receive the same benefits from placements that their peers do, it was suggested that placements can be an opportunity to challenge widely held negative stereotypes about disabled students: one participant observed that society needs to be more inclusive in general, but currently there is a deficit perspective.

Anecdotally, it was felt there were some real success stories, although on programmes where students are not visited in placement, tutors may have limited knowledge of such positive experiences, and few ways to monitor and evidence the impact of placement experience. For example, "there are several students who have complex issues and still managed to do their placement and still come back with good experiences… It shows a lot of strength from students. I'm sure they've taken a lot from it, but I'm not sure we've told them how proud we are of what they've achieved". It was felt that more could be done to showcase students that overcome barriers and personal situations: they "have got enough baggage to fill a 747 and they just get on with it".

The role of placements as a testing ground for "real-world" problems that individuals might experience has already been discussed; one colleague also referred to a widespread move towards professionalization and accreditation, further increasing the importance of placement learning. One participant commented on the value of voluntary work generally for students new to the area: "then they're going to feel included. They're not going to feel isolated, alienated."

Added to the complexity of support, was a discussion about student anxiety beyond that which is short-lived, and the need to recognise ongoing mental health. One participant added "our students have the freedom to choose their placement… so students with additional needs will choose somewhere they are comfortable". However, it was felt that this can undermine the point of placement which is to challenge and stretch oneself. In other words, there is a tension between the challenge of the unfamiliar to promote and sustain learning and yet keeping those challenges to a manageable level. Reaching a balance between comfort and challenge to maximise learning (allowing students the space to fail or make mistakes) could be achieved through the supportive three-way relationships discussed above.

5.0   Discussion and conclusions

The principles of inclusive practice involve anticipating the needs of a diverse student population, such that a more level playing field regarding opportunity for success is created. This was the starting point for this research, which has explored issues relating to inclusive placement learning. Several themes emerged from both students undertaking a placement and a range of support and academic staff. This has provided a clearer picture of what needs to be considered when supporting students who have additional needs or face additional challenges when engaging with work-based learning and placement modules. The data has been derived from one specific course area in one faculty but many of the issues raised are applicable across the University and indeed to the higher education sector more generally.

In this research the nature of the placement organisations tends to be education-related; for example schools, early years centres and so on. Generally, it was felt that such organisations were well-placed to provide additional flexibility and a positive approach to diversity, being approachable and sympathetic to placement students in all their diversity, and facilitating the process of disclosure of disability.

Many students were looking forward to gaining new experiences, developing knowledge and new skills, as well as developing their confidence and considering their future career moves. However, students had reservations often of a pragmatic nature, such as time and travel constraints. A relatively small number of students reported disability or health circumstances that might impact on their placement. Nevertheless, this is indicative of the wide range of challenges that students face if they are to engage in a meaningful and successful placement that maximises their work-based learning and career development.

Many students revealed their desire for more support, guidance or information from tutors. Paradoxically, much of what they requested is already provided. Therefore, there is an important sense in which students' perceptions of the need for more support should lead us to question whether it is currently being provided in an optimal way or at an optimal time. Furthermore, managing student expectations regarding the support they will receive warrants careful consideration. Student numbers and staff capacity limit the scope for entirely individualised support; but even if this were possible or appropriate, it might not assuage the perception of students feeling out of their depth. The placement

module differs inherently from typical, classroom/campus-based modules, in which almost all parameters of the physical and social learning environment are carefully controlled by tutors to maximise student learning; the core element of work-based learning is inevitably out of the control of the module tutors. Therefore, there is a limit to the amount of information and preparation tutors can provide which will mitigate students' fear of the unknown. Engaging in new and challenging experiences is part of the essence of placement learning, and why it is such a valuable part of an academic course of study.

Some general concerns about placement are clearly common to many students, irrespective of any condition or impairment. Nevertheless, analysis of those students who revealed disability or health-related issues seem to show they were more worried about their placement situation than those who had no such issues. It may be that such a response arises from a complex range of needs that intersect with each other and require a range of solutions, including advice and support on disclosure, helping manage anxiety, additional help in securing a placement, and clarity, structure and information about module requirements.

It is natural that many of the emerging themes from the different staff datasets reflect the varied experiences and responsibilities of a range of colleagues and communities of practice in academic, administrative and support roles. Nevertheless, there are common themes that emerge.

The way support is provided requires further consideration. Generally, it was felt that there was a need for greater institutional support for both staff and students. Staff drew attention to the need for clarity of systems, processes, and lines of responsibility between the University and the placement provider; better communication between the students and the University and with placement providers form part of this. The quality of relationships and the need for trusting, empathetic and sensitive staff when it comes to students' concerns were raised. Furthermore, it was felt that more could be done to nurture partnership arrangements with placement providers, and that this would enhance the student experience. Greater communication would enhance support and accessibility to support networks. Support should be anticipatory rather than reactive and the processes are important in this approach. However, resourcing such approaches were regarded as problematic.

There were several themes from staff data that concurred with the student experience, for example, support for students through regular contact and dialogue. To what extent tutors can or should be proactive in finding and supporting placements for students was debated. Whilst the University has a responsibility to support students it was also felt that the students had a responsibility to carefully consider their placement options in light of advice and guidance. There should also be recognition of the diversity of the student population and the wide range of needs. There is a balance to be struck between robust academic principles that encourage students to take on placements that are challenging and maximise their learning experience, while ensuring the level of challenge is manageable. It was argued that placements were important and that disability can be both an advantage and disadvantage to the student and the placement provider.

The theme of disclosure was frequently raised by both staff and students; despite the advantages to the student in disclosing their disability, there are also challenges to be acknowledged. The additional burdens disabled students might experience associated with managing their condition and their disclosure of it, would suggest that additional support is warranted for those individuals. Support for students to make an informed decision about how, when and what they disclose to their placement provider would be helpful. This may be complex, for example where health and safety of the student or of others may be affected by students' functional limitations associated with their condition. In some cases, the suitability and accessibility of a setting for a student with, for example mobility or sensory impairments, will need to be considered at an extremely early stage.

Our findings endorse those of Cunnah (2015) regarding the salience for students in terms of disclosure of disability in a placement context; disabled students can choose not to disclose a condition prior to placement, and those with 'hidden' conditions have the option to continue to withhold this information. The research did not specifically seek data on disclosure of other personal or circumstantial details, such as a student's caring responsibilities, but given the extent and variety of challenges faced by students evident in our data, it is likely that many will have considered sharing this information with placement providers and may face similar dilemmas regarding this.

Disclosure of disability was generally viewed by all parties as positive; for students it is a helpful way for them to reduce anxiety and establish that they will receive appropriate support and adjustments, and for the placement providers it enables them to

prepare for and make such adjustments. However, this relies on the student having an insight into both their own strengths and limitations and into the requirements of the placement environment (Botham and Nicholson 2014). Pre-placement discussions are likely to benefit some students in this regard. It is interesting to note the distinction that one of our student respondents made between a voluntary placement position and a paid job, in terms of their decision whether to disclose. Like Cunnah's research participants (2015), some students in our research reported only disclosing those medical conditions they deemed less stigmatising i.e. not mental health or behaviour-related impairments.

A prominent theme was confidence. A willingness to tackle the unfamiliar, and to accept feelings of anxiety in the process, is a key way to develop confidence and learn strategies for managing fears and stress. Removal of all uncertainties is not only impossible but also undesirable in that normative stress levels and coping mechanisms to deal with them could be regarded as part of a students' personal development that leads to increased confidence and skill levels. However, there is a balance to be struck in giving students the space to take responsibility for their own learning and development, with an appropriate level of support and intervention that does not inadvertently disempower the student. Many students would feel much happier if someone else arranged their placement for them, but part of what they are learning is how to find, select and approach organisations in a professional manner. An expectation or desire for all uncertainties to be removed is not realistic.

Further research

Resource limitations currently mean that data has not yet been gathered from the third (but arguably most important) stakeholder group after students and university staff: the employers who provide students with placement experience. Not only students but also the employers themselves stand to gain from successful placement provision: employers can develop their practice in supporting the employment of diverse individuals and develop the inclusivity of their own organisational culture. We currently lack detailed insight into the perceptions of employers regarding disabled students on placement, although employability support organisations already exist; for example, Remploy and EmployAbility who work "with disabled university students and graduates to ease the transition from education into employment".

Further work is also needed for developing resources to support placement; this could be in collaboration with other institutions or other course areas.

6.0   Recommendations

- The way information, advice and guidance on placement is provided to students - in terms of format, timing, content etc.- need to be carefully considered to maximise its effectiveness.

- Engagement with students regarding disclosure of disability/health conditions should be targeted, supportive and sensitive, and aim to increase students' willingness to disclose to their placement provider.

- Students should be made fully aware of what they are expected to take responsibility for regarding their placement– and why.

- Staff in various roles related to placement learning should be made fully aware of relevant lines of communication, responsibilities and support structures.

- Universities should recognise the potentially greater benefits of placement learning accrued by students at risk of underachievement, and provide appropriate resourcing to support this.

- Universities should support employers to develop positive and inclusive attitudes and environments regarding the employability of disabled people, and celebrate the unique contributions disabled students can make to a setting.

- Further research is needed to explore the perspectives of placement providers.

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