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Inclusive Placement Learning for Diverse Higher Education Students: Anxiety, Uncertainty and Opportunity.

Abstract

There is an increasing policy emphasis on supporting diversity and inclusive practice, as well as graduate employability for higher education students. Work-based learning (WBL), placement learning, or work integrated learning (WIL) is a key component of many undergraduate degree programmes. However, for many students, factors such as disability, ill-health, caring or work responsibilities can impact on their placement experience. This paper presents research based upon students' experiences and staff members' views of placement learning. It offers a wider discussion of inclusion and inclusive practice that goes beyond a single focus on disability. Firstly, the paper addresses the challenges that a diverse range of students face when considering placement and then discusses the experiences of staff in support of this activity. These are conceptualised within the three themes of anxiety, uncertainty, but also opportunity. As researchers and reflective practitioners, the authors present discussion that aims to develop our understanding of inclusive practice, inclusive placement learning, and meeting the needs of diverse groups of students. These are universal requirements, relating to themes of social justice, reaching across different institutions, subject disciplines, and international boundaries.

Keywords

Diversity, inclusion, disability, higher education, placement, work-based learning.

Introduction

Employability plays a significant role in most modern UK universities' policies and practices, with placements and work-based learning (WBL) now forming a core part of the course menu in many disciplines. 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', and facilitating their transition into the workforce. Work based learning is a key vehicle for enhancing the employability of graduates (Blackwell et al. 2001) and is arguably even more important for those at risk of disadvantage within the labour market. Employability is a focus for higher education institutions (HEI) in many advanced western economies (Smith et al 2018).

Equality, diversity, and inclusion are similarly prominent strategic priorities in the higher education (HE) sector. There is a widespread HE policy backdrop of increasing student diversity and the need to demonstrate inclusive practice across all provision. Hockings (2010 p1) defines inclusive learning and teaching in HE as "the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others." The diversity of the student population is particularly notable regarding disability: between 2014/15 and 2018/19 there was an increase of 36% of students with a known disability, representing 16.2% of all UK home students (Hubble and Bolton 2019). Much of the increase is attributed to those reporting a mental health condition. The Institute for Public Policy Research analysis (Thorley 2017)

concluded that nearly five times as many students as 10 years previously disclosed a mental health condition to their university. Disability is just one aspect of increasing diversity of the student population and is not only relevant to the UK.

Student diversity and inclusion within HE is of international concern. Widening Participation (WP) has been “high on the policy agenda in Europe for nearly three decades” (Kottmann et al 2019, p.5). However, the European Commission (Kottmann et al 2019) has pointed out that concern for social inclusion should be paid not only to fair access to HE, but also to student retention, progression, completion, and employability. The relevance of diversity and employability to the international HE sector is clear: “Employability has been one of the main goals to be achieved with the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) from the very start” (EHEA, 2016) for the then 48 member countries which constituted the Bologna Process.

While employability and the debate that surrounds it often frames any discussion on placement, the primary focus of our research was inclusion. We were aware that placement learning presents additional challenges to some groups of students because of disability, caring responsibilities, work commitments, commuting and other factors, often in combination. Anecdotal evidence from students indicated that frequently information about these concerns was not fully shared with academic staff. We needed greater understanding of students’ experiences of undertaking a placement, and were aware that many within HE and indeed in other sectors, could benefit from this. This is particularly apposite, considering the wider employability challenges that certain groups face.

The aim of the research therefore was to address gaps in knowledge regarding placement learning for an increasingly diverse student population; and to better support disabled students, and others facing diverse challenges. The investigation involved students on a variety of undergraduate academic courses in Education Studies (not teacher

training). These students undertake a placement in their second year of study in settings such as schools, charity organisations, local government, and youth centres. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered from students before, during, and after their placement; focus groups and interviews were also conducted with university staff with various roles relating to student support, employability or placement. The outcomes of the research are transferable and are relevant across disciplines and institutions.

The article also offers the authors' critical reflections on the research from a HE practitioner perspective and draw conclusions that have relevance across the HE sector. A key aim is to inform understanding in a way that acknowledges wider perspectives on inclusion (beyond that of disability), that recognises student diversity, and therefore contributes to social justice in helping to support meaningful work-based learning opportunities for all.

Our research was based in an English post-1992 HE institution and aimed to address the following questions in relation to undergraduates undertaking Education-related degrees:

- I. What concerns and barriers are anticipated by a diverse student population when organising their placements?
- II. What are the learning experiences of diverse students while on placement?
- III. What information, advice and guidance do students, their placement providers and academic tutors need, to maximise the benefits of placement learning for all?

Literature review

Research into placements and work-based learning has been well-documented (e.g. Byrom and Aiken 2014; Lester & Costley 2010; Moreau & Leathwood 2007; Peach, 2015; Shaw 2012; Wilson 2009; Yorke 2010). A placement can be defined as “a planned period of work-based learning or experience, where the learning outcomes are part of a course or programme of

study” (DfES 2002, p.2). A belief widely held is that WBL confers a range of benefits; a review of the research literature concluded that “work experience is repeatedly related to higher graduate employment rates and possibly to higher subsequent incomes” (Blackwell et al 2001, p.284). However, it has been argued that barriers to participation in placement have not been explored fully and that systematic and informed approaches are needed to improve graduate outcomes for all students (Peach et al, 2015, p vii). Furthermore, if we are to take social inclusion seriously, the specific challenges of supporting disabled students to successfully undertake WBL need to be addressed (Leon, 2010). Students who are not successfully supported in a meaningful and productive work placement miss out on the personal, academic and employability benefits it can confer, leading to social and economic implications (Mackaway, 2016). Within the context of social justice, WBL should be made “as widely available as possible, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, social class or (dis)ability of the employee” so that citizens “are not stuck in low-level, semi-skilled occupations with minimal chance of progression (Basit et al 2015, p.1014)._

Students who are disabled clearly face employability challenges, but “little attention” (Leon, 2010, p.259) has been paid to addressing the implementation of WBL for them. Leon (2010) identified the key issues of support, accessibility, and disclosure of disability and suggested early interventions on a course to support students’ access to such opportunities. The United Kingdom’s Department for Education (2017) point out that employment outcomes for disabled graduates are worse than for non-disabled graduates: 87% of disabled graduates secure employment or further study within 6 months, compared with 91% for those with ‘no known disability’. It cannot be assumed that this discrepancy can be solely accounted for by the functional limitations of individuals with impairments; hence disability discrimination in the workplace is subject to a robust legal framework in the UK (Equality Act 2010). Nevertheless, according to Smith (2016), 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; and 53% of working-age adults with impairments experienced barriers to work compared with 30% of adults without impairments. Smith's findings support Cunnah's assertion that "Educational achievement that includes employability is crucial for disabled students entering the workplace" (Cunnah 2015, p.214).

Returning to diversity in its broader sense, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education makes explicit expectations of HE providers in the UK and encompasses WBL and placement opportunities in ways that respond to student diversity. This entails providing equality of opportunity for all students, in terms of accessibility of learning opportunities. "An inclusive environment anticipates the varied requirements of students, for example because of a declared disability, specific cultural background, mode of study or age. Where possible, equity of access is achieved through inclusive design but, in some circumstances, arrangements are made to enable access for individuals" (QAA 2018, p.10) such as disabled students (Department for Education 2017).

Research within a range of subject areas provide useful conclusions that can be applied across disciplines. For example, a study on a small sample of disabled students undertaking physiotherapy training (Botham and Nicholson, 2014) was able to identify issues of wider relevance. "Students identified that effective preplacement planning, supportive staff student relationships, the implementation of reasonable adjustments and ongoing monitoring were the key factors for a positive placement experience" (Botham and Nicholson 2014, p.462). A larger sample (173 disabled students based in a single UK HE institution) reported that 13% of their respondents cited barriers relating to their disability that impacted off-campus learning (Fuller et al 2004). One study found that students with mental health and behaviour challenges were at particular risk of exclusionary attitudes in work settings. This contrasted with the university

setting where such students felt “more liberated to affirm and celebrate their disabled identity in the ‘safe haven’ of university than in work settings where they are more ‘at risk’ of exclusion” (Cunnah 2015, p.214). Although many experiences faced by disabled students are shared by students generally (Georgiou et al 2012 concur), some challenges can be exacerbated for disabled students (e.g. using public transport) and may be “amplified in the placement context” (Hill and Roger 2016, p.1214).

While disability as one dimension of diversity has clearly received attention for several years, today’s student population encompasses many other dimensions of diversity, which have recently gained greater recognition in the literature. However, these are not all “protected characteristics” covered by UK equality legislation. For example, caring responsibilities, financial hardship, and being a “commuter student” (Maguire and Morris 2018) can all have significant implications for students studying in HE, and particularly their participation in placement learning. By extension, such factors are also likely to affect an individual’s subsequent participation in employment after graduation.

Given the far-reaching implications for equality in subsequent degree attainment and employment, it is essential HE practice effectively supports and maximises the benefits of placement learning for students at risk of disadvantage in the long term. Osho acknowledges the wide variety of challenges non-traditional students face in HE and advocates a “strengths-based approach” to widening participation practice. “Encouraging the usefulness of students’ lived experience and highlighting their strengths, not [only] seeks to empower non-traditional university students, but also counters the deficit approach that is implicit within some widening participation debates” (Osho, n.d.). Peach et al (2015) propose a set of principles for inclusive work integrated learning, enabling all students to have access, valuing diversity, being practicable and sustainable for stakeholders, and taking a holistic view

of students' lives (Peach et al, 2015, p.96). The valuing of diversity must, under inclusive design, be reflected in policies, practices and delivery. The report "recognises and respects students' individuality, unique knowledge, experiences, capabilities and expectations" (p.96), thus enabling success and minimising barriers. Such an inclusive approach should ensure that activities are aligned to students' circumstances and needs. Furthermore Wall's "manifesto" (2017) for HE, skills and WBL considers disadvantaged groups and the need to "promote the development and adoption of deeply emancipatory approaches to reflection and WBL... Promote ways to further integrate notions of equality and diversity" in WBL, whilst applying sensitivity to "localised cultures and practices" (2017, p.311).

Method

A pragmatic mixed-methods approach was employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data, aiming to achieve both breadth and depth of data, since according to Cohen et al (2011, p24) "mixed methods approaches enable a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena to be obtained than single methods approaches". In this research, although a relatively small sample, numerical data are used to help to give indications of the prevalence of the issues and themes evident in and illustrated by the qualitative data. The priority given to the qualitative data is evident in the analysis below. Nevertheless, the mixed method approach enabled the triangulation of data to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research (Cohen et al, 2011). Further triangulation was achieved through the combination of methods (questionnaire, interview, focus group) and populations (students and staff).

Data Collection

Firstly, a brief preliminary survey of students was conducted prior to commencement of their placement; secondly, in-depth interviews were conducted with students after placement

completion; and finally, individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with higher education staff. These are explained in more detail below.

All students (in their second year of their undergraduate degree) about to undertake the placement module (n=148) were invited to complete a questionnaire; the aim was to identify students' perceptions about their forthcoming placement, especially factors that students felt might create a barrier to their participation in their placement. Participants could choose between online and hard copy formats. The questionnaire generated both quantitative and qualitative data; it incorporated multiple choice questions, Likert scale responses, and open-ended free-text responses. The resulting dataset both informed the second phase of data collection and gave indications of the prevalence of findings emerging from phase two.

In this second phase, individual interviews with students from a previous cohort were undertaken following completion of their placement. Invitations to participate in the research were sent to students through a variety of channels, with a particular focus on those who had formally disclosed a disability to the institution and were therefore entitled to reasonable adjustments in the provision of their education. These semi-structured interviews were informed by both the findings indicated by the survey, and relevant research literature. Questions focused on their feelings during the placement, the challenges they experienced, strategies they employed, their experience of support, and any other issues they wanted to discuss. Seven students volunteered to discuss their experiences, choosing from face to face, phone, video call or written options. The interviews were recorded, and transcribed.

Finally, the research also gathered staff members' views. Opportunistic sampling was employed to collect data from a range of staff employed by the University, including both academic and non-academic staff. The academic staff taught on placement-related modules and some were

“employability champions”. The non-academic staff had responsibilities to support students’ career development, encourage participation in volunteering, and support students’ health and well-being. Again, a semi-structured approach incorporated questions on themes such as opportunities and challenges presented by work placements, disclosure, support mechanisms, and student well-being. The two focus groups and four individual interviews were recorded and transcribed. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the participants and data collected across all three phases.

Full ethical approval was granted by the appropriate Ethics Committee of the university where the research was conducted; all relevant BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2018) guidelines were followed. In order to avoid a conflict of interests, data was collected by research assistants who were not involved in the teaching of the student participants.

Data analysis

For its flexibility as a research tool, a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was applied. Manual coding of the qualitative data was conducted by three researchers who looked independently at each transcription, to enhance validity; there was a high degree of concordance between analysts. Shuttling between data sets, groups of codes were combined and refined into themes that commonly arose in the data; an iterative process of checking between data and themes as they developed ensured that provisional themes worked with the coded data. Influenced by what was already understood about the topic, and by the aims of the research, a predominantly deductive or top-down approach was taken to the qualitative data analysis, while allowing for a certain amount of inductive analysis, in allowing unexpected themes to arise. What resulted from this is a ‘detailed and nuanced account’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p83) of a cluster of themes of salience to participants.

Findings

With a focus on the challenges faced by a diverse student population, both in anticipation of and experienced on placement, the data also indicates some of the assets and strengths students bring to their placement learning. This section illustrates the richness of this data. The participation rate of students invited to do the questionnaire before embarking on their placement was relatively high (66% out of a population of 148). Although this small sample size (n=98) was not intended to generate detailed findings in themselves, the questionnaire data nevertheless provides important indications of students' anticipated areas of concern, thereby responding to Research Question 1; these were used to inform the semi-structured interviews (Research Questions 2 and 3). Free text responses and quotes from the interviews are included below, where these are deemed to reflect a widespread point. The combined findings from students are outlined below in response to the three research questions; these are followed by a discussion of key themes arising from the interviews and focus groups conducted with higher education staff.

Students' anticipated areas of concern

Only a small majority (53%) of students who participated in the survey anticipated no areas of concern. Others identified competing responsibilities, such as caring for children or relatives. Practical issues such as travel, time management and the need to balance other commitments such as paid work with their placement were widespread concerns.

Students were asked what additional help the HE institution could supply ahead of their placement. The most popular reply was a request for additional help in finding and securing a placement (43%). Thirty-six percent of students indicated that it would help if the HEI spoke

directly to the placement regarding any further support that the student required. In terms of what the placement settings could provide, some responses related to flexibility such as giving students additional time to complete the placement. The provision of information about the setting or a timetable was also deemed helpful, as well as further support and reassurance in terms of what work was required. Some students wanted to feel that they would be treated equally as part of the workforce, treated with respect and welcomed fully.

Ten percent of responses specifically related to health, wellbeing and disability issues; many were feeling nervous and worried about settling into placement. Some students suggested specific things that might help them: for example

“having regular breaks just to compose myself if things are feeling overwhelming”

[breaks] “to allow me to go to the toilet as I need to go due to my IBS”.

“a place where I can go if I feel overwhelmed or anxious”.

Students who cited specific health concerns were generally more worried about their placement than those students who had general concerns but no specific condition or impairment. The results suggest slightly higher levels of apprehension about placement for those who expressed health-related issues; however, further research would help substantiate this initial finding. Concerns about mental health or emotional wellbeing were significant for some individuals:

“being nervous and having bipolar and not being understood by people who don’t know me”

“mental/physical health getting in the way and feeling like I can’t cope”.

Feeling out of place or alone and worried, or not fitting in, were also highlighted. Some students expressed concerns about developing professional relationships, not knowing anyone

or “not getting on with the manager”, getting used to new people and having to ask many questions.

This wide range of issues anticipated by students before starting their placement appeared to be fairly predictive of the actual experiences students went on to have – as reflected in the data arising from the interviews.

Students’ experiences on placement:

Students interviewed after their placement were selected for the likelihood of them having had specific additional challenges to face; in our sample, mental health and wellbeing, management of the placement process, and disclosure of disability were prominent, and these three themes largely mirror the concerns of students yet to start their placement. They also perceived considerable rewards, this is a fourth theme discussed below.

In terms of mental health and wellbeing, for some these were diagnosed mental health conditions, and for others they appeared to be secondary to other issues in their lives, although clearly important to them. The placement itself could also be a source of anxiety, with demands often being particularly acute prior to commencement or early in the life cycle of a placement; this is perhaps so for all students, but even more so for those with mental health concerns. For example:

“I suffer from mental health [sic]...I found it very very challenging...- I felt like I was thrown in the deep end. I suffer from anxiety as well. My first day there I was like - oh my gosh, what do I do? I felt so out of place.”

The following extended quote from one student encompasses points made by several other participants:

“I have depression and anxiety due to trauma in my past. So, I feel quite anxious in new situations and environments, so initially anxiety was quite bad and then sometimes I have some really rough days with my depression and I'm unable to do very much at all. So, there have been days where I've been unable to attend my placement and that causes anxiety then about the fact that I've not been and that I've missed a day and I feel like I've let them down.”

This student was not alone in recognising the greater level of responsibility entailed in attendance at placement compared to their classes on campus, and that failure to comply with attendance expectations can worsen anxieties.

Management of the placement process is critical for all students, and managing competing demands was challenging for many. For students with specific impairments or health conditions, these are additional to their academic, placement and personal responsibilities requiring coping and management strategies.

“there also needs to be like that work -life balance where I'm looking after my mental health and my physical health as a priority, rather than putting it on the back burner which I've definitely done in the past.”

“Also, with my physical health condition with fibromyalgia. Sometimes I'm in too much pain to do very much moving around and it can - being on my feet at school all day can impact my pain levels and then can cause me to have a couple of days where I'm uncomfortable and I can't really do very much moving around . Then I'm unable to attend lectures afterwards.”

For some, developing a routine helped overcome anxiety, provided stability and aided confidence. Knowing there was someone to speak to (at the HEI) and keeping communication

lines open also helped. A positive by-product of these coping strategies for several students was increased confidence.

Some students had insight into the placement provider's responsibility to create an inclusive environment and the challenge this might present to the setting:

“They'd never had a blind member of staff before [...]. I think given the circumstances they did what they could and they were very, very open to me. They tried to put me in the best place that would be suitable, [...] just in case, there were health and safety issues or whatever.”

Managing disclosure of a disability

Disclosure can be influenced by a range of complex factors and does not automatically follow a linear path or process. For example, disclosure to a placement provider (as distinct to the HE institution) represented a significant issue for some students. The following example illustrates one student's perception of mental health being more stigmatising than physical conditions, and how she handled this:

“I still haven't disclosed that I struggle with depression. But they are aware now that I struggle with fibromyalgia. [...] So, I chose at that point to disclose that information just to the head teacher and my placement lead just so that they were aware that I was having these difficulties and that's why I wasn't there, rather than it being that oh, she's not here again.”

Fears about disclosure were sometimes unfounded, for example:

“I explained that to them right in the very beginning. [...] I felt a bit uncomfortable about disclosing it but, to be fair, [but] she didn't even bat an eyelid. She was absolutely fine.”

However, recognising the difference between a placement and paid employment, one student stated when applying for jobs she would “not tick the box”; she likened the disclosure process to “spin”:

“I think I'd have to spin it and say, actually I could really empathise with these children that you're supporting because I know how they feel. Or, I might be able to act as some sort of encouragement to them to actually - even though I'm dyslexic, I'm still at university. I'm still doing really well.”

Choosing when to disclose a disability was often difficult. For some, early disclosure helped to increase confidence, reduce anxiety levels and avoid embarrassment, but this appeared to depend on their initial contact with the placement provider, their confidence, and their prediction of whether they would get a sympathetic response. For some students disclosure is not optional, and in such cases the importance of additional preparatory work is illustrated by this comment:

“I'd visited there a couple of times before starting; they kind of knew that I was blind and that I might need to be communicated slightly differently anyway.”

Students were often keen to reflect on how valuable their placement had been. This could be despite, but perhaps also because of the challenges presented by placements. Students' own words capture this most effectively:

“I definitely feel more confident.”

“It's given me an idea of what life would be like as a teacher and sort of cemented my idea of what I want to do going forward after I finish my degree.”

“I'm really glad I have done it, because it's given me an experience and it's opened my eyes. It's helped me.”

Students' support, information, advice and guidance needs

All concerned with placements see information and guidance about requirements of the module and the setting as very important. However, students' desire for information varied widely and unpredictably, as the following two individuals demonstrated:

“I appreciate that's because there's a whole array of placements in general. It's not just working in schools. But I definitely don't think that I've received the support that I need to benefit fully. [...] I do feel that there's not enough guidance there.”

“I can't really fault the advice of anything. I think the lectures before going on the placement is also useful so you can have an idea of what you're doing for your assignment and how it should all link together and what's expected on the placement and stuff like that, I think that is kind of - I think that was useful.”

Finding and making initial contact with a placement setting is another aspect experienced in extremely different ways; for example:

“I spent weeks looking online at - just googling how do I contact a placement. You know, what do I say in an email? Do I phone them? Do I email them? What do I put in that email?...”

“even looking for placements was quite a challenge for me . I was like, oh gosh, where do I begin?”

“I think for me it was absolutely fine . [...], that communication and making those sorts of contacts is something that doesn't faze me. So that wasn't a problem really.”

Securing a suitable placement can be additionally challenging for some, and the following illustrates the crucial role the university can play in supporting this:

“In the end I went through the university because I didn't want to cold call and get sort of get refused because of my disability, so I went through the university - because they have the contacts.”

Meeting these diverse needs for support and information is a theme also reflected on by staff, illustrated below.

Findings from Staff

Data from staff was collected through individual face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Several overarching themes emerged, the three most significant ones – student diversity, support and communication, and the value of placements - are discussed below. Although a range of aspects of diversity were covered, it is worth noting that participants focussed mostly on disability specifically.

Staff generally felt that diversity and disability were viewed positively by their HEI; some also commented on placement providers' journey towards greater inclusivity:

“if they are able to make that adjustment, then other organisations could potentially follow suit and that increases accessibility”.

Voluntary sector organisations were thought to often have a positive orientation to inclusion, but there was a concern that some settings may have negative views of disabled students and need clear guidance about expectations and support.

Practical issues were also discussed, for example health and safety and the functional limitations that might be associated with impairments. Staff felt a need for realism when counselling students about course and career choice, but sometimes found it hard to have “honest discussions about student suitability” for a professional career. In some circumstances “reasonable adjustments” were not always enough to enable the student to succeed and this raised legal and ethical considerations. Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements were a consideration for staff in some disciplines. They felt a tension between professional standards and the flexible approach needed to support students with additional needs.

“Sometimes you do have to have that very difficult conversation that certain career paths... Just not available... I think it is a difficult message and a difficult conversation you have sometimes”.

Discussions on disclosure acknowledged advantages and disadvantages. There was respect for the decision of some students not to disclose, especially where they felt they may be treated less favourably; this was discussed particularly in relation to mental health. However, similar to many student responses, it was generally felt beneficial to disclose so that reasonable adjustments could be made.

In terms of other aspects of diversity, one colleague observed that some “widening participation” groups of students might experience additional challenges; for example, finding placements is harder for those who lack valuable social networks. Extra support might also be needed in the form of emotional support, and academic support (e.g. for students with English as an Additional Language). There was a discussion about the wide range of differing needs: “one size doesn’t fit all.... they all come with their own particular needs” and also a concern that placements may inadvertently “privilege those with privilege”.

These needs require a range of support processes which can be considered at different levels: the HEI, the course or subject area and the individual student. Staff expressed the need for clear institutional support systems and structures; they observed the responsibilities the HEI has for students on campus do not necessarily extend to when students are in placement, resulting in confusion about where responsibilities, and moral and legal obligations lie. At the course level, support is underpinned by good monitoring processes; this entails good communication between the HEI and placement settings. Staff felt that monitoring and support should be proportional and appropriate to the nature and purpose of specific placement requirements in different courses and responsive to individual needs. Alongside academic departments, careers and volunteering and those who provide additional support services all have a role to play.

For some staff, building and sustaining links between the HEI and placement organisations and nurturing these contacts should be a priority, starting long before the student arrives in the workplace setting; this was thought to require “upfront investment” in resources. This relationship needs to be consistent, and assisted by clear structures, responsibilities and communication links. Communication between the HEI and the student was emphasised; a trusting and empathetic relationship with sensitive staff is achieved through regular dialogue. Supporting students with low self-esteem or confidence required “the right kind of person”, echoing some of the confidence issues raised by students. However, students should share responsibility for communication, this is key to a successful placement experience; one tutor noted: “if we don’t know, we can’t address it”.

Like students, staff regard placements as invaluable; they help prepare students for employment and give their CV a competitive edge. Staff felt more could be done to showcase students who overcome barriers and personal situations and “just get on with it”.

“Several students have complex issues and still managed to do their placement and come back with good experiences... It shows a lot of strength”.

Placements could be regarded as a learning opportunity regarding “real-world” problems that individuals might experience. However, staff recognised a tension between capitalising on the challenge of the unfamiliar to promote learning and yet keeping those challenges to a manageable level:

“our students have the freedom to choose where they're going on placement, so students with additional needs will choose somewhere where they're comfortable. Then that sometimes can contradict the whole idea of you going on placement to expand and to stretch yourself. So it's really trying to find the balance.”

This colleague felt the balance can be achieved through strong three-way relationships between institution, placement provider and student. This may also entail allowing students “a safe place to fail”.

Disabled students were recognised as potentially making unique contributions to their placement settings:

“If you've been through a journey and you've had a condition, or it can be a mental-health issue, or something, you're probably in a very good position then to help others, because you understand. So, again, the disability could be a plus rather than a negative.”

At a wider societal level, staff felt placements can challenge widely held negative stereotypes such as those relating to disability.

Discussion

As reflective practitioners and researchers, the findings of the research and the process of writing this paper has encouraged critical reflection on the student experience, on inclusion, and on the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. This paper also informs practice for other researchers, practitioners, employers that are supporting students. The findings have relevance for anyone who is involved with students engaging in placement and the promotion of inclusion; these are universal and core activities applicable to HE provision across international boundaries.

This article addresses inclusive practice in its broadest sense, by encompassing many aspects of diversity, in which disability is one dimension. This enables a more balanced consideration of both the challenges and the benefits that all life experiences can bring to students' placement learning.

Several themes emerge from both students and staff involved in either a support or academic role. The themes can be categorised broadly into "anxiety" (students), and "uncertainty" (staff). Recognising and addressing both will provide a foundation on which to improve support for students and encourage inclusive practice. A third theme, "opportunity", considers how to provide meaningful placement experiences for those students facing barriers to fully engaging in work-based learning.

Anxiety

We use the word flexibly, in its everyday sense, to refer to the worry and apprehension many students feel at the prospect of unfamiliar experiences. For a significant and increasing minority of students, diagnosed mental health conditions are also a complicating factor. The findings indicated that students saw information, advice and guidance as helping to reduce anxiety, especially if provided well in advance. Organisation and processes may have considerable

influence over students' subjective experience of anxiety. Correspondingly, good communication and relationships between student, university staff and placement provider could alleviate excess anxiety. Access to information (for students and staff) is also important (Fuller et al 2004). Students' identities are "profoundly influenced" by previous negative experiences (Cunnah 2015, p.223), and so advanced measures to mitigate anxiety is to be welcomed.

Some students use the term 'anxiety' as a proxy for other concerns which are unrelated to health, such as caring responsibilities, and other family and work commitments. These aggregate and leave the student feeling under additional pressure. Removing all discomfort would be neither desirable nor possible; supporting students to feel more comfortable with a degree of 'anxiety' such that they are in a position to learn from their placement experiences should be the aim.

Worries that many students expressed about placement were magnified for those with impairments or health issues. This was seen most vividly in the concerns students had around disclosure of their disability. Help in managing disclosure in the face of a range of complex factors will be useful for some students, leading to increased confidence and reduced anxiety. This could be through initial support processes that help students arrive at a decision, or through clarity of communication between all stakeholders. Students' highly strategic approach to disclosure shapes our understanding of the challenges they face and reflects findings in similar contexts (Macleod and Cebula 2009; Cunnah 2015; Jones and Hopkins 2003). The quality of staff-student-placement relationships is key to setting up "an atmosphere where it feels safe for students to disclose" (Matthews 2009, p.234). However, "The timing of a student's disclosure is the prerogative of the student. The responsibility of the university is to ensure that an opportunity is available for the students to disclose and that the student is made aware of the

potential implications of disclosing or not disclosing (DRC 2007)” (Botham and Nicholson 2014, p.471).

Uncertainty

Uncertainty characterised many responses from HE staff involved in supporting students on placement. Some expressed uncertainty about how to balance the element of challenge (necessary to maximise learning on placement) with the provision of support, without fostering a culture of dependency. Nevertheless, whilst adjustments could be made to support students, this should not be in a way that compromises academic standards or learning outcomes. A combination of a flexible approach to adjustments and support arrangements and regular monitoring is important (Department for Education and Skills 2002), as is flexibility in teaching and learning (Fuller et al 2004). However, some of these solutions have resource implications. To provide an inclusive education for all, universities need to take responsibility to provide routine support and ensure appropriate monitoring and quality of provision (Cunnah 2015, p.225). This may be a matter for senior management, who arguably are best positioned to prioritise support for disabled students (Botham and Nicholson 2014) and promote inclusive practice and institutional culture more generally. While robust systems for capturing student information about disability already exist in the HEI these are not replicated for all other aspects of diversity presented by the student population; this led to debates about what issues, such as child care responsibilities, constitute justifiable claims for adjustments, especially where these might impact on attendance at placement.

Uncertainty was also expressed specifically in relation to disability. Macleod and Cebula (2009) have argued that staff in HE settings are likely to be unaware of a significant number of disabled students who require additional support, partly because students choose not to disclose

to their university. Indeed, the fact that disclosure rates vary widely between countries of the UK (Advance HE 2018) suggests that disability is still somewhat under-reported. In terms of teaching approaches towards the “invisible” disabled students, others have alluded to the “anxieties frequently articulated by academic staff” and how to accommodate students with hidden impairments (Matthews 2009, p.229). Our findings also reflect those of Fuller et al: “The actions and attitudes of staff are manifestly important” but there is an “unevenness of understanding” (Fuller et al 2004, p.316). In a study of health disciplines, Botham and Nicholson (2014) argued for disability awareness training for stakeholders and this recommendation for staff development is likely to be appropriate for other disciplines as well. Clarity of processes was another area of uncertainty, echoed by other researchers, who identify a “need for clarity and coherence in the dissemination of information about services for disabled students” (Fuller et al 2004a, p.465). Furthermore, practitioners should be more cognizant of a range of demands placed on students throughout their studies, especially in our expectations of students engaging in a placement.

Opportunity

A final theme prominent in data from staff (and students) was that placement represents opportunity: for personal development, enhancement of employability, and clarification of career aspirations. These benefits may be greater for some students, such as those from widening participation backgrounds; in other words, effective placements may contribute to the narrowing of subsequent degree attainment and employability gaps.

Typically seen as challenges, many aspects of students’ complex lives can also be viewed as assets to be drawn upon during the placement journey - a perspective resonant with Osho’s (n.d.) ‘strength-based approach’ which recognises that throughout the diverse nature of

humanity all exhibit a profile of capabilities. In education this leads to a more fluid consideration of all students where life experiences are viewed as a resource rather than an individual characteristic, marking a shift away from a deficit model (Brewster and Thompson, 2020). Experience of managing competing responsibilities alongside studying, or coping with impairments or health concerns, act as a springboard for developing confidence when operating in a professional arena and provide a source of unique expertise that students can contribute to their placement setting. This can also be an opportunity for transformative effects on placement providers, who gain insight into what diverse students can offer.

Conclusion

This paper considers inclusive practice in supporting diverse groups of students engaging with learning on placement. Taking an inclusive approach means that we not only learn lessons about the challenges to meaningful placement experiences faced by many students but also recognise the wealth of life experience that many bring to their placement learning. Where previous research has often considered disability in isolation from other dimensions of diversity, the project reported here encompassed all aspects of diversity – including characteristics often associated with ‘widening participation’ which often receive less recognition. As Gordon et al (2010, p.965) point out; “Conceptions of student diversity in the context of learning and teaching are related and multidimensional”.

Our data revealed that HE staff and students experience varied anxieties and uncertainties, while also recognising the opportunity for placement learning to enhance employability. Students’ anticipated concerns prior to going on placement often mirrored the experiences of those who had completed it. These concerns reflected a diverse range of personal circumstances – such as managing competing domestic and work responsibilities – and characteristics – such

as health conditions or impairments - that could impact on their engagement with placement in complex ways. Managing mental health and wellbeing, and the process of disclosure of disability were relevant for many students and were additional to the demands faced by all students for managing the practicalities of placement. We found considerable variations in students' needs for support, information and guidance, and the extent to which it could alleviate students' anxieties. Staff demonstrated some insight into many of these challenges and experiences, and a commitment to inclusivity, which is somewhat contrary to Gordon et al's assertion that "some teachers are far less aware of the need for flexible arrangements for students" (Gordon et al 2010, p.962). However, many staff expressed uncertainty about various policy and procedural matters related to placements, while being well aware of the need to maintain academic standards.

The complexities of many students' lives are often viewed by both students and university staff as challenges to be overcome. However, we have argued that while we can acknowledge that these complexities can add to the demands of engaging with placement opportunities, they can also be regarded as personal assets or strengths. Indeed, provision that acknowledges diversity and "caters" for difference "can lead to an emancipatory approach to learning and learning outcomes" (Gordon et al, 2010, p.965).

We propose a number of tentative recommendations, with the aim of alleviating additional burdens experienced by some students that may be exacerbated by the unique requirements of learning in the workplace. Flexibility in the requirements stipulated by the academic programme or the placement setting can allow students to capitalise upon their strengths and derive maximum benefit from their experience. The development of strong, productive and supportive relationships between student, HE staff and placement providers, and ensuring early and ongoing communication can help allay students' anxiety and increase confidence. For the student this relationship can start from their first engagement with the course, and should

include an open and honest discussion about their career aspirations, especially where impairment might raise questions about disclosure of disability to a placement provider, and the adjustments they might therefore require. For employers, a mutually beneficial working relationship with the HE institution should be developed and sustained long term; workplaces can then be supported in developing a more inclusive culture and practice of their own. These recommendations have resource implications, especially in terms of time. Such a significant aspect of HE study and of institutional policy should not be left to any one individual or department.

All research has limitations. The empirical findings reported here were drawn from just one discipline - Education. Inevitably issues such as those related to requirements of professional and regulatory bodies that might arise in other disciplines were therefore not encompassed within this project. A wider range of perspectives were offered by the staff participants; but as with students, limited participant numbers resulted in greater depth than breadth of data. Further research is now needed to engage with employers, the third key stakeholder group in the placement landscape; investigating how placement providers perceive and accommodate student diversity would generate further recommendations for maximising the benefits of placements.

Finally, as a coda to our deliberations at the time of writing, the COVID 19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures continue to create uncertainty and anxiety. Social distancing requirements and the need for shielding for clinically vulnerable people have implications for both campus and placement provision. Recent reports (e.g. Blundell et al 2020) reveal the negative differential impact the pandemic is having on already disadvantaged groups such as those living in poverty, and in minority ethnic communities. For students, caring responsibilities, financial insecurity, health concerns etc. may increase and bring further challenges to placement learning. Paradoxically these challenges might also present

opportunities for development, as institutions look to respond to individual circumstances with greater flexibility, responsiveness and openness. The move to homeworking, for example, has revealed personal circumstances that previously employers did not need to pay attention to. Placement providers, in common with all organisations, have had to get used to new ways of working and this new-found expertise and capacity to work flexibly and often remotely may offer scope for more varied modes of engagement in placement and work-based learning, thereby benefiting those who struggle with the demands of attendance. It will be interesting to observe whether recent events will provide a catalyst for longer term change that may actually benefit our diverse student populations.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Summary of the participants and data collected.

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