

Do 'sandwich' student job advertisements promote access and participation of women in Higher Education work placements?

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Previous research comparing job advertisements written/constructed in subtly different ways demonstrates that small changes can influence an applicants' perception of the advertised role and their inclination to apply. Such research has analysed effects of specific features on disadvantaged groups, including women. This paper presents an original gender inclusion analysis framework and reports on its use to critically assess 280 'sandwich' (or year-long) placement advertisements (sourced from RateMyPlacement.co.uk- a leading UK student jobs listing board), as an under-explored structural mechanism that may help sustain gender inequality in work placement. Practice which supports student engagement with work placement, particularly for disadvantaged groups, is important given the robust evidence that placement enhances employability and graduate employment outcomes. Findings offer evidence based recommendations for employability practitioners working with student employers or managing their own work experience schemes seeking to promote gender diversity and explore research relevant to enhancing inclusive employability practice.

Full paper

Student Impacts of Work Based and Placement Learning (WBPL)

There is an extensive body of research investigating the outcomes of WBPL whilst on a Higher Education (HE) programme of study and an emphatic consensus that engagement results in positive and wide-ranging student impacts (for e.g. Inceoglu et al., 2019; Jackson, 2013, 2015; Kerrigan et al., 2018), with research identifying WBPL as the most effective intervention that HE Providers can introduce to improve student employability and graduate employment outcomes (Ramaiah and Robinson, 2022). Emerging evidence suggests WBPL can also negate disparities in graduate employment outcomes for disadvantaged student groups and promote social mobility; The longitudinal study of graduate employment outcomes of 350,000 UK students found a year-long work placement effective at closing the 10% employment gap between Widening Participation (WP) and non-WP graduates to 2%. Unfortunately this research revealed that WP students are less likely to enrol in sandwich degrees than non-WP counterparts (Kerrigan et al., 2018).

Identifying and addressing barriers to access and participation in WBPL.

The reasons underpinning why disadvantaged students are less likely to engage in work placement activity is under-researched; Studies have highlighted a range of barriers including students lacking connections to gain work experience, finance, a lack of confidence, self-efficacy and resilience and concerns about time away from University (Brooks and Timms, 2023; Crowson, 2023; Dickinson and Griffiths, 2017; Kerrigan et al., 2018; TASO, 2023).

The impact of placement job advertisements (adverts) on prospective candidates.

The role that placement job adverts may play in attracting or deterring the interest of prospective candidates, including those from disadvantaged groups, has not been investigated which is why we conducted this research. This is an important area for investigation as previous job advert research has shown small changes to the content of a job advert can subtly signal who belongs- or does not belong- in the role being advertised and such research has demonstrated defined job advert features which effect specific disadvantaged groups, including women. For example, Gaucher (2011) evaluated the effects of gendered wording in recruitment materials on men and women's perceptions of the advertised role. Published lists of stereotypical masculine and feminine trait words (e.g. assertive vs. understanding) were used to generate identical job adverts that used subtle masculine-wording, feminine-wording or were neutrally worded. Masculine-worded job adverts reduced perceived 'fit' and appeal of the role only in women. In contrast, feminine wording had no significant effect on men. Horvath and Sczesny (2016) also demonstrated the importance of gendered language and concluded women are more motivated to apply if they are linguistically visible in the text of job adverts; for example, use of word pairs (he/she) for pronouns.

Data source: Salaried year-long placement adverts were sourced verbatim from RateMyPlacement.co.uk- a leading UK jobs board for HE students seeking paid work experience schemes. RMP hosts over 200 of the biggest and most prestigious student employers (RMPEnterprise, 2024).

Methodology: A review of job advert literature informed the development of an original gender inclusion job advert analysis framework and this paper reports on its use to critically assess 280 year-long placement adverts from 61 student employers across the UK. A gender decoder tool was used to determine whether the text of placement adverts was gendered (Matfield, no date).

Findings: A range of job advert features demonstrated to negatively effect the perceptions of prospective female candidates were found to be commonplace in prestigious year-long placement adverts; E.g. a quarter (n=72) of adverts and 47% (n=132) of person specifications utilised wording which could deter prospective female applicants. Despite 54% (n=33) employers promoting an organisational commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in adverts, less than a third (28%) of adverts chose to prioritise candidates from any under-represented group *via* a positive action statement.

Implications for employability practice: Practice which supports engagement with WBPL, particularly for disadvantaged groups, is important given the robust evidence that placement enhances employability and graduate employment outcomes. Findings will be discussed in the context of developing employability practice that is proactively accessible, to try and redress any subsequent disadvantage that some student groups may experience, such as promoting access and participation of women, especially in persistently male-dominated sectors such as STEM. Discussion of evidence based recommendations are relevant for employability practitioners working with student employers or

managing their own work experience schemes seeking to increase female applicants and who wish to promote diversity more generally and explore research relevant to enhancing inclusive practice

References

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