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Making placement learning inclusive for students facing additional challenges (0219)

Stephanie Brewster¹, David Thompson¹ ¹*University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom*

This presentation reports on research conducted at the University of Wolverhampton, with undergraduate students engaged in Education Studies and related courses. Our University is recognised for its widening participation agenda, and explicitly aims to promote equality, diversity and inclusion, and employability for its graduates – all prominent agendas within the HE sector. Similar to many universities, especially the post-92 institutions, we have a high and increasing proportion of ‘non-traditional’ and ‘disabled’¹ students whose impairments, caring or work responsibilities, and other issues raise additional challenges when engaged in work-based learning (WBL). 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”. Significant recent changes in government funding for disabled students have acted as a driver for more inclusive practice, as reflected in the Department for Education (2017) report “Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence”. Drawing on the Higher Education Academy, it points out that ‘inclusive learning and teaching recognises all student’s entitlement to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences’ (p12). However, this is not the experience of some disabled students in HE, nor in subsequent employment.

Among the disadvantages faced by many disabled people, we know that:

- A graduate with a work-limiting disability is more likely to not have a job compared to an unqualified person with no disability
- Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people. In March 2013, the unemployment rate for disabled people stood at 12%, compared to 7.6% of non-disabled people (Smith, 2016).

Improving the employability of disabled graduates is one way of helping to address this situation, and whilst some evidence already exists regarding WBL, there is “still much work to be done in levelling HE experiences for disabled students” (Cunnah, 2015).

The aim of our research was to enhance placement learning for all students, focussing particularly on filling gaps in current knowledge about disabled students’ concerns about placements, their experiences while there, and what support is needed to maximise their placement learning. It therefore moves beyond the provision of guidelines which focus on legal equality compliance, to a greater understanding of the student experience.

Our research questions were:

¹ In common with current policy and guidance in the sector, our research adopts a social model of disability, in which the disadvantages and barriers faced by disabled people are not regarded as solely due to the impairment experienced by the individual, but are largely socially constructed.

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

We took a participatory approach, engaging students in the creation of data within a pseudo-longitudinal design, using samples of students at levels 4, 5 and 6 (corresponding to 'before', 'during' and 'after' placement). We issued an open invitation to students to participate in the project, if they felt it was relevant to them, regardless of whether they had formally declared a disability to the University. This enabled us to be as inclusive as possible in terms of our sample of participants, while ensuring a fully ethical approach to this potentially sensitive area. To capture the student experience, qualitative methods were employed, with students being offered the choice of diaries, interviews (face to face, by phone or skype) or focus groups. We also gathered data from staff networks (academic and professional) supporting them throughout their studies, through individual interviews and focus groups. Data collection is ongoing, and has already yielded some rich insights.

Following on from this research, we hope to develop a range of training, support and best practice materials/guidance related to inclusive placement provision, aimed at students, their academic tutors, placement providers, careers advisors and employers.

This project has the potential for impact at a number of levels. For individual participating students, it could increase confidence and maximise engagement in meaningful WBL, by providing opportunities to share their concerns and hopes. For HE practitioners directly involved in supporting students in WBL opportunities, the research will help inform colleagues' professional practice in supporting students' decision-making with respect to the type of placement they wish to undertake and the experience they hope to gain from it. The research will provide academic tutors with evidence-based strategies for supporting students while on placement, enabling them to adapt their delivery of WBL opportunities to provide a holistic and inclusive pedagogical approach for all students. Likewise, it will inform the work of both disability support staff and other HE staff who work in volunteering/careers departments.

For the HE sector more broadly, the research enhances the HE sector's understanding of the experiences of disabled students with regards to placements and employability. Similarly, for employers/placement providers it will improve practice, in terms of supporting disabled students' learning from placement. Our ultimate aim is to have a positive impact on future generations of students and to promote inclusion by bringing the employment prospects of disabled graduates more closely in line with their non-disabled peers. We concur with Cunnah's conclusion (2015) that "universities may be able to have a positive influence on perceptions of disability and inclusive practice in work-placement settings and that this would contribute to more inclusive employment contexts".

References

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