

Disabled Students and Placements: Barriers and Challenges

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Abstract

The UK is experiencing a persistent skills gap which has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic. One factor that contributes toward the skill gap is university students graduating, but not being equipped with the necessary employability skills to meet graduate outcomes. This skills gap is exacerbated by a leaky pipeline, which is more pertinent for minority groups. Women, for example, are more likely to leave the labour market than men and ethnic minority groups commonly do not continue in their chosen careers due to systemic racism. Research in these areas commonly focuses on STEM subjects, medicine, women and ethnic minorities. We argue, therefore, the leaky pipeline concept currently has quite a narrow focus in the literature. We believe, it can also be applied to other industries and other minority groups, especially disabled people as the number of disabled people is growing and the numbers of disabled students has risen dramatically in recent years.

In light of the persistent skills gap and a lack of diversity in senior levels of key industries, the British government has tasked UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with filling the skills gap. One way that this has been done by HEIs is through work placements or internships. Students, however, are not a homogenous group and access to placements and internships is not equal or available to all. Importantly, disabled students face challenges when both applying for and undertaking placements or internships, arguably placing them at a further disadvantage within the labour market and reducing the potential of HEIs to plug the skills gap. It is, therefore, important to ensure that disabled students develop the skills to survive in the current

labour market by giving them an equal chance to complete skill developing activities such as placements.

This paper uses a systematic literature review to establish current knowledge on the barriers disabled students face when applying for a placement. The paper presents the context to the review and outlines the methodology for the systematic literature review following the protocols for studying qualitative research by Pettigrew and Roberts (2006). The paper presents the findings of the systematic review and outlines future research to continue research in this pertinent area. The research project is underway, and the results of the systematic review will be completed by the time the conference is held in June 2024.

Introduction

It has been long documented in the academic and practitioner literature that the UK is experiencing skill gaps, particularly in soft skills, data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (Mikalef and Krogstie, 2019; Noah and Aziz; 2020; Sangar, 2022; Singh et al. 2022; Stanton and Stanton, 2018). In response to these skill gaps, the UK Conservative government has placed a clear responsibility on universities for increasing the skill level of graduates to plug the skills gap.

One way that UK universities have typically sought to embed employability in their degree programmes is through work placements or internships. Atfield et al. (2021) report that placements can take the form of sandwich placements, short placements abroad for language students or part time work linked to the curriculum, placements are commonly 6-12 months in duration. The benefit of placements include the development of confidence, professionalism,

improved academic performance and greater propensity to get a job and a higher salary (Atfield et al. 2021).

Despite the importance of placements, the ability of HEI to provide placements is constrained by contextual factors. The major contextual factor in recent years was the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a huge impact on HEI being able to accommodate placements, with many institutions encouraging students to undertake remote or hybrid work experience. In 2020, 72% of companies recruiting placement students offered online work experience opportunities; however, in line with a more widely documented push to get people back into the workplace, by 2022, only 6% of placements were virtual and 63% of placements were hybrid (ISE, 2022). The pandemic decline in internships and placements is now in the process of being reversed. Research by the ISE (2022) points to growth in companies offering placements and an almost 50% increase in the number of placement students hired post-pandemic.

More recently, post-pandemic labour market trends, have led some authors to argue that HE policy reform, aimed at guaranteeing pipelines of skilled graduates, needs to do more to equip graduates with cutting edge skillsets to work with big data and AI (O'Toole et al, 2023; Tholen and Brown, 2017). Despite different ways of providing placements and contextual challenges, the importance of placements for improving employability remains constant.

This section has provided some context to the UK skills gaps and the extent to which UK HEIs utilise placements and internships to plug these gaps. The next sections of this paper present an overview of disability and labour market disadvantage, as well as the legislative landscape to set the context and need for the study. The final section outlines the methodology for the

systematic literature review which is currently being undertaken to establish current knowledge on the barriers disabled students face when applying for and / or undertaking a placement.

Disabled students

Much of the research on the value of placements assumes students are a homogeneous group; we know, however that students are *not* a homogenous group. Our focus is on one particular group of students in the student body, disabled students. There are increasing numbers of disabled students in the UK (Office for Students, 2024). In 2021-2022 there were a total of 134,320 disabled students with the majority of them, some 119,480, reporting a mental health condition, (HESA, 2024). The House of Commons Library (2021) estimates that 17.3% of all home students are reporting a disability.

Research shows that disabled students have high levels of educational capital but are constrained by low levels of opportunity to use that capital due to discrimination and lack of opportunity (AGCAS, 2023). Disabled students face challenges when both applying for and undertaking placements or internships (AGCAS, 2023; Riddell and Weedon, 2014), arguably placing them at a further disadvantage within the labour market. Recent work shows that disabled students should have equal access to field trips, placements and internships; but, currently, they do not (Snowdon Trust, 2023). Literature on disabled students undertaking placements, such as Georgiou et al (2012), confirmed the value of these for improving skills and confidence, whilst others, such as Brewster and Thompson (2020), indicated that undertaking a placement is not without its challenges. These problems around providing and undertaking placements for disabled students is largely the result of the UK education system where inclusion is based on bolt-on support that reflects ableism (Woods, 2017). Despite the

growing numbers of disabled students, much existing research on placements omits their experiences, instead focusing on women and ethnic minorities.

In this context, extant literature suggests research should no longer look at objective benchmarks of career success and instead should focus on needs, values and goals that underpin choices and behaviour (Arthur et al, 2005). In our context, that means recognising disabled students have constrained choices due to the disadvantage they experience in society. However, the structural labour market forces that constrain disabled people's agency have received little attention with much work focusing on agential factors (Rodrigues et al, 2013). The seminal work by Schein (1990) states that through work experience and feedback from colleagues and supervisors people become aware of their overarching career preferences and range of choices. However, in the case of disabled students these feedback mechanisms do not allow them to choose career preferences that can be enacted, instead they create barriers to hinder them from achieving their career preferences, reducing agential freedom. These factors, therefore, raise the question as to the role of work placements for disabled students. In this context, a focus on disabled students is especially important given the pervasive labour market disadvantage they will face on graduation.

Labour market disadvantage

Pervasive labour market disadvantage is the partly because disabled people are one of the largest under-utilised labour market groups (Alemany, 2023) and this is due to stigma and prejudice towards disabled people (Redacted, 2024). One of the ways this labour market disadvantage manifests itself is through the disability employment gap, which is the difference in the employment rate between disabled and non-disabled people. In the UK, currently, the

disability employment gap stands at 29% (House of Commons Library, 2023). While the employment gap varies by factors such as age, ethnicity and impairment what remains constant is a significant disadvantage for disabled people. For example, older disabled people have a larger employment gap than younger disabled people those aged 50 to 64-years-old having the largest disability employment gap; (31.7 percent compared to 18.7 percent for 18 to 24-year-olds) (DWP 2023).

Further variation relates to impairment type. Disabled people who have a mental health condition are least likely to be in employment (50.5 percent compared to 58.6 percent in 2021/2022 where it was the main condition) (DWP, 2023). For ethnicity, white disabled people had the largest disability employment gap (28.3 percent). This gap is explained by white non-disabled people having the highest employment rate compared to other ethnicities. In contrast, the gap between the employment rates of disabled women and men has been closing for several years; the disability employment gap was narrower for women than for men (23.1 percent compared to 30.2 percent for men) (DWP, 2023). While there are signs that the overall disability employment gap is closing, with a 4 percent reduction in the first quarter of 2023, there remains a significant difference between the employment levels of disabled people compared to non-disabled people (House of Commons Library, 2023).

While the employment gap is one way to measure disadvantage, workflows is another way. Workflows for disabled people tend to be more problematic than for non-disabled people, they leave work twice as fast and return to work at a rate that is one third of that of the rate of their non-disabled counterparts (DWP, 2023). Simultaneously, the disability earnings gap - the gap between the earnings of disabled people compared to their non-disabled counterparts – has

increased (EHRC, 2023). The current disability pay gap is 14.6% (TUC, 2023) with intersectional discrimination at play where women face a higher pay penalty than men (TUC, 2023).

Given the extent of the pervasive labour market disadvantages for disabled people, the need for effective career guidance and opportunities to secure graduate skills through placements is paramount for young disabled people entering the labour market.

Legal context

Disability discrimination in employment and education is unlawful. In this section we chart the development of disability discrimination legislation pertinent to the provision of placements. First, access to higher education for disabled students widened from the 1990s onwards, with Higher Education Funding Councils supplying financial support for disabled students (Tinklin et. al. 2004), making higher education accessible for the first time.

Education-specific disability legislation was brought in in 1992, with the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992; implemented on 1st April 1993. This legislation placed a duty on all HEIs to produce a disability statement outlining disability provision. In addition, the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) was introduced as a means tested financial resource for students. Financial responsibility was divided between the Further Education Funding Councils and the Local Education Authority.

In 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act was introduced but this did not cover education. However, the rising numbers of disabled students in higher education led to the milestone Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), introduced in 2001 to amend part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act to introduce rights for disabled people in education (Davies, 2003). SENDA made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled students in admission, application, the enrolment process and in student services (Davies, 2003).

The Equality Act 2010 is the current legislation that outlaws disability discrimination. Its main focus is to conclude the work of the Equality Act 2006 which was to combine the different equality strands, replacing nine major earlier pieces of legislation with a single statute (Hepple, 2011). The purpose of these changes was to make equality law simpler and easier to understand alongside being more effective (EHRC, 2014). In terms of employment part 5 details the provisions to outlaw disability discrimination in work. For education, part 6 prohibits discrimination in schools, further education and higher education institutions on the basis of nine protected characteristics, disability is one of these. Failure to provide placement opportunities for disabled students is likely to constitute disability discrimination and is, therefore, likely to be unlawful.

Despite the continued push to level the playing field for disabled students or students with chronic health conditions, they still fail to achieve outcomes on a par with their non-disabled counterparts (Snowdon Trust, 2022). Furthermore, Burchardt (2005) states that education does not result in the desired employment for many disabled students, meaning that many are underemployed and unlikely to even feature in academic debates around leaky career pipelines and vertical segregation in organisations because they tend not to be employed in roles where

employment progression is a consideration. As Redacted (2024) argue, managing a disability or a long-term health condition requires skills such as resilience, time management which are mirrored in the wider literature around skills and UK skill gaps.

Methods

In light of the growing number of disabled students and the pervasive nature of labour market disadvantage for disabled people, there is an increasing need to improve the employability of disabled students entering the labour market on graduation. The above section has highlighted the important role a placement can play in improving social mobility and employment opportunities, in line with the theory outlined by Shein (1990). We, now turn to outline the methodology. We began by setting the following research question: what are the barriers for disabled students studying at a UK University when undertaking a placement?. We developed this research question using the SPICE methodology:

- Setting: where? British focus where the Equality Act 2010 is enforce; England, Wales, Scotland.
- Perspective: for whom? Students who self-identify as having an impairment, ie disabled students.
- Intervention; undertaking a placement or internship as a compulsory part of a degree programme.
- Comparison, no comparison.
- Evaluation, to determine barriers to participation in a placement or internship.

In line with the guidance by Pettigrew and Roberts (2006) we passed our research questions to a panel of three experts to assess its relevance and scope. The panel included two academics working in the field and a placements officer.

We then decided to carry out a systematic literature review to establish the current level of knowledge on this important topic. It is widely accepted that drawing evidence from single studies can be misleading and include researcher bias (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2008). To ensure methodological rigour and address researcher bias we decided to conduct a systematic review, to “*provide redress to the natural tendency of readers and researchers to be swayed by such biases and they can fulfil an essential role as a sort of scientific gyroscope*” (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2008: 5-6). While systematic literature reviews originated in the medical profession, they are now being used in the social sciences (Rojon et al. 2011). For example, Guthridge et al. 2022 used a systematic literature review to examine gender equality interventions and Freer (2023) used a systematic literature review students’ attitudes towards disability. The use of such reviews is, therefore, now established in the social sciences and we seek to build on this tradition and establish the current state of knowledge in the field.

To ensure methodological transparency and rigour we followed guidance for carrying out systematic literature reviews in the social sciences by Pettigrew and Roberts (2006). First, we collated background information, much of which has formed the first part of this paper. This background information was collected by reading statistical reports, our current knowledge of the field and current legislation. The purpose of this stage was to gain an overview of the type of material available and also to establish that no other reviews had been conducted in this area.

The next step we engaged in was to establish our search strategy. To do this we researched the most relevant databases for social science research. We concluded with Taylor and Francis Online, Web of Science, ProQuest Education, ProQuest Sociology, JSTOR, SCOPUS, Springer Link. The two researchers carrying out this research project are located at different

universities. We, therefore, were constrained to using databases to which both universities subscribed due to the need to both carry out the research in line with systematic literature review protocol and to limit researcher bias. This constraint left us with the following databases to search:

JSTOR, SCOPUS, Web of Science and Springer Link.

After establishing which databases we would search we set our search terms. We used Boolean operators and truncation tools to maximise search results:

1. “Disabled student” OR “student* with disab*” OR “long term health” OR “chronic illness”
2. AND Placement* OR internship or “work experience” or “work placement*”

We carried out pilot searches to establish the relevance of the terms and suitability. This led to modification of search terms as some searches created no hits as our search terms were too narrow. We reflected and changed our search terms to generate a wide range of articles.

To ensure we captured relevant articles we set some limits or filters to the research results. The first limit was the date, we only wanted to include articles that were published after the change in the law, so 2010 onwards, when the Equality Act 2010 came into force. We also limited the articles to English due the researchers’ language skills. The third limit was to only include articles where the full text is accessible, without this we would be unable to determine suitability for the review. Fourth we sought only articles that were peer reviewed. Any non-peer reviewed articles could be located in the grey literature search which will be conducted at a later date. Finally, we only sought journal articles for this section of the research.

These searches were carried out by both researchers independently. The articles were then downloaded, and citations saved. The numbers of articles were noted with a view to complete a PRISMA flow diagram which visually displays the screening process we undertook for the review.

The studies were then subject to inclusion and exclusion criteria to reduce the sample. To do this we initially examined the titles and abstracts. The exclusion criteria we used were firstly to remove studies that focused on nurses, social workers or teachers because these students undertook compulsory placements that were linked to their professional registration. This criterion also meant we excluded studies that were focused on clinical placements or clinical practice. Second, we were only interested in university students so excluded college students. We focused only on England, Scotland and Wales where the Equality Act 2010 is enforced, so any studies not in these countries was omitted. We also omitted book chapters and whole books as they are not peer reviewed.

Our inclusion criteria were as follows: studies conducted in Scotland, England, Wales, university students, disabled students, original research, ie not literature reviews, studies focused on placement and internship as while these terms are distinct, they can be used interchangeably. We included cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, and studies that examined barriers, challenges, obstacles, limitations or obstructions.

At each stage of the research, results were saved and use of computer programmes were used. Citations were saved using Mendeley, and the searches were downloaded as RIS files and then uploaded into software by Rayyan, which helps to automate a systematic review while retaining

control for the researchers. For example, Rayyan will search for duplicate articles, but the researchers have to approve the removal of a duplicate article.

At the time of writing this is the stage at which we have arrived. It is anticipated that, in order to search for any articles that may have been missed, manual searches of selected publications will be carried out such as the journal *Studies in Higher Education*. We will also carry out a grey literature search looking at published reports, such as those published by the House of Commons Library or the Office of Students. We will exclude unverified materials such as newspaper articles and blog posts. As intimated already, these manual journal searches and grey literature searches have not been carried out currently. It is anticipated that by the time the conference takes place, these searches will have been carried out and the findings can be presented with the database searches, which have yet to be analysed and filtered down to the studies useful for the review. The type of analysis used will depend on the studies included in the final sample, for example for qualitative studies evidence will be synthesized through narrative interrogation but quantitative studies will be assessed using meta-analysis (Rojon et al, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper aims to add to the body of literature on disability in the labour market by conducting a systematic review of the literature to examine current knowledge on the barriers disabled students face when applying for a placement.

We have situated the importance of access to placements within the context of the need for a wider upskilling of the UK labour market and established that disabled graduates are already

marginalised within UK labour markets. The paper has presented a broad introduction to disability in work and education, and the underpinning legislation. Finally, we have outlined our methodology for the systematic literature review following the protocols set by Pettigrew and Roberts (2006). The project is underway, and the systematic review will be completed by the conference, when the full results and limitations of the study will be presented.

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