



Project Report:

Addressing gaps in the participation of sandwich courses

August 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher and further education providers play a crucial role in ensuring that their graduates fare well in the labour market post-graduation. Yet existing evidence shows persistent equality gaps in the employment outcomes and earning potential of students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds compared to their more advantaged peers.

Following the publication of a rapid evidence review exploring [what works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability](#), The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) identified sandwich courses as a potential avenue for helping to reduce equality gaps. Sandwich courses are typically defined as a student alternating between classroom instruction, full-time placements in industry and part-time work experience alongside their degree-course. The sandwich courses label illustrates a metaphor that the placements are 'sandwiched' between classroom instruction. 'Thick' sandwich courses involve a single lengthy placement, such as a year, while 'thin' sandwich courses involve several shorter placements spread through the course of a degree.

As part of TASO's review on what works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability, we found that graduates who took a sandwich course, with some time in employment, went on to earn around £6,000 more than the average full-time student three years after graduation. Sandwich courses were found to reduce gaps in employment outcomes for disadvantaged students, producing lower levels of disparity in employment outcomes between WP and non-WP graduates compared to traditional taught degrees. While WP graduates taught on full-time degrees were 10% less likely than their non-WP peers to be in professional-grade employment six months after graduation, the difference between the two groups was only 2% for sandwich degrees.

However, existing research shows that WP students are less likely to enrol in a sandwich course, when compared to their peers. Therefore, to inform future impact evaluation of sandwich courses, TASO commissioned this research project to explore students' experiences, mapping out the barriers to, and potential solutions for, students from WP backgrounds accessing and succeeding on sandwich courses.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research project was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** What are the main barriers to, and potential solutions for, students from WP backgrounds accessing and succeeding on a sandwich course?
- **RQ2:** What are the main barriers, and corresponding solutions, to converting WP students' intention to complete a sandwich course into a work placement or year in industry?

As illustrated in Table 1 below, the research project comprised of two strands, each following three phases to address the key research questions:

- **Strand one** ([read the full report here](#)) explored the barriers and solutions for students from WP backgrounds developing the intention to apply for and complete a sandwich course.
- **Strand two** ([read the full report here](#)) explored the barriers and solutions for students from WP backgrounds converting their intention to complete a sandwich course into a successful placement and completion of a sandwich course.

Table 1: Research phases and methodology

Research phase	Strand one	Strand two
	Methodology	
Exploratory research phase	Exploring WP students' intention to complete a sandwich course	Exploring WP students' conversion of intention, to successful completion of a sandwich course
	Qualitative interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate students (WP and non-WP) • HEP members of staff 	Qualitative interviews with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate students (WP and non-WP) • HEP members of staff • Employers Student survey with WP and non-WP students
Theory of Change development phase	Theory of Change development, drawing on existing evidence and findings from the exploratory research phase	
User testing phase	The barriers and solutions identified in the Theory of Change were user tested in a series of qualitative interviews with WP students	The barriers and solutions identified in the Theory of Change were user tested in a series of qualitative focus groups with WP students, non-WP students and HEP staff

3. KEY FINDINGS

This section summarises the key findings from both strands of the research project.

3.1. Key findings from strand one

Strand one of the research explored WP students' intention to apply for and complete a sandwich course. The analysis of interviews conducted with higher education provider (HEP) staff and students presents seven emerging themes:

- **Types of sandwich courses available:** The features of sandwich courses varied across the sample in terms of the minimum length/number of work placements, whether the course was technically focussed (e.g., in health sciences) or more flexible, and the institutions' approach to unpaid placements.
- **Trends in students participation in sandwich courses:** HEPs' approach to data collection and monitoring was varied across the sample and generally inconsistent. Few participants were able to provide specific statistics about their sandwich course cohorts nor identify whether those taking up sandwich courses were representative of the wider student population. Despite this, some participants reported a perception that certain groups of students were underrepresented on sandwich courses - disabled students, students from low-income families, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students.
- **Promotion of sandwich course opportunities:** HEPs advertise sandwich courses, using a range of standard marketing and promotional approaches, both while students are making their UCAS choices, and then once they have arrived at the institution. Some HEPs emphasised the importance of encouraging students to think about sandwich courses early on and have implemented specific promotion activities during the students' first year of an undergraduate programme.
- **Students' decision-making processes:** Students highlighted a series of factors that influenced their decision about whether to undertake a sandwich, including vocational interests (e.g., the desire to be a vet), subject specific interests (e.g., in biology or economics), the availability of accessible information from the HEP, the perceived employment advantages of undertaking a placement, the perceived disruption to their studies,

the geographical location of placements and impact on commuting/relocating, the pay/cost associated with the placement and the application process.

- **Barriers to taking and/or succeeding on a placement:** Both HEP staff and students identified several factors that influence a students' ability to apply to and complete a sandwich course. Among various examples, students cited a perceived lack of support from HEPs and challenges associated with travelling considerable distances for a work placement while HEP staff also cited the limitations of placement locations for students who prefer to stay close to home/university and limited financial resources to draw on coupled with delaying entry to the labour market by one year.
- **HEP action to reduce or remove barriers:** HEP staff referenced a variety of activities, some of which had already been implemented, to remove the barriers (financial and otherwise) WP students experience when accessing sandwich courses.
- **The influence of taking a sandwich course:** There was a consensus across the sample, both HEP staff and students, that participating in a sandwich course had a positive influence on employment outcomes for students. Students, irrespective of whether they had completed a sandwich course, were still considering the option, or had decided against it, held a common view that such opportunities had a positive influence on subsequent employment.

These findings were used to develop and test a draft Theory of Change for overcoming the challenges that prevent WP students from accessing and succeeding on sandwich courses. Four principal themes, to be mobilised as solutions for overcoming barriers, emerged from the Theory of Change development and user testing:

- **Data collection, access and use:** Improved processes to ensure that data on the student journey and long-term employment outcomes are accurately recorded and made available for monitoring and evaluation.
- **Policy development:** Improved and consistent HEP policies to encourage flexible sandwich course formats, and financial support (in terms of both providing financial support to students, and developing students' own financial awareness).

- **Information sharing:** Ensuring that information is made available early; is provided in accessible formats; and that information on sandwich courses is more closely integrated with degree programmes.
- **Support:** Ensuring that group and one-to-one support is provided at critical periods of time: before a decision is made; before a sandwich placement commences; during the sandwich year; and once it has been completed.

3.2. Key findings from strand two

Strand two of the research explored the gap between WP students' intention to complete a sandwich course and their successful placement and completion of a sandwich course. The analysis of data collected during the exploratory phase of research – interviews with HEP staff, employers, and students, as well as responses to a student survey – highlight eight factors salient for students as they navigate securing a sandwich course.

- **Initial intentions and changing pathways:** A variety of factors appear to have influenced students' initial placement expectations and career planning. Students perceive many potential benefits from completing a sandwich course year, including gaining an understanding of a particular sector or role, building their skillset, and improving both their general employability and likelihood of succeeding down a specific career path. Simultaneously, for students who did not consider a placement year, there were common perceptions that a placement was not the best way to develop their career prospects, that the sandwich course pathway was unavailable to them, and completing HE quickly was desirable.
- **Location, living and social life:** Reflections from students and HEP staff highlight several ways in which location, views on relocation, securing accommodation, students' desire to maintain friendships, and the impact of maintaining existing social connections influence students' decision-making and the conversion from an initial intention to complete a sandwich course into completing of a sandwich course.

- **Confidence and resilience:** Students, employers and HEP staff identify confidence and resilience as important for helping students navigate challenges that arise throughout the process of applying to, securing and completing a sandwich course.
- **Personal application:** Students must have the ability to apply for placement roles, and proactively communicate their abilities to potential employers. As well as concerted effort, several factors were identified as important in the application process – time management and organisational skills, tailoring the approach to drafting applications, writing and communication skills and portraying the value of previous work experience.
- **Placement suitability and availability:** A lack of placement opportunities, and lack of opportunities in geographically convenient areas, was identified by students as a factor in whether they could secure a placement. Linked to this, students and HEP staff reflected on how students' views on the 'quality' and 'suitability' of placement opportunities differ.
- **Student background:** Students, HEP staff and employers all reported that there remain biases against students from disadvantaged backgrounds that can influence their experiences of navigating the process of applying to and securing a placement. It was generally understood that biases against certain groups, such as BAME students, disabled and/or those from low socio-economic backgrounds, still exist whether intentional or not.
- **Finances:** The requirement for tangible money and resources feature as a challenge for students' participation in sandwich courses. The costs associated with undertaking a placement year and possible relocation, as well as low or unpaid opportunities, and the psychological effect this has on students were highlighted by HEP staff and students.
- **Timing:** HEP staff, students and employers described how the amount of time available to students throughout the year is a factor that requires careful consideration, particularly for those who work part-time. As well as describing time as a 'resource', participants reflected that the timing of key events (e.g., placements, applications and finding accommodation) influences how priorities increase and decrease throughout the year.

Drawing on these findings from the student survey and qualitative research, several potential solutions were formulated and presented to students and HEP staff in a Theory of Change for further testing:

- **Developing knowledge and application support:**

Consistent support delivered at the individual and cohort level to ensure students have access to relevant employers, appropriate placement opportunities, and skill development workshops for application writing and interview preparation.

- **Expanding social connections and resources:**

Facilitated connections between students considering a sandwich course and employers and alumni or final year students who have experienced the process of securing and completing a placement. Facilitated connections can build students' understanding of what to expect, provide inspiration for what path they could pursue, and enable honest reflection on the difficulties that they may face before and throughout the placement year.

- **Enhancing financial support:** Financial support and interventions to address disparities in economic resources that prevent some students from accessing sandwich courses. Targeted financial support in the form of bursaries could support students wishing to undertake a sandwich placement while financial interventions such as, only offering paid placements, employers creating onsite accommodation for placement students, and developing remote working with employers to reduce the need to travel or relocate could also be implemented.

- **Wider structural changes:** Removing structural barriers, outside the agency of the student, to securing a placement. This could include banning unpaid placements, replacing full-time yearlong placements with shorter placements, and amending the structure of sandwich course support provision to be included inside scheduled teaching hours for all students to attend, rather than students seeking support in their own time.

- **Ring fencing opportunities:** HEP staff were supportive of the idea of 'ring fencing' specific opportunities to make them exclusively available to students from a WP background, for example, using a set application 'window' or ensuring WP students can be seen more favourably. Employers and students had mixed views on this solution, with some employers expressing that an application process should have equality and diversity built in. Some students raised a query about having an advantage over their peers and feeling like they wanted to ensure they had the skills needed to succeed in their career and have 'earned' the position.

- **Relationships and culture:** Fostering beneficial relationships between HEPs and employers to embed a culture within placement industries that facilitates a deeper understanding of the causes behind disparities of success and how employers can address them.



4. THEORY OF CHANGE

Using TASO's approach to [Enhanced Theory of Change](#), each strand of the research project has been synthesised to present a Theory of Change that captures information about the activities and mechanisms by which change is expected to occur, mapping the links between activities and outcomes and assumptions and change mechanisms.

- The [Enhanced Theory of Change](#) for strand one displays the barriers and solutions for students from WP backgrounds developing the intention to apply for and complete a sandwich course.

- The [Enhanced Theory of Change](#) for strand two displays the barriers and solutions for students from WP backgrounds converting their intention to complete a sandwich course into a successful placement and completion of a sandwich course.

Naturally, there is overlap between the two Enhanced Theories of Change and stakeholders aiming to evaluate and improve their sandwich course provision for WP students should consider both, using a 'pick and mix' approach to build their own Enhanced Theory of Change unique to their context.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this project show that while there are particular factors at different points in the student journey, many of the challenges and potential solutions identified are common across the entire journey, from initial awareness of sandwich courses prior to enrolling in HE through to the successful completion of a four-year sandwich course degree. Improving access to, and successful completion of, sandwich courses for students from WP backgrounds requires a joint and concerted effort from the sector, including HEPs, employers and students. To promote change at the student level, HEPs need to provide timely and accessible support and information; these form policies and activities that enable students to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, connections and resources to succeed. At the structural level, both HEPs and employers have crucial roles to play in facilitating consistent data monitoring and tracking of outcomes, implementing policies that reduce the cost of participation in sandwich courses and providing opportunities that are equitable and accessible to students from a WP background.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on findings from both strands of research included in this project. A sector-level response is required, to ensure common practice across HEPs, and that WP students are well-supported in their sandwich course choices, whichever institution they attend. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that HEPs operate in different contexts, with different challenges and varying levels of resource available. This may have a significant influence on which actions HEPs choose to prioritise, and which they are able to pursue.

Develop Theories of Change

To plan, and rigorously evaluate, the impact of support for WP students accessing sandwich courses, HEPs should use the Enhanced Theories of Change provided in [Section 4](#) of this report to develop their own, context specific, Theories of Change using [TASO's guidance](#). The Enhanced Theories of Change are designed to explore the complexity of interrelating individual and systemic influences, demonstrating the non-linear pathways to impact, where loops or interactions between multiple activities, change mechanisms and outcomes are observed.

Improve the collection and use of HEPs' institutional data relating to sandwich courses

HEPs should make a concerted effort to collect consistent data on the social characteristics of students accessing sandwich courses, the placements these students attend, and the degree and labour market outcomes associated with attendance. This should include HEPs routinely monitoring data on sandwich course uptake to assess whether a representative group of the student population is accessing placement opportunities. Furthermore, HEPs should make use of administrative datasets, such as the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, to track students into the labour market and evaluate employment outcomes.

Conduct more robust evaluation

Following recommendations one and two, HEPs should make use of their institutional data and the Enhanced Theories of Change to design and conduct the type of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations that allow strong conclusions to be drawn about what works for helping students from WP background access and benefit from sandwich courses and work

placements. HEPs should also seek to evaluate any changes introduced as a result of the other recommendations in this report.

Develop collective policy making for the provision of sandwich courses

HEPs should work towards collective policy making to address challenges with sandwich course placements that apply across the HE sector. HEPs should consider offering a greater variety of sandwich courses than is currently available in many institutions, for example, part-time placements, shorter placements, internal (to the HEP) placements, and placements that involve spending time with more than one organisation. Greater variety in the type of sandwich course offered was typically welcomed by students as a mechanism for overcoming some of the challenges associated with a more conventional sandwich course model. This recommendation, and any changes to the variety of sandwich courses available to students, should be developed in line with the first three recommendations to ensure that adaptations to sandwich course provision are testable and promote effective evaluation.

Influence institutional and sector-wide culture

HEPs should assess the culture of placements within their respective institutions, including within specific departments, as well as in the wider professional sector. This includes the information and communication shared by leaders in that area regarding placements, identifying practices specific to that department/provider/sector, and shaping messaging about placements.

Address financial barriers

HEPs should also consider implementing specific support on student finances for learners intending to complete a sandwich course. This includes providing budgeting and other financial advice, advertising only paid placements (and perhaps even banning unpaid placements), offering a bursary to WP students, addressing the cost of transportation and housing in placement locations, and liaising with employers to reduce the costs associated with the application process. This relies on building strong relationships between HEPs, and with the professional sector, to agree collective action to address barriers and challenges that WP students face.

Improve the timing and accessibility of sandwich course information and skill development within the curriculum

HEPs delivering sandwich courses should bolster student support services to provide students with easily accessible information and employability skills within all students' first and second year of study. This support should focus on a combination of organisational, self-reflection, communication, and interpersonal skills and be embedded within the curriculum. Simultaneously, HEPs should actively encourage collaboration between the student service teams supporting learners with specific needs (e.g., those supporting students with disabilities) and the employability team promoting the uptake of sandwich courses to ensure the provision of information is timely and accessible.

Enhance comprehensive and tailored support throughout the student lifecycle

HEPs should take a comprehensive approach to supporting WP students considering a sandwich course, as well as those who have already enrolled in such a course, by tailoring support at multiple points in the student lifecycle. This should include individual-level support when students are first considering their options to build confidence, knowledge, and skills and to enable trusting relationships to form between the student and their designated placement tutor. The continuation of tutor support (and connection to the HEP more generally) while the student completes their sandwich course and as they reintegrate back into their final year of study is also recommended. Final year support should include helping students' to reflect on the

skills and knowledge developed during the placement year, assisting students to effectively draw upon experience in job applications, and ensuring that students' academic skills are at an appropriate level for the last year of their degree. Additionally, this comprehensive support should recognise barriers to securing housing, managing transportation, and maintaining social connections - by engaging with students' social links, such as family, friends, and peers, and building on links with schools, colleges, and community partners.

Enhance relationships and communication between students and employers

HEPs and employers should facilitate and enable communication and professional relationships between students and employers. This should focus on support with career options and availability, professional development, opportunities for direct personal contact as well as group sessions, and application feedback.

Translate and apply the learning from sandwich course provision to bolster general support for students' employment prospects

The emerging body of evidence on the influence of sandwich courses on student outcomes should be translated to the wider sector, supporting HEPs and students who do not have access to sandwich courses to improve employability. To address the gaps which exist between more and less advantaged graduates, HEPs must take a strategic approach to employability support, developing and evaluating programmes specifically designed for disadvantaged students.



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