Research report:
Exploring equality gaps in the uptake of sandwich courses and placements

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Nottingham Trent University

Author: Pete Crowson

Contributing authors: Mike Kerrigan, Bec Aeddi, and Zsanett Bicsak

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1. Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to address the gaps in our knowledge about the barriers to students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds accessing, and succeeding on, sandwich year courses.[1] Nottingham Trent University (NTU) conducted exploratory research as part of a collaborative project with the University of Surrey. The aim of NTU's research was to understand and describe the main barriers and corresponding solutions, to converting WP students' intention to complete a sandwich course into work placement or a year in industry.

1.1. Methodology

The research comprised of three parts:

- An exploratory phase, based on qualitative interviews with 23 staff (both internal to NTU and at other Higher Education Providers (HEPs), 10 employers who work with NTU students as part of their placement year, and 14 final year undergraduate NTU students who either successfully or unsuccessfully secured a placement. In addition, a student survey was completed by 359 final year students (both by those enrolled on a sandwich course, and those who did not).
- The development of a Theory of Change based on findings from the exploratory phase as well as existing research in this area.
- A 'user testing' phase, in which feedback on key aspects of the Theory of Change was sought from nine undergraduate students who were a mixture of WP and non-WP students, and who were either successful or unsuccessful in securing a placement.

1.2. Key findings

The key findings of this report highlight eight factors salient for students as they navigate securing a sandwich course:

1. **Initial intentions and changing pathways:** this describes initial planning and placement expectations, career planning, and previous experiences.
2. **Location, living and social life:** this describes location, views on relocation, securing accommodation, desire to maintain friendships, and the impact of social behaviour.
3. **Confidence and resilience:** this describes student self-confidence, resilience in the face of challenges, and emotional regulation throughout the process.

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[1] Sandwich courses are 4 year undergraduate courses, as opposed to the traditional structure of a three year undergraduate course. Typically, the 'sandwich placement' year takes place between the second and final year of a course. This is assessed, with students needing to complete 36 weeks or more of a placement to be awarded a Placement Diploma

4. **Personal application:** this describes both the effort and the skills that a student applies to the process of application itself.
5. **Placement suitability and availability:** this describes not only the availability of placements but considers the student perspective of what is seen as a 'quality' or 'appropriate' opportunity.
6. **Student background:** this describes the students own demographic grouping, discrimination, recruitment methods, and additional background-specific factors.
7. **Finances:** this describes costs associated with the placement year, as well as low or unpaid opportunities, and the psychological effect this has on students.
8. **Timing:** this describes the changing nature of the process throughout the academic year, and explores 'time as a resource' and deficits that may exist.

These factors appear to ultimately influence students in three ways; their capability in securing a placement, the opportunities (perceived or physical) available to them, and their competing motivations in attempting to navigate their complex higher education (HE) journey. Numerous proposals were made for addressing these factors, at both the individual (or student) level as well as at the systemic (and institutional) level.

1.3.   Recommendations

Factors in securing a placement are complex, often interact, and can be both within the control of the student to address as well as outside of their control entirely. Therefore, a dualistic approach for addressing the problem is suggested (change within the student and change within the system), with a consideration for motivation, capital, influences of key figures, and micro-cultures.

Recommendations for practice:

- Student knowledge and skill development built into the curriculum
- Enhancing relationships and communication between students and employers
- A holistic approach to student support
- Collective policy making
- Institutional and sector-wide culture

2. Introduction

2.1 Background and context

As part of the research theme on 'what works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability', and following the conclusion of the Phase 1 rapid evidence review, TASO has commissioned a project to explore the mechanisms through which sandwich courses have an influence on students' outcomes. Nottingham Trent University (NTU) was selected to conduct a research project focusing on increasing widening participation (WP) student success in securing a year-long placement as part of a sandwich course.

Previous UK research cited in a briefing note published by TASO demonstrates that WP students are less likely to undertake sandwich courses, even though the evidence suggests that they could particularly benefit from them. There are clear factors affecting some students in terms of accessing these placements. However, further scrutiny of NTU's internal longitudinal data suggests that communications and messaging may only be a relatively small part of the overall explanation.

Table 1 below, which focuses on the 2016-17 entrant cohort[2] at NTU, shows that there was a relatively small gap in terms of intentions to undertake a sandwich placement between WP students and non-WP students. This is defined as those initially enrolling on a sandwich course as opposed to a full-time course at the start of their first year. This was similarly the case for ethnicity (Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)) and disability status. For example, in 2016-17, 27% of UK domiciled year one WP undergraduate students were enrolled on four-year courses with an embedded sandwich placement, which was only three percentage points smaller than the equivalent percentage of non-WP students. In 2017-18, the percentage of WP students enrolled on sandwich placements fell slightly to 24%, and in 2018-19, only 14% of WP students were recorded as having taken a placement. Effectively, only around half of the WP students who had intended to undertake a sandwich placement, actually did so. This 'successful conversion' rate was considerably higher for non-WP students (Table 1).

These figures appear even more stark figures when considering ethnicity, where the 'successful conversion' rate was higher for White students than their 'Asian' and 'Black'[3] counterparts.

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[2] This cohort is used because it was not affected by various COVID-19-related lockdowns. Subsequent data show similar patterns, albeit with more limited placement availability across the board due to COVID-19 restrictions.

[3] 'Asian and Black' are used here as these are the existing categories for the students in this research. We recognise that terminology on ethnicity is sometimes contentious, and urge researchers to gather data in as granular ways as possible.

Table 1: Analysis of 2016-17 entrant cohort progression, by demographic group:

Characteristic	2016-17 Percentage enrolled on sandwich course Year 1 UG (intend)	2017-18 Percentage enrolled on sandwich course Year 2 UG (intend)	2018-19 Percentage gaining a sandwich placement
WP (IMD)	27%	24%	14%
Non-WP (IMD)	30%	29%	23%
Gap	**3 percentage points**	**5 percentage points**	**9 percentage points**
Asian	37%	33%	17%
Black	29%	24%	12%
White	28%	28%	22%
A / W Gap	**-9 percentage points**	**-5 percentage points**	**5 percentage points**
B / W Gap	**-1 percentage points**	**4 percentage points**	**10 percentage points**
Disabled	28%	25%	14%
Not disabled	29%	28%	22%
Gap	**1 percentage point**	**3 percentage points**	**8 percentage points**

The analysis shown above for the 2016-17 year one cohort was replicated for the 2020-21 entrant cohort who were 'intending' to progress to a sandwich placement in 2022-23. Again, there were relatively small gaps in the initial intentions of WP and non-WP students to take placements. However, for all the groups identified in Table 1, there was, again, a notably increased gap between enrolling in a sandwich course in year one compared to actually gaining a placement in year three. As a result, it is proposed that research and practice places greater emphasis on the cohort of students who intended to undertake a sandwich placement but did not do so.

2.2   Literature and rational

In the past few decades, the UK has seen a substantial increase in the number of graduates in the labour market, resulting in greater competition for graduate roles (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Rae, 2007). This has led to the recognition that a degree alone is insufficient for positive labour market outcomes

(Tomlinson, 2008), and this approach now shapes student experience in UK HEPs (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Clarke, 2018; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Policy decisions in the late 1990s and early 2000s have prompted students to enhance their own employability (Mason et al., 2009; Rae, 2007; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Employability, comprising career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital, has become crucial for graduate outcomes (Fugate et al., 2004:16; Clarke, 2018). A key way to develop employability is through year-long sandwich placements, typically undertaken after the second year of an undergraduate degree. In the 2021-2022 academic year, over 170,00 undergraduate students enrolled on sandwich courses within their first degree programmes (HESA, 2023a), representing around 10% of all student first degree enrolments (HESA, 2023b).

UK-based studies indicate a positive relationship between placement engagement and success on course as measured by degree classification (Brooks & Youngson, n.d.; Gomez et al., 2004; Reddy & Moores, 2006; Santer, n.d.; Surridge, 2009; Yung et al., 2015), even after controlling for selection bias (Jones et al., 2017; Mansfield, 2011). Apart from the tangible outcomes, engaging in a placement opportunity contributes to the construction of employability components, including "soft currencies" such as abilities, values, and temperaments (Brown et al., 2004; Greenbank, 2011). Extra-curricular activities, such as year-long placements, provide these soft currencies in addition to the traditional "hard currencies" of credentials, portfolios, and references (Brown et al., 2004). Literature on the value of placements often particularly focus on the development of 'skills' (Atfield et al., 2021), which in turn, are integral to the development of employability and various forms of capital (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2008). Capital development and mobilisation are crucial for employability (Bathmaker, 2021; Clark & Zukas, 2013), encompassing social, physical, and psychological resources that enable individuals to navigate labour market challenges (Inceoglu et al., 2019; Hirschi, 2012; Hendry & Kloep, 2002). Although post-graduation inequalities continue to persist for students, particularly from WP backgrounds, sandwich degrees can significantly reduce these inequalities (Kerrigan et al., 2018; Divan et al., 2022).

Capital, which can be classified as 'cultural', 'social', and 'economic' (Bourdieu, 1986) is influenced by one's socio-economic context. This includes intersectional characteristics such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and age, which contribute to variations in accessible social, cultural, and economic capital for individual students. Prior access to capital resources predicts the ability to engage in employability construction through placements (Allen et al., 2013). 'Disadvantaged' students who would benefit the most are less likely to have taken part in a year-long placement compared to their more advantaged peers. The existence of these differences is broadly consistent with work by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2009) and also

complement research originating from NTU (Kerrigan et al., 2018) highlighting demographic differences in placement year take-up.

The explanations for these disparities, however, are limited. Multiple authors have identified general and discipline-specific reasons for different levels of engagement with placement years among students. However, only a limited and qualitative body of work explores the relationship between some of these reasons and stratification, focusing primarily on class (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker et al., 2013), while neglecting other intersectional characteristics. Hejmadi et al. (2012) suggested that some students may forgo placements due to the need to pay tuition fees during their placement year, although tuition fee reforms and deferred repayments have since become the norm. The cost-of-living, however, remains a significant factor. A recent survey by Blackbullion revealed that students are increasingly working longer hours and taking on more part-time employment, with 78% of the 1,000 respondents currently working alongside their studies (Office for Students, 2023). Unpaid placements are common (Smith et al., 2015), with 66% of student respondents in Prospect's Early Careers Survey (Smith & Greaves, 2022) stating that their work placements were unpaid. However, this figure encompasses students from different educational levels and does not specify placement duration. Bathmaker et al. (2013) note that unpaid placements can be particularly inaccessible to less advantaged students, who understandably prioritise short-term economic capital over the long-term benefits of placements. This aligns with previous research indicating that less advantaged students are more likely to engage in part-time work instead of employability-building activities (Waller et al, 2012, in Abrahams, 2017). Within the current economic context, this is likely to have been exacerbated. Already this poses a crucial question; to what extent is 'motivation' to pursue a placement, in comparison to factors, such as economic difficulties, the main influence of the disparities seen in securing placements?

In addition to questions around motivation and economic capital, further research is needed to explore the role of networks in differential engagement with placements. Existing qualitative studies have provided insights into class-based variations in employability efforts and network utilisation among students. These findings underscore the importance of considering the interaction between social factors and individual psychology, an area that has received limited attention in relation to placements in UK HE.

Hejmadi et al. (2012) highlight the perception of placements as a "gamble," particularly for less advantaged students who may have concerns about the risks associated with completing a degree. Individuals navigate institutional demands and application behaviours differently, viewing them as challenges or insurmountable barriers. Personal adaptability, a key aspect of employability, aligns with Tymon's (2013) work indicating that attributes such as having a proactive personality contribute to differential

employability construction, including engagement with placements. However, the mechanisms behind these psychological differences in placement uptake remain underexplored. The existing body of evidence on this social issue has addressed the contributing factors and processes to some extent, but lacks exploration of how they may relate to each other.

A scoping exercise analysing emails from 33 students in a single course at one institution (Aggett & Busby, 2011) highlighted the importance of institutional factors. The emails revealed students' reasons for not attending a placement preparation lecture. Some participants mentioned a lack of support from the university in securing placements. Holman & Richardson (2020) emphasise the importance of preparing students for skills sessions to enhance their confidence in relation to placements. The need for support was also evident regarding the relevance of placements to students' career plans (Aggett & Busby, 2011), complimenting Divan & Mcburney's (2016) findings that a common reason for low engagement with placements was the lack of suitable or attractive opportunities. Walker & Bowerman (2010, p.10) observed similar challenges, with respondents noting difficulties in finding the "right role" and suggesting that an adjusted application process could address this issue.

Multiple emails in Aggett and Busby's (2011) work highlighted the temporal aspect of the placement application process as a site of conflict, referring to clashes between the lecture and course demands, including both deadlines and cognitive load. Conflict between the application process and various other aspects of the university experience, including applying for housing and meeting deadlines, has been given elsewhere as a reason for lack of engagement (Hejmadi et al, 2012). Bathmaker et al (2013) noted that every participant who gave lack of time as a reason for being unable to secure a placement was 'less advantaged'. Altogether, these findings highlight the role that universities may play in the way that students are prepared for and guided through securing a placement, and how the increasing extra-curricular and financial demands placed on students as a result of the cost-of-living crisis may make this especially significant for less-advantaged students. More research is needed into how gender, ethnicity, and disability status may intersect with this.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research aims and objectives

This project explores equality gaps in the conversion of intention to complete a sandwich course to a work placement or year in industry. It investigates the barriers to and potential solutions for, WP students completing sandwich courses and develops a Theory of Change that sets out the mechanisms through which sandwich courses can be used to improve employability outcomes for WP students.

3.2 Key research questions

The primary research question:

1. 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?

In breaking this down further, there are several areas of focus that contribute to achieving the primary aim; these include motivation, barriers, capital, influences, process and solutions.

This leads to several secondary research questions listed below:

1. To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement?
2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process?
3. How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time?
4. Who and what influences students in their decision to pursue a placement throughout their HE journey?
5. What are the processes for securing a placement?
6. What are the current solutions for improving the equity of success in securing a placement across various student groups, and how can these be improved?

These research questions, and any additional themes found in the research through an inductive approach, form a general structure for the findings of the research.

3.3 Overview of research design

This research study used a mixed-method approach, with the phases detailed in Figure 1, below.

- Phase 1 was an exploratory phase based on qualitative interviews with staff, students, and employers. This also included a student survey aimed at final year students.
- Phase 2 involved a review of the primary and secondary research, formulating findings into a Theory of Change and providing an overview of what had been found.
- Phase 3 involved light-touch user testing, whereby the Theory of Change was presented along with findings to students, exploring its accuracy and allowing for students to shape the final draft of the Theory of Change.

Figure 1: Overview of three phase research design:
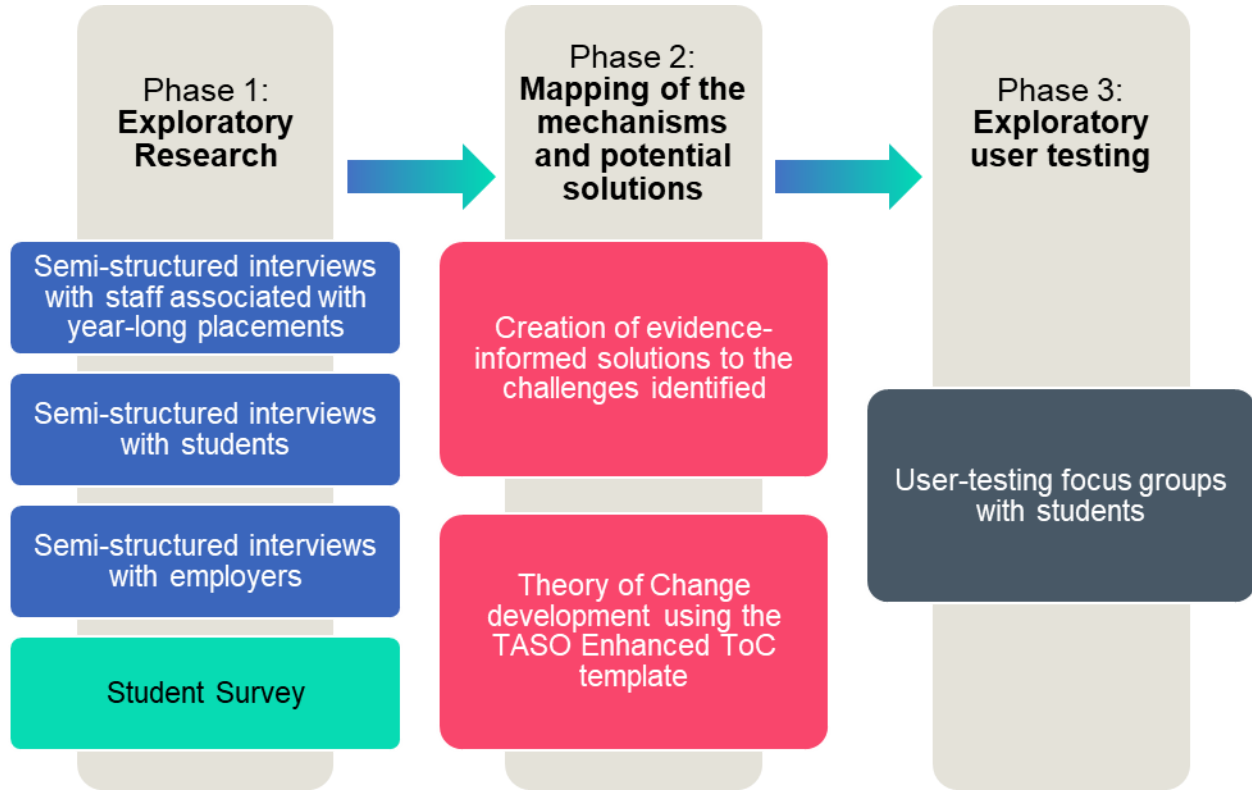
3.4 Details of the research methodology

Phase 1 and 3 contain all the primary research conducted in this project. This section of the report details the focus, sample, methodology, and research objectives for each element of phase 1. Table 2 below summarises the research sample:

Table 2: Breakdown of samples included in the primary research.

Group	Sample size	Relevant appendices
HE staff internal to NTU that support students in securing placements	16	A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.1.
HE staff external to NTU that support students at other HEPs	8	A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.1.
Students (level 6) who have completed a year-long placement	6	A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.2.
Students (level 6) who did not secure a year-long placement despite an initial intention to do so	9	A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.2.
Employer staff that currently, or have recently, employed one or more NTU students on a year-long placement	11 (from 10 employers)	A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.3.

Survey responses, of which 359 were final year students	410	A full breakdown can be found in [Appendix 12.4.](#)
Students involved in two 'user-testing' group sessions, comprised of students previously interviewed	8 (4 per session)	A full breakdown can be found in [Appendix 12.5.](#)

Implementation

- All interviews and user testing sessions were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 30 minutes to one hour.
- The student survey was conducted online via Online Surveys.

Research and Analysis

- Interviews and user testing generated qualitative feedback only, which was coded using NVivo, as part of an inductive thematic analysis.
- Qualitative responses from the survey were coded using NVivo and supported the themes generated in the analysis of the interviews.
- Quantitative responses from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis in SPSS.

A further detailed breakdown of the methodologies can be found in the appendices, including the semi-structured interviews with staff ([appendix 12.6](#)), semi-structured interviews with students ([appendix 12.7](#)), semi-structured interviews with employers ([appendix 12.8](#)), the student survey ([appendix 12.9](#)), the Theory of Change Development ([appendix 12.10)](#), and user testing ([appendix 12.11)](#)

4. Findings from the student survey (phase 1)

This section of the report outlines the results of the student survey. When interpreting the results, readers should note the differences between the four distinct student groups, listed below:

- **Group 1a**: Students who enrolled on a sandwich course at the start of their study programme and subsequently undertook a sandwich placement (either in 2021-22 and are now back studying, or currently on work placement in 2022-23)
- **Group 1b**: Students who originally enrolled on a three-year full-time course at the start of their study programme and subsequently converted to a sandwich course and undertook a placement (either in 2021-22 and are now back studying or currently on work placement in 2022-23)
- **Group 2a**: Students who originally enrolled on a sandwich course at the start of their study programme and subsequently converted back to a three-year full-time course
- **Group 2b**: Students who never enrolled on a sandwich course

The sample size for some sub-groups of interest was relatively small and therefore the analysis resulting from the survey was, by definition, exploratory and informed the subsequent more in-depth qualitative research. Sub-group sample sizes are provided where appropriate, and results should be interpreted with caution.

The extent to which survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements related to participation (or non-participation) in sandwich placements is summarised in Table 3 (analysed by the above four groups) and Table 4 (analysed by WP and ethnicity status) below. Further reporting on students' perceptions is provided below these tables.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with, by Student Group:

|	Group 1a (n=187)	Group 1b (n= 54)	Group 2a (n= 32)	Group 2b (n= 86)
I knew the difference between sandwich and full time courses	99%	93%	97%	88%
I felt gaining work experience would benefit me personally	98%	98%	84%	88%
I felt gaining work experience would benefit me academically	89%	91%	78%	84%
I felt gaining work experience could benefit me professionally	100%	100%	91%	94%
I felt work experience alongside study was a priority for me	92%	72%	63%	61%
Sandwich placements are likely to improve career prospects	99%	100%	81%	91%
Sandwich placements are likely to improve academic performance in final year	83%	74%	69%	57%
I felt like I should go on a placement year	94%	91%	77%	N/A
I felt like I wanted to go on a placement year	98%	93%	68%	N/A
I had enough information about placements	83%	70%	61%	N/A
I had enough support in finding placements	62%	59%	42%	N/A
I had enough support applying for placements	62%	63%	39%	N/A
I had enough emotional support	48%	43%	36%	N/A
I had enough practical support	60%	45%	52%	N/A
I have done other work experience before / during uni that provides the same benefits as a placement	N/A	N/A	52%	65%
I feel disadvantaged in comparison to my peers that secured a placement	N/A	N/A	36%	33%
My placement has improved my career prospects	96%	96%	N/A	N/A
I had enough support from the university with the practical aspects of starting my placement	55%	54%	N/A	N/A
My placement changed my approach to study	71%	87%	N/A	N/A
My placement improved my academic performance	68%	68%	N/A	N/A
I found it easy to manage my finances during my placement year	80%	66%	N/A	N/A
I had enough support from the university with the practical aspects of returning for my final year	50%	42%	N/A	N/A

Table 4: Percentage of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing, by students' WP and ethnicity status:

	WP (n=84)	Non-WP (n=232)	BAME (n=66)	White (n=249)
I knew the difference between sandwich & full time courses	95%	95%	91%	96%
I felt gaining work experience would benefit me personally	92%	95%	91%	96%
I felt gaining work experience would benefit me academically	84%	88%	80%	90%
I felt gaining work experience could benefit me professionally	98%	98%	96%	98%
I felt work experience alongside study was a priority for me	83%	77%	76%	80%
Sandwich placements are likely to improve career prospects	93%	97%	95%	96%
Sandwich placements are likely to improve academic performance in final year	67%	78%	64%	78%
I felt like I should go on a placement year	95%	92%	85%	94%
I felt like I wanted to go on a placement year	91%	94%	91%	95%
I had enough information about placements	79%	77%	77%	78%
I had enough support in finding placements	55%	59%	55%	59%
I had enough support applying for placements	66%	58%	57%	61%
I had enough emotional support	45%	43%	33%	45%
I had enough practical support	55%	54%	47%	55%
I have done other work experience before / during uni that provides the same benefits as a placement	59%	61%	46%	65%
I feel disadvantaged in comparison to my peers that secured a placement	32%	34%	46%	29%
My placement has improved my career prospect	88%	98%	88%	98%
I had enough support from the university with the practical aspects of starting my placement	52%	56%	60%	51%
My placement changed my approach to study	69%	76%	57%	78%
My placement improved my academic performance	65%	69%	57%	70%
I found it easy to manage my finances during my placement year	70%	80%	72%	79%
I had enough support from the university with the practical aspects of returning for my final year	62%	44%	57%	46%

Figure 2 below provides an insight into students' knowledge and perceptions of sandwich placements at the start of their first year of undergraduate study at NTU. As many as 95% agreed (81% strongly) that they knew the difference between a sandwich course and a full-time course. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were differences between the groups, with 99% of Group 1a (those who enrolled on a sandwich course and subsequently undertook a placement) agreeing, compared with 88% of Group 2b (those who never enrolled on a sandwich course) (Table 3). Considering Group 2b includes many students who may not have had the option to do a sandwich version of their course, this still demonstrates a high level of awareness of sandwich placement opportunities from the offset.

The vast majority of respondents (including WP students, as shown in Table 4) felt that gaining work experience alongside study through the sandwich placement route would benefit them personally, academically and professionally and that gaining this experience was a priority for them. These results offer insight relevant to the primary research question – what are the main barriers, and corresponding solutions, to converting WP students' intention to complete a sandwich course into work placement or year in industry – and suggest that awareness of, or aspiration towards undertaking sandwich placements are not necessarily the major barriers to accessing them.

Figure 2: Knowledge and perceptions of sandwich placements at the start of the first year of study (all groups; n=359)
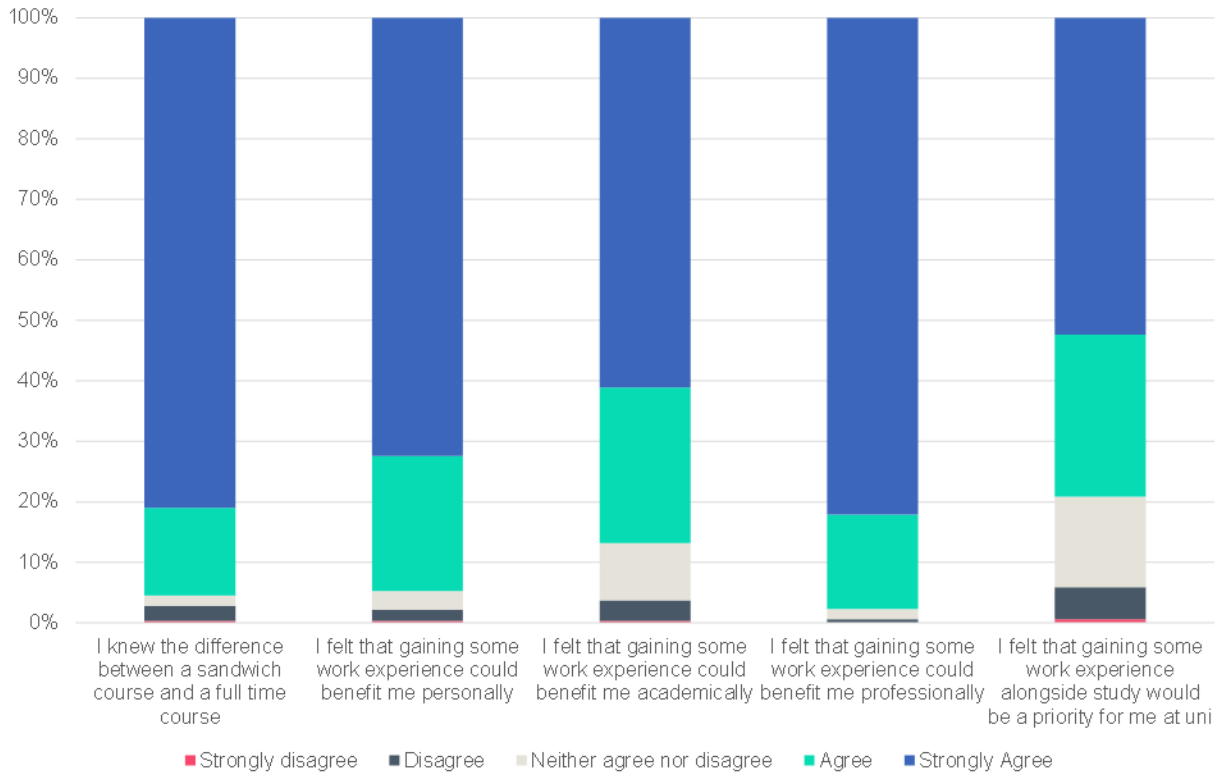
Whilst sandwich placements had been considered beneficial by the vast majority upon initial enrolment, there were differences in terms of these perceptions between the four groups (Table 3). Indeed, 100% of Groups 1a (originally enrolled on a sandwich course and undertook placement) and 1b (originally not enrolled on sandwich course but undertook placement) felt gaining work experience would benefit them professionally from the offset of their course, compared with 91% from Group 2a (originally enrolled on sandwich course but did not undertake placement). Group 2a and, unsurprisingly, Group 2b (never enrolled on sandwich course and did not undertake placement) also had a lower proportion indicating that gaining work experience alongside study was a priority for them.

A considerable 96% of respondents agreed that placements were likely to improve a student's career prospects. Again, however, there were differences between student groups (Table 3); almost 100% of students who had undertaken (or were currently undertaking) a sandwich placement (Groups 1a and 1b) felt like career prospects were improved, compared with 81% of Group 2a (who switched from sandwich to full time)

and 91% of Group 2b. When focusing on student characteristics, WP students were less likely (93%) than non-WP students (97%) to agree that placements would improve their career prospects (Table 4). Indeed, further investigation showed that only 58% of WP students *strongly* agreed, compared with 78% of non-WP students.

The majority of respondents also agreed that there was a positive association between participation in sandwich placements and academic performance upon return to their final year study programme. Again, however, we see a large variation between the different student groups (Table 3). 83% of Group 1a agreed that sandwich placements were likely to improve academic standards, compared with 74%, 69% and 57% of Groups 1b, 2a and 2b, respectively. Interestingly, WP and, in particular, BAME students were less likely to agree with the positive association between placements and improved academic performance (Table 4).[4]

Figure 3: About respondents' intentions to undertake a sandwich placement (groups 1a, 1b & 2a; n=269):
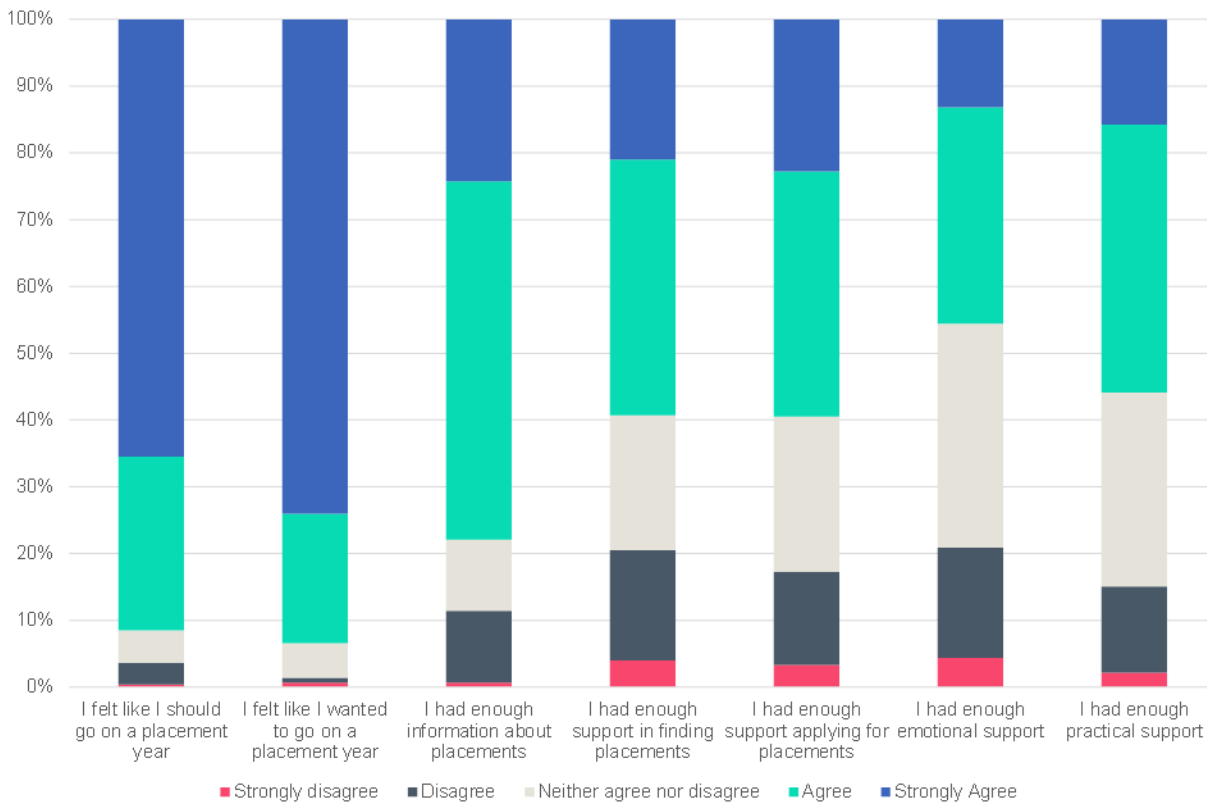
Of those students that, at some point during their study programme, enrolled on a sandwich course, over 90% felt like they *should* and, an even greater proportion felt like they *wanted* to go on a placement year when they originally decided to enrol (Figure 3).

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[4] Although, to some extent this is influenced by confounding variables, disadvantaged student groups were more likely to be in Group 2b and, as we saw above, Group 2b students were less likely to agree that placements were likely to improve academic performance.

Perhaps tellingly, around 20% disagreed that they'd had enough support (both emotional and practical) in finding placements and applying for placements. Only 25% strongly agreed that they had enough information about placements, suggesting another avenue for further exploration.

Unsurprisingly, Group 2a (originally enrolled on a sandwich course but did not undertake placement) were significantly less likely to report that they had felt that they wanted to go on a placement year (Table 3). They were also much less likely than the other two groups to feel they had had sufficient information about placements. Only 42% felt they had enough support in finding placements, and even fewer (39%) in applying for them. This reinforces the importance of Group 2a in this study and confirms that these students were more likely to experience barriers that they felt prevented them from accessing placements. To identify potential solutions to inequality of opportunity in accessing sandwich placements, it's important to first identify the problems, a task that Group 2a's experiences helps facilitate.

Around a third of students not undertaking a sandwich placement (36% Group 2a; 33% Group 2b) reported that they felt disadvantaged in comparison to their peers that secured a placement. Interestingly, there appears to be a wide disparity between BAME (46% felt disadvantaged) and White (29% felt disadvantaged) students (Table 4). BAME students were also considerably less likely to have felt that they had done other work experiences that had provided the same benefits as sandwich placements.

The vast majority, 96%, of respondents (Table 3) who had undertaken a sandwich placement and returned to their final year of study (year four) agreed that their placement had improved their career prospects (with no discernible difference between Groups 1a and 1b). However, this masked considerable variation (Table 4) between WP (88% agreed) and non-WP students (98% agreed) and BAME (88% agreed) and White (98% agreed). This may suggest that WP and/or BAME students that manage to secure placements are less likely to find the most desirable opportunities and/or that they don't equally feel their placements benefited them. Just over half of respondents agreed (and 22% disagreed) that they had enough support with the practical aspects of starting their placement (with little difference between Groups 1a & 1b).

Of those students now back on campus having undertaken their placement year in 2021-22, more than three-quarters reported that they had found it easy to manage their finances during their placement year. However, WP and BAME students were less likely to agree (Table 4).

Around three-quarters of these year four respondents currently back studying at NTU after their placement year reported that the placement had improved their academic performance, and a similar proportion agreed that they had changed their approach

(Table 3). However, there was a large gap in these affirmative responses between BAME and White students (Table 4).

Students who did not secure a placement were asked why they did not pursue one based on various reasons (see Figure 4). More than half reported that they wanted to complete university quickly, with a similar proportion citing fear of losing their study momentum. At the same time, those who undertook a placement felt that the year out helped improve their academic performance, so perhaps communications could be improved in this regard. Other oft-cited reasons for not pursuing sandwich placements included financial reasons (33%), personal circumstances (32%), having already had work experience (26%) and lack of confidence or readiness (25%). Relatively few cited that there was a lack of placements in Nottingham (16%) or close to their family home (11%).

Figure 4: Reasons cited for not pursuing a placement (groups 2a & 2b; n=88):
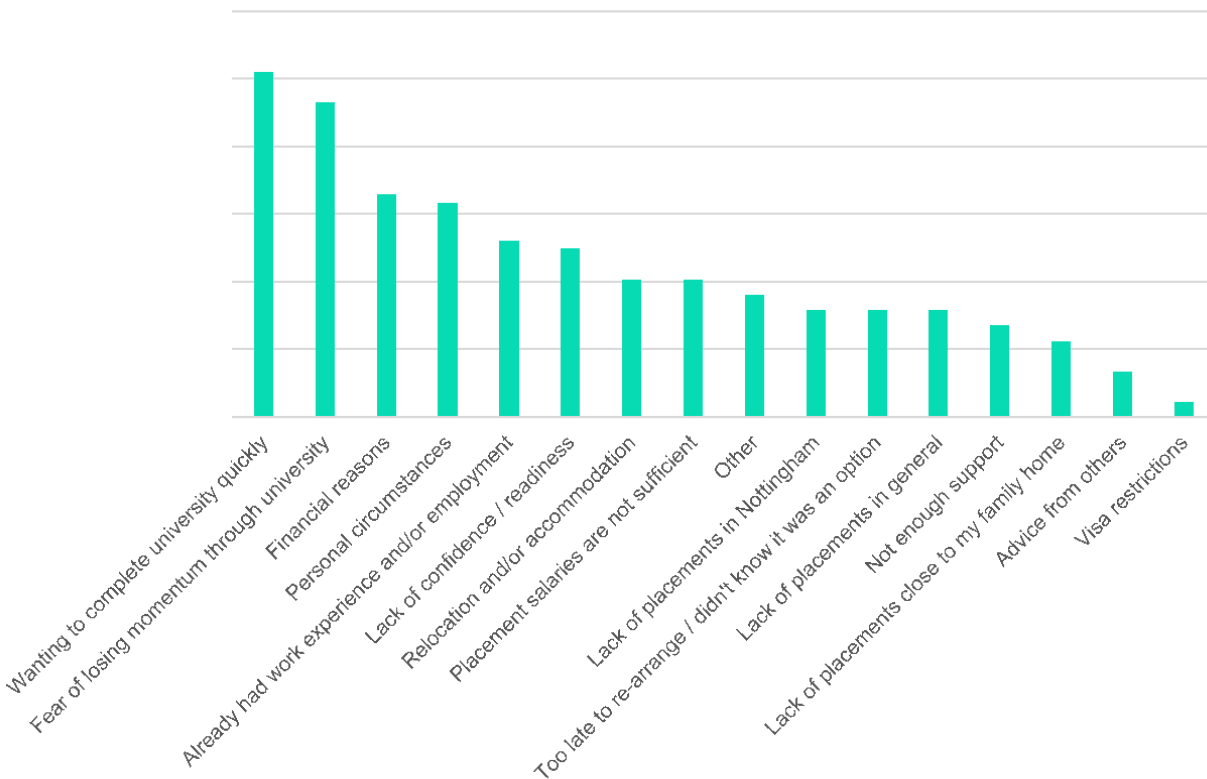
Students who had undertaken placements were asked what the main challenges were to applying for them ([Figure 5](#)). More than half cited unsuccessful applications, suggesting that some of the most sought after opportunities were competitive. Other oft-cited reasons included a lack of confidence (39%), unsuccessful interviews (37%), and placements insufficiently paid (37%). Unlike their counterparts who did not undertake placements, a considerable proportion of students suggested that there was a lack of available places in Nottingham (27%), close to home (28%) or in general (36%). This suggests that these issues are more likely to come to the fore once students are seriously embarking on a placement opportunity. In other words, lack of available placements is less of a barrier in terms of *intentions* to undertake a sandwich course but a major obstacle in terms of converting those intentions into actually taking up a placement.

Figure 5: Main challenges cited to applying for a placement - Groups 1a, 1b & 2a; (n=254):
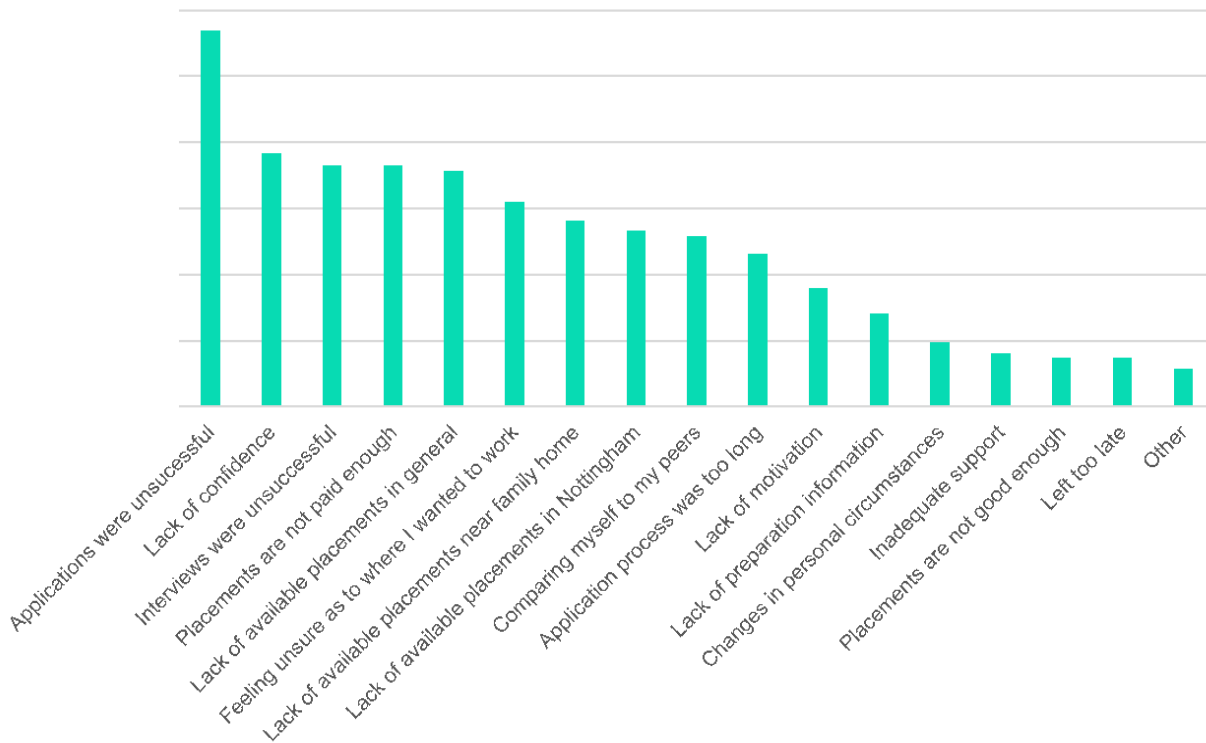
5. Findings from qualitative research (phase 1)

This section of the report outlines the qualitative findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with staff, interviews with employers, interviews with students, and students' responses to open-ended survey questions.

The thematic analysis of the research conducted in phase 1 resulted in the identification of eight key factors that capture the challenges and considerations that students experience: initial intentions and changing pathways (section 5.1), location, living and social life (section 5.2), confidence and resilience (section 5.3), personal application (section 5.4), placement suitability and availability (section 5.5), student background (section 5.6), finances (section 5.7), and timing (section 5.8). Each of these factors, and the specific considerations within each factor, is presented below.

5.1   Initial intentions and changing pathways

Before we explore those factors preventing students from securing a placement, it is important to better understand the aims and goals behind their intentions. This research shows that students perceive many potential benefits from taking a placement year, including gaining an understanding of a particular sector or role, building their skillset, and improving both their general employability and the likelihood of succeeding down a specific career path. However, throughout the survey, for those students who did not consider a placement, the majority of students (60 out of the 84 students) did not believe a placement would be the best way to develop their career prospects, did not feel that the pathway was available to them, and wanted to complete university quickly.

Career progression was seen as a crucial reason why students wish to pursue a placement opportunity. Where many students had an idea of what sector, or more specifically, what role, they wished to work in following graduation, securing a placement would help them achieve that goal.

> *"the most common motivations we see [are] we find a student that is really fixed on working within a certain industry. And they will move mountains to secure a role within a certain industry." – Staff interview (NTU 14)*

> *"the job I wanted is really difficult to get because it's quite high in demand, so doing a placement increased my chances of getting an interview." – Placement student 1 (non-WP)*

Several of the students interviewed as part of this project were motivated to secure a placement in order to gain **wider experiences** of the work environment. These students described how a placement would provide them an understanding of the realities of

working in that field, help to distinguish between different roles within a sector, or enable them to develop their career plan.

> *"I wanted to do it because a lot of graduate jobs, they already want you to have like at least a year's worth of experience. I also thought at that time that it would help me to decide what career I wanted to do in the future, like whether I did want to go into fashion or what I want to go into specifically."* – Non-placement student 6 (non-WP)

However, entering the placement process with a less specific goal could ultimately lead to disappointment.

> *"I was going in with an open mind and just trying to go and enjoy myself and see what the working world is like…. …Unfortunately, that experience wasn't like I expected."* – Placement student 2 (WP)

A few students interviewed described their intention to do a placement as being directly linked to their financial situation. A placement was seen as an **opportunity for security**; providing the means for a less uncertain financial future, or to gain experience that otherwise wouldn't have been provided to them due to coming from a less affluent background. Although obtaining money is not the sole motivation for getting a placement in the short term, it does highlight how the desire for a strong financial situation is a driving motivational factor for students.

> *"I didn't grow up around many people that actually went to university, or that actually seemed like they would be able to do well, if I'm being honest. The jobs that my family did are just basic jobs that required you to have basic GCSEs… I wanted to be different. Wanted to be in a better position financially and mentally stable as well."* – Placement student 2 (WP)

Employability stakeholders, as well as employers largely drawing on their own experiences, reflected on the **external influences** of students' family and friends on the students, specifically in relation to undertaking a placement. These influences were seen to be both positive and negative. Where families didn't understand the potential value of the placement or had concerns about the need to financially support the student, they could deter the students from applying or continuing with their placement.

> *"They go home for Christmas and then we noticed a lot of students come back and decide not to do a placement because their parents kind of tell them "Look, you know, can you afford it? You know we can't afford to support you…" …A lot of students on placement tend to drop out as well after Christmas, because their parents give them pep talks."* – Staff interview (NTU 11)

Conversely, family members who had previously undertaken successful placements or had certain experiences of post-university life encouraged and/or inspired students to take placements.

> *"I had two older siblings that went to university, they knew how hard it was once you graduate, they pushed me massively to say you need to do a placement" – Employer Interview 10*

The research suggests that many students initially intend to do a work placement in order to gain **additional work experience** to help them subsequently progress in their careers. However, several students interviewed during this project who did not secure a placement stated that they were significantly less motivated to do so because they had already secured work or work experience following graduation, hence they ultimately chose to switch to a three year full-time course without the placement option.

> *"I'd already been offered this graduate job next year. And so I was sort of in the back of my mind, I was like, do I do a placement? Or do I just go forward and take a graduate job at the end of it?" – Non-placement student 4 (Non-WP)*

From the perspective of the employers, several described how a diverse and extensive work experience is attractive when looking for new staff. This presents a 'catch-22' situation; students who already have work experience are more likely to get a placement, however those that have existing experience, may be less likely to want a placement.

Students described that the factor of **finishing quickly** dissuaded them from committing to an additional year on their course. For some students their motivation to seek a placement was reduced by the (perhaps ill-conceived) idea that they would be 'left behind' and needed to enter post-graduate employment earlier, whilst for others, a lack of enjoyment of their course was a key factor in their desire to finish quickly.

> *"At that point I was like "ohh, I just wanna finish university now"… …It's just like the way the world was at that time [Covid], but personally made me really dislike the course. So then at that point, I was like, "I just wanna graduate as like, as soon as possible". So that's probably the main reason that I didn't do a placement." – Non-placement Group Interview Student 2 (WP)*

> *"if you come from more of a disadvantaged background, there's that emphasis on like finishing university and getting out to work, so you can start to earn money." – Non-placement student 6 (non-WP)*

5.2 Location, living, and social life

The second of the eight key factors discussed was the location. There are a variety of ways in which the location of a placement can be a barrier (or facilitator) for students, and how that can affect students, particularly from a WP background. It is clear that the influence is not simply related to economic capital or the ability to relocate. There is a significant social and emotional component to where the student will live, how they will achieve it, and the social ties they make or leave behind.

It was widely understood across staff, students, and employers that students often **needed to travel or relocate** to access a desired placement. This issue is particularly notable for students at institutions not based in one of the few large cities within the UK, and for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, where navigating (and paying for) travel and relocation can be more challenging.

> *"We obviously will offer support in that we will alter start times, start dates. We will help them find accommodation… But [we] only offer financial help for relocations of people that are [a specific grade] or above." – Employer Interview 5*

A significant aspect to relocation that was raised was the social and emotional impact of moving away and students' **distance from social groups**. Students were concerned that taking a placement would result in them being alone not only during the placement year itself, but also in the year of university that followed (assuming their friends did not take placements).

> *"if I personally did a placement this year and I came back next year, I wouldn't have anyone to live with because all my friends won't be here. So then it would make final year even harder because you'd feel quite isolated." – Non-placement Interview Student 2 (WP)*

Students are actively influenced by the **actions and opinions of others**. Indeed, the research found entire social groups succeed or fail to secure a placement, based on the actions of a group and how these actions reinforce each other within that collective.

> *"A lot of students want to stay together in their third year. They don't want to live by themselves in a strange city. So if their friends aren't doing a placement, then they tend to not be doing one as well." – Staff interview (NTU 11)*

> *"if you've got particularly strong advocates in a seminar group, they're completely against placements to saying "It's pointless" and don't want to do it, that can sway the whole room." – Staff Interview (HEP 5)*

For many students who wish to stay with friends, near partners, or in a specific area, there is an increased likelihood of them **prioritising accommodation and discounting risk.** The pressure to secure accommodation early in the academic year is high for many students, not only to reinforce their social connection with friends, but also due to external pressures from landlords and property management companies.

> *"Landlords want them to sign up as soon as possible. Students want to sign up as soon as possible to secure the good house mates and the houses, and that is completely at odds with them leaving [university town/city] to go and do a placement." – Staff Interview (HEP 5)*

Several students reflected on a lack of **willingness to relocate** to secure a placement, despite applying for, or even securing a placement opportunity. Interestingly, for these students, even having a clearer path of what the following year may look like was not enough to convince the student to commit to relocating.

> *"they did offer me one… in Manchester, for example. But I didn't really want to move that far north. So that kind of made a decision a little bit easier for me" – Non-placement student 4 (non-WP)*

Some students interviewed did undertake significant relocations, despite the emotional and social challenges. In these cases, students often reflected on feelings of isolation and loneliness when moving to a large new city, even if they had experienced relocation as part of attending university. Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those with a lower predisposition to social and cultural capital, appeared to have a preference for staying closer to a known location (e.g. university or the family home), which might restrict opportunities.

> *"people want to stay quite rooted in their location. The more social, cultural capital you have, the more confidence those people have to relocate." – Staff Interview (HEP 6)*

5.3   Confidence and resilience

The third theme identified throughout the research was linked to the confidence and resilience of students. In the student survey, for example, participants were asked what their advice would be for other students in securing a placement. The most commonly occurring theme from these free-text comments was related to building confidence and resilience, particularly in the face of repeated rejections.

Confidence and resilience is framed both in terms of the general predisposition of students, but also how the process can affect the students on a psychological level. The two terms were generally described in slightly different ways. Participants discussed confidence in relation to the student mindset when considering an application and

presenting themselves at points in the application process (for example, an assessment centre). Resilience was discussed more in relation to how the student reacted to setbacks or difficulties throughout the process, and to what extent the student persisted. In both instances, there was a general perception that a student who had higher levels of confidence in their own abilities, and greater resilience when facing obstacles would be more successful in securing a placement.

Firstly, considering **confidence and disadvantage**, the students themselves identified how confidence in general can be lower in those from low socio-economic backgrounds, due to a more negative self-reflection and a lack of self-belief.

> *"when you don't come from the most wealthy background or whatever, you're not at the same amount of education as other people. So you may think of yourself as less likely to get a placement if it's more competitive." – Non-placement Student 7 (WP)*

Disadvantaged students were seen as potentially lacking the direction that can be provided both internally (driven by your own aspirations) and externally (driven by role models and social capital) and had a smaller circle of people who had undertaken placements, upon whose experience they could draw.

> *"If you've got a student that hasn't been supported, hasn't been given these opportunities from a young age, they're gonna be a lot less confident and they're not gonna have the communication skills… it's extremely important for placement students." – Employer Interview 5*

A lack of self-confidence, and the presence of self-doubt, can lead to a **paralysis of action**. For example, a few students believed that their application or accompanying documents (for example, a portfolio of work, when relevant) would not have been 'good enough' for them to succeed in securing a placement. Others felt that competitive placement opportunities might be out of their reach due to the calibre of other candidates. As a result, applications simply weren't made, and opportunities were missed.

> *"I've spoken to students before who have genuinely not applied for a placement because they didn't think they would get it. So they're ruling themselves out of an opportunity before they've even ruled themselves in because they're telling themselves they're not good enough to do it." – Staff interview (NTU 7)*

Several employers described **confidence as an asset**, insofar as they are actively seeking confidence in the student as part of the selection process. Some employers reflected that they were deterred from offering students a placement opportunity because of a perceived lack of confidence in the candidate. Reflecting on their own

needs as a business, they felt that students who can demonstrate a level of confidence in themselves and their ability are generally seen as a more desirable asset.

> *"if we are having someone join our business and we are investing a lot of time and resource in teaching them, it is really beneficial to have someone who can come in and be confident enough to ask those questions and not to be a wallflower, in that sense." – Employer Interview 3*

In order to address issues in **building confidence**, some students relied on social support, networks, or communities. However, HEPs have an equally important role to play in coaching and in providing emotional as well as practical support, in order to enhance student success in applying for placements.

> *"We're putting on a session next week, which is just essentially "keep going". You know, there's no slides, no scripts, nothing. None of that nonsense. It's real conversation." – Staff interview (NTU 14)*

There is a need for considered and personalised approaches to coaching and confidence-building. For some students, staff insistence and continued encouragement to pursue a placement had the opposite of the intended effect, by overly pressurising students or making them feel like they were failing before they have even started.

The research found that students not only need confidence going into the process, but **resilience** in maintaining that confidence in the face of challenges or perceived failure. Many of the students interviewed reflected on how their confidence wavered throughout the process, such as in the face of multiple rejections, compounded by receiving little or no feedback. This can lead to talking decisions to stop pursuing a placement to lessen any emotional impact.

> *"I could just zone in on my degree, rather than a lot of people had a bit of trouble getting the job or it's quite hard… … So I can kind of ride along thinking "I'm doing quite well" without having been shot down every second week with "you haven't made it through" kind of thing." – Non-placement student 8 (non-WP)*

Like with confidence, resilience is not only beneficial in successfully navigating the application process, but can also be a desirable quality for prospective employers.

> *"We have found placements with care leavers and with those who've been through addiction… Quite often, these people make the best employees because they've overcome adversity so much they do most things to succeed. They've got grit, they've got determination." – Employer Interview 9*

5.4   Personal Application

The fourth factor identified through the thematic analysis is personal application. In navigating the process for securing a placement, students require more than simply considering their own plans, where they wish to work and having the confidence to put themselves forward. Students must also have the ability to apply to placement roles, often having to submit a large number of applications and make a number of contacts in order to be successful. This requires both a significant 'effort' on the part of the student, as well as skill in effectively selling their own abilities to potential employers.

Through the survey of final year students, approximately a third of the students who attempted to secure a placement but were unsuccessful described difficulties navigating the placement process as the main reason for not securing a placement. However, the total number of responses was relatively small and lacked detail. Additional detail is provided in more depth through the interviews.

It is recognised by staff that the process of obtaining a placement can be arduous and requires work and persistence on behalf of the student with no certainty of success. Staff were generally sympathetic to student challenges and hoped to support them as much as they could, short of completing applications on their behalf. On the other hand, students were notably less compassionate to their peers who had not secured a placement. Several participants questioned the **general effort** that their peers had made to achieve their goals, and cited this as one of the main reasons for lack of success.

> *"the people who don't get a placements are the people that… "lazy" is a strong word, but during the application process probably didn't dedicate enough time or effort to it." – Non-placement student 4 (non-WP)*

Both staff and students felt that some students expected to be "given" a placement rather than having to apply. This could suggest a lack of understanding of the process, rather than simply a lack of effort.

Numerous research participants suggested that rather than resulting from a sustained lack of effort, failure to gain a placement was a result of sub-optimal **timing and organisation**. Staff in HEPs and employers stressed that students needed to start searching earlier in the academic year. Some students, however, had either not prioritised securing a placement in the first or even second term in their second year or had actively procrastinated before searching for opportunities.

> *"Some of them that did know, didn't bother looking until it was like April. And those are the ones that didn't get one." – Non-placement student 5 (WP)*

Having the organisational skills to navigate often difficult timeframes and logistics was seen as crucial to securing a desired placement.

> "I emailed companies even if they weren't advertising placements, saying "This is My Portfolio, this is my CV. I'm a second year student. If you have placements available…" …Then I also checked In-Place as well. I had like an Excel spreadsheet and ticked through the ones that I did and whether I've heard back from them." – Placement student 3 (non-WP)

Although 'being organised' was suggested by several staff as a positive step, the main strategic advice was of students **tailoring the approach** to match their application with the requirements of the role and company.

> "The best applications we see are the ones that are properly tailored to the role, the industry, the company that they're actually applying to… I've often said to students you're better off sending five really good quality applications to five companies, then 50 generic CVs to 50 companies." – Staff Interview (NTU 7)

Around half of the students interviewed who secured a placement stressed the importance of taking the time to personalise their applications, which might include drawing on interpersonal and communication skills in liaising directly with employers. Employers described how a personalised application that specifically details how they fit with the employer itself and its values, is significantly more likely to be successful.

> "There's a lot of people who you can just tell that they haven't spent the time to research the company, and tailoring things to the company is the only way to get in." – Employer Interview 10

Demonstrating **writing and communication** skills were crucial in submitting a strong application, as well as during the interview and/or assessment process. Some staff and employers made the link between communication skills and WP status, implying that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less skilled in communication, in part due to education standards but also due to style.

> "There is a bias towards people who are competent at communication and internationalisation, and working in large groups of people. And that tends to be people who have come from richer backgrounds." – Employer Interview 1

Employers shared how valuable **previous work experience** was from their perspective in finding suitable candidates to fill placement opportunities. Prior experience of work was deemed to not only help the student develop key skills needed in employment but

also demonstrate something about the character of the student that is desirable to the employer.

> *"the reason we employed him actually, was because he'd already done some work experience for [a relevant] company… he talked about this period where he'd done PAT testing. He talked about doing that for 12 hours a day, every day through the summer, for whatever many years. And it's like, wow, okay, this guy loves [this area of work], is diligent, is a completer/finisher. You can't not hire somebody like that."* – Employer Interview 1

5.5 Placement suitability and availability

The fifth factor identified through the thematic analysis was placement suitability and availability. A lack of placement opportunities was identified by students as a large factor in whether they could secure a placement. Competition for placements is driven by numerous factors, including availability in specific geographic locations and subject areas. For some, the role was of paramount importance, whereas for others, the employer itself was the main consideration. Whilst university staff acknowledged the lower availability of placements in certain areas, they also highlighted that students can have a narrower definition of a suitable or desirable placement than they would recommend. In this way, the perceived availability and suitability of placements are linked. Helping the students broaden their search may be part of the solution. However HEPs and employers also need to ensure that there are sufficient relevant and high quality placements available.

Many of the students interviewed, both those who secured placements, and those who did not, suggested that one of the biggest challenges was a **lack of placement opportunities** (real or perceived) available. This was often described in the context of courses that had a large number of students searching for an opportunity at the same time, or for courses that have more specific career outcomes or practical elements, such as sport and healthcare.

From the perspective of HEP staff, there was also a recognition that the number of placements can be limited in certain fields. It is acknowledged that each respective university has part-responsibility for improving the number of placements available, which can be achieved through enhancing partnerships with employers.

> *"It's very clear to us where we need to put more effort into finding employers, that we can provide to the business development advisors."* – Staff interview (HEP 2)

There are external factors that influence the supply and demand of placements. For example, there are rising numbers of students wishing to secure placements, as both universities and students across the country increasingly understand their benefits. Recently, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the availability of placements. Several students who did not secure a placement attributed this to a lack of availability due to the pandemic, while others reported choosing to switch to the full time three year course option to avoid an impacted placement experience.

Some staff suggested that the restrictions that students feel like they have, either to a specific field or role, may not be as severe as the student may believe it to be. By considering either a wider career path, or how an experience in a different field can still have a benefit to a professional journey, the student may have more options available to them. A suggestion is that staff can work with the student to broaden their horizons in terms of opportunity, and this can be a valuable form of support that is missing from academic learning at university.

> *"If they're doing a psychology degree they don't have to go into psychology, so it's actually making them aware of the range of roles that are available to them" – Staff interview (NTU 12)*

This advice was reflected in the student survey, whereby participants were asked what their advice would be for other students in securing a placement. A reoccurring piece of advice from students for their peers was to expand their search to include more possibilities for what the student could secure. Many gave their own anecdotes about how they ultimately secured a placement that they had not expected or had fitted their initial criteria, but ultimately was extremely beneficial to them.

Many students not only look for specific roles, but also favour specific employers. Often, students are more drawn to medium to large-sized employers (e.g. over 250 employees) with **brand recognition**, over small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The reasons for this are twofold; firstly, having a known employer listed on a CV is felt to have a positive influence for the student in terms of future prospects. Secondly, large employers with a well-known brand are more likely to have a positive reputation, and the student may feel like they 'know' more about what the role may hold.

Notably, many staff described not only how SMEs can be equally as valuable for students as the larger employers, but often can provide a better placement experience, developing a wider range of skills and/or being more personalised.

> *"I do favour the SMEs because you do get some good experiences. They rely on the students a lot more in terms of giving them the insight, the opportunity, the training to then carry out real*

5.6 Student background

The sixth factor identified through the thematic analysis is student background. Students, university staff and employers were all found to be conscious of issues surrounding background. Employers spoke of two distinct approaches (objectivity testing and personalisation) that attempt to minimise discrimination and bias from their placement recruitment processes. However it is acknowledged that these cannot eliminate the impact of disadvantage. Disadvantage is seen to affect students' opportunities, self-image, the way they present themselves or communicate with others, and the support they need throughout the process of securing a placement. This, in turn, also affects the factors described previously.

It is generally understood that **discrimination and biases** against certain groups, such as ethnic minority students, those with disabilities and/or those from low socio-economic backgrounds, still exist whether intentional or not. While some students recognised this, examples of any bias or discrimination were mostly either generalised or related to classmates rather than themselves.

One specific example was given during the interviews where a student received a rejection to an application that they had perceived as possible discrimination, based on their demographic background. The student provided the rejection letter, which states:

> *"Although we found your qualifications impressive, there are candidates whose backgrounds more closely match the requirements of the position."*

The meaning of 'background' in this context is unclear, but the student's response to the statement is important for this study. Regardless of intent, the student reflected during the interview that these words significantly influenced them and their confidence.

> *"So basically, they read my application, thought that my experience and qualifications were great, but my background wasn't right. I don't quite know what they mean by background, but I'm not taking it as a good thing. When I read that, I was like "Oh, OK well, what if every law firm looks at me like that because of my background?" Because of where I'm from and who I am as a person, no matter how hard I work… That really took me aback." – Placement student 4 (WP)*

The employers interviewed as part of this study were largely mindful of bias and discrimination, and took time to describe the importance of equality and diversity within

their respective businesses and organisations. However, a few staff members highlighted that a lack of a joined-up approach between universities and employers was a barrier to success. A lack of shared definitions, differences in demographic groupings, and minimal data sharing between employers and universities were reported to make sharing best practices difficult.

> *"what we consider as our [disadvantage criteria] isn't necessarily what employers consider as their sort of equality and diversity… that's not necessarily the same thing on the agenda." – Staff interview (NTU 3)*

Some employers attempt to address bias or discrimination by embedding **objectivity in recruitment** processes. This involves blind recruitment (i.e. removing names and details of applicants), implementing various objective 'tests' (e.g., skills testing or psychometric testing), and offering little in the way of personalised approaches to support students throughout the process. These methods are more likely to be used by large or multinational employers.

> *"we get lots of applicants, we need to filter it down. So they use the usual methods of psychometric testing all of that stuff and then written applications and then you progress to assessment centres… …it's unfair if maybe one person gets talked through it when others maybe haven't." – Employer interview 10*

Staff and students interviewed generally understood the value and approach of objective testing and blind recruitment that examines previous experience and skills. Using this approach, students have equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills and unconscious bias can be kept to a minimum. There are, however, some drawbacks. Considering testing, for example, a few staff members raised concerns that disadvantaged students may perform less well in these situations due to additional needs that are not considered, or simply due to a lack of similar experience. Effectively, the disadvantage is systemic, and therefore even objective measures can still disadvantage some individuals.

> *"the psychometric tests and that kind of thing that a lot of employers do nowadays... I think they terrify our students. …a lot of them fall out because I think they're scared of them. They don't know they can practise or they don't practise and they can get lost." – Staff interview (NTU 9)*

The second approach employers take to avoid bias and discrimination is very different. This method embraces **personality and values in recruitment**, whereby employers prefer to meet the individual, allow them to sell their strengths and ability personally, and recruit based as much on values and disposition as on skill. This type of recruitment is

more likely to be found in small-to-medium size enterprises, or even family businesses, where cultural fit is likely to be an important factor.

> *"Within a few minutes you can also get a sense of somebody's personality. I think I am a good judge of character and personality; it has never really let me down. So, I think its intuitive really whether you know somebody is a little bit self-deprecating, as we are a fun place to work…." – Employer interview 8*

Whilst several students welcomed the opportunity to 'sell themselves' and be able to demonstrate their abilities in a more personal way, others felt that a more personal approach may still be subject to unconscious biases, or that a non-traditional student may not represent that 'fit' or 'person' that the employer interviewing them may have pictured.

> *"some people from more 'disadvantaged' backgrounds might apply… won't ever come across like that because there are rules. But I think there's still that thing there that [the employers] know what they want. And it's probably the sort of high achieving academic, uni student. That stereotypical academic uni students who looks like one." – Non-placement student 4 (non-WP)*

Several employers suggested potential problems with attempting to measure **communication** subjectively. Clearly there is a tension between issues in measuring communication skills, and the suggestion that some lack communication skills. However, some employers implied that students from more 'advantaged' backgrounds would be more practised at communication, particularly in a professional environment. Again, the possibility of unconscious biases, even if this had been accounted for, could still be present.

From a student perspective, some linked communication 'ability' to race and ethnicity, rather than socio-economic background. The issues highlighted here were when English was not a student's first language, or when they had a strong regional accent.

> *"I speak English great. You wouldn't be able to tell that I'm ethnic or I'm from a different background. But a lot of my other friends, who English isn't their first language, or their English isn't as great, they would put on a 'white voice'. Especially all my black friends. They say 100% they cannot do a telephone interview without putting on my white voice." – Placement student 6 (WP)*

Some of the students interviewed described how their **background and self-image** impacted them because of internal rather than external biases. In these cases, students

felt uneasy or out of place in a specific professional environment due to their internal self-image.

> *"Definitely fear of failure and imposter syndrome. I've had a lot of, like psychological support with that actually because I used to have really bad imposter syndrome"* – Placement student 4 (WP)

Employers also discussed how some students, particularly those from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, suffered from imposter syndrome, or lack self-belief as a result of who they are, rather than any prejudice they have received.

> *"If your background is from a minimum wage family [or] single parent [family] … …maybe there is a potential that you don't have the same experiences that you can draw from, you don't always necessarily feel as positive about situations, you always believe that there are people who have got advantages over you, and you protect yourself against that by assuming that these things are for other people."* – Employer Interview 1

Both students and employers noted that students' self-limiting views can be compounded by not seeing people like them working in particular roles or companies.

> *"I think it's more of own self-doubt like self-sabotaging you think because I'm not white, I'm not good enough… I don't think everyone's racist, all they see is white people in a job."* – Placement student 6 (WP)

> *"[students might think] I'm not gonna apply there because no one that is from my background or looks like me or sounds like me works there, so I'm just not gonna 'cause what's the point?"* – Employer interview 10

Understanding student background through data was seen as crucial in identifying specific groups of students that may require additional or tailored support when navigating the placement process. However, the information required to provide this support effectively is often unavailable. Specifically, a lack of individualised student data makes targeting information and guidance, or gaining an understanding of who is accessing support, very difficult.

> *"We've not got loads of this information because we're still quite new to it and we're starting to analyse graduate outcomes in relation to placement years and where there's differences [on the] impact of that placement year depending on its students, what we would call widening participation, or not. I think if you ask us in three years, we'll have loads more data and stuff like that, but we are catching up."* – Staff interview (HEP 4)

5.7 Finances

The seventh theme identified is student finances. For many students, the challenges in securing a placement related not just to 'who you are', but also 'what you have'. The process of choosing a placement is influenced by students' ability to fund themselves; from being able to attend an interview, through to potential relocation or cost-of-living throughout the placement. The amount of money on offer during the placement is, unsurprisingly, an important consideration for students, and is likely to influence several of the factors described above.

Transportation and relocation costs are a crucial consideration for students. Where travel is required to attend interviews, the costs associated with taking a placement begin at the application stage. If the student does not have easy access to personal transport, or cannot afford public transport, then the student will struggle to access the opportunity. Some employers are aware of this, however at least three of the 10 employers interviewed still believe in the need for in person interactions, despite the logistical challenges it may pose.

> *"So they have travel costs to get to Leicester and then in second stage [we] would be asking them to travel to the site as well. And I think it's important that they do have one, at least one, face to face meeting at site. A lot of travel and costs… it was maybe unmanageable for certain students." – Employer Interview 6*

For some students, travel remains an issue throughout the placement. In particular, the cost and logistics of continued travel or commuting, even in the event of relocation. Employers in remote or rural areas, or with the requirement to travel between offices, often require students to drive to work throughout the placement. This issue is one of two parts for students; their ability to drive (i.e. having had the finances and opportunity to obtain a licence) and their resources to own a vehicle or fund travel. Some students identified this as an inequality of opportunity due to the barrier of obtaining a driving licence. This is perhaps an overlooked issue, as one employer described being an 'equal opportunities employer' while still requiring someone to have a full UK driving licence unless they had a disability.

Most HEPs interviewed were based in the North or Midlands regions of England. As a result, the issue of 'gravitation' towards bigger cities, in particular London, in order to secure the most desirable placements was widely noted.

> *"a lot of careers seem to be limited to London and really expensive places to live, and those sectors don't seem to pay very well. So if you're trying to get into the events industry, you're not going to find*

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much in [northern town/city]. So you're [combining] relocation costs on
top of no salary" - Staff Interview (HEP 5)

A number of students described how they may have been able to relocate, however, low pay or lack of financial incentive made it difficult to justify.

"…how can I justify moving to Manchester getting a flat and not a lot of
money left over at the end of it? That was probably number one [reason
for not securing a placement]." – Non-placement student 4 (non-WP)

The issue of **unpaid and low-paid placements** was discussed in almost every interview and is clearly a major barrier for some students. While it is difficult to fully capture the number of students who are currently on an unpaid placement, a staff member interviewed at one HEP estimated that between 6% and 9% of placements in the 2022-23 academic year are unpaid.

Although the consensus across the HEPs was that the number of unpaid and low-paid (e.g. expenses only and/or minimum wage) placements advertised to students should be minimised, it seems likely that they will persist for the foreseeable future. Unpaid placements in healthcare and social sciences sectors appear to be systemic and beyond HEPs' ability to address without external support or policy change. Staff noted that while the universities can choose not to offer such placements, students still frequently choose to access them regardless.

"At least 50% of our psychology students are doing unpaid placements,
which are legal. With the NHS, and with statutory bodies like the prison
service, they're unpaid, so that is a very obvious barrier for students
from lower socioeconomic backgrounds." – Staff interview (HEP 4)

The choice to take an unpaid or low-paid placement may not be financially viable or appealing to students from a WP background. Students recognised that the lack of pay rendered certain opportunities, several of which were seen to be "the best", inaccessible to them despite their abilities. For some, there was a need to be financially secure when doing a placement. Therefore they were drawn towards opportunities that were more highly paid or allowed them to continue to earn in a different fashion alongside their placement.

Receiving no pay or low pay for a placement role does not just impact the student financially. A few students described how being paid less also made them feel of less value. This link between **finances and psychology** manifested in students feeling a lower sense of control and worth, and being less able to change their situation as a result.

5.8   Timing

The eighth factor identified through the thematic analysis is timing. The issues discussed so far in this report, from the availability of placements and the skill and efforts of students in applying, to individual confidence and the pressure of securing accommodation, are not necessarily factors experienced by the student simultaneously. Each of these factors has increasing and decreasing priority throughout the year as they compete with other elements of university life. Staff, students and employers all described how the amount of time available to students is a factor that needs considering, particularly for those who work part-time.

Through the survey, students were asked approximately when they began searching for placements; 59% described starting their search in the **first term** (between September and December) of their second year, whilst 39% described a starting time of term two or beyond. Students who had not started attempting to secure placements until after the winter break were more prone to missing opportunities; indeed, large or multinational employers, particularly those with strong brand reputations, are likely to run a 'recruitment cycle' from early in the first term. Many of these roles can be filled as early as before the winter break, or can close early with high demand. In the student survey, participants were asked what their advice would be for other students in securing a placement. The second most common piece of advice (over a quarter of responses) was for students to start their search earlier, particularly in this first term.

> *"I would have started applying to placements earlier, I think I would just have started applying in December time and maybe spent a bit of time around Christmas applying."* – Non-placement Student 6 (non-WP)

The reasons for delaying the search are due to several factors, including needing time to produce a portfolio or personal statement, a focus on adapting to second year university life, or simply believing that securing a placement was a low priority at this stage.

From the start of the **second term** after the winter break, most students are required to refocus on their academic life after time away from university. For those who have not yet secured a placement, there is increased pressure to also focus on the application process. Staff and students suggested that this can represent a decision-making period, considering more about what the next academic year may look like, and the actions

needed to ensure goals can be achieved. Students feel more pressure at this stage, but their expectations may not match reality.

> *"I think there's a bit of a myth amongst students, anecdotally, that if you've not secured a place by Christmas, you're in trouble. And actually the vast majority of students will not secure placements until later in the academic year." – Staff Interview (NTU 7)*

For some, the new term meant a renewed effort and dedication to the process. For others, however, the idea of already missing opportunities was demoralising. Added to this is the significant factor that in some courses, January represents a period of assessment deadlines and exams. This can result in students prioritising the immediate issue of academic deadlines over the application process.

> *"So around like the end of February, start of March time, I would say my motivation definitely dropped off as I focused on my university work more. And then I think finishing second year, and thinking, Oh my God, like I don't have a placement and also I don't have anywhere to live in Nottingham next year." – Non-placement Student 5 (WP)*

In the **final term and summer period**, pressure can mount further for students as end-of-year exams and coursework deadlines loom. At this stage, for those students who have not secured a placement, other options, such as progressing directly to a final year, or even deferring a year, begin to carry more weight.

Although new placement opportunities are still available in the third term and even throughout summer, some staff reflected that anxieties around securing a placement could often turn to a feeling of inevitability that the student will not be able to secure a placement in time, particularly if their confidence had been knocked by repeated rejection.

> *"…kind of around Easter, there are those that become very "I'm just not able to secure one, and I've applied to, you know, 100 different opportunities. I'm not getting any feedback." – Staff interview (NTU 4)*

Several staff interviewed described how they continued encouraging students to search for placement options right through to the deadline. This strategy worked for a couple of the students interviewed, and they secured a placement during the summer break. However, almost all of the non-placement students interviewed had stopped searching by the middle of summer, despite the knowledge that opportunities may still be available. For these students, the risk of failure, coupled with the need to focus on academic work and the desire for a defined pathway in their next academic year was too great, and therefore an active choice was made to switch to the full-time three year course.

"I thought I'm getting way too close to the cut-off point now. And I have until August, to get an application out and I've got all my exams. I can't focus on applications and work and the university. It was just kind of trying to consider other options" - Non-placement Student 7 (WP)

Disadvantaged students may lack **time as a resource,** particularly when their financial status dictates that they need to undertake considerable amounts of help fund their living costs. This, in turn, can limit their time to attempt to secure a placement or access support. These students are also more likely to be spending time securing appropriate accommodation, negotiating transport issues, and securing additional funding. Addressing these issues can be a vicious cycle for disadvantaged students requiring more time for support, in order to compensate for a lack of time as a resource.

"the [university scheme for supporting disadvantaged students] helped me like preparing for all of that but the process is quite long as well and taking the time out to actually do those things as well, it's time consuming for sure" – Placement student 4 (WP)

6. Solutions proposed in the qualitative research (phase 2)

The findings from the survey and qualitative research resulted in the identification of eight factors that describe the main barriers that students, and those from WP backgrounds in particular, may face in their journey towards successfully securing a year-long sandwich placement. This section of the report responds to these factors and draws on the research to identify several potential solutions to overcoming these barriers to inform interventions to enhance students' success. Although these solutions were generated through research in phase 1, this has been framed and reflected on as part of phase 2 of this research project. This is because these solutions contributed to the development of a Theory of Change (phase 2), addressing multiple factors raised in sections 5.1 through to 5.8, often simultaneously or concurrently.

6.1 Developing cultural capital and application support

Many of the students interviewed were complimentary about the support they received from their HEP, regardless of whether they secured a placement or not. Generally, students felt they had the support they needed from the university to secure a placement, and any issues they experienced were either helped by, or perceived to be outside of the university's control. In particular, the personalised support around CV and cover letter support, and interview preparation, were well received.

Staff recognised the importance of personalised support, albeit that this cannot be the sole way in which students are supported. Finite resources mean that a balance must be found between providing intensive support to individuals and helping as many

students as possible. Almost all staff stressed the amount of provision that already exists for supporting students; from their perspective, not only are students supported on a personal and cohort level, but much of the support for students is unseen by the students themselves. For example, the work with employers to ensure their placement roles are appropriate and that they can effectively support their placement students, is often built up over a number of years or even decades.

Staff across the sector made suggestions on what could be improved in terms of direct student support. Firstly, an increased focus on skills development, both in terms of application skills and resilience building. Secondly, working more with students in their first year to prepare them for the crucial start of the second year application process. There was even a suggestion by a couple of staff members that increasing student awareness and knowledge could be a pre-entry activity.

> *"it's better careers and placements awareness and provision in schools. That's been woeful for a long time, woeful when I went. It's talking to young people about the possibility. Because a lot of this is awareness and certain people come to university despite our open days, despite everyone else, despite all our efforts when they're here, so many people still don't know that the service exists" – Staff Interview (HEP 1)*

The suggestion for more provision and support still requires thought in terms of how it is delivered. Scaling up interventions around motivation, for example, which can be complex, can lead to negativity from some students if using a blanket approach.

> *"Like, so basically our course is actually very, very pushy into the fact that you need to do a placement. Like up to the point where they've said like, "if you don't do a placement, you're not gonna do as well in final year" like they've physically said that." – Non-placement Group Interview Student 2 (non-WP)*

6.2   Expanding social capital

In addition to suggestions for earlier development of cultural capital in relation to placements, numerous staff described the importance of social capital as a positive influence on success. For example, they described how a student's family member having a link with an employer or a professional sector can be beneficial, providing both a greater insight into the area and a connection that can offer the student more opportunities. In order to replicate this, universities often turn to employment or recruiter fairs, and several staff described their importance. A few students interviewed suggested that building a relationship with an employer at one of these events directly led to them securing a placement or subsequent graduate opportunity. Staff and employers recognise this, and encourage ways to facilitate this relationship, particularly for those students who may lack social capital upon entry.

"I went to one of these networking events at uni, that my course do. And I met somebody there who works at [company name]. So I was speaking to her on LinkedIn, and I did some work experience with them for about six or seven Tuesdays. And at the end of it, they just said, we'd love to have you when you graduate." – Non-placement Student 4 (non-WP)

Another way in which universities look to expand a student's social capital is through connections with alumni or final year students who have been through the placement process. This provides students with a better understanding of what to expect, inspiration for what path they could pursue, and an honest reflection of some of the difficulties they may face before and throughout the placement year. A few students made a particular point of hearing an account from their peers that may not be entirely positive, but was realistic and useful to them.

"we had presentations from people in the years above who'd been on placement. And I think that was quite inspiring to see where they've been and see what they had done." – Non-placement Student 6 (non-WP)

From the interviews, employers were more likely than HEP staff to discuss mentoring as a solution to developing cultural and social capital both prior to employment, and as part of their placement or graduate role. Student mentoring is often a part of university support, and at NTU there is a developed mentoring scheme. There could, however, be more focus on placements through this scheme, in order to build that peer-to-peer support. In addition, HEPs could explore how they can foster mentoring relationships between employers and students, to expand the number and variety of mentors available to mentees. Interestingly, a few employers described how engaging students in the mentoring process had been more difficult in recent years, mirroring a decline in student engagement with extracurricular support that has been identified at a number of institutions, including NTU, particularly since the onset of the pandemic.

"We're finding from a lot of employers that they're struggling to get student engagement on those non-compulsory events that we host and that does come across sometimes in the recruitment of placement students as well. You can just see they're not 100%; their heart's not in it as opposed to pre COVID when you had a massive group of really engaged and motivated students." – Employer Interview 5

6.3 Enhancing economic capital

In addition to cultural and social capital, interviewees also described the steps taken by HEPs to enhance economic capital, such as lack of money or resources. One of the main ways in which universities attempt to address lower economic capital is through

additional, targeted bursaries. During student interviews, three students mentioned receiving a bursary in relation to their placement. While the additional funding was described as welcome, it was noted that the amount received was not sufficient to fund an unpaid placement, and thus it did not entirely level the playing field. One student, in particular, felt they should have qualified for additional funding.

> *"…it's not gonna make a huge amount of difference about whether you can take a placement that's unpaid. There's kind of a sense of you can take an unpaid placement because you'll get paid £1000 grant to do it. And I'm like, well, that's not true and also £1000 for 12 months is not gonna touch anything." – Placement student 5 (non-WP)*

Staff described different strategies to address disparities in economic resources. Solutions included working with employers to create onsite accommodation for placement students and developing remote working with employers to reduce the need to travel or relocate. Some suggested that rather than working on solutions; the focus should be addressing systemic issues that create the need for the resource. Unpaid placements were one of the most widely discussed issues that required resolution.

Addressing underlying issues and creating solutions to mitigate issues rely on collective action and strong partnerships between universities and employers, in order to ensure the change is applied to the sector. Staff and students recognised that a single university changing policy or introducing restrictions would simply divert employer offers away from that institution, potentially disadvantageous to that institution's student cohort.

> *"what it needs is a genuine collective stand against unpaid sandwich placements. …in order to make that work, I think we would need a fundamental [sector] wide approach to that policy." – Staff Interview (NTU 7)*

6.4   Wider structural changes

Methods of addressing factors in securing placements by universities predominantly, but not exclusively, focus on changes for the individual student. These include increasing skills, knowledge, forms of capital, or changing the behaviour of the individual. Several participants across the interviewed groups recognised that in order to address inequalities, a change to university structures and processes is also necessary. As many of the factors and barriers to securing a placement are outside of the control of the individual student, addressing the cause of the issues rather than dealing with the symptoms is also a necessary approach.

One example of adapting or amending structures to affect change could be to include support inside scheduled teaching which all students are required to attend, rather than

students needing to seek support in their own time. This could address some of the consequences of offering extracurricular support, such as individuals lacking in time, awareness of the programme, or confidence in putting themselves forward to attend. Some of the students interviewed already had employability skills built into their course, whereas others did not. Generally, the suggestion was well received by participants, regardless of their success in securing a placement or not.

> *"That would be amazing. I mean, I remember I did my CV during this [programme for supporting disadvantaged students] …I haven't done a CV before that, so I definitely [think] something in first year where you know it doesn't matter too much on the actual topic you're doing in first year." – Placement Student 2 (WP)*

The main challenge in making systemic change such as this would be the potential need to reduce or condense other aspects of the curriculum in order to accommodate the additional content. This requires commitment across the university, which can itself present challenges.

> *"it was the first time career stuff had ever been timetabled in curriculum as my old university was Russell Group and you'd be seen as diluting the curriculum. Like what? Why? Why ask? The [university name] degree is good enough." – Staff interview (HEP 6)*

6.5   Ring fencing opportunities

The research uncovered a plethora of potential solutions that focused on either direct targeted support with individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds or introducing policy, guidance or restrictions to change structures and remove barriers for specific groups of students. Interviewees were invited to describe hypothetical scenarios in order to gauge their views. These included introducing a 'ban' on unpaid placements, replacing full-time year-long with short-term placements, and 'ring fencing' specific opportunities so that they were accessible only to 'disadvantaged' students. Out of these suggestions, the idea of 'ring fencing' generated the most strongly conflicting opinion.

HEP staff were more likely to be supportive of this idea, albeit in a reduced capacity, such as using different application 'windows' or ensuring disadvantaged students can be seen more favourably. The reasons for this would be mainly to redress the extensive structural problems that disadvantage some students over others and ensure fairness overall.

> *"I like the idea of exclusivity, but not at the expense of opening opportunities out to all students. But I think there's ways that we could do that to make it a bit fairer." – Staff interview (NTU 7)*

Employers were more likely to be opposed to this idea, believing that an application process should have equality and diversity built in, and that this would be sufficient to address the issue. Some employers raised a concern that they would have poorer quality candidates as a result of a more restricted pool, and that this could negatively affect their business or industry.

Students had strong but mixed views on this idea, with some being very much in favour and others passionately describing why they were not in favour. Interestingly, several students did not agree with the idea, even if it would have given them a personal advantage over their peers. These students suggested they may not have developed the skills necessary for a role that had been ring fenced for them, that they wanted to feel they had earned the role, and that they wanted to make sure they had the skills needed to succeed in their career. For others, they felt that being given an opportunity could make them a 'representative' of a particular cohort of students, and that this system would lead to an added pressure for them to be successful. One student shared their reaction to the suggestion that a similar practice existed in their workplace, and how it affected them.

> *"I interviewed them along with my manager… at the end of an interview …someone in the team said "Oh we should take on this person because again, this person is not white, it's a person of colour." … I thought wow is this why you hired me? Because I'm not white. That was my initial thought straight away. And honestly, that really [annoyed me]." – Placement student 6 (WP)*

6.6   Relationships and culture

A large amount of work by HEP staff to address disadvantages in student placements is not necessarily visible to students; for example, the effort involved in fostering beneficial relationships between HEPs and employers. HEPs have significant influence when working with employers, and some employers described why this relationship is often not simply transactional, but transformational. Several employers discussed how they are interested in helping to shape the culture of their respective industries over the long term. These employers were also more likely to show a desire to understand the causes behind disparities of success and how their business can address them.

> *"One of the reasons that we do this is it's as good for us as it is for the graduate or undergraduate because if we understand more about what is going on in the marketplace, for resource, we know how skilled people actually are, and making the marketplace better as it were, it means that we have less strain and stress when we actually need to bring people into the company." – Employer interview 1*

A large difference in culture and attitudes towards placements was noted within the higher education environment. In some areas, the placement process is deeply embedded within the course. Teaching staff within these areas are more likely to dedicate time during scheduled teaching hours to address employability skills, placements, and career development, and consistently discuss the importance of a placement to their students. Conversely, where sandwich placements are less of a priority to staff, this is felt to be reflected in how placements are discussed with, and subsequently by, their students. It is considered that the placement culture within a course needs to be understood and developed to facilitate change.

> *"the drive for students to want to do a placement comes from the culture of the course, so I think we rely heavily on that peer-to-peer and also the academics. So academics think it's a really worthwhile thing for them to do. Then they all come in and they can kind of like champion what we're doing..." – Staff interview (NTU 1)*

7. Reflections from the user testing (phase 3)

Following the construction of a Theory of Change model that illustrates the main factors and solutions that influence WP students in securing a placement, 'user testing' was conducted (phase 3). These reflections on the Theory of Change (phase 2) and findings (phase 1) are analysed and presented here.

7.1 Reflecting on 'factors'

When reflecting on the eight main factors that influence students' ability to secure a placement, most felt that the Theory of Change was comprehensive, with little to add beyond these general themes. Participants in both groups were able to frame their experiences and journey through the model. For example, some described how their 'path' changed as their own goals and experiences changed throughout their first two years at university (see section 5.1). Others described how managing 'location and social life' (section 5.2) was the biggest factor for them. Each theme appeared to be relevant to at least one participant within the sessions, and any additional comments about each of these themes simply re-emphasised the existing summary from their own perspective.

> *"it makes sense in the way that you've said it… Everything seemed to line up to be correct. For example, at the end of second year, is exam time. So we'll have the exams around May." – User Testing Group 2*

As the factors were agreed on during the user testing sessions, these could be reframed as outcomes to be changed. For example, rather than 'location' and 'social life' being a factor that negatively influences the student, a reframed outcome could be 'a more secure living and social experience'. The conversation then shifted to how these

reframed outcomes ultimately influence the student, and what could be done to achieve those outcomes. A significant part of this user testing explores the influence of these factors on students through three lenses; student capability, opportunity, and motivation. This is a reflection of the COM-B model, (Michie, 2011) which ultimately forms a key part of the Theory of Change.

7.2 Student Capability

Participants explored what a student with high and low capability to succeed in securing a placement may look like. Participants in both groups described a 'capable' student as someone who has particular skills; for example good communication skills both written and verbal, in order to be successful during the application stage (see section 5.4), and organisational skills in order to better navigate more intense periods of the academic year (see section 5.8). More 'capable' students were also described as having more knowledge of what was available, and social capital to prepare them for what was ahead.

One of the main discussion points in both sessions was the way in which students could develop their knowledge and skills. Some participants described how embedding skills into the curriculum could be a solution (see section 6.1). Other participants reflected that on their course, this provision was already in place and in fact was beneficial to them. There is clearly a disparity between courses on the extent to which employability skills form part of the curriculum, a factor that emerged as beneficial throughout this research. This solution is not only linked to skill development, but reflects the issue of timing, with some students believing they are less able to access support if this is provided as extracurricular provision.

> *"it's harder for us, because anything that is timetabled… is purely academic and it's only academic support that you get. …They have to use the resources that are available in their own time." – User Testing Group 2*

7.3 Student Opportunity

Discussions around improving student opportunities were initially related to the number of placements available, and increasing the number of placements that can be found by the student. This included increasing the number of placement opportunities listed on HEP 'job search' sites and providing additional methods of finding vacancies. However, as the discussion developed, some described how increasing the number of placements available may have a negative outcome if search parameters are not applied. Some described how for them, an overwhelming amount of opportunity does not lead to greater success without the opportunity being tailored to their needs. Therefore, the solution is two-fold: the student having a developed sense of their career path (see section 5.1), and having more personal support that they can access individually to help

navigate the process (see section 6.1). For example, some described how they had specific needs around location (see section 5.5), and therefore they enhanced links with businesses in a wider variety of areas, or gained more knowledge from support staff about those opportunities. One participant in particular reflected on external support they received, and while well-intentioned in highlighting the opportunity, was not necessarily helpful on a practical level.

> *"when you start to ask them, like, "do you know anywhere to look around Midlands at the north, like anywhere outside of London?" it kind of was met with a bit of, "you just have to have a look!" They weren't then more well informed around that. And then [the students] weren't actively trying to find any that weren't based around London." – User Testing Group 1*

Both groups also reflected on the need to develop students' social capital is a way of providing opportunity. This does not necessarily mean developing existing social connections, but rather the idea of creating and enhancing new connections with employers and professional contacts. This can directly improve the students' opportunity with that particular employer, but can also lead to a student increasing their awareness of opportunities more broadly in that sector, and pathways to success.

Also discussed was the concept of improving the quality of opportunities through regulation. While the benefits were perceived, students also suggested caution in the university taking singular action in developing policy or imposing restrictions. Again the reasons were twofold: a concern for reducing opportunities for those who may have an existing advantage due to their own circumstance, or the consequence of imposing regulations that lead to employers rejecting students from that university as a whole.

> *"if [the HEP] became fussy, then they'd just stop taking placements from us, because there's so many other students out there from other universities that want that placement. So they'll just give it to them." – User Testing Group 2*

7.4   Student Motivation

As previously discussed, a personal approach to supporting students accessing sandwich placements not only enhances an individual's capability and opportunity, but was also claimed to be a benefit to motivation. Participants described how their motivation was particularly shaped by staff, tutors, or mentors, exploring options that specifically applied to them. This also mirrors feedback gathered in the interviews that gave an example of where generalised 'motivational' prompts from staff had the opposite of the intended effect, as the motivation itself was not applicable to that individual, and therefore pushed them away from pursuing a year-long placement.

Participants also reiterated that they have other motivations, both *internal* to them (for example, the desire to stay with friends – see [section 5.2](#) - or to secure their present financial situation – see [section 5.7](#)) or *external* to them (for example, family pressures to complete university quickly – see [section 5.1](#)). Being able to align these varying priorities and motivations from an individual perspective may therefore be key in developing the students' motivation to pursue a placement opportunity.

> *"It is individual and specific and is based on people's circumstances. Some people want to graduate university quickly because their parents may have told them "oh once you graduate, you can move to this place or you'll get this or you'll get that" so they have different motivators outside of wanting to do a placement and building their career so early on."* – User Testing Group 2

For some, motivation could be influenced by those around them, including friends and family, and therefore tapping into this resource can be a positive way to increase motivation for that student. A consideration for continuing motivational pushes throughout the year (see [section 5.7](#)) was described, and the impact of seeing others succeed acting as a demotivating factor was also raised as an issue (see [section 5.3](#)).

> *"just having someone to talk through it with because most of the other time, you're just talking to other students and you're either self-motivating yourself, you're all working off each other's buzz, or you're seeing people getting placements, and it's demotivating."* – User Testing Group 1

Despite several of the students not securing a placement, some were keen to reiterate that the responsibility for motivation, and indeed responsibility for success more broadly, was at the very least in part with the student. These discussions reinforced the idea that the solutions to barriers in securing a placement lay jointly with the students and the structures surrounding them.

8. Discussion

This section of the report considers the extensive results generated by the research. The findings are considered in relation to the original research questions, with reference to the literature and through the lenses described within the corresponding Theory of Change.

8.1 Interpretation of results

These results can be considered against each of the secondary research questions in turn, which surmise the overarching primary research question ("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?"

Motivation

The first research question asks: "To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement?"

Initially, the thought underlying this question was exploring whether those who do not secure a placement are, at least in part, simply less motivated to do so. Through this research, evidence suggests that rather than being *less* motivated, some students may be *differently* motivated, or have multiple motivations that can be competing. Viewing motivation from this perspective suggests that students managing these differing and sometimes conflicting motivations can often be a strong influencing factor. For example, in section 5.1, students describe having different motivations for doing a placement, such as to progress in their career or to explore a specific role. Some students may have additional motivations, such as securing accommodation (section 5.2) or financial security (section 5.7). The latter point, in particular, is reflected in the literature, with evidence that students prioritise short-term economic capital over a long-term placement (Bathmaker et al., 2013); participants in this project maintained that they often were still motivated to secure a placement, however they were also motivated to secure their financial future for the next academic year. Motivation can also change throughout the process, for example, dropping for some in response to repeated application rejections (section 5.3) or changing as competing priorities, such as exams and assessments, are introduced throughout the academic year (section 5.8). Ultimately, this research proposes that motivation in itself is not directly a factor but instead is influenced by a variety of factors identified as 'themes' throughout this report.

Barriers

The second research question asks: "What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process?"

Based on the information gleaned by the research, in this report the term 'barrier' has been reframed into 'factor'; this change has been made for two reasons. First, 'factor' better reflects those cases that might be a barrier for some in securing a placement, may actually contribute towards success for another. For example, the inference of students witnessing their peers secure placements was demotivating for some, whereas for others, it prompted a renewed effort in attempts to secure a placement themselves (section 5.3). Similarly, a factor that helps a student secure a placement may actually result in a less positive experience. An example of this was found when the student described their approach to the application process with few expectations, little restriction, and a willingness to have new experiences. However, in a few of these

cases, the placement opportunity was not ultimately beneficial to those students, and therefore did not have a strong positive contribution to their development (section 5.1).

The thematic analysis of qualitative data identified eight key 'factors' that students face when attempting to secure a placement. Methods for addressing these factors were discussed throughout, but specifically in sections 6 and 7. The responsibility for ensuring equity in the influence of these factors lies with all parties (the employer, the university, and the students themselves).

Capital

The third research question asks: "How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time?"

This project considered 'capital' as described by Bourdieu (1986), with three distinct types of capital discussed: 'cultural', 'social', and 'economic'. Regarding cultural capital, there is a proposed distinction between student background and knowledge and skills. This was discussed more directly when considering initial motivations and pathways, and the knowledge that underpins this (section 5.1), the effort and skill put into each application (section 5.4), and communication skills more broadly (section 5.6). Regarding social capital, this link with student background was described more strongly. This was particularly notable in the influence of social groups (section 5.2), how social support and culture influence students' psychological empowerment (section 5.3), application success (section 5.4), and links to a wider range of quality placements (section 5.5). The link between student background and economic capital was discussed most strongly, in particular through accommodation and transport availability (section 5.2) and with finances (section 5.7). Considering change over time, this was referenced in each section but most comprehensively in section 5.8.

Ultimately, capital in various forms underpins how students behave in response to one of the eight main factors described in this report. For example, considering accommodation and location, a student with applicable cultural capital may have a better understanding of where and how to secure accommodation which reduces that factor as a pressure or priority early in the process. A student with increased social capital may have links with a wider variety of areas that can be utilised, and a student with increased economic capital may have more physical access to accommodation in more expensive areas of the country. As a result, 'capital' is a component to a 'solution' to a variety of factors that a student must consider, rather than a barrier in and of itself.

Influences

The fourth research question asks: "Who and what influences students in their decision to pursue a placement throughout their higher education journey?"

Students are often influenced by key individuals throughout the process, as discussed within the results section of this report. Firstly, parents and family members play a significant role in influencing students. In particular, these individuals often influenced the student directly in terms of initial intention to do a placement, or in some cases, their continued desire to secure a placement during university (section 5.1). Parents and other family members have a particularly strong influence prior to students entering higher education, which could be a further area of support for HEPs. This influence can have a lasting impact throughout their university lives and beyond.

Secondly, there was a significant amount of feedback related to the influence of friends and peers during university. This in particular influenced students in terms of their living situation (section 5.2) and support and confidence-building in the face of challenges (section 5.3), at various points throughout the academic year (section 5.8). At university, participants also noted the influence of HEP staff members, both in terms of tutors and support staff, who can influence students not only due to the knowledge and skills that can be shared, but through emotional support and motivation. In particular, this was discussed from the perspective of what support currently works, what can help facilitate success, and collectively in shaping a culture within a specific academic area that is conducive to success in securing placements.

Finally, there was evidence both in interviews and the survey of the key influence of the employer, or professional staff in that field. Participants frequently suggested that increasing this link, either through developed employability fairs, or through the course, would help them improve their knowledge of career paths following university, and provide a way for them to establish personal contacts through which they can secure potential placements.

Processes

The fifth research question asks: "What are the processes for securing a placement?"

Evidence, particularly in the interviews, shows that there are several ways in which students secured their placement opportunities. Many followed the standardised route of finding opportunities through the universities' 'job search' sites, and applying for opportunities there. This leads to a range of further assessment processes; typically smaller employers arrange interviews whereby the student is able to demonstrate their abilities in a face-to-face setting, whereas larger employers select candidates through more objective testing and assessment centres. Students predominantly appeared to prefer the former, however did feel that any attempt to remove interviewer biases was of paramount importance. Several identified the biases in both of these routes, and therefore there is no 'perfect' system of recruitment.

Some students gave evidence of securing placements outside of university involvement. For these students, opportunities were found either on job vacancy websites, or through

social media such as LinkedIn or Twitter. A few students and employers described how placement opportunities can be created through establishing a relationship directly with the employer. In these instances, strong communication and interpersonal skills were required, however these bespoke opportunities could then be more tailored to the needs of that individual student.

There were also significant differences in terms of timescales, both between courses and between employer types. Students on creative courses for example, tended to start the process later into the year, both due to when the placement was advertised, but also due to the need for additional materials such as a portfolio. Smaller employers also appear more likely to begin their recruitment process later in the academic year, in comparison to large or multinational businesses. For these opportunities that are available later in the year, factors such as the need to secure accommodation or academic work can influence students, where the pressure is increased as the year progresses. In other sectors, for example Business or Law, there was a tendency to recruit earlier in the academic year, with opportunities particularly at large employers being made available before the winter break. However, some students ended up missing opportunities as a result, due to either a lack of prioritising the application process early on, a lack of skill in applying that only developed as the year went on, or simply due to a lack of knowledge that applications may need to be made early in their second year.

Solutions

The sixth research question asks: "What are the current solutions for improving the equity of success in securing a placement across various student groups, and how can these be improved?"

Throughout the findings section (see section 5), solutions for improving disparities were discussed. These solutions predominantly fall under two general approaches: change within the student, and change within the system.

Regarding change within the student, four of the eight general factors that students face when attempting to secure a placement appear more within the control of the student; **the initial and changing 'path'** that the student wishes to pursue (section 5.1) **living and social situation** (section 5.2), developing **confidence and resilience** (section 5.3), and the skill and effort that a student puts into their **personal application** when securing a placement (section 5.4). Capital (culture, social, and economic) are all foundations on which this is built, and therefore solutions to addressing these factors lies ultimately in improving each of these areas. Development of these required factors arguably must occur prior to the student entering their second year, and any ongoing support should be personalised and built into the curriculum where possible. University staff can support the student in developing skill and knowledge, however development

of the students' emotion regulation and psychosocial abilities can also be fostered through building connections with employers and alumni. It also needs to be recognised that for some students, alternative opportunities to a placement can be valuable, but that students still require personalised support in goal setting and achieving their individual aims.

Four of the eight factors are arguably outside of the students' control, but remain significant. These include the **availability and suitability of placements** (section 5.5), the students' individual **background** (section 5.6), **financial** requirements for pursuing a significant number of placement opportunities (section 5.7), and conflicts in **timing** throughout the year (section 5.8). While the student cannot change these issues, universities in partnerships with employers can reduce their impact. For example, rather than changing a student's background, the solution lies in reducing and removing the impact of this factor. Solutions require collective change across all HEPs in order to embed changes, and a strong relationship between universities and employers is needed to ensure structural changes are consistently applied. Some structural changes, such as the structure of a curriculum, can have an influence in addressing some of the issues raised. However, a single institution or employer cannot address the size and scale of the issues that students face on their own. Universities and employers have taken strong steps already in this area to ensure students have equality of access; solutions therefore may not simply need to be newly found but more consistently adopted from existing best practices.

8.2   Reflections on feedback and learning

This discussion has been generally framed around the six secondary research questions linked to the following overall topics: motivation, barriers, capital, influences, processes, and solutions. Each of these six topics can also be interpreted through various 'lenses', which have been the subject of discussion across multiple interviews.

Firstly, there is some evidence of the variety of 'cultures' across different sectors. For example, in certain Built Environment courses, staff and students frequently discuss placements as the primary route for progressing through HE. In these areas, students often have increased cultural capital based on knowledge of the subject itself, are more motivated to obtain a placement due to the culture around them, and are very heavily influenced by those around them to secure a placement. In comparison, courses that do not have the same 'culture' of placements, for example Social Sciences, have very different levels of capital, motivation, or influences around them in relation to a placement.

Secondly, there were significant differences between participants in the view of how much agency the individual student has to make significant changes. For some, the barriers, capital or processes for obtaining a placement can be significantly influenced

by the student, and therefore the responsibility for improving the chances of success sits with the student. For others, these factors are defined by system and structure; barriers for securing a placement are entirely outside of any student control, and therefore changes must focus on changing the structures, rather than actors within the structures. One can surmise that there is truth in both of these viewpoints, and the Theory of Change developed as a result of this research reflects this duality.

Thirdly, and linked to the previous point, each factor seems to have both an 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' side. For example, there is a significant difference between intrinsic motivation (for example, the student wanting to go on placement for themselves) and extrinsic motivation (for example, the student feeling like they should go on placement because a member of staff recommends it). Similarly, sub-themes within a factor can also be seen from an internal and external perspective. For example, 'finances' can be seen as an external issue because it may prevent access to unpaid opportunities in a different area, but also as an internal issue, because the student may feel they are simply unable to access an opportunity, even though options may be available to them to overcome that barrier.

Fourthly, each of these topics can vary in their impact based on the overall timeline and journey of that student. For example, one participant may have been highly motivated to obtain a placement when they first entered university, and lost motivation throughout their time at university, whereas another participant developed their motivation over time based on their experiences and interactions. Similarly, different topics or issues must be seen within the context of a key time or moment in order to understand their influence. The issue of securing accommodation for example, can be a barrier to students, but this differs at key points within the second year based on context.

Finally, there is the need to understand and consider the roles, responsibilities, and labels that are attached to individuals across this process. In discussing the term 'disadvantaged students', for example, it is clear that this label can be applied to a substantial cohort of students, each with an incredible variety of strengths, weaknesses, and an intersectionality of various backgrounds. As such, deducing factors that influence this entire cohort as a group is difficult. Similarly, self-perception can vary wildly between two seemingly similar characters. For example, two members of staff with almost identical roles and backgrounds give a very different account of what their own 'role' is in supporting students. For some staff, the university has a significant role in more pastoral-like care of students, ensuring not only that they succeed, but also that the responsibility for success lies as much with the university as with the student. For others, the responsibility for success is almost entirely with the student, and the university's role is simply to provide access to support which the student must then decide to access themselves.

9. Limitations

This section of the report outlines the key limitations to the research study.

9.1 The short timeframe of the project

This research project had an ambitious aim, addressing a complex issue, and producing meaningful and detailed outputs, all inside a six-month window. Analysis of a large amount of qualitative research, both primary and secondary, is a time-intensive task, and therefore the researchers were required to take a strategic and planned approach to analysis. Firstly, regarding the qualitative analysis, the researchers closely followed steps in a thematic analysis of primary research, which limited the exploratory nature of analysis. As a benefit, this provided focus and structure, however more time and resource in the analysis phase would have provided more comparison between specific groups. Although evidence of the difference of views between specific groups of interviewees (for example, staff versus students, or large employers versus small employers) was woven in throughout the results, a more detailed comparison could provide a greater insight. Secondly, collating literature that spans a wide range of student behaviours and influences required a structured approach based on pre-existing models, and applying the 'snowball method' from that point forward; key papers were identified and subsequent papers can be found from the bibliographies of these key texts. This may mean that some relevant literature may be unintentionally omitted, and therefore further literature reviews would be welcome.

9.2 Sample size and participant recruitment

Securing ethical approval for the project took longer than initially anticipated which meant research and data collection was delayed, causing the final-year student survey to be pushed until after the winter break of 2022-23. The National Student Survey (NSS), a UK-wide and high profile survey launched in February 2023, and was also targeted at final year students. As a result, the window for the survey to be open was significantly shorter than expected, and promotion of the survey was limited as a result of the NSS. This also shortened the time frame for recruiting participants for student interviews. The researchers attempted to counteract these issues with an offer to students of vouchers to compensate them for the time. A £10 voucher was given to all student participants of interviews and a prize draw of three £50 vouchers was held after the survey closed for all survey participants.

9.3 Lack of diversity in samples

This delay and difficulty reaching students quickly compounded an already existing issue; that the easiest to reach students are often the most engaged with the process. This self-selecting sample is therefore inherently more biassed towards students who

actively engage with university, including potentially any support the university provides in obtaining a placement. In order to mitigate this issue within the survey, the lead researcher looked to engage students more directly outside of existing student contacts. For example, in-person and online lecture 'shout-outs' were conducted, in multiple schools across the university. This was in addition to email promotion, social media involvement, sharing the survey on various student 'network' groups, contacting senior managers in various schools to disseminate the survey to their teaching staff, and to involve the Students' Union in its promotion. However limitations, particularly with the interview sample, remain. Not only were students likely to be 'pre-engaged', but staff at other HEPs and employers were selected as a result of their pre-existing relationships with the university. Furthermore, User Testing (phase 3) was conducted with students who had previously been involved in the student interviews, limiting the range of views within the sample.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

This research study was conducted in three phases: (i) qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and a student survey; (ii) the development of a Theory of Change for overcoming barriers to sandwich placements; and (iii) user testing to gather feedback on the proposed Theory of Change. The study identified **eight main factors** (sections 5.1 through 5.8) that need to be considered when supporting students, particularly those from a WP background, in securing a placement. These factors have been used to generate solutions for facilitating success in securing a placement, and contribute to a Theory of Change model, mapping how solutions may address inequalities in securing placements.

10.1 Considerations for practice

For some students, the lack of success in securing a placement was due to their abilities. This was most explicitly discussed in section 5.4, whereby staff, students, and employers, described how crucial skills such as organisational, communication, and interpersonal skills, often directly led to the student successfully securing a placement. Other individual skills and abilities were more indirectly discussed, such as forward planning (section 5.1), self-reflection (section 5.3), proactivity in finding opportunities (section 5.4), understanding opportunities available to them (section 5.5), and managing multiple priorities at once (section 5.8). Often these skills have been developed through a mixture of intentional participation in extracurricular development, and the unintentional consequence of their increased capital, both of which are less accessible to WP students. It was also highlighted that successful students develop their knowledge and begin to apply this to their own planning from as early as their first year. In order to redress this, students require at least some element of skill development at

an earlier stage in the process, and embedded into the curriculum rather than extra-curricular.

Several students gave examples of successfully securing placements through establishing relationships with employers before applying for an opportunity (section 5.4). It was also discussed how student interactions with employers helped them to gain a better understanding of opportunities that they could access, and gave them an insight into pathways to success in their future professional lives (section 6.2). Better communication between students and employers resulted in actionable feedback (section 5.5) and continued confidence going forward (section 5.3). This is facilitated by some HEPs, often through employability fairs and guest lecturers, however more can be done to enhance this relationship between students and employers.

It was clear throughout the research that a significant factor for students in securing a placement related to confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of 'self'. Ultimately, there is a significant 'psychological' aspect to this process, which was discussed explicitly as one factor in the results section (section 5.3), however touched upon in almost all other parts of the process, from social and living situation (section 5.2), to background (section 5.6), to finances (section 5.7). Social links are strongly beneficial in providing psychological support to students as well as developing knowledge and skills; these include family, friends, and even through schools and colleges prior to the student entering HE. While HEPs may provide some additional coaching or resilience training, a holistic approach is needed, tapping into various student communities pre- and post-enrolment, in order to empower the student.

Although the majority of students who provided feedback described very positive and beneficial experiences with placements, this research highlighted some examples of placement opportunities that were not of the highest quality (section 5.1), or whereby recruitment practices could have some form of discrimination, even if unintended (section 5.6). There are also several examples of placement opportunities that do not appear to compensate the student for their time fairly, with unpaid or expenses-only placements being taken up by students who struggle to continue through them for financial reasons alone (section 5.7). In all of these cases, staff and students both highlight the problem, but also recognise that addressing it as one HEP alone could negatively impact that institution while failing to fix the problem. This is similar to the issue of relocation and living situation (section 5.2) and the associated transport costs (section 5.7). Some HEPs may be 'better' located with regards to the availability of placements in that region, in comparison to others. Solutions to this issue, for example in reducing the pressure on students to sign up for accommodation early in the year, or even sharing accommodation for students between HEPs in different regions, require a collective approach. Furthermore, a fundamental change to higher education or sector policy requires collective action across all HEPs, to ensure the problems highlighted are

addressed properly. This also requires the development of relationships between HEPs, as well as between HEP and employers, to achieve strong partnerships that benefit all.

Finally, feedback strongly suggested that students were differently impacted based on their area of study. For example, business students are considerably more likely to miss early advertisements of placements than fashion students (section 5.8), but are, conversely, less likely to be impacted by the prevalence of unpaid placements (section 5.7). Not only are there cultural differences between professional sectors, but these differences exist even within the HEP itself, between faculties, schools, or departments.

10.2 Key recommendations for practice

Recommendation 1: Student knowledge and skill development within the curriculum

HEPs should bolster student support services to include an element of employability skills development 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.

Recommendation 2: Enhancing 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.

Recommendation 3: Holistic approach to student support

HEPs should take a holistic approach to empowering WP students, with a particular consideration for confidence and resilience, as well as knowledge and skill development. This should focus on engaging with students' social links, such as family, friends, and peers, and build on links with schools, colleges, and community partners.

Recommendation 4: Collective policy making

HEPs should work towards collective policy making to address placement issues that apply across the HE sector. One aim of such collective action would be to address the number of low- or unpaid sandwich placements and other employability opportunities, which place greater burden on disadvantaged or WP students. 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.

Recommendation 5: Institutional and sector-wide culture

HEPs should assess the culture of placements within their respective institutions, including within specific departments, as well as external to it 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.

10.3 Considerations for further research

Although this research has illustrated the factors that influence disparities in accessing placements between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers, there is still a significant amount unknown, or undefined. Therefore not only does this research project lead to recommendations for action, but recommendations for future research, to build on this picture.

Throughout this project, the understanding of what a 'disadvantaged' student may be, is not strictly defined. The researchers in this project chose to use 'widening participation' as the category by which disadvantage is measured. From our understanding of student classification, individual differences, and intersectionality, we also know that this does not define one homogenous group. At points, this research project has touched on the specific impact of race, socio-economic background, nationality, and disability, but has not had the capacity to explore this in great detail. Similarly, the relatively small number of participants that provide the quantitative evidence provided a snapshot of student opinion, rather than evidence of opinion at various points throughout the year. Similarly, the quantitative evidence of the disparity itself is retroactively viewed, based on where the students end up, rather than giving key milestones of when that disparity occurs. There is a need therefore, for this to be built upon.

The qualitative evidence gathered through this research has been extensive and detailed, with a number of hours of interview recordings providing rich data. However, these interviews have encouraged participants to be entirely reflective of their experience, as opposed to measuring the experience as it occurs. For example, a student reflected on why they made a choice a year later, when their own narrative may have influenced their views, rather than measure the thought behind the decision as it happens. To some extent, this has built a picture of the current processes of securing a placement, however this is based on the experiences of the actors within the system (i.e. the staff, the students, and the employers). While this provides a rich narrative with regards to how students act within the system, it may not provide a complete picture of

the pathways in which a student is guided to act, or indeed where the current policy fails. Linked to this, a variety of methods are taken by HEPs to address issues and support students; several students in our research for example, praised the work of their HEP's employability team, citing clear examples of where staff support and interventions have had a direct and positive influence on student success. Similarly, HEP staff provided multiple examples of the work they do that helps disadvantaged students secure placements in the face of adversity.

This research identified that the recruitment practices vary significantly between employers, and by size, type, and sector. These different recruitment methods were adopted, in part, to address equality and diversity issues within recruitment practices and ensure fairness. However, different employers take almost opposing approaches while claiming to achieve the same goal. Further research is needed to ensure that recruitment methods are objectively found to be fair, and that these methods do not disproportionately disadvantage particular groups of students.

10.4 Key recommendations for further research

Recommendation 1: Further exploration of student backgrounds considered 'disadvantaged'

A greater understanding for what is considered to be 'disadvantaged', with a consideration for intersectionality, and a shared definition across HEPs and employers as a result.

Recommendation 2: Macro data on changing behaviour throughout the year, by demographic

Large scale quantitative research project involving multiple HEPs that explores and measures student behaviour throughout their educational journey, particularly in relation to the process for securing a placement. 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.

Recommendation 3: Additional qualitative research across the student journey

Tracking changes in student views, opinions, and abilities using longitudinal research methods to better understand how these complex issues change throughout the students educational journey.

Recommendation 3: Sector-wide policy and practice review

Reviewing and collating the existing policy and supportive practice, evidence of impact, and a consideration for future improvements.

Recommendation 4: Exploration of recruitment methods

Reviewing existing recruitment methods, evidence of the impact of different methodologies on the student, and suggestions for improving these recruitment processes with a consideration for equality, diversity, and inclusion.

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12. Appendices

12.1 Breakdown of university staff interview sample

Reference number	Relative size of placement programme	Type of HEP
Staff interview (NTU 1)	Approximately 1,500 out of 29,000 students	Post-1992
Staff interview (NTU 2)		
Staff interview (NTU 3)		
Staff interview (NTU 4)		
Staff interview (NTU 5)		
Staff interview (NTU 6)		
Staff interview (NTU 7)		
Staff interview (NTU 8)		
Staff interview (NTU 9)		
Staff interview (NTU 10)		
Staff interview (NTU 11)		
Staff interview (NTU 12)		
Staff interview (NTU 13)		
Staff interview (NTU 14)		
Staff focus group 1 (2 participants)		
Staff interview (HEP 1)	Approx. 400 out of 25,800 students	Post-1992
Staff interview (HEP 2)	? of 32,000 students	Post-1992
Staff interview (HEP 3)		Plate glass
Staff interview (HEP 4)	Approx. 450 out of 40,000	Red Brick
Staff interview (HEP 5)	Approx. 600 out of 34,000	Post-1992
Staff interview (HEP 6)	Approx. 250 out of 26,000	Post-1992
Staff interview (HEP 7)	? out of 14,000	Post-1992
Staff interview (HEP 8)	Approx. 200 out of 20,000	Post-1992

12.2 Breakdown of student interview sample

Reference number	Gender	Course	WP status
Placement student interview 1	Male	BSc Coaching & Sport Sci	No
Placement student interview 2	Male	BA(H) Bus.Man. & Acc & Fin.	Yes
Placement student interview 3	Male	BA(H) Product Design	No
Placement student interview 4	Female	LLB(H) Law	Yes
Placement student interview 5	Female	BA(H) Int Fash Bus	No
Placement student interview 6	Female	BA(H)Bus. Man. and Mktg.	Yes
Non-placement student interview 1	Female	MSc Marketing	Yes
Non-placement student interview 2	Male	BSc(H) Construction Mgt	Yes
Non-placement student interview 3 (group)	Female	BSc(H) Product Design	No
Non-placement student interview 3 (group)	Female	BSc(H) Product Design	No
Non-placement student interview 4	Male	BA(Hons) Marketing	No
Non-placement student interview 5	Female	BSc(H) Phys With Astrophys	Yes
Non-placement student interview 6	Female	BA(H) Fashion KnitDes& KTex	No
Non-placement student interview 7	Female	BSc(H) Biochemistry	Yes
Non-placement student interview 8	Male	BSc Quantity Surv and CM	No

12.3 Breakdown of employer interview sample

Reference number	Geographical location	Industry	Size
Employer Interview 1	London	Data and Technology	SME
Employer Interview 2	Nottinghamshire	Electronics	SME
Employer Interview 3	Nottinghamshire	Marketing	SME
Employer Interview 4	Nottinghamshire	Architecture	SME
Employer Interview 5	Multiple locations	Automotive	Large
Employer Interview 6 (Group)	Multiple locations	Automotive	Large
Employer Interview 7	Nottinghamshire	Engineering	SME
Employer Interview 8	Leicestershire	Textiles	SME
Employer Interview 9	Nottinghamshire	Food and drink	SME
Employer Interview 10	Multiple locations	Engineering	Multinational

12.4 Breakdown of student survey sample

Student Group	Total	WP Status*		Ethnicity**		Gender**	
		Non-WP	WP	BAME	White	Female	Male
Group 1a	187	128	39	32	134	88	79
Group 1b	54	39	11	8	42	36	14
Group 2a	32	19	6	7	18	10	15
Group 2b	86	46	28	19	55	51	22
Total	**359**	**232**	**84**	**66**	**249**	**185**	**130**

* Excludes 43 students for whom WP status is unknown or not applicable (e.g. international students).

* Excludes 44 students for whom ethnicity or gender is unknown or not applicable.

Details:

- **Group 1a:** Students who enrolled on a sandwich course at the start of their study programme and subsequently undertook a sandwich placement (either in 2021-22 and were now back studying, or currently on work placement in 2022-23).
- **Group 1b:** Students who originally enrolled on a three year full-time course at the start of their study programme and subsequently converted to a sandwich course and undertook a placement (either in 2021-22 and were now back studying, or currently on work placement in 2022-23).
- **Group 2a:** Students who originally enrolled on a sandwich course at the start of their study programme and subsequently converted back to a three year full-time course.
- **Group 2b:** Students who never enrolled on a sandwich course.

12.5 Breakdown of user testing sample

Reference number	Gender	Course	WP status
User Testing Group 1	Male	BSc(H) Construction Mgt	Yes
User Testing Group 1	Female	BA(H) Int Fash Bus	No
User Testing Group 1	Female	BA(H) Fashion KnitDes& KTex	No
User Testing Group 1	Male	BSc Quantity Surv and CM	No
User Testing Group 2	Female	BSc(H) Product Design	No
User Testing Group 2	Female	BSc(H) Product Design	No
User Testing Group 2	Female	LLB(H) Law	Yes
User Testing Group 2	Male	BA(H) Bus.Man. & Acc & Fin.	Yes

12.6 Detailed breakdown: Phase 1 - Semi-structured interviews with staff

Sample	Staff internal to NTU that support students in securing a placement or work directly in the year-long placement process at NTU.Staff external to NTU at other HEPs that support students in securing a placement or work directly in the year-long placement process at their respective institutions. Staff members interviewed must be working in a role directly contributing to either a) supporting students in securing a placement, b) working with employers to develop and advertise placement opportunities, c) developing or influencing policy that relates to year-long placements in their respective institutions, d) academic staff who have a large cohort of sandwich course students within their remit. Sample size: 16 NTU staff, 8 staff from other HEPs. A breakdown can be found in appendix 12.1.
Implement-at ion	Conducted online via MS Teams, approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Record of interviews kept via transcription. These were auto-transcribed using Microsoft's automatic captioning service. Interviews also had audio-visual recordings, as a backup for transcription purposes only. All recordings and transcriptions are saved to a secure SharePoint file.
Research and Analysis	Semi-structured interviews generating qualitative feedback only. Research coded using NVivo. A thematic analysis approach is used by the researcher. The researcher conducted several 'waves' of analysis, to collate themes into large categories, before drilling down into more specific themes in subsequent coding 'waves'.
Research Question	1. To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement? 2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process? 5. What are the processes for securing a placement? 6. What are the current solutions for improving the equity of success in securing a placement across various student groups, and how can these be improved?
Justification details	These interviews enable staff to discuss, in detail, patterns of participation in their respective institutions. Staff share their own perceptions of motivations and barriers that students face, had a good knowledge of processes for securing a placement, and provided solutions for improving equity of success based on a wide range of experiences, roles, and institutional approaches.

12.7 Detailed breakdown: Phase 1 - Semi-structured interviews with students

Sample	Level 6 (final year undergraduate) students within NTU, predominantly (but not exclusively) from a WP background. There was an aim for these participants to be from a range of demographic background (e.g. gender, ethnicity), and from a range of academic disciplines within NTU. Sample size: 6 students who have completed a year-long placement year as part of their sandwich course, 8 students who did not complete a year-long placement year despite an initial intention to do so. A full breakdown of the final sample can be found in appendix 12.2.
Implement-ation	Conducted online via MS Teams, approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Record of interviews kept via transcription. These were auto transcribed using Microsoft's automatic captioning service. Interviews also had audio-visual recordings, as a backup for transcription purposes only. All recordings and transcriptions are saved to a secure SharePoint file.
Research and Analysis	Semi-structured interviews generating qualitative feedback only. Research coding using NVivo. A thematic analysis approach was used by the researcher. The researcher conducted several 'waves' of analysis, to collate themes into large categories, before drilling down into more specific themes in subsequent coding waves.
Research Question	1. To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement? 2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process? 3. How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time? 4. Who and what influences students in their decision to pursue a placement throughout their HE journey?
Justification details	These interviews provide an in-depth accounts of students' own experiences, their own motivation, and the barriers that they have faced. Students are also able to give an insight into their own knowledge, understanding and capital, and how that has changed over time. Finally, they are best placed to share their views on who and what acts as influences on them and their peers throughout this process.

12.8 Detailed breakdown: Phase 1 - Semi-structured interviews with employers

Sample	Employers that currently or have recently taken one or more NTU students on as a year-long placement. There was an aim for these employers to be a range of sizes (from Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through to large or multinational organisations), and a variety of sectors.
	Staff members interviewed must be working in a role that either a) contributes to the recruitment of placement students, b) contributes to the development of policy that relates to year-long placements in their respective institutions, or c) has a senior role within that company and directly works with recruiting or working with a placement student.
	Sample size: 10 staff. A full breakdown of the final sample can be found in appendix 12.3.
Implement-ation	Conducted online via MS Teams, approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Record of interviews kept via transcription. These were auto transcribed using Microsoft's automatic captioning service. Interviews also had audio-visual recordings, as a backup for transcription purposes only. All recordings and transcriptions are saved to a secure SharePoint file.
Research and Analysis	Semi-structured interviews generating qualitative feedback only. Research coded using NVivo. A thematic analysis approach is used by the researcher. The researcher conducted several 'waves' of analysis, to collate themes into large categories, before drilling down into more specific themes in subsequent coding 'waves'.
Research Question	2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process? 3. How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time? 5. What are the processes for securing a placement? 6. What are the current solutions for improving the equity of success in securing a placement across various student groups, and how can these be improved?
Justification details	These interviews enable employers to discuss, in detail, the processes for securing and participating in a year-long placement at their respective organisation. Staff share their own perceptions of barriers that students face, give some insight into student 'capital' based on receiving applications and their subsequent work with students. Finally, staff are able to provide solutions for improving equity of success based on a wide range of experiences, roles, and organisational approaches.

12.9 Detailed breakdown: Phase 1 - Student Survey:

Sample	Level 6 (final year undergraduate) students within NTU. There was an aim for these participants to be from a range of demographic backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity), and from a range of academic disciplines within NTU. Sample size target: ≈8,500 final year undergraduate students (of which 14% were on placement). Therefore, we aimed to have a 10% response rate of all final year students, with a good proportion of responses from students from sandwich courses. Therefore, our response target was 850 students. The survey itself had 410 responses, of which 359 were from the target group of final year students. A breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.4.
Implement-ation	Conducted online via Online Surveys. A full output of responses was produced in a .csv file, that can be accessed and amended using MS Excel and is saved to a secure SharePoint file.
Research and Analysis	The survey contained a combination of open-ended questions that promoted free text responses and closed questions with Likert scale response options. Question logic was used to guide the respondent through the survey and ensure they were presented with the questions relevant to their experience and journey through HE. Quantitative responses will be analysed using descriptive statistical analysis in SPSS, and qualitative responses will be coded in NVivo using a thematic analysis approach. It is important to note that this exploratory research is designed to complement the literature and other qualitative research conducting in this project, rather than allowing for standalone conclusions to be drawn.
Research Question	1. To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement? 2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process? 3. How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time? 4. Who and what influences students in their decision to pursue a placement throughout their HE journey?
Justification details	This survey enables students to share their experience and journey through university, and the factors that contribute to their journey. Participants had the opportunity to give both qualitative and quantitative feedback, via a survey that was tailored to their potential journeys. This method provides a general overview of the experience of students, and provided comparator groups based on the participants

	experience as well as their background. While survey results cannot be used to draw conclusive evidence of what impacts students in general, it can provide context and supportive evidence for the more complex qualitative feedback gathered via interviews.

12.10 Detailed breakdown: Phase 2 – Theory of Change Development

Sample	n/a
Implementation	A compilation of primary and secondary research to produce a theoretical framework of change, addressing the issues raised through this research.
Research and Analysis	Exploratory research of appropriate literature and a review of internal data provides a situation analysis and an identification of target groups. Through interviews, surveys, and the supporting research, the researchers identify the overall desired impact, the outcomes required to achieve the impact, and the activities that theoretically achieve the outcomes.
Research Question	6. What are the current solutions for improving the equity of success in securing a placement across various student groups, and how can these be improved?
Justification details	A Theory of Change approach is the main backward-mapping approach used by TASO to understand both the methodology of solutions, but also applying the theoretical background to predict a chain of outcomes and provide an evaluative framework.

12.11 Detailed breakdown: Phase 3 – User testing

Sample	Level 6 (final year undergraduate) students within NTU, predominantly (but not exclusively) from a WP background. There was an aim for these participants to be from a range of demographic background (e.g. gender, ethnicity), and from a range of academic disciplines within NTU. Sample size: 8 students who have either completed a year-long placement year as part of their sandwich course or failed to secure a year-long placement year despite an initial intention to do so. A breakdown can be found in Appendix 12.5.
Implement-at ion	Conducted in two distinct sessions online via MS Teams, approximately 30-60 minutes in length. Record of interviews kept via transcription. These were auto transcribed using Microsoft's automatic captioning service. Interviews also had audio-visual recordings, as a backup for transcription purposes only. All recordings and transcriptions are saved to a secure SharePoint file.
Research and Analysis	Semi-structured interviews generating qualitative feedback only. Research coding using NVivo. A thematic analysis approach was used by the researcher. The researcher conducted several 'waves' of analysis, to collate themes into large categories, before drilling down into more specific themes in subsequent coding waves.
Research Question	1. To what extent is 'motivation' a factor in securing a placement? 2. What are the main barriers to securing a placement, and how are these addressed by all parties involved in the process? 3. How does the level and type of 'capital' change between students and over time? 4. Who and what influences students in their decision to pursue a placement throughout their HE journey?
Justification details	These interviews provided in-depth accounts of students' own experiences, their own motivation, and the barriers that they have faced. They were also able to give an insight into their own knowledge, understanding and capital, and how that has changed over time. Finally, they were best placed to share their views on who and what acts as influences on them and their peers throughout this process.