



PAPER

Student-led approaches for reducing awarding gaps through widening participation in placement programmes: co-creation in the design of inclusive practices in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares new empirical data from focus groups with 18 student participants identified as underrepresented within placement programmes, including students who are female, students with disabilities, ethnically-minoritised students and students from communities with traditionally low levels of participation in higher education, as a proxy for social and economic disadvantage. Co-designed and co-delivered by a team of staff and postgraduate student co-researchers with understanding of traditionally marginalised groups, focus groups explored the lived experiences and perceptions of barriers to participation in placement programmes and student solutions for widening participation, with the aim of improving degree outcomes and narrowing awarding gaps. The paper first reviews recent research on placement participation and describes the study's methodological approach. Next, key findings are set out, highlighting three overlapping themes concerning informational, practical and psychological barriers and solutions. The paper concludes with practical recommendations to enhance placement support and communications, staff training and employer awareness.

KEYWORDS: placements, year in industry, employability, awarding gaps widening participation, co-creation, higher education.

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received 10 December 2025. Accepted 22 June 2026.

Introduction

Within a British political context that continues to challenge the quality and value of higher education, this study reveals insights into student perspectives on academic programmes involving substantive placements of 30 weeks or more, often known as Year in Industry (YINI) programmes. The largest study of placement participation to date shows that, in a UK research-intensive university context, completion of placement programmes can narrow degree awarding gaps among diverse student groups, particularly in relation to sex, ethnicity and socioeconomic background (Traynor et al., 2024). However, the groups that could most benefit from placement completion are often underrepresented within such programmes, particularly those who are female, disabled, ethnically minoritised, and from communities with traditionally low rates of participation in HE (as a proxy for socioeconomic background).

There is a well-established body of work exploring educational disadvantage and awarding gaps (Universities UK, 2022; QAA, 2024; Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019), in relation to many protected characteristics including gender (Dobson, 1996), disability (Kendall, 2016) and ethnicity (Cramer, 2021), as well as socio-economic background (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Recent studies feature more than 200 recommendations for addressing ethnicity awarding gaps alone (Cramer, 2021). In England, providers that charge more than the basic tuition fee cap must have an Access and Participation Plan (APP) that explains how they will improve equality in student access, success, and progression, which must be approved by the Office for Students (OfS). However, such plans typically focus on snapshots of equality gaps, inputs over outcomes, and individual institutions over collaborative efforts, which results in a ‘whack-a-mole’ approach, limiting the effectiveness of interventions, and prompting calls for more nuanced and sector-wide approaches (Moore et al., 2024, p. 1). Even degree apprenticeships, introduced in 2015 with the intention of widening participation in higher education and enhancing social mobility, have proven less accessible to disadvantaged young people than Russell Group universities (Camden, 2025). The significant impacts of exclusion and disadvantage on physical and mental health, career outcomes, and personal wealth are also well-documented (Bulatao & Anderson, 2004; Stop Hate UK, n.d.; Williams et al., 2003).



Literature review

Placements as authentic learning

Placements have been proven, through a rich body of work over more than two decades, to be a valuable form of authentic learning and assessment leading to strong graduate outcomes (Jackson, 2013, 2014; Pitchford et al., 2021; Sahama et al., 2008; Zegwaard & Hodges, 2003). Placement graduates are more likely to be in work, find graduate positions more quickly, and earn more than non-placement students (Smith et al., 2018), partially because placements often lead directly to graduate employment offers from the placement provider. In 2024/25, 44% of former placement students secured graduate roles with their placement employers (Institute of Student Employers, 2025c, p. 8).

The key benefits of placements include enabling students to apply their knowledge in practice and develop confidence, skills and professional networks (Institute of Student Employers (ISE), 2025c). As such, placements go beyond Danford's (2006) definition of authenticity in terms of *simulating* everyday professional activities by empowering students to *complete* everyday professional activities over an extended period, enabling rich understanding of a professional role and context developed through lived experience. Placements and their related assessments can (but do not necessarily) align with Ashford-Rowe et al.'s (2013) critical characteristics of authenticity; for example, they can result in an outcome such as a performance or demonstrate that transfer of knowledge has occurred, require metacognition and fidelity in the assessment tools or environment, and involve student collaboration. Moore and Morton (2015) describe the challenges for universities of developing 'work-ready' graduates for a wide diversity of professional roles and contexts, highlighting the importance of 'on-the-job' training such as that provided by employers during placements, in developing the expertise needed to perform competently in professional graduate roles.

Placements are offered and managed by employers, who create placement opportunities because they offer an important and cost-effective tool to support long-term talent recruitment (ISE, 2025c, p. 53). Because of this, placement supply is driven by employer need and the wider economic climate, resulting in considerable competition for placement opportunities. It can be argued that competition within the placement search process is an important aspect of their authenticity; however, it can also be argued that this very competition, while increasing authenticity, at the same time exacerbates and compounds pre-



existing structural inequalities and barriers for historically marginalised students. Compared to the 555,840 undergraduate qualifications awarded in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025a), just 34,550 undergraduate students completed substantive placements of 30 weeks or more (HESA, 2025b), representing 6.22% of graduates.

Table 1. UK undergraduate placement completions as a proportion of undergraduate qualifications.

Qualification	Academic year	
	2022/23	2023/24
First Degree	445,130	465,240
Other	96,385	90,600
All Undergraduate Qualifications	541,515	555,840
Thick sandwich ¹	27,790	26,560
Thin sandwich ²	1,505	1,805
Other Placement	6,510	6,185
All undergraduate placements	35,805	34,550
Undergraduate placements as % of qualifications	6.61%	6.22%

Data source: HESA (2025a) and HESA (2025b)

This represents a slight decline on 2022/23, when placement enrolments represented 6.61% of qualifications awarded, likely due to economic uncertainty amongst employers and the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which prompted some employers to pause or slow recruitment, particularly for junior roles. Placement salaries rose steadily from an average of £17,553 per annum in 2015/16 to £25,500 in 2024/25 (ISE, 2025a, p. 61), but they are failing to keep up with inflation, exacerbating challenges for students with limited family support.

Competition for placements is intensifying—the mean number of applications to each undergraduate placement vacancy was 123 in 2025, up from 97 the previous year, an increase

¹ Thick placement - an industrial or other placement that causes a continuous absence from full-time study for at least one academic year.

² Thin placement - an integrated part of a course where the cumulative total of placements is at least 30 weeks but does not cause a continuous absence of a full academic year.

of 27% based on the same sample of employers, suggesting that students submitted more applications per person and/or that a larger share of students failed to secure a placement (ISE, 2025c, p. 29). Students report feeling under-prepared for recruitment processes and finding certain activities, such as aptitude tests and video interviews, particularly stressful, citing the limited time available to prepare for such assessments and the anxiety associated with being recorded (ISE, 2025a).

Placements and diversity

Research on placement participation amongst historically marginalised student groups has only recently begun to emerge. Qualitative studies highlighting diverse student voices remain somewhat underrepresented across the literature, and relatively few studies include qualitative perceptions of experience or student ideas about how participation could be widened. Diverse voices can be underrepresented in research and policy discourse since students from more dominant, affluent or otherwise privileged backgrounds often have more time to participate and greater confidence in doing so (Bryson & Callaghan, 2021).

One body of work exploring the factors affecting the engagement of historically marginalised students, although not specifically in relation to placement participation, was analysed by Gilani and Thomas (2025). Through a systemised critical review of 118 articles, they identified that a major barrier preventing historically marginalised students from seeking support with challenges is the feeling of isolation that comes from a lack of a sense of belonging. They found that the most dominant 'belonging factor' (2025, p. 17) identified in the literature was relationship-building between students and staff. They describe the critical importance of students seeing academic staff as caring, accessible and approachable—and creating a welcoming institutional culture for students from traditionally marginalised backgrounds—and how this enables students to manage and avoid self-editing behaviours emerging from feelings of isolation that would otherwise prevent them calling on staff for support (such as during challenging placement searches).

For employers, placements are playing an increasingly important role in building diverse and inclusive talent pipelines (ISE, 2025c, p. 10). While the current political situation in the US has resulted in some high-profile corporate shifts away from diversity initiatives following policy changes by the US government, the situation in the UK remains more positive with regard to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). In the UK, 92% of student employers report maintaining



or increasing their EDI commitments (ISE, 2025b) and three-quarters have targets to increase diversity characteristics in graduate recruitment (ISE, 2025c, p. 62). As well as being socially just, EDI is commercially beneficial. Research consistently shows that teams which include a diversity of skills, perspectives and experiences produce better outcomes across a range of settings (British Council, 2013; Lorenzo & Reeves, 2018; Mealiea & Baltazar, 2005).

However, many employers experience persistent diversity gaps due to structural inequalities and a lack of inclusive practices (Gündemir et al., 2024; Kyere & Fukui, 2023). For example, research by the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development showed that only 28% of UK employers train all interviewers on legal obligations and objective interview practice (CIPD, 2024, p. 18), and only around a fifth make efforts to remove bias through testing the wording of job adverts (21%) (CIPD, 2024, p. 17) or checking that tests are valid, reliable, and objective (17%) (CIPD, 2024, p. 18).

Research questions

Given the challenges regarding placement participation identified in the literature, the team sought to explore two key research questions:

1. What do students perceive as key problems or barriers that limit participation in placement schemes such as Year in Industry?
2. What do students perceive as potential solutions that would enable wider participation in placements?

Methods

The study was designed with Charlton's (1998) disability-related demand, 'Nothing about us without us'—the idea that inclusivity should be done with people, rather than to or for them—at its heart. Combining this principle with ideas regarding educational social justice and equity from Freire (2000), hooks (1994), and Ahmed (2012), and conceptions of student-partnership approaches (Bryson & Callaghan, 2021; Cook-Sather et al., 2014), the research team secured a small project grant to employ student co-researchers to co-design and deliver the study. The project team advertised for and successfully recruited two co-researchers with an understanding of the challenges experienced by student groups underrepresented within the placement population—female students, students with disabilities, ethnically-minoritised



students, and students from communities with traditionally low levels of participation in higher education, as a proxy for social and economic disadvantage.

In alignment with the study's pre-existing ethical approval, the co-researchers devised an interactive session plan for a semi-structured focus group that could attract and engage students from underrepresented backgrounds. The plans included activities to build participant understanding and confidence prior to open discussion, including an anonymised participatory Mentimeter quiz drawing on prior research findings to increase awareness and understanding of placement participation and a Scenarios activity involving pair/small group discussion of four fictitious 'student persona' profiles. During the open discussion, participants were asked to share their experiences and perceptions of problems that hinder the engagement of underrepresented student groups in placements and of creative solutions or approaches to addressing those problems. Participants were also invited to complete post-session evaluation forms, which provided an opportunity to add further comments, reflections or suggestions.

Participant recruitment communications were designed and disseminated by the co-researchers. They included details of the specific target student groups in language that the project team felt would be most appropriate and accessible to students from those groups, how the research would benefit future students from those groups, details of incentives including £30 retail vouchers and free pizza for all participants, contact details for co-researchers in case of any questions, and visually appealing design/layouts. As well as hard copy posters in student-frequented areas of campus, adverts were shared by email by academic staff and posted digitally on the university's employability and jobs portal, where it could be specifically highlighted to students flagged as 'widening participation' on university records.

With support from staff researchers, the co-researchers facilitated two focus groups in April and June 2024 attended by a total of 18 students who self-identified as one of the underrepresented groups. During each focus group, participants were invited to discuss barriers to placement participation and identify potential solutions. Three members of the research team independently took handwritten notes throughout each session. Handwritten notetaking was selected as the primary method of data capture because earlier attempts to recruit participants through recorded interviews had achieved limited engagement. In



consultation with student co-researchers, the earlier research design was adapted to reduce potential barriers to participation and create a more informal and accessible environment for discussion. This was considered particularly important given the study's focus on students from traditionally marginalised and underrepresented groups, who may be more cautious about participating in formally recorded research activities.

Following the focus groups, researchers compared and discussed their notes alongside the Mentimeter responses and post-session evaluation forms to identify areas of agreement, recurring issues and notable differences in interpretation. This process provided opportunities for triangulation across multiple data sources and note-takers. Analysis was initially undertaken by the five project team members who participated in the focus groups. Emergent problem-solution pairings were identified and coded inductively, with initial codes reflecting the specific barriers and proposed responses described by participants. Through iterative discussion and comparison across the datasets, these codes were grouped into three broader themes: informational barriers (e.g. awareness and understanding of opportunities), practical barriers (e.g. financial, logistical and accessibility challenges) and psychological barriers (e.g. confidence, belonging and perceptions of fit). These themes emerged from the data rather than being predetermined. The analysis was subsequently reviewed and critically questioned by a sixth team member who had not participated in the focus groups, helping to challenge assumptions, test interpretations and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Results

Analysis of the participant contributions revealed illuminating insights across six problem-solution pairings:

Pairing 1

Problem: Lack of clear, timely information

Solution: Clear, timely and sustained communications

Participants highlighted limitations in student awareness of the financial costs and benefits of placements, such as the significantly reduced tuition fees for YINI study years. Participant 4 explained, 'The financial picture is unclear – what is the financial situation? What are the fees? What is the salary? Can students still get maintenance loans? What are the fees for



international students? This needs to be better communicated'. Participant 5 added, 'It's really important to advertise that you don't pay the full uni fee for a YINI, that's really important, but it's hardly ever talked about'.

Participants emphasised that certain student groups can find it more difficult to access information through student social networks, which they may struggle to locate and join. Participant 6 explained, 'First gen students don't have so much uni life experience, they might commute in, they miss socials, they miss the kind of info other students might pass around during those downtimes'.

Several participants noted low awareness amongst international students about how placements and employment work in the UK and how to identify potential placement employers. Participant 7 suggested, '[International students] need a workshop to explain UK concepts, support available, how to do job applications, international applicants / visa rules, help us to narrow down the search'.

To address these problems, participants suggested multi-temporal and multi-platform messaging strategies that include sustained communications throughout and across academic years during classes, events, emails, websites and social media. Speaking to this, Participant 1 explained:

The messaging has to be done multiple times. During first year, emails and news can get lost. It needs to be done through career studio, social media, lectures, talks in classes, a lot of different channels to get the message through.

Participant 3 added, 'Different students use different social media, you could put a lot more information on Instagram, for example, it would reach more people'.

These proposals are significant within the current context because they contrast with current institutional practices to minimise the frequency of university communications to reduce potential overwhelm and associated negative impacts on student wellbeing, through strategies such as compiling multiple news items into weekly or monthly newsletters. However, participant contributions to this study suggest that sustained dissemination of bitesize single-issue communications through a wide range of communication channels including email and social media platforms may be more impactful in reaching underrepresented student groups.



Pairing 2

Problem: Lack of diversity in placement communications and events

Solution: Greater diversity in placement communications and events

Connected with the availability and frequency of information were perceptions of a lack of representation of underrepresented groups within placement communications and events, leading some students to see placements as 'not for them'. Participant 8 suggested that 'the uni should have more case studies of students from non-traditional backgrounds who've done a YINI: "I did this, it got me here"'. Participant 5 similarly suggested, 'Have some graduates come in, talk to the students: 'these are the steps I went through', this is how you do it, this is when you need to do it'. Others highlighted a need to portray a more varied range of career aspirations and values, that could better connect with diverse student groups. As Participant 4 explained, 'There's a lot of EY [Ernst Young] thrown at you, you could be more diverse in the kinds of opportunities you promote'.

Pairing 3

Problem: Inconsistent placement options across programmes

Solution: Consistent placement options across programmes

Analysis revealed consensus amongst participants that a lack of placement options on some programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels presented unexpected barriers to placement participation and more widely to student satisfaction and perceptions of future success:

When I was searching for uni, before I even applied, in the marketing, YINI was plastered all over the place. That was really good, I knew going forward I wouldn't accept any other course or uni if they didn't offer YINI. (Participant 9)

By contrast, Participant 2 only discovered after she had enrolled that YINI was not an option on her programme, 'I thought YINI would be offered on every course, I was surprised it's not available on my [UG] course'.

Several participants suggested that two-year PGT programmes should be offered more widely, enabling students more time to transition into postgraduate study and to seek substantial work placements as part of their studies:



My [PGT] programme has no YINI option. Undergraduates have 3 years to gain work experience; they have every summer... Postgrads have only one year, we have only spring break, the summer is spent working on the dissertation, there is no time to gain work experience. We need time within the course to get work experience and build up our CV. (Participant 10)

The university should provide more two-year master's programmes where there is a period of foundation skills development where we are supported to transition into the university and UK, learn the academic skills and processes required, and time later in the course to get work experience. It might not be for everyone, but it could be an option for those that want it. (Participant 11)

Pairing 4

Problem: Lack of sense of belonging, low confidence

Solution: Strong sense of belonging, greater confidence

A small number of participants described how feeling excluded from academic support can lead to low confidence and lack of sense of belonging, which can prevent the students who could most benefit from university support from accessing it. Participant 6 explained, 'There is a huge difference between courses, my girlfriend gets coffee with her lecturers, they talk on the phone! This all goes towards your confidence'. Some highlighted a need for wellbeing or mental health support and how this could help to build resilience to cope with placement application rejections. Participant 8 emphasized that 'Mental support just as important as practical support ... like learning how to overcome rejection'.

Pairing 5

Problem: Extra-curricular only placement support

Solution: Consistently embedded placement support

Connected with the reluctance of underrepresented students to access or seek out university support due to a poor sense of belonging, discussions revealed strong agreement that offering placement support only on an extra-curricular basis compounded structural inequalities because underrepresented student groups would be less likely to access such support due to low awareness, confidence or practical barriers such as costs of travelling, work or caring obligations. For example, participant 12 suggested 'First gen students can lack confidence, feel they don't fit in. There's lots of obstacles one after the other ... support needs



to be embedded into the course, into groupwork'. Others described embedded placement and wider employability support as crucial to effectively engaging a more diverse range of students. Participant 9 noted 'We had really good talks about internships and placements' and participant 13 explained, 'We had a module on it, so we knew what it looked like ... how to do a cover letter, CV, so on'. However, others cited a lack of embedded placement support, leading them to seek out support from academic staff who may not have the necessary expertise:

Some Academic Advisors need more training – they're dealing with [student] rejection, sometimes [students] come in, [they've] had 75 rejections ... if you have an AA who has the knowledge to say 'that's not crazy, don't panic, it's all part of how it works', that would be a start. (Participant 12)

Participants suggested a range of approaches to enhance embedded support including lectures, student/alumni panels, employer events, industry or client-led projects, and incorporating recruitment activities like aptitude tests into classes. Participant 14 noted, 'I'd like more employability experiences built into my programme, opportunities to work with clients as part of modules'. Similarly, participant 15 explained that 'Lots of employers use aptitude tests within the recruitment process, and I'd had no experience of them. It'd be really helpful to understand what kind of questions would be asked'.

Pairing 6

Problem: Visa constraints and unfair employer practices

Solution: Visa flexibility and fair employer practices

A final problem highlighted by some participants concerned the constraints that visas place on many international students, prohibiting more than 20 hours of work per week during term time for degree level students. Participant 16 felt strongly that 'Our visa is restrictive, it stops us getting work experience'.

Some suggested that these constraints should be loosened, or that universities should integrate work placements into more academic programmes, which would enable students to legally work more than 20 hours per week. Participant 17 noted, 'Our visas last until 31st December, we could work after we submit our dissertations in September, but our visas would only allow this if it's part of our course'. Meanwhile, others highlighted associated



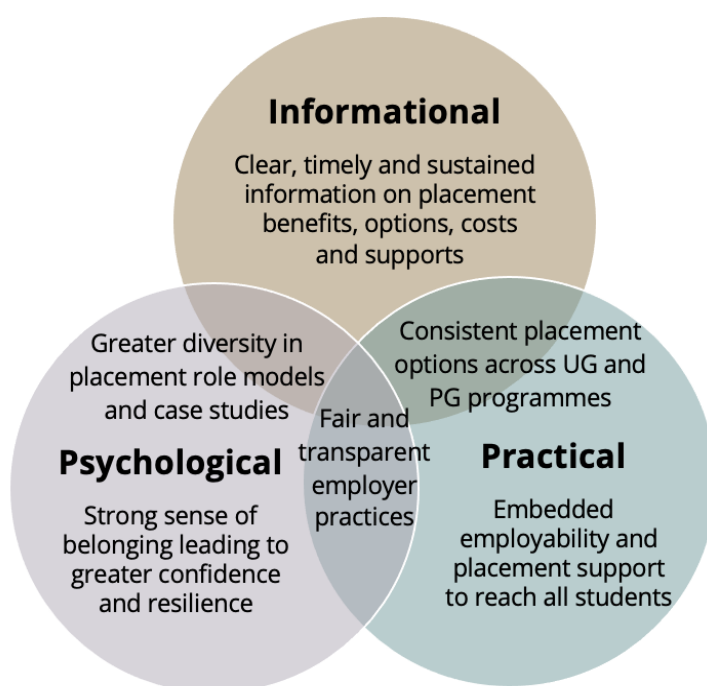
impacts on employer recruitment practices, such as employers prohibiting international students from applying for placement opportunities. Participant 16 suggested that 'Applications should be blind, blank out the names, sometimes I think they look at the name and it goes against you, they want local talent'. And participant 18 suggested that 'The University should bring in more employers who employ international PGT students. I went to the careers fair and looked on [the university jobs portal] but a lot of employers say they will not accept international students'.

Overall, these themes and the participant testimonials underpinning them provide valuable insights into underrepresented student experiences and perceptions regarding placement participation. The following section discusses the implications of the results including the study's contribution to the body of knowledge on placement participation and suggestions for future research.

Discussion

The findings of this research provide crucial insights into overlapping informational, practical and psychological barriers experienced by underrepresented student groups in relation to work placements, and their perspectives on potential solutions so as to widen participation, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 2. Conceptual overlap between key themes and problem-solution pairings.



Informational barriers and solutions

The most significant barrier to placement participation described by participants was a lack of clear and timely information about placement benefits, costs, options and opportunities. Participants cited inconsistent advertising, unclear eligibility criteria, and a lack of targeted support, and suggested that in some cases key information about placement opportunities is not embedded early enough within their academic journey, aligning with the well-documented challenges of designing and delivering communications that effectively reach, engage and inform students and the related need to embed employability support within curricula (Daubney, 2021; Divan et al., 2022). Simpson et al. (2024) found universal emails meant high volumes of irrelevant emails, which many students ignored, often prioritising messages from staff they knew over unknown administrators. In a meta-analysis of student attitudes and preferences towards communications within UK HEIs representing the views of 20,134 students across 17 studies, Gilani (2024) highlighted student preferences for integrated marketing theory approaches that utilise multiple channels (email, social media, student portals) and the role of communications in developing trust and connection between students and their institutions.

Importantly, meta-analysis revealed that, contrary to popular belief, students rarely report receiving 'too much' information and that newsletters, which compile large volumes of information into regular bulletins with the intention of reducing emails, are read much less frequently by students than other communications (Gilani, 2024, p. 284). This suggests that a greater volume of single-issue emails, which can more easily be scanned for relevance or searched for when needed, may improve student awareness of placement and employability opportunities and other matters. In addition, communications strategies often used to build relationships with prospective students, like interactivity (Royo-Vela & Hünernmund, 2016) and storytelling (Cassar & Caruana, 2021), could be used to greater effect with current students.

Practical barriers and solutions

Practical barriers focused on inconsistent access to placement opportunities and support, alongside financial pressures, including the time and expense associated with placement searches, applications and potential relocation. Participants frequently reported feeling ill-equipped to navigate recruitment processes, highlighting disparities in social capital, access to professional networks and familiarity with labour market expectations. These findings align



with previous research demonstrating that students from more advantaged backgrounds are often better positioned to draw upon existing networks, knowledge and resources when pursuing career opportunities (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Bathmaker et al., 2013; ISE, 2025a; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

Participants also described uncertainty around employer expectations and professional recruitment practices, suggesting that barriers extend beyond financial constraints to include unequal access to forms of social, academic and professional capital that support successful transitions into graduate employment. These findings help explain why placement experiences may be associated with improved student outcomes, as placements provide opportunities to develop professional networks, workplace knowledge and confidence, which are often unevenly distributed across the student population. Participants therefore emphasised the importance of practical support measures including tailored guidance, mentoring, accommodation and financial assistance.

For international students, visa constraints exacerbate challenges, as do limitations in employer willingness to allow international applicants who may not subsequently be available for graduate employment, aligning strongly with previous research regarding challenges for marginalised students in realising opportunities (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Camden, 2025; Cramer, 2021; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; QAA, 2024; Traynor et al., 2024; Universities UK, 2022) and the need to improve equality within recruitment practices (CIPD, 2024; Gündemir et al., 2024; Kyere & Fukui, 2023). To address these barriers, participants proposed greater consistency in placement options across academic programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the widening of employer eligibility criteria to avoid specifically excluding international students, and ensuring non-discriminatory approaches to increase diversity within the placement workforce more generally.

Psychological barriers and solutions

The prominence of psychological barriers within focus group discussions was particularly noteworthy. Concerns around confidence, resilience and perceptions of fit suggest that decisions about placement participation are shaped not only by access to information and resources, but by students' sense of belonging within academic and professional environments and whether they can imagine themselves succeeding within them. Participants frequently reported feeling ill-equipped to navigate employer recruitment processes,



highlighting disparities in social capital, confidence and familiarity with graduate labour market expectations. These findings align with previous research demonstrating how social capital, identity, belonging and self-efficacy shape educational participation, career aspirations and student success (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Bathmaker et al., 2013; ISE, 2025a; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Of particular concern was the perceived lack of role models, alumni engagement and case studies featuring historically marginalised students who had successfully secured and completed placements. Such examples were viewed as important not only for providing information and practical guidance, but also for strengthening students' confidence, aspirations and sense of belonging within professional environments.

Participants emphasised the importance of mentoring, peer support and greater visibility of diverse placement success stories as mechanisms for addressing psychological barriers to participation. In particular, participants called for greater visibility of students 'like them' in placement communications, speaking to broader debates around the need for representation, belonging and confidence-building among underrepresented student groups to reduce the long-term psychological impacts of structural discrimination (Bulatao & Anderson, 2004; Hope et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2019; Stop Hate UK, n.d.; Williams et al., 2003). This study's findings also align with recent research emphasising the critical importance of academic staff demonstrating care, empathy, accessibility and inclusivity in their teaching and pastoral support to create a more welcoming institutional culture, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds (Gilani & Thomas, 2025).

Conclusion

This study aimed to develop understanding of marginalised student perspectives on the barriers and potential solutions to widening participation in placements. By employing a co-created, student-led approach to research design, data collection and analysis, the study has generated rich, qualitative insights that develop understanding of the barriers that marginalised student groups face in participating in placements and surfacing student ideas about potential solutions. In amplifying the voices of students often marginalised in employability policy and discourse, the study offers a valuable contribution to placements and employability research.



The study was not without limitations. The sample, while diverse, was relatively small, and participants self-selected into the research. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of students who remain disengaged from employability support, research participation or university services more broadly. While the focus groups successfully recruited students from a range of traditionally marginalised and underrepresented backgrounds, the findings cannot be assumed to represent the full diversity of experiences within these groups. The focus group setting may also have led some participants to feel reluctant to share sensitive experiences or alternative viewpoints, despite efforts to create an inclusive and supportive environment. Finally, the study was conducted within a single institutional context and identifies perceived barriers and potential solutions rather than evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions. Further research involving larger samples, multiple institutions and longitudinal evaluation of implemented interventions would strengthen understanding of how best to support equitable participation in placement opportunities.

However, the insights gained through this study suggest several practical actions that HE practitioners might usefully employ to enable a more diverse range of students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels to realise the significant opportunities placements can offer, summarised as follows:

1. Provide consistent opportunities across academic programmes for students to undertake work placements as part of their studies.
2. Embed placement and other employability support into academic programmes to increase employability skills and confidence.
3. Develop integrated communications strategies involving multiple channels (email, social media and student portals) that are representative of diversity and emphasise single-issue emails with clear subject headers over newsletter compilations.
4. Emphasise, in staff training, the particular importance of care, empathy, accessibility and inclusivity within teaching, employability and pastoral support in building a sense of belonging amongst students from historically marginalised backgrounds.
5. Engage with employers to raise awareness of diversity access and awarding gaps and strategies to widen placement participation.



Furthermore, the study underlines the moral and economic rationales and the unrelenting need, at this time of increasing political pressures, social divisions and economic uncertainties, for universities to prioritise and resource work to address awarding gaps and support students from historically marginalised backgrounds to access placements because they can boost academic achievement, narrow awarding gaps, improve graduate prospects and diversify workforces, bringing wider social and economic benefits.

Future research in this field should urgently explore policies and practices that produce highly diversified placement populations, the efficacy of different communication strategies, perspectives of staff and employers engaged in placement support, and how co-production can widen participation in research and amplify underrepresented perspectives within policy and practice debates.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend sincere thanks to the students from historically marginalised and underrepresented backgrounds who generously shared their experiences and views, which have shaped our understanding of the opportunities and barriers associated with placement participation and student success. We are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and editorial team for their highly supportive and detailed reviews, which helped us improve this paper. We also thank Stefan Melgaard and Selina Churchill for their ongoing support in student records data collation and visualisation which continue to inform our understanding of placement access, participation and academic outcomes. Finally, the authors thank colleagues across the institution for their invaluable advice and insights, particularly the Careers and Employability Service, the Widening Participation and Outreach Team, the Race Equality Charter Team, and those engaged in placement support and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work across the institution.

Disclosure statement

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, design, analysis, writing or preparation of this paper.



Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the University of Liverpool Innovation Fund, which provided a grant of £2,400 to support the engagement of student co-researchers and participants. This funding was awarded in 2023/24.

The authors confirm there are no competing interests to declare.

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