Navigating stigma and safety: A case study of a pilot work placement initiative for neurodivergent higher education students

Abstract

Purpose

English universities have statutory duties to advance equality of opportunity, yet disabled students continue to experience poorer progression into graduate employment. This study evaluates a university-led pilot placement scheme designed for neurodivergent students by offering paid, 30-hour placements with external employers.

Design/methodology/approach

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four neurodivergent student interns and three employer supervisors who participated in the pilot to evaluate the short-term outcomes of the scheme. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, informed by the social model of disability and stigma theory.

Findings

Four themes were constructed to highlight how: (1) enacted and anticipated stigma shaped anxiety and masking in the workplace; (2) inclusionary workplace practices mitigated felt stigma and enhanced confidence; (3) university-mediated work was perceived as the only accessible route to employment; and (4) scaffolded, relational careers-team support enabled participation through ongoing mediation. The findings indicate short-term psychosocial and employability-related benefits while also highlighting the need for sustained wraparound support and organisational culture change to facilitate progression.

Originality

This study addresses a gap in the work-integrated learning and graduate employability literature by examining a university-led, paid micro-placement model tailored to neurodivergent students within the English higher education context. By incorporating both neurodivergent intern and employer perspectives, it extends understanding of how stigma and inclusionary workplace practice shape placement experiences and employability outcomes. The findings offer practical insights for universities and employers on the value of university-mediated placements and scaffolded wraparound careers support alongside organisational culture change to support future employment.

Keywords

Neurodiversity, higher education, employability, work placement, stigma

Introduction

Progression into highly skilled graduate employment is a core priority in English higher education policy and institutional strategy. Under the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), universities must produce Access and Participation Plans to reduce gaps in equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle, from access and continuation to attainment and progression to graduate employment or further study.

Declared disability among applicants has risen steadily, with disabled students comprising 22% of accepted applicants in 2024 (UCAS, 2024). Yet, outcome gaps persist, with disabled graduates continuing to experience poorer progression to highly skilled employment than non-disabled peers (OfS, 2025a). Evidence also indicates uneven access to enabling opportunities. In a UK survey of 1,200 disabled students, only half felt supported to pursue progression-related opportunities such as placements or internships, while awareness of disability-informed careers advice and national Access to Work schemes was low (29% and 25% respectively) (Disabled Students UK, 2024).

Within this context, there is increasing interest in what supports neurodivergent students to participate equitably in higher education (HE) and beyond. Around 7% of UK undergraduates who declare a disability are recorded as neurodivergent (HESA, 2023), although prevalence is likely underestimated due to non-disclosure and barriers to diagnosis (Devine, 2024). Neurodivergence is commonly used as an umbrella term for neurological functioning that diverges from social norms (Chapman, 2020), often including autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dyslexia and Tourette syndrome (Clouder et al., 2020). While evidence suggests increasing numbers of neurodivergent students entering HE (Clouder et al., 2020; Shaw and Selman, 2023; HESA, 2023), empirical evidence on their specific barriers to progression into graduate employment, and 'what works' to address them, remains limited (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024).

Strengths-based perspectives and structural barriers

Research highlights the strengths neurodivergent individuals can contribute to organisations, including sustained attention and precision often associated with autistic employees and creativity and adaptability frequently reported among individuals with ADHD (Wong et al., 2018; Szulc et al., 2021). Neurodiversity-inclusive policies have also been linked to organisational benefits such as improved performance, retention, and workplace culture (Ndindeng, 2024; Johnson and Thompson, 2023). However, these potential benefits are undermined by structural barriers within recruitment and employment. Inaccessible hiring practices, such as unclear job advertisements and conventional interview formats, can disadvantage neurodivergent applicants, while stigma and bias can shape recruitment, progression, and support (Vincent, 2020; Davies et al., 2023). Barriers may continue after hiring when inclusion is uneven, affecting job satisfaction and social connection (Branicki et al., 2024). Reflecting these dynamics, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (AGCAS) reporting suggests autistic graduates remain underrepresented in secure full-time employment 15 months after graduation and are often employed below their qualification level (Drakeley, 2022).

Supported employment and the role of work experience

Work experience is often positioned as a key mechanism for developing employability and easing transitions to the labour market. Studies of internships and supported programmes indicate benefits for

neurodivergent participants, including improved self-confidence and independence, reduced anxiety, and development of workplace-relevant skills (Meeks et al., 2015; Ashworth et al., 2024). Supported employment interventions have also been associated with improved employment outcomes for autistic young people, particularly where transition-to-work support is embedded (Schall et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2013). In England, however, supported internship schemes for disabled young people aged 16–25 are typically delivered through schools and further-education providers and commonly require Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, limiting applicability for many HE students (CooperGibson Research, 2020; Department for Education, 2025). Universities therefore require additional mechanisms to enable neurodivergent students to access placements and extracurricular careers advice, guidance, and work opportunities. Qualitative studies with autistic university students and graduates emphasise the need for specialist, personalised employability support and stronger partnership working with employers (Pesonen et al., 2021; Trusson and Travers, 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2024).

Barriers must also be understood within broader debates on employability. Neoliberal employability discourse frames employability as an individualised responsibility, emphasising adaptability, confidence, and continuous self-improvement, while obscuring the role of structural conditions in shaping graduate outcomes (Handley and Millar, 2023). These normative assumptions about the 'ideal' employee can disadvantage students whose communication styles, sensory needs, or experiences of stigma do not align with dominant recruitment and workplace practices. Therefore, unequal progression cannot be solely understood as a skills deficit or lack of preparedness in neurodivergent students and must be located within workplace cultures that privilege neurotypical behaviours.

Critical perspectives likewise position employability as relational and context-dependent rather than an individual attribute. From this perspective, graduate outcomes are shaped through interactions between individual resources, institutional practice, employer expectations, and social conditions (Dollinger et al., 2023a). Inclusion therefore extends beyond reasonable adjustments to recruitment, supervision, and workplace culture (Branicki et al., 2024; Volpone et al., 2022), meaning neurodivergent students may face barriers to progression both when entering employment and within organisations that fail to recognise or value neurodivergent ways of working.

Despite these developments, limited evidence captures how university-led placement interventions operate in practice, or which features reduce barriers to participation and progression. To address this gap, the present study explores neurodivergent students' and their employers' perceptions of a pilot, university-led work placement initiative. Although situated within the English HE context, the core issues addressed resonate across international research on disability, transition, and graduate employability. International evidence shows that disabled and neurodivergent students often encounter uncertainty around disclosure and inconsistent employer understanding when transitioning from HE into the workforce (Pesonen et al., 2021; Moriña and Biagiotti, 2022). While policy frameworks and placement models vary across national systems, these recurring challenges suggest that questions of stigma, inclusion, and supported transition are not unique to the UK context. Examining how a university-led placement model operates in practice may therefore offer insight beyond this single setting, particularly for institutions seeking to develop their work-integrated learning and employability support for neurodivergent students.

Guided by the social model of disability (Riddick, 2001), we conceptualise disadvantage as produced primarily through structural conditions rather than individual deficits. We also draw on stigma theory to

examine how neurodivergent students anticipate and experience progression and workplace opportunities. Stigma is a systemic process in which labelling and stereotyping, reinforced by power, produce social exclusion and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). In autism research, enacted stigma (overt discrimination) can contribute to felt stigma (internalised shame and fear) and affiliate stigma (stigma by association), shaping disclosure decisions, psychological safety, and participation (Turnock et al., 2022). Using this lens, we examine the barriers and enabling mechanisms within university-mediated placements, offering insight into how supported work experience may mitigate stigma and support progression into employment.

Methodology

The study was undertaken at a university in the East of England, United Kingdom. The host institution has 13.1% of entrants who have a declared disability (OfS, 2025b). Given the wide and evolving nature of the term 'neurodivergence' (Dwyer, 2022), we adopted the pilot scheme's inclusive definition: students could participate if they self-identified as neurodivergent, regardless of possession of a formal diagnosis. The research examined a piloted careers service that offered paid, 30-hour work placements with external employers exclusively to neurodivergent students and recent graduates. In total, nine placements were completed across seven organisations. The scheme was developed in response to neurodivergent student feedback and the careers team's observations, with the aim of enabling meaningful paid external work experience to strengthen confidence and employability skills. It also aimed to enhance employer understanding of neurodivergence, promoting recognition of the distinctive strengths neurodivergent individuals can bring to organisations. To support this, host employers received neurodiversity training from an expert trainer prior to placement commencement.

The current project adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretative and social constructivist framework to enable greater exploration of the meanings ascribed to human experience (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This approach was selected to generate in-depth, contextualised understanding of a small pilot, informing future intervention development and contributing to the emerging evidence base on neurodivergent employability support. Ethical approval was granted by the university ethics committee (RETH/24-048).

Participants

Participants had all taken part in the pilot scheme. Four participants were current students at the university who identified as neurodivergent and had completed a placement. Each reported a formal diagnosis categorised under the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) umbrella, although diagnosis type and timing varied. Three employer participants were staff from organisations that hosted a neurodivergent student through the placement scheme and directly supervised or recruited the intern. As an exploratory qualitative case study, the aim was to develop situated insight into experiences of the pilot from both sides of the placement relationship, therefore the seven detailed accounts built a sufficiently rich narrative.

Participants were recruited via the university careers team, who had routine contact with students and employers involved in the placements. The careers team emailed eligible participants a research flyer alongside a participant information and consent form. Interested individuals returned the completed form and provided an email address, after which the research team contacted them to arrange an interview. One-to-one interviews were conducted within 2 weeks of consent between May and June 2025.

Data collection

Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Separate interview guides were developed for students and employers to capture the different aims of the scheme (see Supplementary_material_appendix_1). Student interviews explored motivations for participating, prior work experience, perceived outcomes, and views on future employment, whereas employer interviews considered motivations for hosting a placement, expectations, perceived benefits and challenges, adjustments, and reflections on future practice.

To maximise accessibility, study materials and procedures were developed with reference to relevant literature, online guidance, and consultation with experts with professional and lived experience of neurodivergence. Several adaptations were made to reduce barriers to participation. Written materials were formatted for readability, including shorter paragraphs and clear headings (Coleman et al., 2021). Materials used light, natural colour palettes (e.g., cream), which may be more accessible for some neurodivergent individuals (Hassan et al., 2022). An infographic video was embedded into the information and consent form, outlining the study purpose, steps and introducing the researcher. The form included explicit detail about what would happen during the interview, as predictability can reduce anxiety related to unexpected activities (Gowen et al., 2019). Where requested, careers staff talked through the form with students to provide additional support.

Participants could choose between in-person interviews on campus or online interviews, with options to keep cameras off. A further online option was offered: participants could request an interview via Microsoft Teams chat if a live call felt uncomfortable. Nevertheless, all participants selected an online Microsoft Teams call. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the interview, all participants received a debrief and were signposted to relevant support services.

Data analysis

Data analysis was informed by Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a ‘method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). It is well suited to exploring how individuals experience and make sense of phenomena, as well as how social processes shape norms, meanings, and behaviour (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2022). This made RTA an appropriate analytic approach for examining neurodivergent students’ experiences of undertaking placements and employers’ perceptions of participation, including implications related to stigma. In line with Braun and Clarke’s approach, we did not seek formal ‘data saturation’, instead prioritising a rich, interpretive account of a small dataset.

Engaging in a process of reflexivity, the researchers acknowledge that the analysis of neurodivergent students and their employers’ experiences is shaped by their understanding of the surrounding literature and theory. Both researchers hold roles in HE research focused on reducing inequality of opportunity for structurally disadvantaged student groups. This background likely influenced design choices and analytic sensitivity to disability-related barriers within and beyond HE. The researchers also viewed their knowledge as a strength, supporting a neurodiversity-affirming stance rather than deficit-oriented interpretations of neurodivergence. Given the researchers’ employment at the institution, they emphasised the independence of the research from scheme delivery to support candid participation and minimise perceived risk. The team also considered their positionality as researchers without first-hand experience

of neurodivergence, aiming to keep neurodivergent student perspectives central and reduce the risk of interpreting accounts through normative assumptions about student experiences.

Following the six phases of RTA iteratively (Braun and Clarke, 2022), the researchers collaboratively generated and refined themes. This process resulted in four themes capturing nuanced aspects of neurodivergent student and employer experiences within the pilot work placement scheme.

Findings

Four themes capture students' and employers' nuanced experiences of a work placement. Collectively, they centre around stigma and reflect barriers to employment for neurodivergent students; the mitigating impact of workplace inclusion upon felt stigma; the safety of familiar environments, and the benefit of scaffolded support for neurodivergent students seeking external work experience. The findings highlight an important tension, in that the conditions that made placements safe and accessible also risked reinforcing dependence upon university-facilitated employment. Taken together, themes show how support, safety, and stigma shaped participation in this small-scale pilot.

Stigma: Navigating neurodivergence at work

The first theme captures how prior and anticipated experiences of stigma shaped students' expectations of employment before and during the placement. Students described past workplace difficulties and repeated rejections as undermining confidence and increasing anxiety about graduate employment. Their accounts point to cumulative experiences of 'enacted stigma' (Turnock et al., 2022), which framed employment as a space of scrutiny and exclusion to be carried forward as expectations of future stigmatisation.

Employers also acknowledged uneven confidence and knowledge within organisations. Jenny emphasised that her ability to support an intern was contingent on personal experience and that colleagues might respond differently:

"For me, it didn't fuss me because I'd had experience in the educational sector... [company] is quite open in terms of that. Um, but I think, yeah… some people at [the company] would have had more of an issue if it was them that had to manage… I think they'd had more concerns over it because they don't know how to deal with that quite so much." (Jenny, Employer)

This suggests that organisational openness does not necessarily translate into consistently supportive cultures, and that negative attitudes can persist and reinforce students' concerns.

Students' anticipation of stigma was strongly linked to self-presentation and pressure to meet perceived norms. Turnock et al. (2022) describe how enacted stigma can become 'felt stigma', internalised expectations of prejudice that drive shame, fear and, in turn, increased psychological burden and masking. George illustrates this internalisation through their concern about performing employability correctly:

"I want to appear in the correct way to an employer. I understand it's very competitive to get a lot of graduate roles and everything. Um, and I think there is a bit of fear that being autistic might be more of a disadvantage there… because again, it's about, can I sell myself at interview? Do I have the skills, the capabilities? Can I do well under pressure?" (George, Student)

Here, autism is framed as a potential 'disadvantage' in competitive recruitment, with interviews experienced as high-pressure environments requiring 'correct' behaviours that do not signal neurodivergence. Students displayed felt stigma, where anticipated expectations lead to the burden of masking to meet normative ideals of employability, which can be detrimental to wellbeing (Khudiakova et al., 2024; Raymaker et al., 2020). This theme provides a foundation for later themes, as students' desire for supportive placements and trusted university mediation can be understood as a response to prior experiences of stigma and anticipated exclusion.

Support: Empowerment through inclusionary practice

The second theme reflects how inclusive work cultures could interrupt, but not eliminate, the effects of stigma. Employers generally characterised their organisations as 'open', often drawing on previous experience of disability or neurodivergence within the workplace. These accounts suggest that students' placement experiences were shaped not only by formal opportunity, but by whether workplaces communicated welcome, flexibility and psychological safety in everyday interactions.

"So the company is all very it's very open. You know, we're all, um, they're really disability positive. Um, I myself am neurodiverse. Um, a lot of us within the company are, um, and we wanted to kind of get that out there, that there are companies that are working actively on being able to support those that are neurodiverse or disabled" (Louise, Employer)

Because employers already positioned themselves as disability-positive, placements often affirmed existing inclusive practice rather than transforming it. However, this appeared to matter for students, as experiencing inclusion during their placements supported motivation and belonging.

"I think it was nice to see again, a very sort of welcoming and friendly environment and open environment. And it just made me more motivated to to eventually get out into the workplace to full time employment, um, and really settle in a role and settle in an organisation and feel a part of it and feel very welcomed." (George, Student)

George's increased motivation contrasts with pre-placement anxiety, suggesting that belonging can buffer the impact of enacted and felt stigma (Turnock et al., 2022). Yet students also emphasised that inclusion is not only about employer attitudes; it is also about how neurodivergence is lived and managed in social workplaces, including active negotiation of expectations, communication, and support.

"when you live with neurodiversity, you live with a level of a level of anxiety that, um, many neurotypical people obviously not all can't really relate to or really understand. And if you think of like the sheer amount of stressors that a neurodiverse person is put under, like the constant eye contact needing to put on this, um, persona to deal with other people and not being able to, like, relax… having a good employer helps but does not come even close to fully mitigating the issues" (Jessica, Student)

Jessica explains how the 'sheer amount of stressors' in the workplace exacerbate anxiety. They describe requirements to mask neurodivergence altogether, leading to elevated distress and discomfort (Barnes, 2019; Turnock et al., 2022). This also points to a mismatch between employer self-assessments and students' expectations of what accessibility and psychological safety require. Positive placement experiences may strengthen confidence while still leaving intact the broader workplace conditions that produce stress, masking, and uncertainty. Inclusion was experienced as partial and situated rather than complete and is therefore more nuanced than being 'open' or having policies.

Safety: University as the sole provider of employment

This theme captures neurodivergent students' perceptions of university-facilitated employment as their only safe and stable employment option. Students often anticipated external employment uncertainty, commonly linked to felt stigma (Turnock et al., 2022), and preferred the familiarity, accessibility, and perceived acceptance of a university context.

"so far the uni has only been been my only real reliable employer who I've, who I've been able to actually count on... they're the only ones that haven't turned me down at any, every step of the way…" (Zachary, Student)

Zachary's contrast between a 'reliable' university and repeated external rejection suggests that universities can function as "safe havens", while external workplaces remain high-risk settings in which neurodivergent identities are evaluated against stereotypical norms of being 'able' to work (Cunnah, 2015, p. 214). It also points to an important tension between safety and independence, as the features that made placements a positive experience could also narrow students' ideas of where work is accessible.

This dynamic helps explain why some students sought further university-organised placements rather than independently pursuing part-time work or external internships and navigating the labour market alone.

Practical features of the scheme also contributed to safety and accessibility. Students valued flexible placement design that could be balanced around study and social life:

"I want to look for some more placements…I like the way the hours are split up so you don't have to do them all in like one big chunk. You can do it for just a couple of hours a week. And it fits in well with my studying and social things that I do." (Martha, Student)

Flexibility enabled equal participation and reduced the exclusion created by inflexible hours, previously framed as a form of workplace hostility for disabled students (Dollinger et al., 2023b). The ability to shape hours around study and social commitments appeared central to why the placement felt manageable. This suggests that what students understood as 'safe' employment was closely tied to structural conditions such as pacing, predictability and workload, rather than to individual preference only.

At the same time, students' preference for university-led work may reflect expectations of negative reactions to disclosure, limited accommodations, and broader external stigma (Davies et al., 2023; Tomlinson et al., 2024). Amongst participants, placements appeared to open access to work but only partially shifted long-term expectations of independence, which may suggest that short-term supported placements need to be understood as one step in the transition to work, rather than a complete solution to labour market exclusion. Further supported exposure to external workplaces alongside university-led mechanisms to encourage systemic changes, such as collaboration with neurodiverse-aware employers, employer training opportunities, and encouragement of strengths-based approaches may be necessary to see lasting changes in student perceptions (Dollinger et al., 2023b; Trusson and Travers, 2024).

Scaffolding: Bridging the gap between university and the workplace

The fourth theme emphasises universities' mediating role in supporting transitions into external workplaces. Students described the careers team as a consistent "anchor" that reduced uncertainty, helped them enter unfamiliar environments, and provided support if problems arose. This appeared to lessen the risks identified in earlier themes and create a bridge between a familiar institutional environment and a less predictable external workplace.

"a big worry for me is if I do a work experience with an external organisation, I'm going to have problems or I'm going to go into it quite worried and I'm not sure what to do. But with this I knew that I was going to get plenty of support from the careers team and ended up I got plenty of support from [EMPLOYER]" (George, Student)

George implies the placement might not have felt feasible without the careers team's involvement, highlighting the value of trusted, ongoing support to navigate unfamiliar workplaces. This mirrors evidence from micro-placement evaluations identifying the need for an institutional "anchor" to organise and facilitate placements (Rigg et al., 2023, p. 11). This helps to explain the tension identified in the previous theme, as scaffolding enabled participation, but also meant that confidence was built within a mediated relationship, rather than independently of university support. Such findings reflect the idea of employability as a relational and context-dependent process (Dollinger et al., 2023a), reinforcing the need to move beyond individualistic approaches to consider structural barriers and embed strength-based approaches to neurodiversity in the workplace.

Employers similarly emphasised the value of pre-placement communication, often facilitated by the careers team, to clarify interests and set expectations, improving fit and reducing assumptions:

"We had a call with [STUDENT] beforehand to kind of find out [their] expectations and what [they] wanted to do, because I didn't want to assume that [they] wanted to work in accounts if [they] had no

interest in accounts, but also it was also a bit led by us because it was a case of, oh, these areas are quite exciting and this would help you with your with your degree…" (Dianne, Employer)

Tripartite communication between all parties, expectation-setting, and appraisal of placement inclusivity helped create positive experiences. The careers team encouraged participation, provided neurodiversity training, and supported pre-placement meetings, offering scaffolded support that can reduce the stigma-related burden of navigating placements (Dollinger et al., 2023b; Disabled Students UK, 2024). Overall, the university emerged as central to students' "employment ecosystem" (Tomlinson et al., 2024, p. 33), with potential to reduce felt stigma (Turnock et al., 2022) and widen access to meaningful work through proactive engagement and partnerships with employers.

Discussion

Adopting a stigma lens, this study explored neurodivergent students' experiences of 30-hour external work placements and employers' perspectives. Four themes were identified: barriers to employment, the mitigating effect of inclusion on felt stigma, the safety of familiar environments, and the value of scaffolded support when accessing external work experience. The scheme appeared to enhance students' confidence and motivation to pursue graduate employment, suggesting short-term mitigation of stigma. However, the findings also point to an important tension between the safety created through university-mediated support and the long-term goal of independence within the wider labour market. Given the small scale and context-specific nature of the study, the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than broadly generalisable, with further research required to establish whether identified short-term gains translate into sustained employment outcomes.

Perceived employment barriers fostered felt stigma and expectations of discrimination. Students described anxiety and pessimism about securing graduate work despite strong career aspirations. Prolonged job searching and unemployment are associated with depression, reduced life satisfaction and lower self-esteem in both neurodivergent and neurotypical groups (Feather and O'Brien, 1986; Hedley et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2003); for neurodivergent individuals, stigma is likely to intensify these harms. When opportunities did arise, fear of stigma increased pressure to mask neurodivergence, a coping strategy linked to burnout (Higgins et al. 2021), impacting job performance, employment sustainability, and quality of life (Raymaker et al., 2020). These findings imply that progression barriers cannot be solely attributed to individual confidence or preparedness, but also to wider recruitment and workplace norms that privilege neurotypical behaviour.

At the same time, participants' accounts demonstrate how inclusive environments can disrupt stigma. Completing the placement strengthened students' confidence in their ability to succeed at work and increased optimism about post-university employment, aligning with evidence that supported internships enhance self-efficacy and reduce anxiety among neurodivergent individuals (Ashworth et al., 2024; Meeks et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these gains appeared relational and context-dependent rather than easily transferable to future workplaces. Supportive supervision, clear communication, and a welcoming culture made participation feel possible yet did not remove concerns about long-term employment.

Additionally, a single positive placement did not erase ongoing workplace stressors or cumulative stigma experiences. Employers noted that inclusion often depended on individual managers rather than organisation-wide norms. This distinction reflects evidence that organisations may demonstrate positive "diversity climates" (representation and accommodations) without developing stronger "inclusion climates" that shift everyday attitudes and behaviours (Volpone et al., 2022). In this study, supportive

supervision appeared as pockets of competence rather than consistently embedded practice. Because stigma operates through everyday interpersonal interactions, negative co-worker and supervisor attitudes remain significant barriers (Krzeminska et al., 2019). Ethical inclusion therefore extends beyond compliance toward cultivating cultures that actively value neurodivergent employees, mirroring wider debates on employability, which caution against attributing graduate outcomes solely to individual skills while overlooking the structural conditions that shape them.

Consistent with Dollinger et al. (2023b), these findings suggest that some inclusion efforts remain rooted in deficit-based disability models. A relational, strengths-based approach would shift focus from perceived impairments toward recognising capabilities and understanding employability as co-constructed within context (Dollinger et al., 2023a). In practice, this involves addressing team norms, managerial practices, and opportunities for mutual job crafting, rather than relying solely on hiring policies or individual adjustments. Pre-placement meetings and collaborative expectation-setting were associated with better experiences and stronger motivation for graduate employment, suggesting that relational approaches may enhance psychological safety and reduce enacted and felt stigma (Ashworth et al., 2024).

Despite reported benefits, students continued to perceive university-organised employment as one of the only "safe" and stable options. All expressed a preference for returning to university-led placements. This echoes evidence that disabled students often experience university-mediated placements as safer and more manageable than independently negotiating external workplaces (Cunnah, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2024). This preference implies that one positive external placement may not offset stigma's longer-term effects, even if it boosts short-term confidence and belonging. Anticipated discrimination can heighten internalised stigma and prompt withdrawal from challenging environments (Quinn et al., 2015). Among neurodivergent individuals, internalised stigma is associated with distress, functional impairment, and reduced self-esteem (Masuch et al., 2019). Avoidance and concealment, including masking, may function as coping responses (Han et al., 2022), but can limit long-term progression. These dynamics suggest that supported placements may need to be embedded within longer-term progression pathways rather than treated as stand-alone interventions.

Both students and employers highlighted the pivotal role of university careers staff. Trusted relationships with careers teams provided continuity, reduced isolation, and supported navigation of unfamiliar workplaces. Careers staff functioned as mentors and monitors, offering supervision, advocacy, and skills development (Moriña and Biagiotti, 2022). In this scheme, careers staff also mitigated stigma risk by selecting inclusive host organisations and providing neurodiversity training, contributing to more supportive workplace climates. While this created positive placement climates for students, universities cannot be held solely responsible for inclusion. Employer culture change remains essential in reducing dependence upon institutional mediation.

Findings support several recommendations for future supported employment schemes. Universities should assess placement sites for accessibility, culture, and willingness to adjust prior to participation (Cunnah, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2023b). Structured pre-placement meetings and clear documentation can reduce disclosure and administrative burden (Trusson and Travers, 2024; Pesonen et al., 2021). Supervisors should receive practical training in neurodiversity, legal responsibilities, and strengths-based inclusion (Disabled Students UK, 2024). Structurally, placements should be flexible, as rigid full-time norms may be disabling. Shorter days, remote options, and smoother transitions may enhance sustainability (Dollinger et al., 2023b; Pesonen et al., 2021). Crucially, wraparound support should be

ongoing, with regular check-ins and encouragement toward further external employment rather than default return to university-facilitated roles (Tomlinson et al., 2024). Though the study is grounded in the English HE context, similar issues around disclosure, employer understanding, stigma, and supported transition are reflected in international literature (Pesonen et al., 2021; Moriña and Biagiotti, 2022), suggesting broader relevance despite differing institutional and policy contexts.

This study highlights the short-term impacts of a supported micro-placement scheme on confidence and motivation. However, longer-term progression outcomes were unavailable, and participation was limited to four students and three employers. The findings are therefore based on a small dataset and self-reported perceptions, and should not be taken as evidence of effectiveness at scale. Future research should incorporate wider stakeholders, stronger involvement of neurodivergent students in co-design and evaluation, and longitudinal examination of employment outcomes.

Overall, the findings reinforce evidence that anticipated and experienced employment barriers contribute to felt stigma and internalised expectations of discrimination (Turnock et al., 2022) amongst neurodivergent students. Supported external placements can enhance confidence and belonging, indicating potential to mitigate stigma. Yet these gains may be temporary without sustained support and genuine inclusion climates. HE institutions, being a part of students' employment ecosystems, therefore hold responsibility in shaping inclusive placements and providing ongoing support to both students and employers, alongside longitudinal evaluation of external placements and their implications for progression.

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