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Widening participation to sandwich courses: temporal challenges

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ABSTRACT

Within the UK, sandwich courses, i.e. degree programmes that include a year spent on a work placement, usually during the third year of a four-year course, are increasingly offered by higher education institutions to maximise the proportion of their graduates moving into employment and, particularly, jobs that are deemed 'graduate-level'. Indeed, there is evidence of a strong positive correlation between participation in sandwich courses and employment. Although this positive impact is particularly marked for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, such students are also significantly less likely to undertake a sandwich course. The article draws on 50 interviews with higher education staff and students to argue that many of the most significant barriers experienced by WP students are related to various temporal challenges. In doing so, it expands the body of work on the frequent mismatch between hegemonic university time and the time of students from under-represented backgrounds. In addition, it argues that WP students are less able than their more privileged peers to take advantage of the 'slow time' necessary to undertake a work placement, and that the rhythms of external actors are also relevant when explaining the challenges faced by WP students.

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Introduction

Within the UK, sandwich courses, i.e. degree programmes that include a year spent on a work placement, usually during the third year of a four-year course, are increasingly offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) to maximise the proportion of their graduates moving into employment and, particularly, jobs that are deemed 'graduate-level'. Indeed, there is evidence of a strong positive correlation between participation in sandwich courses and employment. This positive impact is particularly marked for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds – i.e. those from groups that are traditionally under-represented in higher education (such as those from low-income families and families with no prior parental experience of higher education, those with a disability, and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups¹). Nevertheless, such students are also significantly less likely to undertake a sandwich course. This article seeks to explore the reasons for this disparity; indeed, it is underpinned by the research question: *Why are students from WP backgrounds less likely than their peers to take part in sandwich courses?* It draws on interviews with higher education staff and students to argue that many of the most significant barriers experienced by WP students are related to issues of time. In doing so, the article expands the body of work on the frequent mismatch between hegemonic university time (i.e. the dominant tempo and

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pace of activities found in such institutions; see Bennett and Burke 2018) and the time of students from under-represented backgrounds, and generates new knowledge about the experiences of WP students.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: we first discuss previous studies that have examined sandwich courses and WP students, and the ‘temporal challenges’ of higher education (i.e. the ways in which certain groups (of both students and staff) can be disadvantaged by hegemonic university time). We then outline the methods that underpinned the research. Subsequently, we examine five specific ‘temporal challenges’ that can hinder the take up of sandwich courses by students from WP backgrounds – drawing out their implications for both academic understandings and policy and practice in HEIs.

Background

Sandwich courses and WP students

Within the UK, sandwich courses have a long history. They have been available in the higher education sector since the 1960s, when former Colleges of Technology that often offered such opportunities secured university status (Smithers 1976). Over the last few years, an increasing number of HEIs have started to offer sandwich courses.² It is likely that the increasing interest in offering such courses, on the part of HEIs, is related to the importance that is now attached to the labour market outcomes of their graduates. Indeed, results from the annual ‘Graduate Outcomes’ survey (which collects data on the destinations of graduates 15 months after they have completed their degree) feed into national league tables and also ‘Discover Uni’, the portal that prospective higher education students are encouraged to use when choosing their university. This has incentivised HEIs to take action to maximise the proportion of their graduates moving into employment, particularly jobs deemed ‘graduate-level’. There is evidence of a strong positive correlation between participation in sandwich courses and employment, particularly in relation to high-quality ‘graduate level’ jobs (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009). Moreover, research has indicated that students who took a sandwich course have gone on to earn over £1600 more annually than the average full-time student three years after graduation (Delis and Jones 2023). Other studies have shown similarly positive outcomes, such as achieving a good career fit (Arsenis and Flores 2023) and improved academic performance when sandwich course students return to their degree programme (Brooks and Youngson 2016; Jones, Green, and Higson 2017).

Extant research suggests that the benefits of taking a sandwich course are particularly marked for students from WP backgrounds. Analysis of the Graduate Outcomes surveys for 2011–2014, conducted by Kerrigan, Manktelow, and Simmons (2018), indicated that while WP graduates of full-time undergraduate degrees were 10% less likely than their non-WP peers to be in professional-level employment six months after graduation, the difference between the two groups narrowed to only 2% for those who had taken a sandwich course. Similar results were found in Eade’s (2019) analysis of data with respect to a single HEI.

It is also the case, however, that students from WP backgrounds are less likely to undertake such courses (Kerrigan, Manktelow, and Simmons 2018). Some initial work exploring the reasons why disadvantaged and under-represented students do not participate in sandwich courses at the same rate as their more advantaged peers has drawn attention to the impact of inequalities in social capital, with those from WP backgrounds often having fewer contacts within professional employment to help set up placements and/or provide advice on applications (Allen et al. 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). WP students have also been shown to be disadvantaged by economic factors – making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to undertake unpaid placements, for example (Allen et al. 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Nevertheless, much of this work has focused on specific types of sandwich course (e.g. Allen et al.’s (2013) research focused on the creative industries) rather than such courses more generally and/or experiences in a very

small number of HEIs (often a single case study institution). To address these gaps, this article aims to provide a broader understanding of the barriers to accessing sandwich courses experienced by WP students.

Temporal challenges within higher education

There is now a significant body of work on the temporal challenges of the contemporary university, with which this article articulates. Many scholars have contended that the pace of academic life has accelerated significantly over recent decades (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013; Manathunga 2019), with an associated disparagement of time frames of longer duration (that are often required by staff for book-writing and other research-related pursuits) (Barnett 2008; Leathwood and Read 2022; Toren 1993). Although the majority of such scholarship has focussed on staff rather than students, a small number of studies, conducted in countries where students have historically had some discretion about the length of their studies, have shown how students have come under increased pressure to complete their degrees at a faster pace (e.g. Brooks et al. 2021; Ulriksen and Nejrup 2021).

A second body of work focuses less on processes of acceleration and more on the ways in which hegemonic 'university time' may fail to recognise the alternative temporalities of some groups of students. Drawing on empirical work in Australia, Bennett and Burke (2018) have argued that the capability of students is often judged in terms of their ability to manage their time. As a result, those with competing demands on their time – caring responsibilities or paid work, for example – are misrecognised as being deficient students. Such problems can be exacerbated in institutions or on degree programmes that have shifted to more flexible study structures which encourage students to see study time as asynchronous; these can increasingly individualise the demands made of students, shifting the responsibility for time management away from the institution onto the individual (Bunn, Bennett, and Burke 2019).

Research has also emphasised the difficulties experienced by some students in deciding how to apportion their time. Smith (2019), for example, has described how the 'student-mothers' he interviewed understood time primarily as a resource for helping others (family and co-workers) and, as a consequence, relegated learning to the periphery of their lives and felt considerable guilt about devoting any time at all to study. Various other research on students with caring responsibilities has highlighted similar feelings of guilt (e.g. Brooks 2015), related to the 'time-greedy' nature of both families and universities (Coser 1974). Such responsibilities are often strongly patterned by gender, further underlining the problems of assuming that time is an equally distributed resource. As Davies (2001) has argued,

control over time and space, or at least the ability to be able to choose how to use one's time and space, are for women substantially influenced by the interlocking of the public and private spheres and by women's structural position in these spheres. (p.135)

Individuals' relationships to time are also affected by other social characteristics. Social class, for example, has been shown to influence how students think about the future and conceptualise the relationship between their current learning and future life course (e.g. Brooks and Everett 2008). Moreover, Streamas (2020) has contended that, in the US, at least, there is a significant disconnect between hegemonic university time, which 'runs on the temporalities of the dominant white culture' (p.709) and what he calls 'Coloured People's Time'. These studies provide the framing for our subsequent discussion.

Research methods

This paper draws on a series of 50 (mostly individual) in-depth interviews that were conducted with staff and students in English HEIs between November 2022 and May 2023, as part of a project funded by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) (see

Brooks and Timms 2023). (This received ethical approval from the University of Surrey's Ethics Committee – reference: FASS 22-23 003 EGA.)

Phase 1

The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we interviewed at least one member of staff with responsibility for sandwich course programmes in each of ten HEIs (see Table 1). These institutions were chosen to provide diversity with respect to: experience of delivering such courses; type of HEI; and geography (with all regions of England represented). We consider institutional diversity important because HEIs may have different approaches to running sandwich courses depending on factors such as their experience in this area, the local labour market and the financial resources they have available. We interviewed 12 staff members in total: in two of the HEIs, two staff members were interviewed (at the same time). They were asked about how their institution organises and promotes sandwich courses; the extent to which they have equality gaps in the uptake of such courses; what they perceive to be barriers to participation for students from WP backgrounds; and any action they have taken to increase uptake by this group. All interviews were conducted online, each lasting about an hour.

The first phase of the research also included a set of student interviews. We recruited ten students from each of two HEIs: HEI2 and HEI4 – chosen because of their different experiences of running sandwich courses (the different size of their programmes are noted in Table 1). The student sample was constructed to include diversity with respect to whether the students were from widening participation backgrounds or not; their year of study (second and final-year undergraduate students were both included); and whether they had or were planning to take a sandwich year or not (see Table 2). In addition, we tried as far as possible to have a reasonable balance in relation to gender, ethnicity and degree subject. The interviews included questions on students' views about sandwich courses (including their utility for subsequent employment), and any perceived barriers to taking them up. In addition, the final-year students who had taken a sandwich course were asked a series of questions about their experiences, including any challenges they had encountered during their placement, and their views about how well the sandwich year had prepared them for subsequent employment. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted online. All students were given a £25 online voucher to thank them for giving up their time.

Phase 2

The responses from Phase 1 were then used to develop a Theory of Change (Mason and Barnes 2007). This aimed to represent, in diagrammatic form, actions to be taken to reduce barriers to accessing, and then succeeding on, sandwich courses by students from WP backgrounds. Feedback on the proposed actions, listed in the Theory of Change, was then sought from a sample of WP students. We invited the 12 students from WP backgrounds who had been involved in Phase 1 to be reinterviewed as part of

Table 1. Details of the HEPs at which staff interviewees were based.

Reference number	Relative size of sandwich course programme	Type of HEP
HEI1	Large programme (about 60% of students take sandwich course)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEI2	Large programme (about 30% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEI3	Large programme (about 65% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEI4	Small programme (number for whole HEP not available)	Post-92
HEI5	Small programme (under 1% of students)	Russell Group
HEI6	Small programme (percentage not known)	Post-92
HEI7	Medium size programme (about 9% cent of students)	Russell Group
HEI8	Large programme (more than 50% of students)	Post-92
HEI9	Small programme (4-5% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group
HEI10	Small programme (4-5% of students)	Pre-92, not Russell Group

Table 2. Sample of students interviewed in Phase 1.

Student	Gender	HEI	Degree subject	Level of study	WP or not	Sandwich course status
1	Non-binary	2	Psychology	5	WP	Not considering
2	F	2	Biological Sciences	5	WP	Not considering
3	F	4	HR Management	5	Not WP	Not considering
4	F	2	International Hospitality & Tourism Management	5	Not WP	Not considering
5	F	4	Economics	5	WP	Considering*
6	F	2	Nutrition & Dietetics	5	WP	Considering
7	F	2	Veterinary Medicine	5	WP	Considering
8	M	4	Finance	6	Not WP	Completed
9	M	2	Law	5	Not WP	Considering
10	M	2	International Business	6	WP	Completed
11	F	2	Nutrition and Dietetics	6	WP	Completed
12	F	4	Economics	6	Not WP	Did not take
13	F	4	Marketing Management	6	WP	Completed
14	F	2	Business Management	6	Not WP	Completed
15	F	2	Psychology	5	WP	Considering
16	F	2	Psychology	6	WP	Did not take
17	M	2	Mechanical Engineering	6	WP	Did not take
18	M	4	Business Management	6	WP	Did not take
19	M	2	Biomedical Sciences	6	Not WP	Did not take
20	F	4	Accounting	6	Not WP	Did not take

*NB This student said during the Phase 1 interview that they were no longer considering a sandwich course. However, by the time of the Phase 2 interview, they were considering it again.

Phase 2; nine of them accepted our invitation. In addition, we recruited a further 11 students from two of the HEIs in the staff sample (HEI3 and HEI10) to take part in this phase. Across all 20 students, we sought to represent different WP categories (e.g. first in family to attend higher education; from a low-income family; has a disability; from an under-represented ethnic group). Moreover, as previously, we aimed to secure some diversity with respect to gender, ethnicity of subject of study. The full student sample is shown in [Table 3](#). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted online. All student interviewees were given a £25 online voucher as a token of thanks.

In both phases of research, the relevant researcher made notes of key points from the interview, using an analytical grid. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) was then undertaken, based on the analytical notes and the automatically-generated transcripts of each interview. In addition, the analytical grid was used to explore any differences in response by, for example, institution, discipline of study, and social characteristics. Comparisons were also made between the responses of staff and students and across the two phases of the research. It was through this analytical approach that the theme of time and temporal challenges emerged. Although some questions did ask explicitly about the timing of students' decisions, time was also a topic raised spontaneously by interviewees in response to a range of other questions. It is these data we draw upon in the following section of the article.³

Sandwich courses and temporal challenges

While a range of challenges to accessing sandwich courses were identified by our respondents (Brooks and Timms 2023), many of them had a specific focus on time and temporality. Some of these related to the temporalities of the HEI, while others focussed more on those of other related actors, notably employers, and landlords.

Disinclination to extend degree duration

Both staff and student interviewees contended that a major deterrent to taking a sandwich course, for those from WP backgrounds, was the impact of it on the overall length of a degree – in most

Table 3. Sample of students interviewed in Phase 2.

Student	Gender	HEI	Degree subject	Level of study	WP category	Sandwich course status
1	Non-binary	2	Psychology	5	Disability	Not considering
2	F	2	Biological Sciences	5	First generation; disability	No longer considering
5	F	4	Economics	5	First generation; under-represented ethnic group	Considering
6	F	2	Nutrition & Dietetics	5	Low-income family; under-represented ethnic group	Considering
7	F	2	Veterinary Medicine	5	Disability	Considering
10	M	2	International Business	6	Low-income family	Completed
11	F	2	Nutrition & Dietetics	6	Under-represented ethnic group; low-income family; disability	Completed
13	F	4	Marketing Management	6	Mature student; under-represented ethnic group	Completed
16	F	2	Psychology	6	First generation; low-income family; disability	Did not take
21	F	3	History & English Literature	6	Under-represented ethnic group	Completed
22	M	3	Business Management	6	Low-income family; under-represented ethnic group	Completed
23	F	3	Psychology	5	Under-represented ethnic group	Considering
24	F	3	Law	5	Low-income family	Considering
25	F	3	Law	6	Low-income family; under-represented ethnic group	Considering
26	F	3	Pharmacy	5	Mature student; under-represented ethnic group	Considering
27	F	3	Law	6	Under-represented ethnic group	Completed
28	F	10	Biomedical Sciences	6	Under-represented ethnic group	Completed
29	M	10	Law	6	Mature student	Did not take
30	F	10	Biomedical Sciences	5	Disability	Considering
31	F	10	Religious Studies	5	Mature student; under-represented ethnic group	Not considering

NB Students 1–16 were additionally interviewed during Phase 1. Students 21–31 were interviewed only in Phase 2.

cases, extending it from three years to four. This was brought up spontaneously, in answer to a general question about barriers, by staff at four of the HEIs. They believed that students were deterred largely because of the increased cost of an extra year: the extra debt that would be incurred, through having to take out an additional year of a student loan, and the lost earnings from entering the graduate labour market a year later. In most cases, these perceptions were based on interviewees' own experience of working closely with students over a number of years. However, in HEI5, they were also informed by the results of an institutional survey conducted with students who had initially been considering a placement but who did not ultimately enrol on one. In addition, one interviewee (at HEI6) believed that, for some students from WP backgrounds, and particularly those with no family history of higher education, having secured a place at university was such an achievement in itself (and assumed to lead to automatic labour market reward) that extending a degree, through a work placement or study abroad, was considered unnecessary.

These views, reported by staff, were reflected strongly in the data from students. Frequently, interviewees spoke about not wanting to interrupt their studies, as illustrated in this quotation from Student 2 (HEI2):

I was reluctant to think about doing a placement as well because I just at this point I kind of want to get the degree done and then ... I think it was the amount of time that I've taken out because I don't know, I feel ... like I want to get it through this bit and then worry about work experience and things like that afterwards.

The student narratives provided considerable detail about some of the specific reasons why they were disinclined to extend the duration of their courses, not all of which were related to financial factors. Indeed, alongside concerns about amassing more debt were worries about being able to

fit back into university life after a year on a work placement, and re-engaging with academic studies. This is illustrated well in the following quotations from two WP students, both from HEI2:

... I'd rather do it after my 3rd year [final year] and just get all the education part out of the way first ... makes more sense in my brain ... I feel like if I went on a placement, I would enjoy earning money too much to then switch back to spending a year not earning money (Student 1)

And I think my biggest concern is disrupting the flow of the course, losing touch a bit with the clinical skills and the knowledge and stuff, and then having to return to it. (Student 7)

The data from both staff and students suggest that while the high tuition fees charged by English HEIs may not have deterred students from low-income backgrounds from entering higher education (Harrison 2019), the considerable cost of studying has affected decisions about extending the time spent on a degree programme. In these cases, debt aversion is played out, not in decisions about whether or not to go to university, but in those about embarking upon other activities that would extend the length of a course. However, it appears that, for some students, cultural capital is as important as economic – illustrated above in relation to their serious concerns about being able to fit back into their programmes of study, both academically and in terms of becoming re-accustomed to a relative lack of money. The narratives reported in this section also raise some important questions about the nature of 'hegemonic time' (Bennett and Burke 2018) in universities. In contrast to the literature on the 'acceleration' of time in higher education (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013), it appears that – for some students – hegemonic time, or the time experienced by more privileged students, is slower paced and able to accommodate extensions to the duration of degree programmes required by sandwich years. In contrast, WP students were more concerned to move through their studies at a rapid pace, to complete their studies as quickly as possible.

Introducing sandwich courses

A second major obstacle to taking sandwich courses, identified by both students and staff, was the timing of the information provided about them. Indeed, the importance of making information about sandwich years available at an early point in a degree programme was emphasised by the majority of students from a WP background. Many felt that they had been disadvantaged by what they perceived to be the late timing of information about sandwich courses – typically in the second year of their studies. This, they held, did not give them sufficient time to decide whether they wanted to take such a year before the deadlines for many placement opportunities. For example, Student 5 at HEI4 recalled how, by the time she had decided she wanted to do a sandwich course, the deadline for many of what she considered to be the 'best opportunities' had passed.

When asked for their views about when information about sandwich courses *should* be provided, many students believed that using (pre-application) open days to highlight the possibility of taking a sandwich course would be useful, and nearly all contended that providing detailed information during the first year of study was essential – to avoid the problems, outlined above, when information was not made available until the second year of their degree programme. Students had similar views about the importance of introducing support as early as possible for those definitely taking a sandwich year. For example, Student 7, at HEI2, speculated that, as someone with a disability, it is 'probably quite overwhelming to start a placement' and so building a relationship with a placement tutor before the year starts would help assuage nerves. Students typically contrasted this with the actual provision in place, in which placement tutors were often only introduced at the start of the sandwich year or during it.

These student views were echoed in the staff interviews. Indeed, many institutions (e.g. HEIs 2, 7, 8 and 10) noted that they were planning to start talking about sandwich years at a much earlier point in a student's degree programme in recognition that, historically, information had often been provided too late. This was thought to disadvantage all students, but particularly those from WP backgrounds who may need more time to weigh up the pros and cons of taking a placement (not least because of the

issues discussed in the previous section), become familiar with possible employing organisations, and put an application together. While most HEIs were planning changes to the timing of sandwich course information in general, at HEI1, action was more targeted: attempts had been made to flag students with WP backgrounds to the placements team earlier, so that they could be offered one-to-one support, if necessary. At HEI6 there were not yet any specific plans in place to provide information earlier; it was nevertheless an ambition, with a staff interviewee outlining their desire to ‘shift the narrative’ so that more work is done in the first year, and this comes to be seen as the time you prepare for a work placement. At HEI10, the reason for moving more information about sandwich courses into the first year was also related to the timing and level of academic work. The staff interviewee commented that taking a work placement ‘is often seen as too much work, especially as students have to apply in their second year, when the level of work is stepping up’.

The data reported above bring into sharp relief some of the features of ‘hegemonic time’ (Bennett and Burke 2018), as played out with respect to work placements. Both students and staff recognised that the traditional timing of sandwich course information had disadvantaged those from WP backgrounds who typically needed more time than their more privileged peers to decide whether to take such a course (because of possible work and/or caring commitments); develop their knowledge of placement employers (because of a relative absence of family links); investigate and make additional financial arrangements; and build their CVs (because of often having had less time and money available to pursue extra-curricular activities). Staff awareness of this disconnect, and their plans to address it, suggests, however, that the rhythms of universities are not immutable, and can sometimes be changed so as to reduce disadvantage.

The need for ‘extra-curricular’ time

As mentioned above, one of the reasons for introducing detailed information about sandwich courses at an earlier point in degree programmes is to give students more time to prepare their applications. This was a prominent theme in both the student and staff interviews. It was articulated most clearly by Student 5 (at HEI4) who spoke, in both phases of the research, about the challenges she and many of her peers had faced in freeing up enough time outside class to research placement opportunities and write applications. She believed that, to help students like her, who had little free time outside their higher education studies (because, typically, of work and/or caring commitments), it would be beneficial for key elements of sandwich year preparation (e.g. CV writing) to be embedded within the curriculum.

Similar comments were made by staff. Over half noted that, in their experience, it was often challenging for many students from WP backgrounds to free up sufficient time to research placement opportunities and then write tailored applications for each employer. To save time, such students often sent the same application to multiple organisations, which was rarely a successful strategy.

I think sometimes students have a lack of time with making their applications and tailoring them ... [so they take] a sort of scattergun approach where it’s the same cover letter that’s sent. (Staff member, HEI4)

Making time available to attend interviews could also be difficult. Staff also noted that, because WP students typically had less time than their peers to take part in extra-curricular activities at university and often previously, too (again, because of paid work and, for mature students, caring responsibilities), they had less to add to their CV: ‘they kind of haven’t necessarily got a lot of experience ... on their CV’ (Staff member, HEI9). In addition, some interviewees believed that WP students often needed to spend more time searching for placement opportunities than other students because they were less likely to have family connections and thus more reliant on formal schemes:

Typically, students who are from a WP background may have less of a network to call upon to try and find the opportunities through different avenues. And what I mean by that is if you’re simply going on [placement websites] or university jobs board you’re competing with everyone and it can be quite a long, arduous process. (Staff member, HEI5)

In at least one case, serious concerns about the temporal demands on students associated with taking a sandwich course had led staff to place more emphasis on embedding employment opportunities within the standard three years of degree programmes.

We've widened [our focus on only sandwich years] because of ... we're aware that there are other types of placement opportunity and because some students won't see the sandwich year placement as a viable option for them. [We're thinking] how do we embed this into our courses so that students are getting those opportunities. (Staff member, HEI6)

Extant research has emphasised the importance of both extra-curricular activities and family connections for securing employment *after* graduation (e.g. Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Brown and Hesketh 2004). The data discussed above have demonstrated that similar factors affect the ability of students to take up employment *during* higher education, as part of a sandwich course – underlining Davies' (2001) contention that 'the assumption that time is an equally distributed resource where each individual receives his/her allotted share is ... problematic' (p.135). Nevertheless, the need for 'extra-curricular time' does not, perhaps, affect all WP students in the same way. Mature students with caring responsibilities are likely to face particular challenges, as will those from low-income families who may need to work long hours in paid employment to support themselves, and 'first in family' students, who are less likely to have familial contacts to facilitate the speedy acquisition of a placement opportunity.

External rhythms out of sync

The temporal challenges faced by students from WP backgrounds were also influenced by actors external to the higher education system – in particular, employers and private landlords. The preceding discussion has alluded to the problems, faced by some students, because of what they perceived to be the early deadlines for sandwich year roles imposed by various employers. For example, Student 18 at HEI4 commented:

The barrier is probably the time limit, so I think the [investment bank deadline] was like towards the end of August. But of course I didn't find it until September ...

This misalignment between the time when placement opportunities were advertised and the time when students were actively looking for placements was also remarked on by staff. For example, the interviewee from HEI4 noted that 'students don't apply early enough – a lot of placements are advertised in October, but they are often not on the students' radar'. While implicit in this comment is a sense that students were themselves to blame for not beginning their search early enough, the evidence presented above suggests that HEI staff were aware, also, that they could do considerably more to prepare students for embarking on their placement searches earlier – by, for example, providing more information about sandwich years in the first year of a degree programme, rather than waiting until the second year. In addition, there was a belief, amongst some staff, that some problems were exacerbated by a shift in employer practices – with deadlines becoming earlier, possibly because of increased demand from students and the need to have additional time to process a large number of applications. In such cases, the acceleration of employer practices was not always matched by a corresponding acceleration in the approaches taken by students (or indeed their HEIs).

Student rhythms were also often out of sync with those of private landlords. Indeed, staff from seven of the ten HEIs in the sample contended that changes to the time at which students had to sign housing contracts had a significant and negative effect on uptake of sandwich courses. They indicated that landlords had brought such deadlines forward – often to as early as January of the preceding academic year. This meant, many argued, that students had to make a decision by this point about whether or not they were going to take a placement and, if they were, be confident of their ability to secure one. If they did not sign a housing contract at this point, but then went on not to take a sandwich year, they would have lost the opportunity to live with friends for their final year, and the range of

available accommodation would be much narrower. The required confidence was, many staff asserted, typically less commonly found in WP students than their more advantaged peers.

Thus, WP students were adversely affected, not only by the hegemonic time of the university, but also by the different rhythms by which employers and landlords were operating. Although the temporal challenges associated with early employer deadlines could be mitigated, to some extent, by action on the part of the HEI (see discussion above), it appeared that very little could be done by university staff to address the disconnect with landlord deadlines. Indeed, some students noted that their HEI did provide its own accommodation for those returning from sandwich years, but they had not been interested in living on campus again, particularly after a year of relative independence, and believed that this view was commonly shared. Thus, in understanding the temporal challenges faced by students, we need to cast our gaze wider than the HEI.

Duration of work placements

Finally, the time taken up by a work placement – its duration – was discussed by a number of our interviewees. Staff from four of the HEIs (HEIs 2, 3, 7 and 8) claimed that a year-long work placement was often difficult for some WP students, because of the challenges associated with combining it with other commitments – such as caring for children for mature students, and ongoing part-time jobs for students from low-income families. Year-long placements were particularly problematic if they were low-paid or unpaid – especially for those with limited financial means.

To help mitigate the costs of such placements, some HEIs had reduced the required duration. For example, in HEI2, the minimum duration had been reduced to seven months, to allow students to engage in paid (or better paid) work for the remaining part of the year. Similarly, HEI3 also allowed students to take up a series of shorter placements, rather than a single 12-month one – to benefit those who had to juggle other commitments (and also because the university had found that employers themselves were becoming less likely to offer year-long opportunities). In addition, both HEI7 and HEI8 had introduced or were piloting shorter placements, to try to be more responsive to student demand and, again, to help those with significant commitments outside the university to take advantage of sandwich years.

Conclusion

We acknowledge, based on our wider research, that the barriers to taking a sandwich year, faced by students from WP backgrounds, relate not only to time and temporality. However, as the preceding discussion has illustrated, the various temporal challenges faced by this group of students are significant. Indeed, the strength of views – from both staff and students themselves – provides support for Shaw's (2001) contention that the keeping of time is a crucial part of social structure, informing how we live our lives and what we take for granted. Our arguments above make three main contributions to the extant literature on the temporalities of higher education. First, we have shown how hegemonic university time can disadvantage students (and particularly those from WP backgrounds) in accessing sandwich course opportunities. This is played out in relation to: the timing of information (often too late to facilitate sufficient searching for placement opportunities, particularly for students with relatively little knowledge of graduate employers); the assumption that time will be available, outside class, to put together work placement applications and to engage in CV-building activities (often near-impossible for students with caring responsibilities and/or significant paid work commitments); and the duration of work placements (sometimes too long to balance alongside childcare and ongoing part-time jobs). While the disconnect between hegemonic university time and the temporalities of under-represented groups of students have been previously discussed by scholars, our research shows how this disconnect can impact sandwich courses specifically.

Second, our data have illustrated that not all students have the ability to ‘slow down’ their higher education studies. Indeed, we have shown how many WP students decide not to take a sandwich course because of a desire not to delay their graduation and entry into the labour market. While this is likely to be partially explained by material factors – i.e. not wanting to accumulate more student debt and to start earning a salary as soon as possible – our data also suggest that a lack of familiarity with the possibility of taking a sandwich year was, in some cases, significant. As Shaw (2001) has noted, ‘accommodating to a different tempo challenges what is expected and can produce intense feelings of dislocation in those forced to march at an unfamiliar pace’ (p. 124). This finding also resonates with the broader critique of ‘slow scholarship’ in higher education, which has argued that not everyone has the privilege of being able to move at a slower pace (Mendick 2014).

Third, the research has extended analyses of university time in showing that it is not just the temporalities of HEIs that have a significant bearing on students’ lives. The discussion has illustrated, for example, how the rhythms of both landlords and employers can impact WP students’ ability to take a sandwich year, through being ‘out of sync’ with the timelines to which students are more commonly working. This brings the socially-embedded nature of the university into sharp relief and highlights that temporal challenges emanate not just from the decisions and norms of HEIs, but from other relevant stakeholders. It also suggests that any policy response needs to be holistic in its approach – involving employers and landlords – as well as HEIs. This constitutes a significant challenge for the UK higher education sector.

Notes

1. English universities typically identify the following students as from widening participation backgrounds: from low participation neighbourhoods, areas of high deprivation and/or low income families; care leavers; from families with no parental history of higher education participation and/or where parents work in non-professional jobs; having a disability; young carer; mature learners; refugee and asylum seekers; estranged from families; and from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Data are collected about these characteristics on or before entry to higher education.
2. Although the number of students taking sandwich courses across the UK has declined a little over recent years, a significant number do still take such courses. (Indeed, in the 2021–22 academic year, 179,545 undergraduate students were enrolled on a sandwich course.) Our research indicates that, despite this trend, HEIs are keen to expand their activity in this area.
3. The quotations we use throughout the article are illustrative; our use of such data is inevitably limited by the word constraints of a journal article. However, a more detailed description of the data – with more examples – can be found in the report for the wider project (Brooks and Timms 2023).

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