

Social Inclusion Bursaries for Work Based and Placement Learning: Innovative Practice or Perpetuating the Cycle of Unpaid Placements?



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The sector wide emphasis on improving social inclusion has seen most universities moving away from an elitist stance to refocus on [accessibility](#) for previously excluded social groups. 'Inclusivity' is embedded into most service goals and individual targets- for us as Work Based and Placement Learning (WBPL) practitioners, it's pertinent to what we do and offer. If work experience is so key for successful [graduate outcomes](#), how can we ensure that as many of our students as possible can take part?

Some background...

I've led the Placements team at Bath Spa University (BSU), which has been named '[University of the Year for Social Inclusion](#)', for twelve consecutive years. Approximately 80% of our student cohort come from under-represented backgrounds which makes it harder to engage students in placements/internships. In 2018, our Professional Placement Year (PPY) was opened to all courses and those who have undertaken a PPY are 20% more likely to secure a positive graduate-level outcome.

Barriers to student engagement in PPY

In academic year 2023/24 we reviewed PPY conversion rates (the number of students joining on a four-year PPY degree vs. the actual number securing a placement two years later), alongside staff and student feedback. Students told us that they wanted to stay with their friends, they didn't want to spend a full year on placement, they were struggling to secure roles and experienced multiple rejections, they were tied into accommodation contracts, or they simply could not afford to do a PPY.

Practice to promote social inclusion

We worked up several short- and longer-term objectives to improve access and participation in PPY:

- We're actively increasing the variety of embedded WBPL for students who need shorter-term experiences. We're doing this by expanding our 'Open Modules' which are not subject-specific and widely available across courses. In addition to a 70-hour placement module, we have introduced a 6-week summer placement module and short (paid) live briefs
- Preparatory teaching has been timetabled at an earlier stage (level 4) so students can produce stronger applications and are aware of our services and support earlier
- PPY options on UCAS have been revisited to help manage expectations of finding suitable roles. Although no longer appearing for all courses, any student at the institution can opt to undertake a PPY, but strategically removing the UCAS option for some subjects means we can tailor and target support
- Efforts by our Employer Relationships team have been refocused on developing local paid opportunities, so even if students are tied into accommodation contracts early, they don't have to give up their placement search and may even be able to continue living with friends
- A 'Placements Award' has been established for unpaid, short-term student work experience, providing up to £300 which can be used towards the cost of travel, accommodation, workwear, or sustenance





Unpaid placements and financial barriers

If WBPL is to be truly inclusive then it must, at the very least, enable all students to afford it. In some sectors, such as Psychology and Arts, finding paid roles is tricky, and students who normally receive Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA) are not able to do so on a PPY (despite being enrolled at the University).

At BSU we don't advertise long unpaid placements, but we do allow students to self-source unpaid roles as we don't want to stop them undertaking a valuable opportunity. However, we speak with the students individually to make sure they have fully considered the risks involved. In an ideal world, all placements would be paid.

PPY Bursary – designed to promote access and inclusion

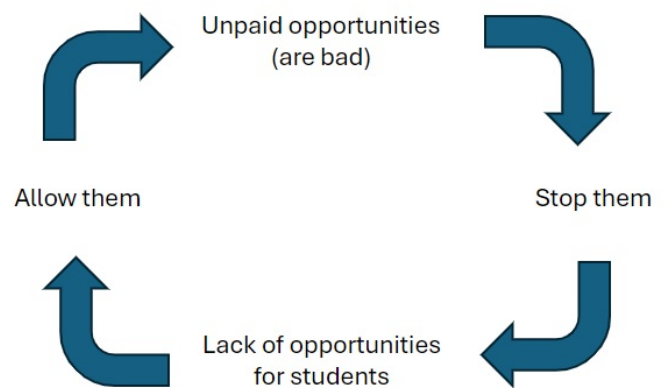
In 2024 we've introduced an innovative PPY Bursary. All students who undertake a PPY receive between £500-£1,500, designed to make PPY more accessible and appealing. Students considered 'at-risk' in terms of Widening Participation markers receive the largest bursary, with a middle tier of £1,000 and everyone else receiving £500. This bursary is paid to the students in two installments and crucially is funded from their PPY tuition fees, meaning it is sustainable for the University to fund. Initial student feedback has been very positive.

Temporary fix, not a cure

Whilst we hope that this new bursary will make placements more accessible, it feels like a temporary fix to a widespread problem, rather than a cure. HE is stuck in a negative cycle of unpaid placements which needs to be broken, but short of paying for the opportunities ourselves, it seems like a permanent solution is still a way off.

Given the government's agenda around [economic growth and harnessing skills](#), and how employer feedback is that [placements improve workplace preparedness](#), surely employers and government should be doing more to increase access for under-represented students. DSA should remain accessible for students during placement years and employers need to realise the value of placement students and reimburse them accordingly. Ultimately, policy makers need to take stronger action on unpaid work experience if things are to ever truly change.

Cycle of Unpaid Placements



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