

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Placement Support for International Students (UG) with evidence from an ASET project



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Introduction: Why This Matters

[International students bring diverse perspectives and skills](#), yet they remain underrepresented in [placement year participation](#). During my 2025 ASET Bursary project at Newcastle University, I explored the barriers that prevent international students from accessing work based learning (WBL) opportunities and identified strategies to make placement support more inclusive and effective.

Research Approach

To understand international student experiences and perceptions, I conducted a mixed-methods study involving a student survey (85 responses, including Postgraduates) and a focus group. The survey explored awareness, barriers, and support needs, while the focus group provided qualitative insights into individual experiences. Secondary research, including [ASET research reports](#), and [UK visa guidance](#), contextualised these findings.

Key Findings: Barriers Beyond Visas

Although visa implications are often cited as the main concern, students identified **application complexity** and **lack of tailored guidance** as more immediate barriers. Many were unsure where to begin the placement process or how to strengthen their applications. Employers' restrictions on international applicants further limited opportunities. Additionally, placement application timelines often overlap with academically intensive periods, creating added stress. Despite these challenges, most students expressed strong motivation to undertake placements, recognising the career and financial benefits of engagement.

What Support Do Students Want?

The most requested form of support was early exposure. Students wanted information about placements from their first year, not mid-degree. Peer mentoring also emerged as a key theme, with students eager to learn from those who had successfully completed placements. They valued relatable advice on navigating applications, cultural adaptation, and professional expectations- areas perceived as more effectively supported by peers rather than by staff in formally scheduled sessions.

Insights from the Focus Group

Participants offered in-depth perspectives that reinforced survey trends. The institutional Careers Service was praised for their guidance, but information was often perceived as “spread across too many pages” and could be better streamlined.

Reflections highlighted three critical needs:

- Clearer communication of visa processes in plain language.
- Integration of practical workshops earlier in degree programmes.
- Recognition of how international students' prior experiences and cultural contexts shape their approach to placements.

From Research to Action

This ASET supported project directly informed development of sustainable, student-led practice enhancements:

- Peer-to-peer mentoring framework linking international students with experienced placement peers.
- Simplified visa guidance posters and a placement year timeline for quick reference.

A co-designed semester 1 Career Event to connect students with employers, alumni, and support services.

Recommendations for Higher Education Providers

- Integrate placement awareness into first-year induction for international students.
- Establish peer mentoring or alumni ambassador schemes for placement guidance.
- Collaborate with employers to explicitly signal inclusivity for international candidates.
- Review institutional websites for accessibility, clarity, and updated visa information.

Conclusion

International students' enthusiasm for placements is clear, but systemic and informational barriers persist. By embedding early awareness, peer-led learning, and transparent employer engagement into work-based learning structures, Higher Education Providers can significantly enhance international students' sense of belonging and employability.

This research underscores that inclusive placement design is not just a policy goal, it is a shared responsibility across universities, employers, and students themselves.

Find out more about ASET Grant Funding for Work Based and Placement Learning.

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