

A toolkit to support students undertaking remote placements

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Introduction to this report

With the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, student placement opportunities and the placement experience have taken a severe hit. It has affected many students who were looking forward to embarking on an unfamiliar yet beneficial journey. According to research from Prospects, 26% of final-year students in the UK lost their internships, and many internships were delivered remotely (online) rather than on-site (Smith, 2021). This unprecedented time will lead to a change in how placements are delivered and the experience of placements for the future.

Due to the pandemic, many placements were forced to move online, with many placement students spending their entire year working from their laptop at home. This result has been beneficial for some, whilst others may have suffered from this new change for varying reasons. A few problems around working from home include; workers experiencing social isolation, being unable to build team rapport as well as the difficulty of finding a healthy work-life balance (Lusinski, 2019). As this is the first cohort experiencing placements amidst the pandemic, little is known on how students can approach remote-online placements and what their experiences with remote-online placements will be like. There is currently neither a national plan nor University approach to tackle the negative impact of COVID-19 in order to support students on placements. Therefore, this report aims to explore the experience of the current placement students who have had to navigate the unprecedented landscape of remote-online placements. The aim of this research is to gather useful information that can guide students on how to navigate their placement year, pre-application, during and after. This research could help future cohorts who will soon have to endure the consequences the pandemic has left on their career opportunities. Exploring the direct experience of students themselves may be useful to the next cohort of students in such an unprecedented time where there is a lack of resources and a wealth of ambition and drive.

Methodology

This is a small-scale exploratory qualitative study which uses semi-structured interviews. The interview consisted of 20 questions categorised into 4 sections taking into account the placement lifecycle: Application process experience, on-placement experience, attitude towards the future and general thoughts on placements. The interview questions can be

found in the appendix. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams and were later transcribed. The responses from participants were analysed thematically, looking for common themes between the responses. The most common or notable responses were recorded.

Ethical approval was given before the interviews commenced. Four participants were recruited via email and were asked if they wished to participate in the project. Participants were all Warwick University students who completed or were about to complete a remote-online placement. Participants were given a £20 Amazon voucher as an incentive. Informed consent was taken from the participants before each interview was conducted. All the participants study psychology and have jobs that revolve around an area they have studied in their degree. This includes statistics and gathering and analysing data; a key component in psychological research.

Findings

APPLICATION PROCESS EXPERIENCE

The participants were asked to recall the process of applying and securing a placement. With regard to how many placement opportunities students applied for, there was a stark variation in the number of placement submissions. Some participants applied for as little as 4-5 placements while others applied for 30-40 placements. Those who applied to a small number of placements explained their reasoning as being certain about the organisations they wanted to work at. Thus, there would have not been any point in submitting themselves to a wide range of placement opportunities that were available, despite the overall reduction in such opportunities and the uncertainty around delivery modes due to the pandemic. Others were less certain and specific on where they wished to work. Therefore it was more beneficial to widen their placement opportunities. Most participants applied between November and January. Some participants were proactive and were successful in gaining placements when reaching out to organisations and putting themselves forward. It is also useful to note that the response rate from organisations is quite low. One participant said the response rate was as low as '30%'. The success rate of moving to the next stage after the first submission was also low. Organisations are likely to only respond to those they wish to move forward with in the recruitment process.

'I only got through the first stage of the placement I'm on right now'

(Placement student)

'I applied to 5 and 3 got back. 1 declined. [One of the last two] was interested but it was a long application process. I didn't bother continuing with the interview process because of the placement I got'

(Placement student)

The participants reflected on the need to spend time on creating a strong CV that demonstrates measurable success to show competitiveness and attract recruiters' attention:

'The main thing was writing down the skills I have. There's a lot of skills you learn in uni but then being able to write it down on paper and explain it to other people was the main skill'

(Placement student)

'I really tailored my CV to every job I applied for so when they were asking for things, I made it clear that I had that. I highlighted and made the things bold based on what the company were looking for'

(Placement student)

Interviews took place over the phone or via Zoom. Most participants note that this stage is quite straight forward. A lot of the questions in the interview are scenario/situation based; in which they will ask 'what you would you do in *this* scenario?'. One participant explains that because her role was linked to her course (psychology), the questions were scenarios she had 'already done at university'. Others were questioned on the soft and hard skills they wanted to learn [at the organisation] to see how suitable they were for the role. Hard skills are measurable abilities that can be taught such as writing or the ability to navigate a computer program whereas soft skills are traits that make you a good employee such communication, problem solving and interpersonal skills. The participants felt that organisations wanted individuals who were willing and open to learning new skills and as well as developing themselves because it means you were audacious and determined to push yourself.

'What I've seen is that a lot of companies want to hire people who want to learn even if you don't have a lot of experience. Letting them know that you're open and willing to try and experience new things – that's what will make you stand out'

One participant draws attention to the fact the interviews took place during the beginning of the pandemic in which organisations were left unprepared and had to quickly adapt to working online. This meant the interview process was not as refined, as it might have been in an on-site setting or should the organisation had more experience with online-remote recruitment. The student observed that now, a year later, organisations will be more prepared in how they will interview and discern their candidates, adding that students should be ready to perform well in an online recruitment environment.

'I think now they'll definitely focus more on how you come across on line because back then [at the beginning of the pandemic], it would be fine if you are blunt or not really a 'Skyper' or 'Facetimer' - like you're not really used to speaking to people online. It's fine because you'll meet them in real life. But now they'll definitely be looking for people who can come across well just from the camera'

(Placement student)

'If you're applying for something you don't have experience in, 'research around the role so you're prepared to answer questions about different scenarios that could come up'

(Placement student)

Having knowledge in the area of your desired role has proven to be beneficial and made participants feel more prepared.

When asked what they would change or do better if they had the chance to re-apply for a placement, one participant says they would have looked at more organisations and applied for at least 10 roles. Widening your placement opportunities can only increase the likelihood of recruitment success. Another participant talks about how they would have kept up to date with applications. They realised only 2 months after that some of the jobs they applied for had actually responded with a yes but it was too late. Also, they speak on how they would have reflected on themselves and their experience:

'I focused more on researching the company – I just wanted to show them I knew what I was talking about but when they were asking questions on my own experience, I couldn't think of anything so being reflective on what I've done in the past so I can use these things in my interviews. Reflecting on myself and what I can offer rather than telling them what I think they want to hear'

(Placement student)

In regards to their application experience, one participant explains how they spent too much time on things they did not need to – they wished they focused on what they needed to know for the role only. When preparing for an interview, it is very easy to overwhelm yourself with a heap of information to avoid feeling ill-equipped but this may be not useful. By focusing on the specific areas needed for your interview, it means, you will have more time to get a better understanding and this can only increase your confidence for when you have your interview. Another participant advises applying for job roles way in advance to avoid waiting.

'It took so long for me to get the contract and paperwork. If I hadn't applied in February – I only got my contract in august – make sure you apply way in advance and tell them you cannot start right. Just so you don't have a go in the placement year where you're just waiting to be sorted out'

(Placement student)

ON-PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

The participants were asked to talk about their placement experience. All placements ran for its original duration stated in the job description. Some participants were meant to be working in the office but due the pandemic, their work had to be adapted to being online. There were no changes to the jobs that were originally designed to be undertaken remotely. Most participants spent the day in group meetings on Zoom, where they would discuss tasks and monitor their progress.

'A lot of meetings were shadowing calls and attending intern meetings and intern activities. Having a lot of network calls. Meeting new people. I would probably have about 4 to 5 calls a day'

(Placement student)

Tasks would be discussed and executed. Participants stated how they would either work independently or in groups with their colleagues. The common work time was 9am to 5pm. When asked whether their placement aided in professional, educational or even personal development, all participants provided ways in which their placement aided in them acquiring new skills. All participants mentioned that they gained confidence in themselves as well as in their academic writing and communication skills through their work experience. Confidence was built by having to constantly communicate with their colleagues as well as having to practise their writing skills regularly. Organisation skills was mentioned by one of the participants as a skill they have developed during their placement year. Additionally, better time management was mentioned by participants as a skill they gained while working. Being able to try new tasks outside the confines of university and working on different skills has been beneficial according to participants' accounts.

'Problem solving would be the big one. Since I didn't know much about training when I joined, I didn't know much of stats outside from what we'd learnt at uni. So being able to just think analytically, clearly write out what I'm doing and just solve problems in different ways'

(Placement student)

'This has helped me more with my academic confidence, writing – looking at research papers. At university, it's completely different to doing it as your job...The things you once struggled with at uni, when you're doing it in a different context, it takes the pressure away and then you realise you don't what you were stressing about because you're doing it now and it's fine'

(Placement student)

All participants thought their host organisation did things well in terms of facilitating student placements. Most participants spoke on how their host organisation provided access to learning and development opportunities in which they could learn and grow. One participant commended their organisation on their efficiency. Participants considered having a manager that listened and catered to their needs as extremely helpful.

'I feel like when they know you're doing it for university placement, it makes your life easier because they know why you're there, they know what you're trying to get out of it. If they don't have that understanding, they'll just give you all these things that aren't really relevant when you can do something else that is more relevant to you'

(Placement student)

With that, participants also pointed out ways in which their host organisation could have improved in order to have enhanced their work experience. A few participants pointed out how working remotely meant they were left not doing a lot.

'I would say 1 out of 5 days, would actually be useful but other days it was just shadowing and it got boring by October'

(Placement student)

When asked how they combatted tedium, participants said they would put themselves forward for other tasks and opportunities their organisation provided to ensure they were getting the most out of their free time. Ensuring you are occupying your time with different tasks, even if you have to seek them out yourself, reduces the risk of tedium whilst also refining and developing new skills. Another participant said they made sure to speak up when they felt their line manager was not being attentive.

'It's really important to make sure that you have regular conversations with your manger/supervisor about your progress or any concerns or issues you have... At the end of the day you're here for a reason and you wanna get the most out of it, you don't wanna waste your time or be unconformable or not be having a good experience just because you don't wanna say anything. Making sure you voice your opinion because you're there for reason and you're there because you're good enough to be there so don't forget that's why they picked you'

(Placement student)

Participants were asked to identify whether they believed any part of their identity influenced their placement experience. One participant identified that being Black had an effect on his experience.

'Being black, it was very hard to relate to people. Even till today I don't think I've built the best rapport with my team because they're white, similar in age, play golf, talk about their kids and when I'm in the call, there's no relatability. In the intern community, it was still very white. Because it was online and you had to relate on things based on you as a person – like in real life, you relate on going to things together – you could only talk about your day or the other person's day, so it was hard to relate'

(Placement student)

They suggested joining the BAME groups and communities if they exist at your organisation. This applies to others who may also be part of other minorities groups. Finding your community and meeting people who understand you and can relate to you will be extremely beneficial to your entire experience if you ever feel out of place.

All participants would recommend their role/placement to other students who wish to do a similar placement in the future. A participant stated how it would be very beneficial to have experience as a research assistant on your CV as a psychology student. All the tasks you endeavour and skills you develop as a research assistant will help you when you eventually go back to university. Another participant explains how being able to lead on certain projects is something that is valuable to lot of students.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FUTURE

All participants were asked to reflect on their attitude towards the future, as they enter their final year of university. They were also asked to compare the attitudes they had towards the future in 2020 (pre-pandemic) to the attitudes they have now. All participants are motivated about their educational future. Their level of motivation has either stayed the same or increased. Their motivation comes from the fact they have gained more experience and feel more prepared and confident to enter working life. One participant says they are better equipped to enter workplace environment and education. Another participant identified the contrast in their motivation from 2020 and now:

'2020, I was tapped out of finishing the degree. I was tired of essays and was over it. And now, because I've had experience on the outside, I'm really excited to go back because I wanna experience that life again before I do this [work] for the rest of my life'

(Placement student)

Like the previous response, levels of motivation are high for their future post-graduation. One participant spoke on how in 2020, they were solely motivated at the idea of finishing university, unlike now where they feel really motivated and excited about what they want to do in the future. Most participants said their placement has given them a clearer vision towards final year and post-university even if they are not 100% certain in what they wish to pursue post-

university. They have also been able to identify what they do not wish to venture into, which is also extremely helpful. Taking the time out to try new things and develop skills not only allows you to enhance your skills set, but also allows you to widen your experience meaning you will be more equipped when discerning between different job (or academic) opportunities and ultimately deciding what job field you will eventually venture into.

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON PLACEMENTS

The participants were asked to identify the qualities they believe make a good placement and whether their placement lived up to those qualities. Their reflections show that a good placement is dependent on each student's individual goals and personal interests. They observed that it is useful to go for a placement which is close to the goals you want to attain. Additionally, a good remote placement is characterised by being organised, with the organisation knowing their way through a virtual environment. Another quality of a successful remote placement is having a good line manager – who is flexible in terms of the experience you wish to get and encouraging. A good placement also has variety in tasks, because doing the same task everyday can become very draining. Moreover, a good remote placement finds ways to prevent social isolation.

'In my team, there's social every two weeks and a weekly Friday drinks thing that you can join and it's not about work, you can just talk about your life. It's a cool way of building team cohesion and making you feel less alone at your placement'

(Placement student)

'One of the big things I felt was imposter syndrome as a placement student, so the team is important in helping you out – people you can lean on or just helping you out with work or provide emotional support. The learning and development opportunities'

(Placement student)

Another participant notes how a good remote placement cares about their employees' wellbeing, especially as they are working from home.

"Still being able to build the same connections that people would've built if it were in real life online – putting in activities"

(Placement student)

Participants were also asked to identify anything students can look out for or ask when in the process of securing a placement to ensure it is the right role/organisation for them. Below are the responses verbatim:

'Before you start applying, you need to step back and think about what you actually want from your placement, what skills you want to develop and look at placements/companies that might offer that'

(Placement student)

'One thing that comes to mind that a lot of the applications talk about diversity and inclusion. It's one of the most important one because that's means there's a lot of learning opportunities and a lot of talks on diversity and inclusion. Another thing is that it shows the company has a culture and focus on making sure that no one is left behind. If there's a mental health or wellbeing lead, that's also important'

(Placement student)

'I would say, if anything ask about how they've adapted to COVID. You'll be able to gain more information on how the company has been able to adapt to COVID to ensure things are still in place to maintain the care for their employees. Reading blogs and always checking LinkedIn because a lot of companies showcase what they've been doing or working on. Microsoft always post and talk about their work e.g. Wellbeing Wednesday. Always look at their socials because if there's nothing there, they probably don't care. It's been a year, if you haven't posted, there's no way that they care and or that they're doing well'

(Placement student)

Recommendations

A plethora of information was gathered from the placement students. Listed below are the notable findings from the responses and the useful recommendations provided. Prospective remote placement students can use this when applying, discerning between placements or ultimately deciding whether doing a remote placement will actually be beneficial for them:

- It would be beneficial to look in to placements that have links to your degree in which you can utilise skills you have already developed from your course.

- Before applying, think about what you actually want from your placement, what skills you want to develop and seek placements/organisations that will offer that.
- Several students pointed out the lack of support from the department during the application process in regard to finding opportunities and linking students to organisations. It may be useful for departments to source local or remote-online opportunities for students who may be struggling.
- It is important to be proactive and reach out to organisations yourself if you wish to work there.
- In the recruitment process, organisations will be looking out for how you come across on camera as well as your skills and work experience. You need to be able to stand out on camera.
- If you're applying for something you don't have experience in, research around the role so you are prepared to answer questions about different scenarios that could come up.
- Being knowledgeable on the skills you have and do not have is important for the recruitment process. Also being reflective and knowledgeable on what you've done in the past will be helpful so you can easily talk about this in interviews.
- Tailoring your CV to the jobs you applying and clearly marking out what the organisation wants so you stand out is extremely helpful for application success. The Department and Career Service can help you with this!
- Be prepared to rejections and don't give up! Applying and securing a placement is a learning curve. It is an important employability skill for the future.
- Some recruiters will get back to you to let you know of the outcome of your application while others will only contact you if you have been shortlisted to the next phase or they want to recruit you following a successful interview.
- Being open and willing to try new things will help you stand out to organisations.
- Apply for jobs in advance to avoid waiting long periods. Develop a system to record and monitor your application, so that you can stay on top of things and don't miss important information.
- Remote placements aid in boosting confidence in both academic and professional aspects; which is extremely useful for the future.

- Students are left feeling very motivated for their educational future and eventually moving into the workplace, despite or perhaps due to the challenges they encountered before and during their placement.
- It is important to speak up about your progress and concerns. Make sure you voice your opinion because you want to make the most out of your placement experience. You're good enough to be there, that is why they picked you.
- If you part of a minority group, seek those groups if they exist in your organisation – finding your community will be extremely beneficial to your experience if you feel out of place.

References

- Lusinski, N., 2019. *9 of the most challenging things about working remotely according to the people who do it.* [online] BusinessInsider.com. Available at: <<https://www.businessinsider.com/working-remote-challenges-work-from-home-2019-10?r=US&IR=T>>
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Appendix

Interview questions:

APPLICATION PROCESS EXPERIENCE

1. On average, how many placements did you apply for and from what dates?
2. How many organisations actually replied regardless of outcome? You can give a percentage.
3. How successful were you in moving to the next stage after the first application submission?
4. How was the interview process - was there anything that stood out/worth noting?
5. What do you think you did successfully in your application process that made you successful in securing placement?
6. What do you think you would change or do better if you could redo your application process?
7. Overall, in your opinion, how was your application experience? Is there anything you wish you had known before going through this process?

ON-PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

8. If you secured a placement, did it run for the original stated duration?
9. Was your job role originally remote and if not, what changes were made once the pandemic happened?
10. What was your average day like?
11. Do you think the placement aided in any development for you? If so, what?
12. In your opinion, what do you think your organisation did well?
13. In your opinion, was there anything you think your organisation could have included or improved on in order for you to have had a better work experience?
14. Do you think your identity had any influence on your experience during your placement? If so how?
15. Based your experience, would you recommend your role/placement?

ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FUTURE

16. How motivated are you about your educational future? Why? (State how it was at the beginning of 2020 and how it has changed now, towards the end of your placement?)

17. How motivated are you about your future post-graduation? Why? (State how it was at the beginning of 2020 and how it has changed now, towards the end of your placement?)
18. Has your placement given you clearer vision for your career path moving towards final year and post-university?

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON PLACEMENTS

19. In your opinion, what do you think makes a good placement? Do you think your placement lived up to these qualities?
20. Is there anything you can look out for/ask when applying and looking at the job description or in the interview to find these qualities?