

Supported Internships: Evaluating the outcomes of a nationwide project using different internship models to support young people with intellectual disabilities and autistic young people into employment.

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By Andrea Meek, Dr Elisa Vigna and Dr Stephen Beyer, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University



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Keywords

supported internship, supported employment, autism, intellectual disability, job coaching, transition.

Abstract:

Background: This study reports the evaluation findings from Engage to Change, a seven-year project which included two supported internship models supporting people with intellectual disabilities and/ or autism in attaining and maintaining employment. The evaluation reports the effectiveness of the models from the different stakeholders' perspective in four DFN: Project SEARCH sites and three alternative supported internship sites.

Method: Data was collected on interns using a bespoke application installed on iPads or Android tablets. Stakeholder perspectives, including interns, were obtained via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Employment outcomes were monitored.

Results: Supported internships are an effective model for gaining employment for young people with intellectual disabilities and autistic young people. The models used within the Engage to Change project supported young people with a needs-led approach, increased their confidence and offered longer term experience and support to allow for skill development and informed choice regarding employment. The DFN: Project SEARCH model offers higher model fidelity and better outcomes than the alternative supported employment programmes, however both models deliver employment at greater than UK rates for this population.

Conclusion: The results suggest that supported internship models are valuable in supporting the transition of young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism into employment.

Background:

There is strong evidence to show that for young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism gaining employment is a challenge (Hendricks 2010; Wagner et al. 2016). Employment rates are much lower than for other forms of disability at 4.8% for people with intellectual disabilities aged 16-64 in England (BASE 2023). In Wales the employment rate of people with intellectual disabilities is unknown, as it is not reported, but it is likely to be comparable to England. 21.7% of autistic are reported to be in paid employment in the UK (ONS 2022). Transition from education to adulthood often does not culminate in employment for people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism despite this being a key element in achieving independence, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

The Equality Act (2010) promotes and supports the inclusion of people with any disability in the workplace. However, it is widely recognised that people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism have significant problems in finding, obtaining, and maintaining jobs. They face difficulties in accessing vocational support and in learning practical work-based transferable skills within education, and there is a clear lack of work experience promoted within schools. While the experience of having intellectual disabilities and/or autism will range greatly for each individual, there are common difficulties that may influence employment outcomes including: difficulties with: communication; social interaction; planning; working memory; coping with change and time management; sensory issues; and problems with executive functioning. It is therefore difficult to predict the impact of these difficulties on achieving employment goals and the level of support needed.

This does not mean that individuals cannot work. Many young people with intellectual disabilities and autistic young people learn work skills more effectively by doing tasks in real work environments, with needs-led support to guide learning, rather than in special or simulated environments. The right support and the right environment are essential for good quality employment outcomes.

A range of studies have reported that people with intellectual disabilities in employment report higher employment satisfaction levels, positive mood and greater control over their lives than their unemployed peers with a disability (Jiranek and Kirby 1990). People with intellectual disabilities in employment also scored higher in quality of life scales than unemployed peers (Eggleton et al. 1999) and in their level of engagement in social activities and social interaction were higher in employment than their employed peers (Kilsby and Beyer 1996).

Supported employment, utilising job coach support, is well established as a successful model for helping with young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism who are interested to build vocational skills and move into employment. However, there remains a lack of opportunity in the UK to experience work while transitioning from education into adult life, with individualised job coach support not being routinely offered (Beyer 2016). In searching for appropriate ways to support young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism transition into work, supported internships have increasingly become recognised as a feasible route.

Engage to Change was a 7-year project across Wales aiming to support 1000 young people aged 16 to 25 across Wales with intellectual disabilities, autism or a specific learning difficulty to increase employment skills, gain employment experience and ultimately move into paid jobs. The project brought together a consortium of partners including North and South Wales supported employment agencies to deliver job coach support, paid placements and paid jobs in ordinary workplaces following the supported employment model. Engage to Change offered two pathways for young people, individual job finding and supported internships, both using job coach support. This paper focuses exclusively on the supported internship pathway.

The aim of supported internships is to equip young people with the skills they need to enter sustainable paid employment through vocational education and job coach support in the workplace. Primarily based within mainstream employment settings, supported internships are unpaid work-based learning placements. Engage to Change offered two supported internship models within the project

DFN Project SEARCH (PS)

DFN Project SEARCH is the most frequently used model for delivering supported internships in the UK (DFN Foundation 2023). This supported internship model has delivered higher rates of employment for people with intellectual disabilities than alternatives in the United States (Rutkowski et al. 2006) and United Kingdom (Cooper Gibson Research 2013) and delivered financial savings (Lab 2013). The Project SEARCH model has grown in popularity across Europe over the last decade. In 2016 the first DFN Project SEARCH site in Wales, UK, was established under the Engage to Change project. Further sites were established under Engage to Change in 2017, 2018, and 2022.

Project SEARCH recognises that interests and talents of people with intellectual disabilities are as personal as they are for the rest of the population (Rutkowski et al. 2006). The model provides support for young people to learn employment and independent living skills in a work-based context (O'Bryan et al. 2014). To achieve this, three elements are brought together:

- **Host Business:** Provides an on-site base and a variety of internships that teach core skills related to jobs in that business. Businesses in Wales included hospital trusts, universities, and local authorities as they typically have high-turnover recruitment with various job options offering complex but systematic tasks. Departments within the host business supply a work-based mentor who works with a job coach to support the intern.
- **Local college/ education provider:** Recruits interns through an application and interview process. An instructor/ tutor is also provided who implements a Project SEARCH employability skills curriculum, covering work-related aspects such as job searching, applying for a job, communication skills, safeguarding, manual handling, payslips, budgeting and managing money, information governance, health and safety, timekeeping, dressing for work, social skills, and other topics relevant to the employers' business.
- **Supported Employment Agency:** Provides job coaching support for interns at the host business and in their initial paid job. The supported employment agency provides local employment knowledge and is skilled in vocational profiling and training work tasks using systematic instruction. The supported employment agency identifies appropriate work placements in conjunction with a business manager within the host employer and provides in-situ job coaching to support interns to learn and carry out agreed roles and tasks.

Interns complete three, 10-week rotations in roles across the host business to enable a variety of experience and growth of transferable skills. Typically, interns are on site at the host business for 6 to 8 hours per day. Interns start the day in an onsite base working on the employability curriculum with the tutor focusing on upskilling in work-based tasks/ qualifications or providing additional pastoral support as needed. The host business provides work placements 5 days a week, replicating a full-time working pattern. Interns return to the onsite base at the end of the day for consolidation of learning.

DFN Project SEARCH in the UK achieves a rate of 60% of interns in full time paid employment, compared to the national average of 4.8% of people with intellectual disabilities (BASE 2023).

Alternative Models of Supported Internships (ASI)

During the period 2019 to 2020 three alternative sites offering supported internships were set up under the Engage to Change project, but without accreditation and support from DFN Project SEARCH. Again, these internships lasted an academic year, were full time, enrolling students from a further education college supported by a tutor responsible for work-based education and one or more job coaches from a supported employment agency for in-work support. These internships offered students on vocational access pathways from further education colleges a similar set of immersive work experiences as Project SEARCH but operated a more flexible model in two ways. First, each site negotiated its own work-based learning and college tutoring timetables. For example, the timetabling of class-based learning was “up front” in some cases, where interns spent the first several weeks in the college setting before undertaking work placements in the community. In other sites interns would spend one day a week in the classroom and then undertake placements on the remaining days. Second, the number of internship rotations and working hours spent in employment varied, reflecting the preferences of interns and the availability of employers. Interns were in placement between 1 and 5 days per week, received between 1 and 3 placement rotations and work-based learning hours varied between 4 hours per week and full-time working hours.

For all sites the project culminates in individualized job searching with the aim of securing paid employment for interns. At the end of the internship the host employer has the option to take on the intern in paid employment or the internship ends. If interns did not successfully move into paid employment, they had the option to transfer onto the main Engage to Change project and continue working with the supported employment agencies who provided ongoing support to secure employment. Alternatively, interns who were not employment ready were signposted to the most relevant service.

The National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University undertook an independent evaluation of Engage to Change supported internships. This article aims to give an overview, comparison, and outcome summary of the development of two supported internship models for young people with intellectual disabilities and/ or autism in Wales under the Engage to Change project.

Research Questions

In this evaluation we tried to answer of the following research questions:

- Was the percentage of young people employed at the end of supported internships greater than the national employment average?
- Are there differences in outcome for different models of SI?
- Were the employment rates for key personal characteristics of interns' equivalent between models (e.g. gender, age, diagnosis)?
- What factors seem to determine differences in outcomes shown?

Method

Data on intern education, employment background, skills, vocational profiling, workplace preferences, benefits received, equality and diversity, disability, and support needs, was collected by job coaches working directly with interns using a bespoke App installed on iPads or Android tablets. This included all interns who enrolled on an Engage to Change supported internship between 2016 and 2022. Ethical approval from an NHS Research Ethics Committee was obtained. Data was available to the evaluation team with informed consent from project participants using easy-read briefing and consent documents.

During internship years one to three (2016 to 2019) the evaluation team completed face to face semi-structured interviews with interns. This included all interns in year one and a 10% randomized sample of interns in consecutive years. Interviews focused on job coaching and teaching, support received, skills developed overtime, outcomes from working, and future plans.

Changes to Data collection due to Covid

During the Coronavirus pandemic, data collection was amended to allow for its continuation through lockdown and the period of social distancing. For interns, the questions used for face-to-face interviews were replicated in an online easy-read survey. Interns were given the option of self-completion or receiving support from the research team via Teams, Zoom or telephone.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Identifying features were anonymized or redacted. A thematic analysis was undertaken of qualitative data. All data was analyzed using SPSS and Excel and cross checked by a team of two researchers. Positive and negative features of both supported internship models were considered.

Results

Overview of Supported Internship Sites

The majority of the sites created were hospital based within large health boards with one site being based within a large university. For these sites internship placements were internal to the host business and were generally on site. One other site was based within a college of further education and linked with a large local authority who provided internship opportunities within its workforce and regional boundaries. A final site was again based within a college but did not have a large associated employer acting as a host business, this site accessed community-based internship placements. Table 1 provides a description of sites. All sites were supported by trained job coaches from supported employment agencies. One college-based site had an additional job coach who was a member of college staff.

| Site | SI Type | Host Business/ Employer Type | Placements internal/ external to host business | College Provider | External Supported Employment Agency | Start Year | Total number of interns (n=191) |
|------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | DFN Project SEARCH | University | Internal/ on site | Yes | Yes | 2016 | 63 |
| 2 | DFN Project SEARCH | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | Yes | Yes | 2017 | 39 |
| 3 | DFN Project SEARCH | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | Yes | Yes | 2018 | 22 |
| 4 | Alternative SI | Local Authority (community placements) | Internal/ off site | Yes | Yes/* | 2019 | 28 |
| 5 | Alternative SI | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | Yes | Yes | 2019 | 18 |
| 6 | Alternative SI | Community placements | External/ off site | Yes | Yes | 2019 | 16 |
| 7 | DFN Project SEARCH | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | No | Yes | 2022 | 5 |

*Additional Job Coach provided in-house.

Table 1: Description of Engage to Change: Supported Internship sites

Participants

Between 2016 and 2022, 224 young people enrolled on a supported internship through Engage to Change (144 PS, 80 ASI). In total, 203 young people aged 16 to 25, with intellectual disabilities/ specific learning difficulties and/ or an autism diagnosis, gave informed consent to be included within the evaluation study. 191 of these successfully completed the academic year. Of these, 129 young people undertook a DFN Project SEARCH (PS) internship and 62 enrolled in an Alternative Supported Internship (ASI) program. Data below is based on 191 interns.

Across both PS and ASI models 30% of interns identified as female and 70% identified as male. By internship type, for PS sites 73% of interns identified as male and 27% identified as female. For ASI sites 65% of interns identified as male and 35% identified as female.

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The average age of interns across both models was 19.7 years (range 17-25), with PS sites having an average age of 19.6 years (range 17- 25) and ASI sites having an average age of 19.8 years (range 17-24). There were slight differences in the typical age at referral, the majority of PS interns being aged 19 compared to 17 years for ASI interns.



Table 2 summarizes self-reported intern diagnosis. 34% of interns had a diagnosis of intellectual disabilities, 10% had a diagnosis of autism, 18% had autism and ID, and 20% were diagnosed with specific learning difficulties (SpLD). Additional diagnoses reported included: Cerebral Palsy, Williams Syndrome, Di George Syndrome (22q Deletion Syndrome), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Down’s Syndrome, Triple X Syndrome, Tourette’s Syndrome, mental health issues, speech and language delay and visual impairment. Table 3 outlines the highest reported levels of formal support within education prior to commencement of internships. PS sites had more complex people, with more having a Statement of Special Educational Need or an Individual Development Plan. This coincides with PS recruiting more people with a diagnosis of ID, and ASI sites recruiting a higher percentage of young people with SpLDs.

| Diagnosis | Internship model | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|------------|-----------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| | PS (n) | PS % | ASI (n) | ASI % | Combined (n) | Combined % |
| Intellectual Disability (ID) | 57 | 44 | 7 | 11 | 64 | 34% |
| Autism | 15 | 12 | 5 | 8 | 20 | 10% |
| Autism and ID | 28 | 22 | 6 | 10 | 34 | 18% |
| Autism and SpLD | 12 | 9 | 7 | 11 | 19 | 10% |
| Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) | 13 | 10 | 26 | 42 | 39 | 20% |
| Undiagnosed | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1% |
| Missing | 3 | 2 | 11 | 18 | 14 | 7% |
| Total | 129 | 100 | 62 | 100 | 191 | 100% |
| SpLD neurotype | | | | | | |
| ADD | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% | 1 | 1% |
| ADHD | 14 | 11% | 5 | 8% | 19 | 10% |
| Dyslexia | 18 | 14% | 5 | 8% | 23 | 12% |
| Dyspraxia | 17 | 13% | 7 | 11% | 24 | 13% |
| Dyscalculia | 6 | 5% | 1 | 2% | 7 | 4% |
| Dysgraphia | 2 | 2% | 3 | 5% | 5 | 3% |

Table 2: Intern diagnosis

| Highest level of educational support reported | Internship model | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------|---------|-------|--------------|------------|
| | PS (n) | PS % | ASI (n) | ASI % | Combined (n) | Combined % |
| School Action (Additional classroom assistance in school) | 19 | 15% | 32 | 52% | 51 | 27% |
| School Action Plus (Additional expert advice and help from outside agencies) | 6 | 5% | 2 | 3% | 8 | 4% |
| Statement of Special Education Needs | 36 | 28% | 7 | 11% | 43 | 23% |

² The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021 replaced existing support plans (including statements of SEN and individual education plans (IEPs)) with Individual Development Plans.

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| IDP (following move to ALN Act in Wales) | 26 | 20% | 4 | 6% | 30 | 16% |
| Missing | 42 | 33% | 17 | 27% | 59 | 31% |
| Total | 129 | 100% | 62 | 100% | 191 | 100% |

Table 3: Levels of support in previous education

Interns' views

In total, 44% (n=58) of PS interns, and 28% (n=17) of interns who completed an ASI gave feedback about their experience through face-to-face interview or online survey. All sites were represented. Data here represents this sub-cohort (n=75).

The majority of interns across both models stated that they had some experience of work prior to applying for the supported internship (PS=81%, ASI=53%, combined=77%). Typically, these experiences were short in duration (two weeks or less), unpaid and facilitated by school or college. Coffee shops/ cafes and retail work were the most commonly reported work experience placements pre-internships.

Interns were asked for the reasons they applied for the course. For PS interns the primary reason, typically outlined below, was to get a paid job (62%).

“I did not want to be on the dole, receiving money from the government. I wanted to see if I could get some work in my life. I did not want to be slouching at home all the time and break the monotony, get out of the house, try to learn something, at least this is helping me.” Int.24.PS

About a quarter (24%) of PS interns applied to gain more experience or to gain confidence. The remaining 14% undertook the course for other reasons, including tutor/ parental recommendation or because friends were enrolling.

A smaller proportion of ASI participants reported they applied because the course would enable them to find paid work (47%), with the majority (53%) applying for work experience or confidence building.

| | Teaching | | | Job Coach Support | | | Communication | | | Mentor | | |
|------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| | PS % (n=58)) | ASI % (n=17)) | All Sites (n=75)) % | PS % (n=58)) | ASI % (n=17)) | All Sites (n=75)) % | PS % (n=58)) | ASI % (n=17)) | All Sites (n=75)) % | PS % (n=58)) | ASI % (n=17)) | All Sites (n=75)) % |
| Very good | 65 | 41 | 60 | 67 | 53 | 64 | 52 | 65 | 55 | 69 | 59 | 67 |
| Good | 31 | 35 | 32 | 26 | 35 | 28 | 39 | 17 | 35 | 21 | 12 | 18 |
| Neither good/bad | 2 | 24 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 17 | 7 |
| Bad | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 3 |
| Very bad | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Table 4: Intern rating of job coach support, teaching and communication.

Working with the Tutor

The majority of interns across both PS and ASI models reported their experiences in the training and education room to be very good (60%) or good (32%) in regard to the teaching elements of the course which are outlined by an intern here, “I learnt about fire safety, doing first aid, cross contamination and we also went to the Senedd and they told us about taxes and things, health and safety, how to do a CV, do’s and don’ts in work, internet safety, how to navigate the workplace, money skills and we had to do work diaries. I enjoyed it all.” Int.15.ASI

The teaching sessions, run by the tutor, were reported to be important for the development of new practical skills, but also sessions had a significant impact on confidence building, social skills and personal growth as noted here,

“Helped to build my confidence, in September I thought I did not even have the confidence to even complete this course and the confidence grew bigger, and I did. We are in June now and I have done it, I have done a whole year, I can’t believe how it’s gone so quick.” Int.24.PS

Where ratings of “Neither good/bad” or “Bad” were given (ASI 24%, PS 2%) feedback was individual and generally occurred around specific instances where interns had experienced singular issues within the classroom.

Job Coaching

Job coaching was described positively by interns with 93% of PS interns and 88% of ASI interns rating job coach support as “Very good” or “Good”. The job coach was an important source of learning and support in the workplace. Interns described how they were helped practically within their job placements with a range of needs-led support provided.

“They have helped me in different situations, for example practical things to help me do the job, they made sure I was alright and made sure I understood the routine and they encouraged me to learn to do the job on my own.” Int.13.

ASI

Both models helped interns by increasing their confidence in their capabilities. They became more socially confident when talking to new people and in new environments. The importance of having longer term support from experienced job coaches was recognised by interns.

“(I’ve) probably gained confidence when talking to new people. I think it is also reassuring knowing that you are not on your own, even though you sometimes feel like it (Job Coach) is always there reminding you. I think it is also reassuring what (Job Coach) said the other day, even though we leave here now 5 years from now (Job Coach) will still be there, she said you are not going to be like picked up, dumped and left because you have finished.” Int.07.PS

They helped me with difficult things, with one of the placements I got very stressed, so I called them up and they helped support me to find something else, very “They helped me with difficult things, with one of the placements I got very stressed, so I called them up and they helped support me to find something else, very supportive they were. I think the job coaches spoke to you and understood how you feel because they had done it for many years and were able to give good advice.”

Int.58.PS

Communication

Communication between interns and class tutors/ job coaches was also rated highly across the project. Interns appreciated that having access to onsite support meant they could address issues as they arose and that communication was open, understandable, and tailored to young people’s learning styles, including practical communication for visual learners.

Employment planning meetings

Employment planning meetings to discuss placements, progress and support were held for interns across both models up to 6 times per academic year. Meetings typically included interns, workplace mentors, parents/ carers, course tutor and the job coach who worked collaboratively with the intern to help them progress towards employment. Although these were generally viewed as positive experiences a minority of interns across both sites reported that having a parent/ carer attend was difficult for them, and that having a choice over parental attendance was important.

“I thought they were quite annoying, a waste of time. And I kind of think like, we are 20 to 22 years of age and I found it quite like childish that our parents had to come in, like a parents evening, so it kind of made me feel like I was still in school.”

Int.07.PS

“It did not help much. You must take your parent, but I am over 18. If your parents can’t make it they re-arrange the meeting. If I really do not want it or they (parents) don’t want it why should you bring parents?” Interviewer: “Is the meeting an opportunity to show your parent what you can do?” Intern; “Yeah, but this should be our choice.” Int.10.PS

“We did have these but because I am an adult now I didn’t really want my parents there and they respected that - I just had the work coach, the tutor and the workplace people.” Int.16.ASI

Mentors

Within each internship interns had a designated mentor from the host business. Mentors identified job roles and allocated work tasks in conjunction with the job coach, and, where appropriate, also provided support with social aspects in the workplace. Interns described mentors as supportive, helping them to learn tasks and roles, but also providing opportunities to have experiences outside their comfort zone and to try something new in a supportive environment.

“They discussed what was going to happen and they showed me what to do, they helped me a lot - they were my shadows in a good way!” Int.56.PS

In the few cases where a problem with the mentor was mentioned it was either because the intern felt that the mentor had just been there to give them work rather than to help or support them, or that they could not “connect” with the mentor, highlighting that good relationships are significant.

“My first mentor was very helpful and always seemed happy to help or answer any questions I had. My second mentor would answer questions as well but I didn’t feel as comfortable around her as I did my other mentor but otherwise she left me to work.” Int.49.PS

Outcomes

Interns reported that the project had boosted their confidence, provided work-based experience, and helped them identify the most appropriate type of job to match their skills. Several interns reported they had the opportunity to learn in a job role they had not known about before, thereby increasing future options and choice. The majority felt that the project had added to their prospects of a job in the future. 91% of PS interns and 76% of ASI interns reported that they wanted to get paid employment following their internships.

Were the percentages of young people employed at the end of supported internships greater than the national employment average?

The employment rate for Engage to Change at the end of year six across all supported internship sites was 36%, an employment rate greater than that for people with learning disabilities (4.8%). Project SEARCH sites delivered employment at greater rates than national estimates for autistic people (22%). Across Project SEARCH sites 16% of interns had more than one paid job. In addition to paid employment young people were also supported into short term unpaid placements (PS 15%, ASI 24%) or volunteering roles (PS 9%, ASI 8%).

Are there differences in outcome for different models of SI?

Table 5: summarises paid employment outcomes for young people following their Engage to Change supported internship. The table shows that the PS model delivered a mean employment rate of 47% over the 6 years of the project. The four PS schemes delivered mean employment rates between 24% and 80%, all significantly above the national rate of 4.8% for people with intellectual disabilities. The three ASI model delivered a mean employment rate of 13%, ranging from 6% to 31%, again above the national rate for intellectual disability.

| Site | SI type | Host Business/ Employer type | Placements internal/ external to host business | Start Year | Total number of interns | Number of Interns gaining paid employment | % | Combined paid employment % by type of internship | |
|-------|---------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | PS | University | Internal/ on site | 2016 | 63 | 28 | 44 | 16% | |
| 2 | PS | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | 2017 | 39 | 20 | 51 | | |
| 3 | PS | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | 2018 | 22 | 8 | 24 | | |
| 7 | PS | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | 2022 | 5 | 4 | 80 | | |
| total | | | | | 129 | 60* | | | |
| 4 | ASI | Local Authority (community placements) | Internal/ off site | 2019 | 28 | 2 | 7 | | 13% |
| 5 | ASI | Hospital/ University Health Board | Internal/ on site | 2019 | 18 | 1 | 6 | | |
| 6 | ASI | Community placements | External/ off site | 2019 | 16 | 5 | 31 | | |
| total | | | | | 62 | 8 | | | |
| | | | | | 191 | 68 | 36% | | |

***16% of this figure had more than one paid job**

Table 5: Years 1 to 6: Summary of paid employment outcomes for young people following their Engage to Change Supported Internship.

Were the employment rates for key characteristics of interns equivalent between models?

This study examined the differences in employment outcomes between models based on gender, age and diagnosis. However, the figures on which the ASI outcomes are based are low at 8 young people moving into employment and therefore it is difficult to make assumptions about this cohort. Figures are included here for description purposes.

By gender, 1 out of 8 (13%) ASI interns gaining employment were female, with PS having a higher figure of 19 out of 60 (32%), however in both models a significant employment gender gap exists and an underrepresentation of females is clear.

When considering age, 7 out of 8 (88%) ASI interns who secured employment were 16-19 years old. For PS sites there was a range across ages, with 27 out of 60 (45%) being 16-19 years old, 25 out of 60 (42%) were aged 20-22, and 4 out of 60 (7%) who were 23-26 years of age gaining employment respectively.

Employment rates vary according to young people's diagnosis across models. ASI gained employment for one young person with a diagnosis of ID (12%) and one young person with co-occurring Autism and ID (12%), 5 out of 8 (63%) young people who gained employment in this model had specific learning difficulties. PS models achieved highest rates of employment for young people diagnosed with an intellectual disability, the figure being 24 out of 60 (40%), followed by 13 young people with specific learning difficulties (22%), and 8 autistic young people (13%).

What factors seem to determine differences in outcomes shown?

We explored whether number of previous work experiences influenced job outcomes resulting from participation in each internship type. It appears that having some prior work experience is important but alone does not guarantee future employment, additional support is important. Data here was limited on the nature and duration of previous experience in relation to age.

For PS interns 45 out of 60 young people (75%) had previous work experience and 10 out of 60 (17%) had been in historical paid employment. Under the ASI model, 5 out of 8 young people (63%) had previous work experience and 2 out of 8 (25%) had worked in a paid job.

Level of educational support was available for most young people who secured employment.

3 out of 8 (38%) of ASI interns had Statements of Special Educational Need or Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and 3 had School Action Plus support. For PS, 24 out of 60 (40%) had a Statement or IDP, 11 young people (18%) had received support at School Action Plus level. Having a Statement of SEN or School Action Plus support indicates that the young person may have more complex needs requiring individualised and needs-led support. The data here provides a basis for further investigation around the impact of quality and duration of work experience during school in relation to educational support needs and how this impacts on later models of internship support and job outcomes.

Follow-on support for interns not achieving paid employment.

Funding was available through Engage to Change to provide paid placements of up to 6 months duration aimed at subsidising employer costs for Engage to Change participants, 14% of PS interns and 6% of ASI interns who did not go into paid employment were supported in paid placements following their supported internship. Interns who did not transition into one of the above outcomes were re-directed to job clubs and continued to be supported by job coaches via the main Engage to Change project (PS 15%, ASI 51%).

Types of job found for interns.

Paid jobs were classified according to the UK Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) which groups occupations according to the level of skill. (ONS 2020). The highest proportion of positions were “Other Administrative Occupations n.e.c”, followed by “Kitchen and Catering assistants” and “Cleaners and Domestic”. “Sales and retail”, “Hospital portering”, “Nursing auxiliaries and assistants” and “Laboratory technicians” roles were also popular outcomes. Project SEARCH sites associated with larger host employers had higher proportions of interns in each job role, and therefore less variety of job types, than ASI sites.

Hours and pay in employment.

Data on number of hours in paid employment was available for 57 out of 68 interns. 65% of interns were working 16 hours or more per week in paid employment, however there were differences between sites with the PS model achieving higher rates of 16+ hours, (PS 68%, ASI 38%). The range was 2 to 40 hours for PS sites and 2 to 30 hours for ASI sites.

Data on wage rates was available for 52 out of 68 interns. All interns were paid the UK National Minimum Wage for their age or higher.

Future expectations and outstanding needs post-internship

Expectations about paid employment following internships were high, with 88% (PS 91%, ASI 76%) of interns reporting that they wanted to get a paid job when the course was finished.

“I like the factory job in (Business) I have now so I am hoping to get a paid job there, I like the heavy lifting and the walking around there - it keeps me fit and healthy! I work there two days a week - it's volunteer but would like it to be paid and more days” Int.12.ASI

Interns were asked to compare the areas of work-based support they felt they still needed following the completed internship compared with the support they needed at the start of the course. Interns from across both models reported that they still felt they needed help in most areas. For PS interns, writing a CV, finding jobs to try, applying for a job, undertaking interviews, managing benefits and support with work-place issues were highlighted as areas where support may still be helpful. For ASI interns, finding out about jobs (job searching) and finding jobs to try, were the highest concerns (Figure 1). Interns generally reported that they were more confident with learning how to get on with people at work and making sure the workplace suited them with any adaptations required, highlighting that self-advocacy skills had improved as a result of their supported internships.

Figure 1: Intern support need post internship

Impact of supported internships on wider life

Interns were asked if the project had an impact on their wider lives. Friendships, personal independence, and increased communication skills were reported, however, “confidence” was the single biggest emerging theme across all sites, highlighted here, “Yes, I became more confident than I used to be. I was very shy, I could not approach people to say Hi or to ask things. Now I can ask people “Do you want me to do this?” Int.54.PS

Although not formally taught as part of the course, educational skills were also noted to improve through day-to-day use. “Boosted my confidence up a lot more, I can feel myself starting getting better with maths and English”. Int.07.PS

There was also a recognition that opportunities for the future had changed; “Because of this it is giving me options and possibilities of looking into a paid job and given me options for the future. I am at the stage now where my family and friends are looking at me moving into a paid job. My advice to people for next year would be to seize your opportunity” Int.13.ASI. This emphasizes a greater awareness of the employment market and more informed choice around employment for young people with ID.

Discussion

Supported internships were introduced to Wales, UK under the Engage to Change project in 2016. Prior to this there were no significant opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism to have experiences of this type or duration. To date there are now 17 sites which offer supported internships. Feedback from interns enrolled in both Engage to Change Project SEARCH and Alternative Supported Internship models showed many benefits for young people with intellectual disabilities and autistic young people.

Supported internships offer work-based learning which has proven to be an effective learning context for new skills, professionalism, and independence. Skills learnt in the workplace are consolidated in the classroom, with support from a college tutor. Job coach support is pivotal to the success of internships. Employment became a realistic option for young people through the project, with Engage to Change supported internships in Wales achieving a 36% employment rate overall, with Project SEARCH sites having higher outcomes at 47% against 13% for Alternative Supported Internship models.

There are several points to note about the difference in outcome figures between models. Project SEARCH was established in the US in 1996 and in the UK around 2010. It therefore offers a robust model across sites, with defined elements and a system of review that determines the fidelity of delivery against model criteria. It includes a structured timetable for intern rotation between placements, class-based learning and internship hours in work placements. PS internships also operated within large host employers, the benefits of this being interns were already on-site, there was organisational backing, induction and training, and a wide variety of on-site placements available. The Project SEARCH model was in operation under Engage to Change for 3 years prior to the start of the first ASI, and the implementation of ASI projects was impacted by closures of workplaces under Covid-19 lockdown rules. This should also be taken into account when comparing outcomes.

The Alternative Supported Internship models under Engage to Change offered a flexible approach. Each site determined its own timetable of class and work-based learning. Time in work-based placement varied between sites and interns. Hours/days worked were person centered and dependent on available opportunities. Commuting time between base (or home) and work placements in the community also impacted on the availability of placements.

This article highlights several key factors which are important in getting more young people with ID into employment. Overall, the project experienced a gender disparity within both SI models. This may be linked to the high prevalence of autistic participants. A higher proportion of males are identified as autistic than females and there is a lower incidence of clinical diagnosis of autism in females due to masking of autistic traits (Lai et al. 2017). This could also be linked to females being more sensitive to potential benefit changes when entering employment, or having a position within their family environment that leads to employment being seen as less relevant or achievable to them. Additionally, it may be that the pathways to internships through education are not as inclusive of females as males. This requires further investigation.

Employment is historically and culturally problematic for young people with ID and/or autism. This is likely to be linked to extra support being needed with the learning process and the additional social and emotional demands of work (Tobin et al. 2014). Rates of employment by diagnoses differed between models. 5 out of 8 (63%) young people who gained employment in the ASI model had specific learning difficulties, whereas PS sites achieved the highest rates of employment for young people diagnosed with an intellectual disability (24 out of 60 (40%)). This coincides with PS recruiting more people with a diagnosis of ID, and ASI sites recruiting a higher percentage of young people with SpLDs. Typically, SI's have become the dominant model for realising successful transitions into employment for young people with ID (Hanson et al. 2021) however It is difficult to determine if either of the Engage to Change models better suits young people with ID, Autism or specific learning difficulties over the other model due to limitations in numbers. There are also issues with differences in definition of ID/ SpLD which may occur between Job Coaches, Parents, Carers and the young people themselves. Finally, it could be argued that diagnosis is secondary to vocational profiling undertaken by the job coaches in each Engage to Change SI model. This supports a needs led approach identifying strengths and weaknesses in the workplace, thereby adopting a more social model of support.

The project overall supported young people aged 16 to 25, with young people aged 16 to 19 being the largest group entering employment via the ASI model, reflecting the average age of 17 years for young people enrolled on this route. The PS model, with a higher average age at referral of 19 years achieved higher rates of paid employment. This could be linked with greater life experience, degree of work readiness and higher motivation to be employed for this group.

Having a previous work experience appeared to contribute to the success of getting paid employment in both of the Engage to Change Supported Internship models. Although information was not recorded about the type and duration of experiences here, research on the transition from school to employment has shown that previous experience predicts higher employment rates post-education for people with ID (Test et al. 2009; Vigna et al. 2023). The importance of work experience should be given higher status in school or further education establishments when preparing young people with ID and/ or autism for adult life, particularly within pre-internship courses.

The figures on which the ASI outcomes are based are lower at just 13% of young people moving into employment, and therefore it is difficult to make assumptions about this cohort. Further analysis of outcomes from additional settings would be beneficial to examine if the ASI model is a robust option for supporting young people with ID and/ or Autism into employment.

As the supported internship model has been extended to many more sites in Wales under the Welsh Government's post-16 Independent Living Curriculum, and within this Pathway 4 SI funding, the model has deviated from the PS model, and to some extent the ASI model also. There is more flexibility on outcome, with employment not regarded as the singular goal of SI, with other routes of progression such as supported apprenticeships being valid. Time spent in workplaces during internships varies even more than within the Engage to Change SI schemes, as does delivery of college's education input. We have yet to see if this variability impacts on outcomes achieved from these developing schemes.

Sustained funding is required for supported employment agencies to continue to provide one-to-one support through job coaching for interns who may require preparation support, such as travel training, for intern's pre-internship or for those post-internship who are still looking for employment or may need sporadic support (Christensen 2015). There remains a gap in provision highlighted by interns not able to find jobs before or immediately after their internships who require further support to get into employment. While Pathway 4 funding is paying for supported employment agency job coaching in many supported internship schemes, this commonly does not extend to interns after graduation from their scheme and there are no dedicated sources of funding for that job coaching outside of supported internships.

Research has shown that having experiences similar to their mainstream peers is a significant factor in developing greater independence for young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism ultimately enabling young people to make more informed choices (Beyer et al. 2014). Opportunities in real work environments increased the self-confidence, self-esteem, and the employability of the interns. Interns recognised that the move from education into work-based learning was a shift to adulthood with growing independence and confidence. Interns appreciated the support given for this and that they felt involved and treated as equals. Trained job coach support, specialising in working with people with intellectual disabilities and adopting a needs-led approach to focus on strengths and skills growth is key here.

In terms of good practice, most interns were in paid employment of over 16 hours per week post-internship and all were receiving the UK National Minimum Wage or higher. Ensuring that people are better off in work than on government benefits is important if we are to achieve financial independence for young people with intellectual disabilities. Future evaluation of jobs gained by internship sites in Wales should investigate how dependent achieving part-time or full-time work is on interns' personal characteristics and circumstances, including the receipt of benefits.

Post-internship employment was generally characterized by entry-level jobs, typically low-skilled with less secure working conditions. It is important that young people with intellectual disabilities are supported in regard to job sustainment with a focus on career progression and choice. The limited nature of funding for job coaching in Wales currently does not support individuals who may want more responsibility or upskilling in the workplace thus limiting the choice and control people with intellectual disabilities have over their working lives.

Having meaningful work opportunities in real work placements over an extended period has positive effects for paid employment for people with intellectual disabilities. This includes social inclusion (Hanson et al. 2021) self-esteem and quality of life as well as increased independence and choice (Wistow and Schneider 2003). Internships help to improve the vocational skills and personal performance of interns in work and life. Job coaching and a targeted curriculum are key to achieving this. Further evidence and studies are needed to establish whether, and what helps, people sustain their jobs over the long-term.

Conclusion

The overall rate of employment is not comparable to the national UK DFN Project SEARCH employment rate of 60% (DFN Foundation 2023) but is higher than the employment rate for people with intellectual disabilities (4.8%) and autism (21.7%) nationally. Discussions for the future need to focus on developing a stronger pathway for transition into employment from education.

A Supported Internship Quality Assurance Framework (SIQAF) has recently been introduced in the UK (BASE 2023b) and is primarily available to be used by all SI providers and their delivery partners as part of the Internships Work programme in England with the aim of ensuring supported internship models operate to the strengths of the individual site whilst also offering high quality and robust experiences to interns (NDTi 2023). In Wales, Quality Standards and Guidance for delivery of supported internships was published in 2023 by Colleges Wales, a member led organisation that acts as the voice of further education in Wales, but these are independent and different from the English SIQAF. It will be important to see how these standards impact on quality in supported internship delivery and if these standards continue to evolve to ensure high quality outcomes for young people, including higher numbers of interns progressing into paid employment. Engage to Change supported internships represented a valuable addition to supported employment provision in Wales and acted as a catalyst for the roll-out of supported internship programmes across all further education colleges as part of the Welsh Government funded Independent Living Skills curriculum. Further work is needed with the UK Department for Work and Pensions so that Access to Work funding can be more easily utilised in Wales, including to extend job coach support hours to help young people and sites to prepare for supported internships starts and for follow on support after an internship has ended.

Engage to Change supported internships have demonstrated the effectiveness of job coach support and educational input within the workplace in developing skills and establishing jobs. This form of intensive internship has received positive feedback from young people. Job coaching is key to the success of this form of internship. Proposed extensions of Access to Work funding for job coaching prior to supported internships to allow for preparation work, and after supported internships for follow on support in gaining and maintaining employment should be more highly considered, including permitting Access to Work funding use for permanent salaried job coach staff within large host employers. The provision of quality assured job coaching for supported internship programmes and for pre-internship and follow-along support will require on-going discussion with policy makers and funders, including Welsh Government and UK Department for Work and Pensions.

Key Recommendations

- A national framework across Wales for colleges and supported employment providers ensuring quality across Supported Internships is required to promote equal opportunity and experience for young people.
- SI should include minimum hours of work based experience. 70% is recommended by The Supported Internship Quality Framework (SIQAF) (BASE 2023b).
- Alternative Supported Internships working in rural areas or outside of large employers would benefit from a more rigorous framework for ensuring substantial placements are identified for interns which offer enhanced opportunities for transition into paid jobs.
- Job Coaching is key to the success of supported Internships. National funding of a Job Coaching service should be considered.
- Formal recognition of Job Coaching as a skilled role would ensure enhanced provision, training and monitoring.
- Extension of supported internships to 12 months duration should be considered to ensure maximum time for pre internship preparation work (vocational profiling, social support, travel training etc), and post internship support for finding and maintaining employment.
- Access to Work Funding should be extended to allow for Job Coaching to provide pre internship preparation work and/or post internship support.
- Higher status should be given to the importance of work experience in secondary and further education to allow for expectations to be raised around employment and to allow young people to make informed choices about future employment.
- There should be greater emphasis on assessing suitability of learners for progression onto supported internships, ensuring that young people are ready for, and committed to, moving away from education and into paid employment.
- There should be an expectation that paid employment is the primary goal. Supported Internships should be the final stage in the post 16 pathway through education.
- If employment is not achieved, a further work-focused provision should be considered (i.e. volunteering/ supported apprenticeship) as a step towards employment over the option to return to education.
- Further investigation on the pathways to Supported Internships across both models should be undertaken to ensure the inclusivity of females.
- Future evaluation of jobs gained by internship sites in Wales should investigate how dependent achieving part-time or full-time work is on interns' personal characteristics and circumstances, including the receipt of benefits.
- Further evidence and studies are needed to establish whether, and what helps, people sustain their jobs over the long-term.

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