Supported Internships: Evaluating the outcomes of a nationwide project using different internship models to support

January 2024

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

Contents

Keywords

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

Abstract:

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 employment is a challenge (Hendricks, 2010; Wagner, 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. Employment rates for apeople report that 21.7% are in paid employment in the UK (Statistics 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, improved 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. There are 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. The experience of having intellectual disabilities and/or autism will range greatly for each individual however 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 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 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 their level of engagement in social activities and social interaction were higher in employment (Kilsby and Beyer 1996).

Supported employment, utilising job coach support, is well established as a successful model for working with young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism who are interested in building vocational skills and moving into employment. However, there remains a lack of opportunity in the UK to experience work with adequate support (Beyer 2016). Indeed, while transitioning from education into adult life the opportunity of engaging individualised job coach support is not routinely offered. In searching for appropriate ways to support young people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism 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 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. The first was traditional supported employment using job coach support. The second pathway offered supported internships. This paper focuses exclusively on the latter 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)

In 2019 the David Forbes-Nixon Foundation secured the UK franchise for Project SEARCH. DFN Project SEARCH is the most popular model for delivering supported internships in the UK (DFN Foundation 2023). The supported internship model has provided higher rates of employment for people with intellectual disabilities than alternatives in the United States (Rutkowski et al. 2006) and United Kingdom (Gibson et al. 2013) and delivered financial savings (Social Value 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.

The Project SEARCH ethic is 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 (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 that business or organisation. The programme works within a large employer such as hospital trusts, universities, and local authorities as they typically have high-turnover positions with several different job types 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:** Identifies and recruits interns through an application and interview process. An instructor/ tutor is also provided who implements a Project SEARCH employability skills curriculum. The curriculum covers several 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 as relevant to the employers' business.

- **Supported Employment Agency:** Provides job coaching support for interns at the host business and in their initial job. The supported employment agency provides local employment knowledge and is skilled in vocational profiling and training in 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 carry out agreed roles and tasks.

The Project SEARCH model distinguishes itself from other internship models with the large host business taking a central role in the programme, supplying an in-house business lead who assists with identifying work placements and promotes and supports intern development as staff members. Interns complete three 10-week rotations 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 classroom base working on the employability curriculum with the college tutor, this time also provides an opportunity to upskill in work-based tasks/ qualifications or to provide additional pastoral support as needed. The host business provides work placements 5 days a week between the hours of 10.30am and 3.00pm, replicating a full-time working pattern. Interns return to the onsite base at the end of the day for a further curriculum-based activity and consolidation of learning.

The employment rate of existing Project SEARCH programmes is encouraging, with DFN Project SEARCH in the UK achieving a figure of 60% of interns moving into employment. This represents DFN Project SEARCH graduates who achieve full-time permanent roles, compared to the national average of 4.8% of people with intellectual disabilities. (BASE 2023)

Alternative 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, enrolled students from a further education college together with a tutor responsible for work-based education and employed a job coach provided by a supported employment agency for in-work support. The aim of the courses was to progress learners who had previously completed vocational access pathways in further education colleges into paid employment by providing work-based learning, internship placements and support to search for paid employment. These alternative internship sites preceded the introduction of a quality framework for supported internships and therefore operated a more flexible model, differing from the DFN Project SEARCH model in two ways. The first was that 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 other days. Secondly, the number of internship rotations and working hours spent in employment varied to reflect 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.

Overview of Supported Internship Sites

The majority of the sites 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 acollege but did not have a large associated employer acting as a host business. Instead this site accessed community-based internship placements. All sites were supported by trained job coaches from an external supported employment agency. One college-based site had an additional job coach who was a member of college staff.

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

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.

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 as a paid employee 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.

Name of department, name of university, undertook an evaluation of Engage to Change supported internships as part of their wider involvement in the Engage to Change project. 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.

Method:

Data on intern education and 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 interview 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 for completion.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and identifying features were anonymized and redacted. A thematic analysis was undertaken of quantitative 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:

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 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.

The average age of interns across both models was 19.67 years (range 17-25), with PS sites having an average age of 19.59 years (range 17- 25) and ASI sites having an average age of 19.84 years (range 17-24). There were slight differences with the typical age at referral. The majority of PS interns were aged 19 at project referral whereas the highest proportion of ASI participants were aged 17.

”

Table 2 summarizes intern diagnosis. 38% of interns were autistic, 51% had a diagnosis of intellectual isabilities and 51% were diagnosed with specific learning difficulties. Additional diagnosis reported included: Cerebral Palsy Williams Syndrome, Di George Syndrome (22q deletion Syndrome), OCD, Downs Syndrome, Triple X Syndrome, Tourette's Syndrome, mental health issues, speech and language delay and visual impairment. Table 2 outlines the highest reported levels of formal support within education prior to commencement of internships.

Table 2:

Diagnosis*	PS (n=129)	PS %	ASI (n=62)	ASI %	Combined (n=191)	Combined %
Autism	55	43%	18	29%	73	38%
Intellectual Disability	85	66%	13	21%	98	51%
Specific learning Difficulty	60	47%	38	61%	98	51%
Missing	3	2%	11	18%	14	7%
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%

*figures here are not mutually exclusive

			Internship model			
Diagnosis	**PS (n)**	**PS %**	**ASI (n)**	**ASI %**	**Combined (n)**	**Combined %**
ID alone	32	**25**	6	**10**	38	**20%**
SpLD alone	13	**10**	26	**42**	39	**20%**
Autism alone	15	**11**	5	**8**	20	**10%**
ID/SpLD	25	**19**	1	**2**	26	**14%**
Autism/ID	18	**14**	2	**3**	20	**10%**
Autism/SpLD	12	**9**	7	**11**	19	**10%**
Autism/ ID/SpLD	10	**8**	4	**6**	14	**7%**
Undiagnosed	1	**1**	0	**0**	1	**1%**
Missing	3	**2**	11	**18**	14	**7%**
Total	129	**100**	62	**100**	191	**100%**

Table 3: Intern diagnosis

	Internship model					
Highest level of educational support reported	**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%
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%

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 course (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 was to get a paid job at the end of the course (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 did the course to gain more experience or to gain confidence and the remaining (14%) undertook the course for other reasons, including tutor or 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.

Interns' view on Course Teaching , Job Coach Support and Mentoring

	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.

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. The teaching sessions, run by the supported internship tutor, were reported to be important for the development of new practical skills. For example, job searching, applying for a job, work-place roles and responsibilities, understanding equality and diversity, budgeting and health and safety. Class based sessions also had significant impact on confidence building, social skills and personal growth.

"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 around the workplace, money skills and we had to do work diaries. I enjoyed it all." Int.15.ASI

"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 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 reported that 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, for instance, when talking to new people and in new environments. In addition, 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 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 between interns and class tutors/ job coaches was also rated highly across the project. Interns appreciated that having access to onsite support meant that they could address issues as they arise and that communication was done in a way that was open, understandable, and tailored to learning styles, including practical communication for visual learners.

Employment planning meetings to discuss the current placement, progress and support were held at regular intervals, up to 6 times in the academic year, for interns across both models. Meetings typically included interns, workplace mentors, parents/ carers, course tutor and the job coach and were person centred with an aim to collaboratively work with the intern to progress them towards employment. Although these were generally viewed as positive experiences a minority of interns across both sites stated that parent/ carer involvement was an issue for them, and that choice 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

“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 parent 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

Within each internship placement every intern 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 to perform workplace roles, but also providing opportunities to have experiences outside their comfort zones 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 there was a problem with the mentor 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.

“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 that they had had the opportunity to learn in a job role they had not known about before, thereby increasing their 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 the internship course.

Paid employment

Table 5: summarises paid employment outcomes for young people following their Engage to Change supported internship. The employment rate for Engage to Change at the end of year six across all supported internship sites is 36% (PS 47%, ASI 13%). 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%). Funding was available through Engage to Change to provide paid placements of up to 6 months duration aimed at subsidising employer costs for employing Engage to Change participants, 14% of PS interns and 6% of ASI interns were supported in paid placements. 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%).

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 Domestics”. “Sales and retail”, “Hospital portering”, “Nursing auxiliaries and assistants” and “Laboratory technicians” roles were also popular job outcomes. Project SEARCH sites associated with larger host employers had higher proportions of interns in each job role and less variety of job types. Alternative supported internship sites had a wider variety of job type.

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	47%
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%	

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

Hours and pay in employment

Data on number of hours in paid employment was available for 57 interns. Across all sites 65% of interns were working 16 hours or more per week (PS 68%, ASI 38%). 19% were working less than 16 hours (PS 17%, ASI 38%). The range was 2 to 40 hours for PS sites and 2 to 30 hours for ASI sites. 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. 88% (PS 91%, ASI 76%) of interns reported that they would want to get a paid job when the course was finished.

“I like the factory job in (internship) 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

Looking ahead, interns (n=75) were asked to compare the areas of work-based support that they felt they needed now following the completed internship compared with the support they needed at the start of the course. Interns across both models reported that they still felt they needed some or a lot of help in most areas. For PS interns the areas of most concern were writing a CV, finding jobs to try, applying for a job, undertaking interviews, and sorting out benefits and work-related problems. For ASI interns finding out about jobs and finding jobs to try were the highest concerns (Figures xxx and xxx). 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 adaptions required. as they felt these skills had improved as a result their supported internship experience

Impact of supported internships on wider life
Interns were asked if the project had an impact on their wider lives. “Confidence” was the single biggest emerging theme here across all sites.

“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

Friendships, personal independence, and increased communication skills were also reported and, although not formally taught as part of the course, educational skills were also noted to improve through day-to-day use.

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 the tutor. Job coach support is pivotal to the success of internships.

Employment became a realistic option for young people. Engage to Change supported internships in Wales overall achieved a 36% employment rate, 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 fidelity across sites, including 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 Alternative Supported Internship models under Engage to Change offered a more flexible approach. Each site determined its own timetable of class and work-based learning. Time in work-based placement was person centred, hours/days worked varied and were dependent on available opportunities. Commuting time between base (or home) and work placements in the community also impacted on the availability of placements. The Project SEARCH model was in operation under Engage to Change for 3 years prior to the start of the first ASI. This should also be taken into account when comparing outcomes.

Sustained funding is required for supported employment agencies to continue to provide one-to-one support through job coaching for interns who are still looking for employment or may need sporadic support post internship (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.

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. Contact with the general population in a real work environment 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, the majority of 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. The 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. Young people generally learn job tasks and settle in socially more quickly when they work more hours per week. The goal should be to increase the number of hours interns work in paid employment. Post-internship employment was generally characterized by entry-level jobs, typically low-skilled and 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. The limited nature of funding for job coaching 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 of time has positive effects for paid employment for people with intellectual disabilities a 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 yet comparable to the national UK DFN Project SEARCH employment rate of 60% (DFN Project SEARCH 2023) but is higher than the employment rate for people with intellectual disabilities and autism nationally, (excluding Wales), which is currently 4.8% for people with intellectual disabilities and 21.7% for autistic people. 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) was introduced in the UK (BASE 2023) 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. 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.

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 in Wales as part of the Independent Living Skills curriculum funded by Welsh Government. 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 for extended job coach support hours in preparation for supported internship 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, for the follow-up needed after internships end, and to capitalise on the progress young people who do not have a job at the end have made. The provision of quality assured job coaching for supported internship programmes and for pre-internship and follow-along support requires on-going discussion with policy makers and funders including Welsh Government and UK Department for Work and Pensions.t

References:

Beyer, S. et al. (2010a). A Comparison of Quality of Life Outcomes for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Supported Employment, Day Services and Employment Enterprises. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 23(3), tt. 290-295.

Beyer, S. et al. (2010b). A Comparative Study of the Situation of Supported Employment in Europe. Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 7(2), tt. 130-136.
Beyer, S. (2016), Commentary on “Employment for all: United States Disability Policy, Tizard Learning Disability Review, 21 (3), 162-164.

Bryan, A. et al. (2014). Employer engagement that works: The European expansion of Project SEARCH. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 41(1), tt. 45-51.
Burnett, K. (2019). EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE. Training Journal, tt. 28-29.

Christensen, J. J. et al. (2015). Longitudinal outcomes of Project SEARCH in upstate New York. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 42(3), tt. 247-255.

Document, G. (2010). Equality Act 2010. In: www.gov.uk gol.
Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) (2017). Improving lives: the future of work health and disability. In: Pension, D.o.W.a. gol. Improving lives.

DFN Project SEARCH (2022). Outcome Summary [Online] Available at:
https://www.dfnprojectsearch.org/about-us.html
Accessed 11th May 2022.

Eggleton, I. et al. (1999). The impact of employment on the quality of life of people with an intellectual disability. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 13(2), tt. 95-107.
Equalities Act (2010). [Online] Available at:
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents (Accessed 11th May 2022)

Gormley, M. E. (2015). Workplace stigma toward employees with intellectual disability: A descriptive study. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 43(3), tt. 249-258.
Hendricks, D. (2010). Employment and adults with autism spectrum disorders: Challenges and strategies for success. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 32(2), tt. 125-134.

Jiranek, D. and Kirby, N.H. (1990). The job satisfaction and/or psychological well being of young adults with an intellectual disability and nondisabled young adults in either sheltered employment, competitive employment or unemployment. . Australia and New Zealand Journal of Developmental Disabilities, (16), tt. 133 – 148.

Kaehne, A. (2016). Project SEARCH UK - Evaluating Its Employment Outcomes. Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 29(6), t. 519.

Kilsby, M. and Beyer, S. 1996. Engagement and Interaction: A Comparison Between Supported Employment and ATCs. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 6(2), tt. 141-152.Statistics, O. f. N. 2022. Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021. Office for National Statistics. Available at: Outcomes for disabled people in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) [Accessed: 16/03/2022].

Project SEARCH (2022). Outcome Summary [Online] Available at:
https://www.projectsearch.us/outcome-summary/
Accessed 11th May 2022.
ONS SOC reference

Rutkowski, S. et al. (2006). Project SEARCH: A demand-side model of high school transition. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 25(2), tt. 85-96.

Scottish Council for Learning Disabilities (2018). Learning Disability Statistics Scotland, 2018 Provisional Statistics. Available at: https://www.scld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Learning-Disability-Statistics-Scotland-2018.pdf
(Accessed 11th May 2022).

Society, T. N. A. (2016). The autism employment gap; too much information in the workplace. Sutherland, A. (2016). Time to celebrate neurodiversity in the workplace. Occupational Health & Wellbeing, 68(11), t. 11.

Wagner, M. M. et al. 2016. The Benefits of High School Career and Technical Education (CTE) for Youth With Learning Disabilities. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 49(6), tt. 658-670.

BASE. 2023. Employment Rates for People with Disabilities 2021-22. Available at: British Association for Supported Employment (base-uk.org) [Accessed: 16/05/2023].

Bryan, A., Daston, M. M. and Riehle, E. 2014. Employer engagement that works: The European expansion of Project SEARCH. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 41(1), pp. 45-51. doi: 10.3233/JVR-140697

Eggleton, I., Robertson, S., Ryan, J. and Kober, R. 1999. The impact of employment on the quality of life of people with an intellectual disability. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 13(2), pp. 95-107.

Hanson, J., Robinson, D. and Codina, G. 2021. Supported internships as a vehicle for social inclusion. British journal of learning disabilities. 49(4), pp. 433-444. doi: 10.1111/bld.12428

Jiranek and Kirby. 1990. The job satisfaction and/or psychological well being of young adults with an intellectual disability and nondisabled young adults in either sheltered employment, competitive employment or unemployment . Australia and New Zealand Journal of Developmental Disabilities (16), pp. 133 – 148.

Kilsby, M. S. and Beyer, S. R. 1996. Engagement and interaction: a comparison between supported employment and ATCs.

ONS. 2020. Standard Occupational Classification for the UK. ONS. Available at: SOC 2020 - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) [Accessed: 02/08/2023].

Rutkowski, S., Daston, M., Van Kuiken, D. and Riehle, E. 2006. Project SEARCH: A demand-side model of high school transition. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 25(2), pp. 85-96.

Statistics, O. f. N. 2022. Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021. Office for National Statistics. Available at: Outcomes for disabled people in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) [Accessed: 16/03/2022].

Wistow, R. and Schneider, J. 2003. Users' views on supported employment and social inclusion: A qualitative study of 30 people in work1. British Journal of Learning Disabilities 31, pp. 166-173. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-3156.2003.00253.x

Website: www.engagetochange.org.uk

YouTube: Engage To Change

Facebook: @engagetochangewales

Twitter: @Engage_2_Change / @ncmh_wales