



Abstract Submission

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WG4: Employment, entrepreneurship and new professional opportunities

Pathways to Employability: Inclusive Internship Models for Disabled Students in Higher Education

In response to persistent barriers to employment faced by disabled graduates in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin launched the Inclusive Internship Programme in 2022 to create meaningful, supported, and sustainable work-based learning opportunities for disabled students. This paper presents a three-year review of the programme's design, implementation, partnerships, and impact, drawing on case studies and national data to inform a model for embedding inclusive practices in higher education internships.

Developed collaboratively with academic departments and professional service units, the programme offers paid, structured internships underpinned by Universal Design for Work-Based Learning. Each placement is co-designed with the student, employer, and Disability Service to align with the student's strengths and goals. Tailored preparation, coaching, and employer mentorship ensure a supportive and inclusive environment that directly addresses barriers such as inaccessible recruitment and limited disclosure confidence.

The programme has led to demonstrable outcomes, including increased confidence, job-readiness, and graduate progression. However, national employment rates for disabled graduates remain static. This paper explores these gaps and showcases how targeted interventions like the Inclusive Internship Programme can enhance equity in graduate employment.

Key elements of the programme's model—such as alignment with national funding (HEA PATH, FSD), data-driven feedback loops, and adaptive strategies to address legacy systems—are detailed. The paper concludes by proposing a policy framework to mainstream inclusive internships across the higher education sector, informed by the Trinity Inclusive Integrated Model and aligned with Article 27 of the UNCRPD and SDGs 4 and 8.

This paper argues that higher education institutions are ideally positioned to drive equitable transitions to employment, and provides an evidence-based critique of employment practices alongside a proven, scalable model for inclusive internship delivery.