Article

What Makes Supported Internships an Effective Approach to VET?

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Abstract

Internationally, there have been varied attempts to secure the inclusion of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Vocational Education and Training (VET). This paper investigates *supported internships* (SIs), which are programmes that include college courses in numeracy and literacy, workplace learning, and broader life skill development. Drawing on an empirical study of one SI in England, this paper focuses on the pedagogic structure of SIs to explore how systematic instruction combines with elements of the workplace environment to bring about successful vocational learning for young people with SEND. It considers whether the expansive-restrictive conceptualisation of apprenticeship learning explains successful outcomes within an SI. A case study approach using a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews was adopted to explore the experiences of people involved in the SI. These included two job coaches, four colleagues, six interns and three graduates from the SI. Thematic analysis revealed this SI facilitates workplace learning for young people with SEND because

it models an expansive (not reductive) approach to internships. Systematic instruction did not result in restrictive learning because of role design and broader organisational features. A key facilitating aspect was that the design of the internship fostered opportunities to develop identity through crossing boundaries. Implications for the design of SIs (to facilitate social inclusion and ensure employment outcomes for young people with SEND) are discussed.

Keywords: supported internship, vocational training, expansive approach

Introduction

Drawing on the model of the expansive-restrictive continuum (Fuller & Unwin, 2004), this paper explores the pedagogic structure of *supported internships* (SIs). It considers how approaches to workplace learning used in one SI, combine with elements of the workplace environment, to bring about successful vocational learning in an 'expansive' (Fuller & Unwin, 2004) learning environment for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Young people with SEND often face significant challenges when entering or completing technical and vocational educational training (TVET) (e.g., Ebuenyi et al., 2020) which include, but are not limited to: information presented to parents/ young people that is difficult to decode, poor career guidance, mistaken assumptions by educators and employers about the abilities and capabilities of persons with SEND, inaccessible buildings and transport, restrictive entry criteria, and a lack of inclusive teaching capacity, methods and materials (e.g., British Council, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2017). The number of students engaging with TVET in England has been in decline until very recently (e.g., ResPublica, 2022; Department for Education [DfE], 2019; Dickinson & Cullen, 2018) with more young people turning to higher education: however, the United Kingdom (UK) Government has begun to invest in further education, looking to improve teaching, governance and leadership as well as make TVET a significant part of the solution to increasing skills gaps (DfE, 2021). Similarly, for young people with SEND, TVET has become an important part of the English Government's approach to supporting them into employment (statistics on the number of SIs that are delivered or the number of young people taking an SI are not readily available). The promotion of TVET and apprenticeships necessitates therefore an improved understanding of what pedagogic practices are most effective in this context.

The British Council (2018) concluded that effective TVET programmes need to deliver high-quality inclusive provision with a strong focus on the removal of barriers as well as an innovative practice. They need to be: personalised, including the development of adult life skills, engage employers to include work-based learning and encourage high aspirations and expectations for young people. Internationally, there have been varied attempts to secure the inclusion of young people with SEND in TVET by adopting some of these features (e.g., European centre for the development of vocational training [Cedefop], 2016). Entry to

Employment (E2E) in England, as an example, was an entry-level/level 1 work-based learning programme for young people (aged 16–18) who were not yet ready to enter an apprenticeship, employment, or structured learning at level 2. The focus of the E2E programme was compulsory basic and/or key skills, vocational skills, and personal and social development. In Spain, "Jovent" provides comprehensive pathways of guidance, training, social inclusion, and labour market inclusion. This paper focuses on supported internships (SIs), which have become a key approach to facilitating successful employment outcomes for young people with SEND in England and which draw upon many if not all the features identified by the British Council (British Council, 2018; Hanson et al., 2021).

Utilising the lens of the expansive-restrictive conceptualisation of apprenticeship learning (Fuller & Unwin, 2003, 2004; Fuller et al., 2015), this study aimed to explore the pedagogic structure of one SI to identify how systematic instruction combined with elements of the workplace environment to bring about successful vocational learning for young people with SEND. In the following section, the paper outlines the contextual background of Sis before reviewing the literature on workplace learning practices and Fuller and Unwin's (2004) conceptualisation of the expansive-restrictive continuum.

Contextual Background
SI programmes are typically 12 months long and unpaid. They are specialised, employment focussed study programmes for people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), aged 16–24, who have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan (DfE, 2022). These plans are available to children and young people between the ages of 0–25 in England who qualify through assessment for additional funded support (although not those attending education at university).

The fundamental structure of a SI is comprised of college courses (e.g., numeracy and literacy learning) and broader life skill development which typically takes place in a Further Education (FE) college. These two aspects are combined with workplace learning with the support of a job coach (DfE, 2014). Job coaches are specialist trainers who support interns to learn job roles via systematic instruction. This is the deconstruction of complex job roles into simpler tasks for the interns to learn whilst in the workplace. Job coaches are skilled at determining when and how to provide support as well as recognising when to increase or reduce that support throughout the internship (Hanson et al., 2017).

SIs are typically delivered by FE colleges in partnership with job coaches and employers. There are approximately 160 FE colleges in England and most now offer Sis (exact statistics have not been published). In this model of SIs, job coaches match interns with employers and specific jobs. However, this model is not the only one used in England. A very small number of organisations employ job coaches directly to deliver the SI wholly on-site whereby the intern will complete their college courses and workplace learning all

within the organisation.

Evaluations of several supported internship programmes, both here and in the USA, reveal positive outcomes for the young people who take part (e.g., Purvis et al., 2012; CooperGibson Research, 2013; Beyer et al., 2014) with around one-third of participants transitioning successfully into employment, and significant percentages of participants either moving into voluntary work or further education (CooperGibson Research, 2013). Participants of SIs also report increased self-confidence, identity development and importantly, increased social inclusion (Hanson et al., 2021).

Supported internships are not without their challenges, for example, CooperGibson (2020) found that parents/carers can become a barrier to interns progressing through and beyond an internship. To some extent, this happens because pre-existing policy and practice in England have encouraged parents to hold low aspirations for their children and makes the offer of state benefits dependent on prescribed circumstances. Thus parents'/carers' perceptions of the intern's capability can be skewed, and they may have significant anxiety around the loss of paid state benefits (Purvis et al., 2012; CooperGibson, 2020). Engaging sufficient employers can also be challenging because they may lack an understanding of special educational needs or the capabilities these young people have. Consequently, employers can feel anxious and underconfident about hosting a supported internship (Purvis et al., 2012; CooperGibson, 2020). For those employers and SI providers who do engage, there are difficulties in accessing funding sources (CooperGibson, 2020). Finally, there are challenges around managing expectations and securing work for interns due to the lack of entry-level positions available in organisations that offer SIs (CooperGibson Research, 2013, 2020).

Literature Review

Effective learning in supported internships

SIs have become the favoured approach in England for supporting young people with SEND to engage with TVET and progress into employment. Research on SI, particularly in England, has been largely confined to evaluations (e.g., CooperGibson Research, 2013, 2020). Two notable exceptions are Laungani (2019) who explored the transition experiences of interns through a "Preparing for Adulthood" framework, and Hanson et al. (2021) who have studied the SI's ability to promote social inclusion through the lens of Simplican et al.'s (2015) ecological model. Despite the paucity of research, we know from the British Council (2018), CooperGibson (2020) and Hanson et al. (2021) there are several factors which contribute to interns completing SIs and being able to transition into paid employment. Firstly, employers need to offer a personalised experience, be committed, supportive and positive, and they must be invested in the interns. This requires employers to be "disability aware" and have employees who are "well-prepared" (CooperGibson, 2020, p. 38) as this facilitates positive working relationships with interns. Hanson et al.

(2021) noted the personalisation and person-centred approach of the organisation promoted mutual reciprocity and social inclusion.

The literature (e.g., CooperGibson Research, 2013; CooperGibson, 2020; Hanson et al., 2021) identifies that the role of the job coach is essential to the success of SI's. Several elements of the role identified have been identified as significant but perhaps most important is the provision of tailored support to both the supported intern and employers to enable the young person to eventually progress from the internship into paid employment. The job coach role is distinct from other roles involved in the delivery of SIs and requires specialist training in supported employment and systematic instruction. Typically, job coaches employ a highly structured approach to teaching decision-making, job tasks, and employability style skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, and professionalism). They are vital to the success of SIs, not just because they are responsible for systematic instruction with the interns, but also because they act as a liaison with the wider organisation, helping it to understand the specific needs and requirements of each intern (CooperGibson, 2020). Job coaches help colleagues prepare for new interns and work with current interns, reaffirming a personalised and person-centred approach as well as mediating relationships between the workplace and home and feeding back to families on the intern's skills, abilities, and achievements (Hanson et al., 2021).

A necessary but insufficient element of a successful SI programme is support from the job coach and the wider organisation to enable the intern to learn and develop. Parental/carer support is also important as it helps to ensure the interns can access the SI, will attend the SI, and be supported at home if they encounter negative experiences during the SI (CooperGibson, 2020). Furthermore, CooperGibson (2020) argues that young people themselves need to be motivated and aspire to work. The British Council (2018) believe that effective TVET programmes for young people with SEND must encourage high aspirations and expectations for young people. Hanson et al. (2021) found that interns' motivation and self-confidence are developed when an organisation's policies and practices foster high performance, which includes setting high expectations for interns and providing clear, specific feedback on tasks and skills. Thus, the factors which underpin the effective transition of interns into, and through, SIs are beginning to be understood. In particular, the role of the job coach, who delivers a personalised programme of learning using systematic instruction, appears to be pivotal. This paper seeks to consider the pedagogic practices of workforce development that sit alongside those deployed by the job coach to facilitate effective workplace learning for young people with SEND.

Pedagogic practices in workplace learning

Fuller and Unwin (e.g., 2003, 2004, 2007) have "opened up the black box of learning at work" (Fuller & Unwin, 2004, p. 127) to illuminate the pedagogic, organisational, and cultural factors which "influence the

extent to which the workplace creates 'opportunities for, or barriers to, learning'" (Fuller & Unwin, 2004, p. 136) within an apprenticeship context. Their research was conducted in organisations in the English steel industry which have/had apprentices. Synthesising their research findings, Fuller and Unwin (2004) developed a conceptual framework which depicts approaches to workforce development as occurring on an expansive-restrictive continuum. Some of the key elements are displayed in Table 1. The continuum is comprised of several aspects which relate to individual-level skills, organisational values and organisational practices/policies. For example, noting the continuum that exists between, "expansive" approaches to workforce development that support apprentices through:

- "planned time off-the-job including for knowledge-based courses and for reflection" (Fuller & Unwin, 2004, p. 136)

right the way through to "restrictive" workforce development practices which engage apprentices:

- "virtually all-on-job [with] limited opportunities for reflection" (Fuller & Unwin, 2004, p. 136).

The workforce development continuums Fuller and Unwin (2004) note (whilst not exhaustive) pertain to factors associated with pedagogy, organisation and culture.

Table 1. Expansive-restrictive continuum

Expansive learning approaches	Restrictive learning approaches
Participation in multiple communities of practice	Restricted participation in communities of practice
Main community of practice has shared "participative memory"	Main community of practice has no or little "participative memory"
Access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences	Access to learning is restricted in relation to tasks and knowledge
Access to range of qualifications	Little or no access to qualifications
Planned time off the job for learning and reflection	Virtually all-on-the job learning
Gradual transition to complete participation	Rapid transition to full participation
Career progression is fundamental	Static careers
Employees viewed as learners	Employees not viewed as learners
Development of workforce to align individual and organisational goals	Workforce development uses individual capability for organisational need

Expansive learning approaches	Restrictive learning approaches
Workforce development facilitates identity expansion	Little or no identity expansion from limited cross-departmental working
Highly developed concrete workplace "curriculum" that uses a range of cultural materials which are accessible to all	Lack of concrete materials in workplace curriculum with limited accessibility
Widely dispersed skills	Localised or bounded skills and roles
Technical skills valued	Lack of value afforded to technical skills
All workforce afforded opportunity of skill development	Only key workers afforded opportunity for skill development
Specialisms developed in teams	Specialisms developed in individual roles
Communication occurs across teams and departments	Communication is bounded by teams and departments
Managers facilitate development	Managers control development
Opportunities to learn new skills	Barriers to learn new skills
Innovation is valued	Innovation is not valued
Expertise viewed as multi-dimensional	Expertise viewed as uni-dimensional

Note. Adapted from Fuller, A., & Unwin, L. (2004, p. 133).

As Table 1 indicates, expansive learning approaches offer both breadth and depth of task experience, meaning apprentices can engage with multiple teams and employees, learn more complex skills in greater depth and begin to develop a work identity. The organisational environment is comprised of attributes that are aligned and facilitate learning (e.g., documents, systems, processes, communication) and, crucially, learning that is incremental. The culture of the organisation values the contributions of learners both in the present and the future, emphasises teamwork and has a uniform investment in workforce development, seeing itself as an entity which is continually learning. As Esmond et al. (2017) note:

> the notion of expansive apprenticeship asks more from workplace trainers than a focus on the trainee. Rather, the workplace trainer must be aware of the way in which the whole organisation might develop itself as an effective and conducive site for learning (p. 8).

Fuller and Unwin (2003, 2004, 2007) argue that this expansive approach to apprenticeships provides scope for apprentices to engage in deep learning and belong to multiple communities of practice. We would posit that this expansive approach mimics the five aspects of high-quality work design described by Hackman and Oldham (1980): (i) *Task identity* – a clear task to identify with that is their responsibility; (ii) *Task*

significance – an understanding of the importance of that task to the organisational as a whole; (iii) *Task variety* – the opportunity to engage with a variety of work aspects; (iv) *Autonomy* – a reasonable level of independence and (v) *Feedback* – from superiors, colleagues, or customers. The presence of these five aspects of design in a job role promotes learning and leads to motivated and satisfied personnel (e.g., Boonzaier et al., 2001).

The design of a role is important for providing a work experience that is engaging and encourages motivation and satisfaction with work, but it does not take us far enough in understanding effective workplace pedagogic practices. To better understand these, it becomes necessary to consider the importance of colleagues and social processes. It is accepted that intertwining students, workplaces and vocational education providers support learning and transferability of theoretical and practical knowledge into the workplace (e.g., Mikkonen et al., 2017). In part, this is because the students are proffered the opportunity to work with experienced employees, but it goes beyond this. Fuller and Unwin (2011) recognise that social participation is critical for workplace learning with it being conceptualised as the acquisition of individual developments (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal attributes) all within a social context (Esmond et al., 2017). The notion that skills to be delivered in TVET must go further than technical and functional skills, so as to include, the development of attitudes and aspects of personal effectiveness, such as resilience, self-belief and empathy is noted elsewhere (e.g., British Council, 2018; Lucas, 2016). Hanson et al. (2021) found that SI interns and graduates did display increased self-confidence and self-belief and showed the development of technical and functional skills, but the exact ways in which the pedagogy of this workplace learning brought about these outcomes were not explored.

Methodology

Approach and ethics

A case study approach was utilised, the case being a SI programme within an organisation in the UK. This organisation lent itself to this research because it has been hosting SIs for at least five years and is considered highly successful, with over 100 interns who have completed the programme. The programme has a 60% success rate of interns securing employment upon completing the SI. Unlike other SIs this one is delivered solely within the organisation; interns complete the college courses in the work building rather than attending a college campus. To fully understand the extent of the pedagogy of the work-related learning practices involved we interviewed interns, graduates from the SI currently employed by the organisation, the job coaches, and a sample of colleagues of the interns and graduates.

The research had the approval of a University Ethics Committee and included full participant briefing and consent. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Participants and methods

Fifteen participants took part which included current and former interns, job coaches, colleagues, and supervisors. The former interns, colleagues and supervisors worked in a range of departments within the organisation. These participants have been given pseudonyms (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participants and pseudonyms

Participant Job Role	Department	Pseudonym
Intern	Multiple	James
Intern	Multiple	Richard
Intern	Multiple	Michael
Intern	Multiple	Callum
Intern	Multiple	Bal
Intern	Multiple	Peter
Graduate	Health and Safety	Tyrone
Graduate	Business Support	Colin
Graduate	Catering	Charlotte
Job Coach	Student Internship Programme	Alison
Job Coach	Student Internship Programme	Heather
Supervisor	Mailroom	Clare
Colleague	Mailroom	John
Supervisor	Reprographics	David
Colleague	Acquisitions	Linsey

The research adopted two different data collection methods. Firstly, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with three graduates from the SI who had moved into paid employment at the organisation. The job coaches introduced each graduate to the research team. These graduates worked in three different departments: Health and Safety, Business Support, and Catering. Talking with graduates offered the research team the opportunity to look at longer-term outcomes for young people with learning disabilities who take part in SIs and access their reflections on what helped them achieve those outcomes.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four employees from the organisation who worked with interns, graduates, or both. They had been involved in the SI for a minimum of three years and worked in three different departments: Mailroom, Reprographics, and Acquisitions. Two of these employees were departmental supervisors and two were colleagues. Questions in these interviews centred around the employees' experiences of working with the interns and graduates and the practices that took place whilst the interns were learning the different roles. The interns worked in multiple departments across the organisation.

Focus groups were conducted with the interns as opposed to individual interviews so they could be accompanied by the job coaches whom they knew and trusted. This in part provided safeguarding but also facilitated a more open dialogue since the job coaches could help explain what was meant by different questions. Whilst it is acknowledged that the job coaches' presence introduced possible response bias on behalf of the interns, reviews of the transcripts suggested the impact of the coaches' presence was predominantly clarification of the questions being asked by the researcher and checking of the researcher's understanding of interns' responses. The questions focused on the interns' reasons for doing the SI, their experiences of the internship and what they had learnt, information about the departments they worked in and the people they worked with, the skills they had developed and what had changed about them and their lives since starting the internship.

A second focus group was conducted with the two job coaches using a semi-structured interview schedule. The purpose of this focus group was to help understand the pedagogic elements of the SI programme and to further explore changes in the interns' and graduates' participation in communities of practice, as observed by the coaches.

Data analysis

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Braun and Clark's (2012) six-stage approach to thematic analysis was adopted, to uncover the lived experiences of people within the SI and explore the pedagogic factors in the work-related learning taking place (Braun et al., 2019). This approach is especially relevant when working with socially marginalised groups such as young people with SEND since it gives them a voice (Braun et al., 2019). The approach to analysis was also grounded in Fuller and Unwin's (2003) theory of expansive learning environments but analysis remained vigilant to the possibility of themes unrelated to this work being present in the data.

Findings

Traditional thematic analysis was applied to identify which of the aspects of Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum were present in the SI and to determine whether they indicated an expansive or restricted

learning environment. The data provided evidence for sixteen of the aspects from Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum (see Table 1 for the full list of twenty aspects) and in each case, this evidence suggested that the environment was expansive rather than restrictive. Thematic analysis grouped these sixteen aspects into three themes: work experience role design; organisational values and goals; career development (see Table 3). Evidence for the presence of each feature is discussed under each theme.

Table 3. Identified aspects of Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum, grouped thematically

Theme 1: **Work experience role design**	Theme 2: **Organisational values and goals**	Theme 3: **Career development**
1.1 Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace.	2.1 Technical skills valued.	3.1 Access to a range of qualifications including knowledge based VQ.
1.2 Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences.	2.2 Teamwork valued.	3.2 Planned time off-the-job including knowledge-based courses, and reflection.
1.3 Workforce development fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing.	2.3 Reification of 'workplace curriculum' highly developed (e.g., through documents, symbols, language, and tools) and accessible to apprentices.	3.3 Gradual transition to full, rounded participation.
1.4 Widely distributed skills.	2.4 Organisational recognition of, and support for employees as learners.	3.4 Vision of workplace learning: progression for a career.
1.5 Chances to learn new skills/jobs.	2.5 Knowledge and skills of the whole workforce developed and valued.	3.5 Managers as facilitators of the workforce and individual development.
1.6 Multi-dimensional view of expertise.		

Theme 1: Work experience role design

In this first theme, there are six expansive elements from Fuller and Unwin's (2004) workforce development model. These expansive facets relate to how the work in-terns learnt was organised and designed. In the present case study, interns rotated around at least three departments within the organisation during the internship: for example, they might have therefore worked in reception, the mailroom, the restaurant, reprographics, or customer service. This is not typical of all SIs that run in

England, but the size of this organisation and its "multi-dimensional view" (see Table 3, 1.6) of expertise meant that interns were afforded the chance to learn several jobs and skills and consequently have "widely distributed skills" (see Table 3, 1.4). Job rotation meant that the interns could participate in "multiple communities of practice within the organisation" (see Table 3, 1.1), and this enhanced social participation. One intern talked about his favourite placement:

> Mine would be the mailroom because I can walk around the building. I can see people's faces, go around the building more and get to know people 7(Peter, intern).

Rotating around departments not only facilitated multiple technical skill development but also taught the interns about the social norms acceptable for these different communities. A mailroom supervisor, for example, told us:

> There's a bit more fruitful language down here... and that's part of the role they are coming into. They are learning about the work and the aspects of the work and the conditions of the work... I mean someone may say something off the cuff to them and we say "What's the golden rule? We don't say it upstairs!" because of clients and it is a reflection on the organisation (Clare, supervisor, mailroom).

The design of the work for interns also included other features of high-quality work design. Interns were clear on what their roles involved (task identity), recognised the importance of their role (task significance) and were supported to become autonomous:

> I enjoyed helping people in my customer liaison placement. For example, there was one person who didn't know where to find the laptop holders. So, I offered my help and I took them to the business lounge... I showed them which cupboard the holders were stored in, and I gave them their laptop holder and they thanked me. They were pleased about me helping them. Then they went on their way (Peter, intern).

There was also clear evidence of the use of feedback which took place formally through aspects of the workplace curriculum (reviews and testimonials) but also in informal communications, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

> Alison, Job Coach: You all have reviews in weeks 1, 4, 8 and 12. You have testimonials, so they all know what their departments think of them.
>
> Callum, intern: I have been told that I am hard-working.
>
> Richard, intern: Some of them have said that I am willing to learn. I think they know I want to get it but they say to take your time a bit. They say I am hard working, arrive on time, you know.
>
> Alison, job coach: They say you [Richard] are very smart.
>
> Richard, intern: Yeah very smart... and I think they say I'm trying my best, I don't want to let people down, I want to work.
>
> Alison, job coach: The mail room asked you [Peter] to go back because they were so desperate for your help. He had to be taken out of his new department! He got lots of compliments from people didn't you Peter? I'd get emails saying how polite, chatty and helpful he is.

The activities within the internship extended to taking part in organisation-wide events such as hosting stalls at the Christmas fair and talking to colleagues from the entire organisation to raise awareness of their experiences, for example as an individual diagnosed with Autism. This further exposed the interns to wider communities of practice and proffered access to another feature of expansive learning environments 'breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences' (see Table 3, 1.2). As Hanson et al. (2021) demonstrated, successful participation in these workplace communities, alongside structured support from the job coach, enabled the interns to develop the skills and confidence to participate in events and activities outside of work:

> When [graduate] started the internship, he had never taken a bus by himself but now he takes the bus and is getting into taking trains by himself (Alison, job coach).

> ... I am doing more activities, whether it be going to the pub with a few mates or whether it be art classes with my partner... there is also the gym and occasional stuff like cinema and bowling (Tyrone, graduate).

> But now since I have joined here and the internship, I have grown my talking skills and grown more confident in socialising with my peers as well as my team (Colin, graduate).

This offers a segue into another feature of the expansive learning environment which was evidenced in the SI "workforce development fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing" (see Table 3, 1.3). This was particularly well evidenced by one graduate from the SI who was now living independently and had engaged in public speaking and blogging to raise awareness of Autism. He was able to demonstrate significant career progression within his chosen field which contributed to a developing identity as a role model for other people with Autism and a Health and Safety expert:

> I think I have started to realise that I am making a difference and people are seeing me as that role model... I have done a lot of work with the Government's disability confidence campaign... I have gone over to businesses and spoken to them about how these internships can help them... I have spoken to schools and parents before about their concerns for their children (Tyrone, graduate).

The job coach acknowledged the importance of this developing identity for current interns:

> Last Friday I think you choked Richard up. I think he heard you talk and he thought you were once in the same place he is now (Alison, Job coach).

It is evident then, that the multidimensional view of expertise held by job coaches and embedded within the organisation underpins the job rotation design of the work. This in turn meant the interns had several opportunities to "learn new jobs and skills" (see Table 3, 1.5) (which was further supported through the college courses they completed) and consequently develop more widely distributed skills. There was breadth in learning through cross-company experiences, and participation in multiple communities of practice inside the workplace. This in turn enabled learning of work roles and also social norms. Increased confidence in wider social contexts enabled interns to engage with communities of practice outside the organisation. The culmination of this boundary crossing was the development of identity.

Theme 2: Organisational values and goals

This theme grouped organisational-level aspects of Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum which were concerned with what the organisation wanted to achieve and what it considered important for realising those achievements. There was evidence from the job coach, colleagues and graduates that the organisation valued both "technical skills and teamwork" (see Table 3: 2.1, 2.2). Graduates described the technical skills they had developed and how they were important for the paid roles they now held in the organisation:

> I was creating milestone plans and working in excel spreadsheets, making presentations... on Health & Safety and the environment, whether it was about a piece of legislation changing or whether it was about a campaign... And then I worked in the gas business where we helped engineers work on the pipes, making sure their software worked properly. Now I work through data and analyse trends (Tyrone, graduate).

> I very much excel with my computer skills, they are absolutely good. I usually have brilliant attention to detail... the work I do is very much essential to the team (Colin, graduate).

Colin's quote above points to graduates' recognition of the importance of teamwork and their role in the team, with Colin further stating that:

> I contribute a lot of, well, the work I do is very much essential to the team and it's more of a need to be done or the project will have to be put back and even further delayed. So, I do think the work I do is absolutely essential to the team... I am a good team player... they [colleagues] say I am essential to the team (Colin, graduate).

The job coaches and colleagues reified the importance of interns and graduates for their teams. One job coach told us that Colin's team had fed back to her that they needed ten of him. Colleagues of interns and graduates regarded them as highly skilled and important to the team meeting its targets:

> She is just so unbelievably quick. I could never do anything as quickly as she can because of the way she is so organised... I remember someone [gave her work to do] said that will keep her busy for the day and I burst out laughing saying "I can guarantee that before lunchtime it is done"... And at lunchtime, we asked her if she needed more work and she said, "yes please, I've done that", and they [other colleagues] said "That is unbelievable!" (Linsey, colleague).

> [They are] very important. I am going to beg for an intern tomorrow because Richard is off tomorrow and I want Peter down (Clare, supervisor, mailroom).

> The thing is I think when they finish their internship, we realise how much we miss them in all the areas because they are doing important jobs (John, colleague).

Within this theme of organisational level aspects, another feature of an expansive learning environment that was evidenced in the data was the "reification of 'workplace curriculum' highly developed (e.g., through documents, symbols, language, tools) and accessible to apprentices" (see Table 3, 2.3). By virtue of the role of the job coach and utilisation of systematic instruction, the SI is fundamentally built to make the workplace curriculum accessible to interns. However, it was clear that colleagues engaged in explicit behaviours which increased accessibility and ensured the interns could excel in their roles. A job coach

described a reprographics colleague:

> I tell you—he is brilliant. He's very good, he breaks the task down really well. If I want something broken down into simple tasks, I ask him! He is quite particular and detailed, so he is good for an intern as he will break it down nicely (Alison, job coach).

A colleague described working with a graduate and learning what made her feel more relaxed and comfortable so she could get on with her work:

> She doesn't like you to acknowledge anything good that she does, or you know if you ask her if she's had a nice weekend, she doesn't really enjoy being asked those kinds of questions... so we've adapted by asking "how was your weekend?" You can pick up quite quickly with her what works (Linsey, colleague).

This finding leads to what seems to be two closely related sub-themes; the expansive features of "organisational recognition of, and support for employees as learners" (see Table 3, 2.4) and "knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued" (see Table 3, 2.5). The data revealed several examples of how the organisation manifested a culture of learning by all employees, particularly in respect of disability awareness and inclusivity. The job coaches were fundamental to this, in both informal and formal ways. The job coaches were well-known around the organisation and universally accessible because they were housed in the same building:

> People will stop me and say you know "Such and such has a headache" and ask how to handle it. So, there might be little bits of advice given here and there (Alison, job coach).

More formally, departments received a profile of each intern from the job coaches before they started which gave them insight into the interns' abilities, characteristics, and background:

> I know the job coaches always send us a profile beforehand and it's worth reading through that as well because that does differ from person to person (David, supervisor, reprographics).

The job coaches were however not the only facilitators of disability awareness. One colleague described events delivered by management around autism:

> I went to an event with a director and he did a talk with some guests. His brother was autistic, and we have a girl who works in ET who is autistic, and she was in her 20s and she talked about her experience here. There were a couple of guys with children who have autism, so it was from all perspectives (Linsey, colleague).

Colleagues acknowledged that having the SI and access to disability awareness learning had raised their understanding and given them confidence in working effectively with people with SEND, but the key thing they seemed to have learnt was the importance of focusing on the individual and taking a person-centred approach:

> The thing that has stuck with me most was you can meet a person with autism, but you've only met one person. Every single person—the spectrum is so large—no two people are the same (Linsey, colleague).

> Just deal with the person in front of you. The preconceived ideas are just... no, no. Just look upon who they are and assess them and take it from there (David, supervisor, reprographics).

> Well, it's like everybody has got their own personality... I mean we've all got our own personalities! (Clare, supervisor, mailroom).

The disability aware/more inclusive culture had led to the subject of disability being less "taboo" and more part of day-to-day interactions. Longer standing colleagues drew on their own experiences of SEND which helped them to work effectively with interns. Other colleagues felt more able to disclose their own disabilities:

> I have people disclose to me—because I have the logo on my back and they know I do this—I think people feel more comfortable to start talking about it so you know I have had people come up to me and say, "you know, I am on the autistic spectrum", or whatever (Alison, job coach).

> You know I have mild epilepsy and I've had people come towards me at times and look at me like I am a livewire or a ticking bomb whereas I am happy for you to look at me just like everybody else (Colleague, reprographics).

The SI model delivered in this organisation had adopted several organisational-level expansive learning environment features which were closely aligned with each other. The inherent nature of the SI, with systematic instruction and support from job coaches, meant the workplace curriculum was accessible to interns. Moreover, there was the opportunity for all employees to learn from the job coaches and indeed sometimes from the interns who were frequently described as a "breath of fresh air". There was a clear emphasis on developing an inclusive culture where disability awareness was promoted not just by the job coaches but also by management who organised disability awareness events which encouraged learning by all employees. Interns and graduates recognised they had developed technical and teamworking skills and that these were valued by their teams and in the organisation.

Theme 3: Career development

As has been evidenced in the previous two themes (work design and organisational values and goals), it was the inherent design of the SI which underpinned the presence of several features: access to a range of qualifications including knowledge-based VQ, planned time off-the-job including for knowledge-based courses and reflection, and gradual transition to full, rounded participation (see Table 3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3). The latter feature was closely associated with the systematic instruction that formed the basis of workplace learning; roles were broken down into component tasks and each task was taught individually and at the right pace for the intern, allowing gradual development that was aligned with the needs of the intern. The other two features were fulfilled through the inclusion of numeracy and literacy-based college courses within the SI which is a planned and essential component of all SIs. These courses not only support the interns in the work roles they learn in the internship but also help prepare them for further education

should they choose that as the next step. One graduate spoke about how the SI enabled him to feel able to return to college following the successful completion of the internship:

> I went back to college to do my maths and English because once I finished my supported internship I thought, right, I need to do what I can to get better at things. Because it was this programme that made me realise I could do things which I previously thought were beyond my ability. That's what happened and here I am now (Tyrone, graduate).

Other graduates opted to transition into employment: the two graduates interviewed were working at the host SI organisation, although one graduate had also been offered a role as a receptionist at a hotel. The opportunity for development continued after the internship, and was particularly striking for one graduate, linking back to the previous theme of the workplace valuing learning across all employees (see Table 3, 2.5), and to another sub-theme in career development "vision of workplace learning: progression for career" (see Table 3, 3.4). This graduate had returned to the organisation following his college courses to a full-time role in health and safety. The organisation supported him to continue developing his professional qualifications:

> I have carried on working to become a better health and safety professional by doing NEBOSH general certificate in occupational health and safety. It's basically the standard qualification you need to be compliant as an H&S adviser. Because I have gone through that and worked with the team for many years, people would say that I am the go-to guy to make sure that what is being said is correct (Tyrone, graduate).

Tyrone's career was progressing to such an extent that he had secured promotion in a different company. In part this was supported through the skill development embedded in the SI: alongside the numeracy and literacy courses, interns engage with life and employability skill development, which amongst other things supports them to develop a CV and facilitates transitions post internship (see Table 3, 3.1, 3.2). However, graduates also spoke about how their "managers acted as facilitators of the workforce and individual development" (see Table 3, 3.5):

> I've learnt how to write a proper CV and what I need to write down for that... I have had support here [to develop a career plan], the managers that I have had in the past and the support I have had from the programme [the SI], have helped me get where I need to (Tyrone, graduate).

Within the theme of career development, the structure of the SI facilitated three aspects of the expansive learning environment, and this coupled with the organisation and management valuing and supporting professional development and career progression underpins the other expansive elements evidenced. This expansive learning environment features enabled interns to learn about themselves, and develop employability skills as well as the self-confidence to develop career plans. Theme three – career development – was closely intertwined with theme two: organisational values and goals. Both themes recognised the importance of learning and continuing professional development across the organisation for

all employees and these values were enacted by managers (see Table 3, 2.5, 3.5).

There were four aspects of Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum that were not explicitly evidenced in the data:

- The primary community of practice has shared participative memory (cultural development of workforce) – the primary community of practice has little or no participative memory: no or little tradition of apprenticeship.
- Workforce development is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability – workforce development is used to tailor individual capability to organisational needs.
- Cross-boundary communication valued – bounded communities.
- Innovation is important – innovation not important.

There was perhaps some allusion to cultural development; the inclusion of the job coach and the SI directly within the organisation could be construed as a community of practice but this was not something the participants referred to directly. However, there was no indication that there was not a community of practice. Similarly, with the alignment of individual and organisational goals and cross-boundary communication, the data did not provide clear evidence that these were operating expansively or restrictively. Finally, the concept of innovation was not addressed within the questions or in participants' responses, so it is impossible to consider whether innovation is important or not (although you might argue that if it is not discussed explicitly, it is because it is not considered important and is therefore not in the forefront of people's minds).

Discussion

The findings indicated that the SI delivered in the case study organisation modelled an expansive learning environment. The analysis, driven by Fuller and Unwin's (2004) model, suggested that the expansive learning features coalesced around three themes. The first was situated at the level of the roles the interns were undertaking during their supported internships. The second theme is comprised of organisational-level features. Theme three was concerned with the career development of interns and employees. The evidence suggests there were three explanatory factors for the presence of these sixteen features. The first was the underlying structure of the SI (typical of all SIs). The second was the SI model delivered by the case study organisation. The third was related to the organisation's value of learning.

SIs are fundamentally built to make learning accessible to, and effective for, interns through systematic instruction and graduated support from a professional job coach. This was evident in the present case study

and the criticality of the job coach for effective learning has been noted elsewhere (e.g., CooperGibson Research, 2013, 2020; Hanson et al., 2021). The inclusion of formal learning and the completion of college-level qualifications as part of SIs was important not just for supporting work-related learning but also for the development of those skills which feed into career development. As with other SIs, the job coaches in the present case study facilitated learning across the organisation as well as with interns by liaising between the interns and departments and supporting staff to understand the interns' abilities.

There were aspects of the SI in the case study organisation which were not necessarily typical of SIs but that manifested expansive learning features. The rotation of interns through multiple departments provided the opportunity for them to learn several jobs and develop a wider range of skills. In addition to helping them learn about future careers they would enjoy: it also exposed the interns to multiple communities of practice within the organisation, in turn, this built confidence and encouraged participation in communities outside of the organisation.

At the organisational level, there was an ethos of learning around disability awareness. Colleagues were able to learn from the job coaches, the interns, the graduates and from management about different disabilities and the experiences of young people with SEND. Learning and professional development more broadly were also supported by the organisation and considered to be important with managers supporting interns and graduates to develop skills, qualifications, and career plans.

The combination of typical SI features alongside organisational and cultural factors did conspire to create a workplace which created learning opportunities and worked to remove barriers, i.e., an expansive learning environment (e.g., Fuller & Unwin, 2004). This expansive internship saw job coaches, colleagues and managers providing more than a focus on the intern, they demonstrated awareness of the necessity for the organisation to learn and to continue to develop itself as an "effective and conducive site for learning" (Esmond et al., 2017, p. 8). The additional insertion of typical SI features (job rotation) encouraged the breadth of learning and participation in multiple communities of practice. This task variety was accompanied by other aspects of high-quality job design. Interns and graduates were clear about what their roles required, and the importance of those roles more widely and was supported to learn how to do these autonomously. Managers and job coaches gave feedback regularly. Job rotation and cross-organisation events ensured that interns experienced just this but equally the job coaches and the organisation's efforts to ensure disability awareness helped employees to interact socially and support interns to acquire these individual developments.

The findings have implications for organisations involved in SIs. The case study organisation's approach to delivering a SI differed from the model recommended by the Government (DfE, 2022) where interns would

spend some time in the workplace but some time in a further education college setting. They would also more typically experience only one job role. The findings here suggest that "inhouse" models which offer college courses and multiple job roles within the organisation setting may result in more effective work-related learning, however, the ability of the case study organisation to offer such a model is likely dependent on its size and capacity, as well as its openness to working inclusively. Organisations have reported their capacity as a barrier to being able to offer internships (e.g., CooperGibson Research, 2013, 2020) so it may be unlikely that most organisations who do offer an internship would be able to offer job rotation and in-house college courses. However, a more inclusive culture where learning is valued and promoted for all is something that might be more easily replicated. For those people serving as trainers in apprenticeships, there may be learning from how job coaches work. They might, for example, consider the value of exposing apprentices to multiple teams and liaise with those colleagues to help them prepare for this. They might also promote the work that apprentices do more widely across the organisation.

What is not clear from this research is the role that visiting a college campus for part of the SI might play within an expansive learning environment: it ought to provide access to another community and alternative social contexts, but it may be less effective for work-related learning than total immersion in an organisation. The inability to compare the learning environments of the case study SI to other SIs is one limitation of this research. It would also have made for a more comprehensive sample if the research team had interviewed a wider range of colleagues, including senior management.

A final area for consideration is that Fuller and Unwin's (2004) expansive-restrictive learning environment model was originally developed from research in an apprenticeship context. There is a clear difference between an apprenticeship and a supported internship. The former is paid and assumes the apprentice has engaged in career decision-making and seeks to learn the knowledge and skills necessary for the work they have chosen. A supported internship, whilst usually being matched to an intern's abilities and interests, is unpaid and does not assume that the intern has chosen that work for a career. Rather, it is part of the transition process from formal education to employment. Nonetheless, the findings here indicate that this SI modelled similar practices to apprenticeships delivered in expansive learning environments.

Although there was a range of participants in this study, a larger sample size would help strengthen the reliability of these findings. Future work might now consider looking at the extent to which the more traditional model of SI delivery (i.e., college and life skill courses delivered in a further education college, work-based learning delivered in an employer setting) can replicate such an expansive learning environment and compare the outcomes for young people taking part.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the particular SI under investigation delivers effective workplace learning. The use of job rotation leads to young people being able to participate in multiple communities of practice which supports identity formation. To do this effectively the work roles needed to afford the learner both breadth and depth of learning. Furthermore, it is critical that the organisation values learning, and providing encouragement and support. Job coaches are also fundamental to young people and employees' learning and development, supporting them as they do both the learning of tasks and also because their work encourages the whole organisation to develop into a site which is conducive for learning by everyone. Although Fuller and Unwin's (2004) model of expansive-restrictive learning environments was originally devised in the context of apprenticeships, there is evidence here that it also applies to, and explains, effective workplace learning in supported internships. With reference to the model, for instance, organisation recognition and commitment to learning were shown in the way in which work roles were designed and supported: the values of the organisation and how career development was promoted. It seems appropriate, therefore, that existing SIs/those in conception take some time to review their practice through the lens provided by Fuller and Unwin (2004), recognising, celebrating, and enhancing their more expansive practices and developing and improving their more restrictive practices. Job coaches from differing SIs may also find the expansive-restrictive model an effective tool to use as the basis for conducting peer-to-peer reviews/challenges within the sector. as has been successful in the school sector (see Greany, 2020).

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