

THE GRADUATE BOOST PROGRAMME – HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYERS COLLABORATING TO EXPLORE INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT PRACTICE FOR GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES

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Keywords: *Inclusion, graduate recruitment, employment*

ABSTRACT

This innovation paper opens exploration for a collaborative opportunity for education, employers and specialist organisations and disabled graduates to come together to look at how we can support inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and early career transition into employment. A Graduate Boost Project was created to allow lived experiences of all stakeholders to inform the way forward, acknowledging the shared responsibility for inclusion and success. This paper captures both the employer and graduate perspectives as the programme team build an enhanced understanding and guidance for inclusive recruitment practice which can ensure the onboarding of graduate talent and skills to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The area of graduate success through graduate internships to employment has a long history of success at Ulster University (UU), Northern Ireland (NI), with 550 graduates completing the Graduate Leadership Internship Programme and achieving 100% progression to employment since 2012. Recent challenges have included adapting the work-based learning provision to ensure solutions that guarantee access and support which is engaging and worthwhile for all students and employers. For those graduates with disabilities, the consistent challenge is securing employment at a graduate level. For those disabled graduates, the likelihood of gaining highly skilled/graduate-level employment is 10% less than that of their non-disabled peers (UU Graduate Outcomes (GO) Survey 2019/20). While graduate-level employment across the UK nations has improved slightly following the pandemic for those with disabilities, this has not been the case in NI.

More recently, the profile of graduate students on internship programmes has become increasingly diverse, calling for a change in the learning experience both in the academic programme and within the work-based context. A well-established internship pathway has been utilised to focus uniquely on graduates with disabilities, allowing the programme team to immerse themselves in the review of the lived experiences of this cohort of graduates,

including more fully understanding the needs of the employer partners who are providing the work-based opportunities. This has been undertaken with the support of competitively secured local government funding. The Graduate Boost programme gives employers the opportunity to have a subject-relevant graduate contribute the most up-to-date research, knowledge and understanding to their business. To address skills gaps in the context of falling numbers within the working population in NI, it is also critical that employers now seek to increase inclusive recruitment practice.

The Graduate Boost Programme builds on experience gained from Ulster University's Graduate Leadership Programme, a successful graduate internship programme (since 2012). To date, over 550 students have completed this programme and have secured graduate-level employment alongside a postgraduate-level award. From within the full graduate leadership award, a 15-credit postgraduate module called 'Demonstrating your Professional Identity' was selected to underpin the Graduate Boost internship and is designed to develop higher-level skills around three key leadership areas - leadership of (a) self, (b) others and (c) strategic projects. The module facilitates critical reflection on graduate attributes and behaviours within a professional context and helps graduates to analyse their current skills and identify future skills needed for career progression. The overall aim is to enable graduates from all subject areas to build their leadership capacity and develop confidence in an applied context. The current iteration of Graduate Boost focuses on disabled graduates alone.

The purpose of this programme is to:

- Enhance the visibility of the lived experiences of employers and disabled graduates.
- Encourage the development of inclusive practice which respects individual differences and reduces the reluctance to innovate because of fear of the unknown.
- Provide safe psychological spaces where employers, students and project partners can address existing barriers and constraints such as law related constraints limiting the willingness to explore new approaches.
- Support the development of new partnership working across higher education and industry.

Current Challenges for Disabled Graduates Seeking Employment

Across the UK and Ireland, there are challenges for people with disabilities in seeking to secure employment when compared to their non-disabled peers. In Ireland, 36.5% of people (aged 15-64) have a disability at work, compared to 72.8% of people without a disability (IBEC, 2019). The Labour Force Survey (NISRA, 2019) shows that across the UK 'there were no significant differences in the overall employment rate for non-disabled people. However, Northern Ireland had the lowest employment rate for disabled people (37.8% in 2019) and a rate for non-disabled people of 80.1% had the largest disparity (42.3 percentage points). The employment rate for disabled people was higher in England (53.7%) than other countries (Scotland, 46.9%, Wales, 48.6%).'

The student profile within higher education has become increasingly diverse. The challenge is to ensure that the opportunities for success are both inclusive and diverse, meeting the needs of individuals, society and the wider economy. It is both interesting and encouraging to note that a recent report in 2022, carried out by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in collaboration with Pearson, shows that more university applicants are declaring their disabilities. 'More applicants are sharing an impairment or condition: 14% of all UK applicants shared an impairment or condition in 2021 – an increase of 105% (+42,650)

since 2012' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022). However, this does not always translate to those with hidden disabilities where they are 'more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment, and less likely to have high expectations for HE' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022).

Graduates with disabilities also find challenges in securing employment. However, a degree adds recognisable value in reducing the disparities when compared to outcomes for nondisabled peers. The GO Survey (HESA, 2022) in the UK showed that almost two-thirds of first-degree graduates with disabilities (63.9%) managed to find full or part-time employment 15 months after graduation with almost half (48.4%) working in professional-level jobs (Smith, 2022). The need to address the inequalities of access and support to employment that recognises the ability and skills of the applicant is vital for social inclusion, the future of a vibrant workforce and ensuring the skills requirements for future economies are met.

At UU, those students declaring disabilities rose from 12% (2018/19) to 15% (2021/22). The graduate outcomes survey for 2017/18 – 2019/20 (up to 52% response rate) continues to show that graduates declaring disabilities are 10% less likely to secure highly skilled employment 15 months after graduation. This is an indication of the diversity of the student profile and potentially the differentiated support required to help ensure a comparative experience for students. The UCAS report in 2022 states that 'not only are these students more likely to defer, but 56% researched available support before applying, with these students commonly looking at the general and educational support available, and facilities and physical adjustments on campus' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022).

When a comparison is made (*Figure 1* overleaf) between those graduates with and without disabilities who are employed in 2019/2020, they earn on average £2k (approximately €2200) less than their non-disabled counterparts. When this is specifically considered for highly skilled employment, the gap is reduced to around £600 less. This trend suggests that where disabled graduates are employed at the right level commensurate with their ability and aptitude, equity is more apparent.

Northern Ireland Regional Context

Historically, the NI economy has been characterised by comparatively low pay, low productivity, limited opportunities for career progression, elevated levels of economic inactivity and low levels of innovation. While the Department for the Economy (DfE) Regional Skills Strategy 2022 identifies these as challenges to be addressed, the need to ensure equality of access to labour market opportunities is now critical. For the disabled graduate, access to work-based experiences including part-time work prior to graduation has been limited. This has been due to a range of factors including societal stereotypes, lack of supportive infrastructure and lack of confidence on the part of employers and disabled graduates. However, the longer-term impact of this restricted work-based experience also impacts their readiness to avail of ongoing and future opportunities that ask for a defined experience timeline alongside their educational achievements and qualifications.

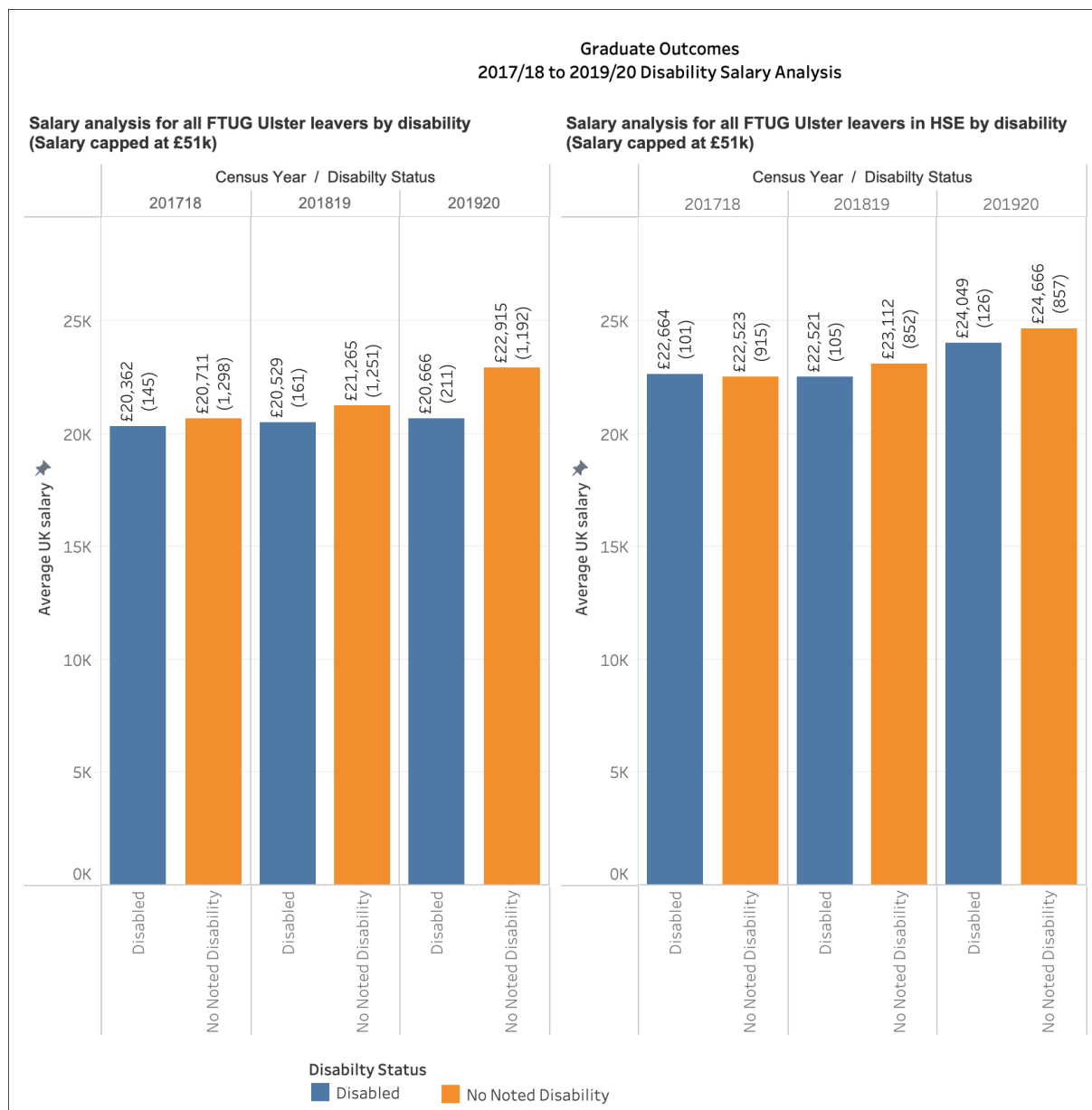


Figure 1: Ulster University Graduate Outcomes Disability Salary Analysis 2017/18 to 2019/20

Developing Partnerships – Informing Design

The development of stakeholder partnerships for Graduate Boost considered those with the best placed expertise to inform and guide employers to grow inclusive and diverse recruitment practices and achieve the best possible outcomes for graduate participants. Working with delivery partners such as Disability Action NI and Specialisterne NI who have extensive experience in supporting pan-disability and neurodiversity in the workplace ensured that academic programme staff and employers had the collective confidence, tools and techniques to deliver on programme outcomes.

Adapting and building on the recommended factors for success (Eurofound, 2021), the sustainability measures utilised included:

- Northern Ireland informed guidance/support for employers relating to lived experiences of inclusive recruitment and early onboarding into professional employment.
- Funding secured through local government supported 75% of costs (NI-DfE) valuing £170k, which supported student fees and graduate bursary/funding for successful disabled graduates for 15 weeks of the internship to support autonomy.
- Engaged employer partners contributing 25% of overall costs who are supporting pathways to actual jobs.
- Integrated approaches to include physical, organisational adjustments and other support.

UU has a strong track record of purposeful employer engagement and connecting the skills ecosystem across Northern Ireland to enhance the student learning experience. Success in this space is strengthened by the regional nature of our campuses and the extensive reach of work-based and work-related learning provisions, which include undergraduate placements, practice placements, internships and graduate development programmes. Every year over 2,000 UU students undertake professional roles in local, national and international settings. Employer partners for the Graduate Boost programme were secured by utilising those existing established connections, engaging in online networks such as LinkedIn and reaching out through new employer networks such as Employers for Disability NI. Eighteen graduate students secured opportunities with NI employers in January 2023.

EXPLORING INNOVATION, THE GRADUATE BOOST PROGRAMME

A collaborative approach from all programme partners was essential from the outset because of the tight time constraints of the funding model. A large programme team was formed, and external partners came alongside the University Employability and Careers, Student Wellbeing and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion teams to ensure the programme was fit for purpose and to agree on a shared language with all stakeholders. Over 120 employers were invited to participate in the programme via personalised emails highlighting the benefits of improving diversity in the workplace. Employers were encouraged and supported to submit inclusive job vacancies focusing on the function of the role and avoiding ableist language.

An HR consultant from the university reviewed all job applications prior to advertising on the website, providing another inclusivity and safeguarding layer. Employer interest was impressive, with high-profile employers such as Allstate (a large multinational insurance company), Reach PLC (one of Britain's biggest newspaper publishers), Northern Ireland Electricity, Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment and the Northern Ireland Executive Office (government department) all registering to participate with roles covering a vast range of subject areas from marketing and communications, engineering, law, creative design and computing.

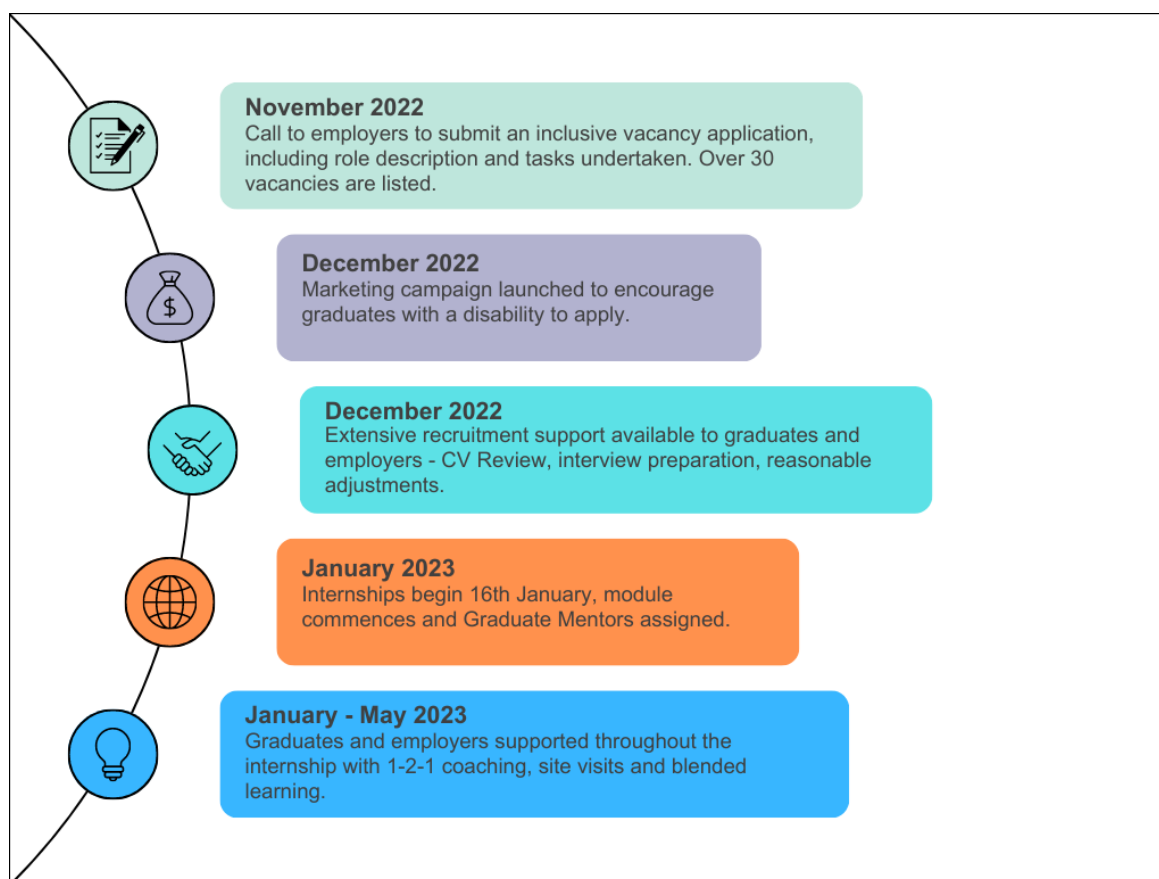


Figure 2 Timeline and recruitment process for Graduate Boost

The University Marketing and Communications team assisted with creating modern and vibrant marketing collateral (*Figure 3*) that was used to promote the programme to graduates via paid-for social media campaigns and newspaper print adverts. Marketing collateral was shared with all partners, and they were encouraged to engage with social campaigns via their networks. Whilst employer response was notable, graduate engagement and uptake was more challenging. This could be for several reasons:

- timing (mid-December)
- timeframe (two weeks from programme launch to the application deadline)
- stigma associated with a programme such as this
- not actively using social media and missed the marketing campaign

As part of their application, graduates were asked to outline their experience of living with a disability and seeking graduate-level employment. Many students discussed getting to the interview stage but not progressing further. The programme team supported graduates with curriculum vitae review and interview preparation, and with the graduate's permission worked with employers to implement any reasonable adjustments required for the recruitment process, such as:

- access to interview questions prior to the interview
- familiarisation tour of business prior to the interview
- competency based tasks instead of an interview
- extra time to answer questions



Figure 3. An example of social media marketing collateral

Assessment Strategy for Skills & Employability

The programme combines a 15-week internship with a 15-credit postgraduate module called Demonstrating your Professional Identity, delivered in a blended model with a mix of online live sessions, recorded lectures and face-to-face workshops. A curriculum review was required to ensure curriculum and delivery met the Universal Design for Learning guidelines, with multiple opportunities for engagement, representation, and action and expression provided (CAST, 2018). The curriculum was scrutinised on an ongoing basis and content was adapted to meet a range of learning needs. Learning and assessment within the module are closely aligned to a workplace experience and the module helps to facilitate critical reflection on attributes and behaviours within a professional context. Through a written reflection and a professional conversation, graduates are required to analyse and articulate their current skills 'justifying and extending what they know, can do and value' (Billet, 2019). Alongside the taught programme, graduates were provided with a connected and supported pedagogical experience (Campbell et al., 2019). Each graduate was assigned a mentor for the duration of the programme, who provided one-to-one coaching and mentoring to support a smooth transition into the workplace. Mentors also worked closely with employers to actively inform work-based practice and are developing feedback from the programme to co-design recruitment support for employer-based teams.

DISCUSSION

Early feedback from employer partners has identified known challenges to inclusive recruitment and accessing graduate talent via initiatives such as Graduate Boost. These include employer confidence, workplace readiness, financial constraints, programme timing and existing recruitment practices that could not be adapted. Working with the specialist programme partners, some of these barriers could be easily overcome, particularly through employer-facing training and consultancy. It is worth reflecting on the power dynamics of these partnerships and how to best foster successful collaborations with organisations that do not have the resources or agency of the university but whose input and expertise can help deliver successful outcomes.

Employers noted that their engagement in the programme included alignment to corporate social responsibility and social value objectives and, because of the additional funding, it allowed a low-cost and low-risk opportunity to explore introducing a graduate into their organisations. However, as the programme progressed, learning and reflections included the current constraints within existing recruitment and onboarding practices and challenged them to address and reconsider existing norms such as not sharing questions with candidates prior to interviews. Due to the nature of collaboration with the university, which included addressing recruitment challenges together, seeking solutions and providing dual mentoring support, a stronger working partnership has been developed where partners welcome the increased visibility of their profiles in this space. The value of the work experience for individual graduates became part of the lived experiences for both employers and the graduates themselves and the appreciation of the value of this was shared. An employer commented that 'In a competitive labour market, this programme has enabled us and other employers to access a broader pool of potential employees with very unique skillsets, looking beyond their disability and recognising their ability' (RSK Ireland Limited). As employers seek to fill their skills gaps both now and in the future, the programme has provided confidence to review recruitment practices to increase an inclusive and diverse approach.

Graduate students have noted increased confidence and opportunity to develop their experiences giving additional personal reference points that they did not develop due to previous barriers to work-based learning experiences including part-time jobs and placement. Understanding the challenges faced by employers and the wider workforce through an opportunity to reflect as part of the programme allowed the graduate voice to help inform solutions and/or ask questions directly to employers, which enabled them to rethink why practices were established. Some of this included sharing of interview questions and utilising hybrid and flexible working patterns. Challenges in changing working patterns do continue for some employers, particularly where they perceive that the size and infrastructure of their workforce prevents agility.

The review of the curriculum ensured that inclusive learning, teaching and assessment principles supported individual success and addressed future of work demands for graduates. The alignment of the assessment strategy with work-based practice was valued by graduates in supporting real-world experiences. Recent research shows that disabled people often feel a lack of confidence that they will be treated fairly in the recruitment process (Leonard Cheshire, 2019). The assignment of a mentor for each graduate enabled minimisation of early barriers to engagement during recruitment, such as anxiety and fear, and was recognised by all programme partners. Feedback suggests that this support was critical to retention on the programme including the internship. The development of this new practice should inform any future iterations of programmes like Graduate Boost with a view to ultimately developing programmes that are inclusive for all graduates.

Stakeholder engagement led by the university programme team included an international representative from the Harkin Institute, graduate interns, NI employers and local government. This provided an opportunity to reflect on lived experiences and discussion on how policy and practice regarding graduate recruitment could be enhanced. It was notable that graduates demonstrated an increase in confidence through open engagement in a discussion where they each reflected on their work-based lived experience.

CONCLUSION

Graduate Boost was welcomed regionally as a unique programme whose purpose was to influence and connect local government and key stakeholders with international best practice, policy advisers, specialist community-based organisations and a diverse spread of employer partners. It is envisaged that the Graduate Boost programme will inform a more inclusive provision of university graduate internship programmes in the future, removing the need for explicit disability cohorts. Together, partners have recognised the appetite amongst employers and all programme partners to grow momentum and best practice that will deliver sustainable and scalable practice across the region.

New partnership working has resulted in enhanced practice actively informed through stakeholder review in protected and safe contexts. This includes:

- Revising the approach to recruitment assessment and how the interview process is managed, including the pre-allocation of questions, results in a richer conversation at the formal interview point.
- Lived experiences are supporting informed changes for working practice, including onboarding, which has resulted in enhanced communication and benefits for all employees, not just limited to those with disabilities.
- Internships offer an opportunity for graduates with limited work-based experiences to have a reference point which is valuable for themselves and academic mentors and tutors.
- Internships provide a pathway to develop professional confidence and work-based understanding for disabled graduates, and the learning and professional skills gained are evident.
- Increased inclusion in recruitment extends beyond corporate social responsibility and can support significant improvements and return on investment for an employing organisation.

The dissemination of practice following project completion will include employer-facing information. This is aimed at supporting confidence and engagement with inclusive recruitment practice and moving from conceptual support to actioning the growth of a diverse workforce. Working with all programme partners, the aspiration is that this guide will be shared across a range of sectors. Together, the university, employer and specialist organisations are committed to developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of all stakeholder needs to best deliver on the regional skills agenda. This includes listening more intentionally and defining the challenges that need to be addressed. This type of consultation is demonstrating stronger partnership working that will support employers in addressing their skills gaps and increase equity of opportunity for access to employment for disabled graduates and job seekers.

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