



## Inclusive Internships as a Bridge Between Academic Learning and Employability: A Systematic Review

Ms. Navneet Kaur<sup>1</sup> & Mr. Saurabh Mishra<sup>2</sup>

1. Amity Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh  
Email: [navneetkaur2667@gmail.com](mailto:navneetkaur2667@gmail.com)
2. Amity Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh  
Email: [skmishra1@amity.edu](mailto:skmishra1@amity.edu)

### Abstract:

*The transition from education to employment remains a significant challenge for students with disabilities, despite increased access to higher education. Inclusive internships have emerged as an effective strategy to connect academic learning with real-world employability by providing structured workplace exposure alongside individualized support. This systematic review synthesizes existing research on inclusive and supported internship models to examine their role in enhancing employment outcomes, skill development, and workplace inclusion.*

*Findings indicate that inclusive internships contribute positively to work readiness, confidence, and competitive employment, particularly when programs are embedded within educational curricula and supported through collaboration among educators, employers, and support professionals. However, variations in program quality, limited employer preparedness, and policy inconsistencies continue to restrict scalability. The review highlights critical success factors, identifies persistent barriers, and proposes directions for future research and practice to strengthen inclusive internship pathways and promote equitable employment opportunities.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Internships, Supported Internships, Employability, Students with Disabilities, Work-Integrated Learning, Transition to Employment.*

### Introduction:

Employment is widely recognised as a key determinant of independence, social inclusion, and quality of life. However, students with disabilities particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities continue to experience disproportionately low employment rates after completing their education. While access to higher education has improved, the translation of academic learning into meaningful employment remains limited. One major gap lies in the lack of structured opportunities that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in authentic work environments.

Inclusive internships have gained attention as a practical response to this challenge. These internships are intentionally designed to accommodate diverse learning and support needs while placing students in mainstream workplaces. By integrating academic instruction with hands-on work experience, inclusive

internships aim to prepare students for competitive employment rather than sheltered or segregated work options. This review examines existing literature to understand how inclusive internships function as a bridge between education and employability, what outcomes they achieve, and what conditions support their success.

From an educational perspective, inclusive internships represent a shift from deficit-oriented models of disability toward strength-based and capability-focused approaches. They position students as active contributors to the workplace rather than passive recipients of support. Simultaneously, they encourage institutions to take responsibility for employment outcomes by embedding work-integrated learning within curricula. At the organisational level, inclusive internships offer employers a structured and supported opportunity to engage in inclusive hiring practices, often resulting in more positive attitudes toward disability inclusion.

Despite growing policy attention and programmatic investment, the implementation and outcomes of inclusive internships vary widely across contexts. Differences in support intensity, employer involvement, and inter-agency collaboration lead to uneven results. Understanding these factors is essential for designing scalable and sustainable internship models that genuinely bridge the gap between academic learning and employability.

In this context, the present systematic review aims to synthesise existing literature on inclusive internships to examine their effectiveness as a transition mechanism from education to employment. Specifically, it seeks to explore employment and skill-related outcomes, identify key facilitators and barriers, and highlight implications for educational practice, employer engagement, and policy development. By consolidating current evidence, this review contributes to ongoing efforts to strengthen inclusive pathways and promote equitable employment for students with disabilities.

### **Rationale of the Study:**

Many students with disabilities complete their education with strong academic knowledge but still struggle to find suitable employment. This gap exists not because of a lack of ability, but because they often do not get enough real workplace exposure during their studies. Inclusive internships have the potential to connect classroom learning with real job experiences, yet the available research is scattered and not always clearly linked to practice. This study is undertaken to bring together existing research on inclusive internships and understand how they support employability. By reviewing past studies, this research aims to highlight what works, what needs improvement, and how inclusive internship models can be strengthened to create fairer employment opportunities for students with disabilities.

### **Objectives:**

1. To understand how inclusive internship programs help students with disabilities connect their academic learning with real workplace skills.
2. To identify the main benefits and challenges of inclusive internships for students, educators, and employers.
3. To explore key factors that make inclusive internships effective in improving employability for students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How do inclusive internship programs help students with disabilities apply what they learn in academics to real workplace situations?

2. What benefits and challenges are experienced by students, educators, and employers involved in inclusive internship programs?
3. Which factors play an important role in making inclusive internships successful in improving employability for students with disabilities?

## **Review of Literature:**

### **1. Employment Outcomes of Graduates with Disabilities**

Research over the past two decades has consistently documented the employment gap faced by graduates with disabilities. One of the most comprehensive systematic reviews in this area was conducted by Moriña and Biagiotti (2022), titled *“Inclusion at University, Transition to Employment and Employability of Graduates with Disabilities”*. Their review synthesised findings from 18 peer-reviewed studies and concluded that while higher education participation among students with disabilities has increased, employment outcomes remain disproportionately low. The authors highlighted limited exposure to workplace learning as a key contributor to this disparity.

Similarly, Shier, Graham, and Jones (2009), in their study *“Barriers to Employment as Experienced by Disabled People”*, identified structural and attitudinal barriers within labour markets that restrict employment opportunities even for qualified graduates. These findings laid the foundation for later research emphasising the importance of work-based learning interventions.

### **2. Role of Work-Integrated Learning in Employability**

The relationship between work-integrated learning (WIL) and employability has been extensively explored in general education literature. Jackson (2015), in *“Employability Skill Development in Work-Integrated Learning”*, demonstrated that internships and placements significantly enhance transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and professional identity. However, Jackson noted that students with disabilities were often excluded from these opportunities due to inaccessible program structures.

Building on this gap, Ferns, Dawson, and Howlett (2019) argued in *“Work-Integrated Learning and Disability Inclusion”* that traditional internship models fail to accommodate diverse learning needs. Their review called for intentional redesign of WIL frameworks to ensure equitable access for students with disabilities.

### **3. Emergence of Inclusive and Supported Internship Models**

Inclusive and supported internships emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional vocational and sheltered employment models. One of the most influential studies in this area is Wehman et al. (2014), *“Supported Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities”*. The authors provided evidence that supported employment and internship models significantly increase competitive employment outcomes compared to segregated work options.

A scoping review by Avellone, Scott, and McDonnell (2023) titled *“Internship Programs and Employment Outcomes for Youth and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities”* examined multiple internship initiatives and found that programs incorporating structured workplace experience and individualized support consistently resulted in higher post-internship employment rates.

### **4. Supported Internships and Transition Outcomes**

Supported internships have been particularly effective for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Luecking and Luecking (2015), in *“Translating Research into a Seamless Transition Model”*,

highlighted that supported internships bridge the gap between school and work by embedding employment preparation within real workplaces rather than simulated environments.

More recently, Ashworth et al. (2023) conducted a multi-informant evaluation titled “*Evaluating a Supported Employment Internship*”, which gathered perspectives from interns, families, employers, and job coaches. Their findings demonstrated improvements not only in employment outcomes but also in workplace confidence, independence, and employer attitudes toward disability inclusion.

## 5. Skill Development and Psychosocial Outcomes

Beyond employment rates, several studies have explored the broader developmental impact of inclusive internships. Carter et al. (2012), in “*Predictors of Postschool Employment Outcomes for Young Adults with Severe Disabilities*”, found that paid work experiences during education were strong predictors of later employment success.

Qualitative research by Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, and Kohler (2009) highlighted that internships contribute to self-determination, self-advocacy, and career awareness. These psychosocial outcomes were identified as critical for long-term employment stability.

## 6. Employer Perspectives and Organisational Benefits

Employer attitudes have been a major focus in the inclusive employment literature. A landmark systematic review by Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji, and Karon (2018) titled “*A Systematic Review of the Benefits of Hiring People with Disabilities*” examined employer-reported outcomes and found no negative impact on productivity. Instead, benefits included improved workplace culture, employee morale, and retention.

Hernandez, Keys, and Balcazar (2004) further noted that employers who participated in supported internship programs reported increased confidence in inclusive hiring and were more likely to offer permanent employment after internship completion.

## 7. Role of Job Coaching and Individualised Support

Individualised support, particularly job coaching, has been repeatedly identified as a critical success factor. Wehman, Chan, Ditchman, and Kang (2014) emphasised that job coaching facilitates task mastery, workplace socialisation, and gradual independence.

However, Riesen, Morgan, and Griffin (2015) cautioned in “*Barriers to Supported Employment*” that inconsistent funding and lack of trained job coaches often undermine program effectiveness. Their findings underscore the need for structured and sustainable support systems.

## 8. Policy and System-Level Influences

Policy-oriented research highlights the importance of systemic alignment. OECD (2010), in “*Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers*”, emphasised that education-to-employment transitions require coordinated policy efforts across sectors.

In the UK context, DfE (Department for Education, 2022) evaluations of supported internship programs demonstrated improved employment outcomes when education providers, employers, and employment services collaborated effectively. Similar **Conclusions** were drawn in European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) reports.

## 9. Limitations in Existing Literature

Despite strong evidence supporting inclusive internships, several gaps persist. Mazzotti et al. (2021) noted limited longitudinal research tracking long-term career progression. Additionally, most studies focus on intellectual and developmental disabilities, with minimal representation of sensory, psychosocial, and multiple disabilities.

Researchers also highlight methodological limitations, including small sample sizes and lack of experimental designs, calling for more rigorous and comparative studies.

### Methodology:

This review adopts a systematic narrative approach, drawing upon peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic and scoping reviews, doctoral theses, and government and organisational evaluation reports published between 2005 and 2025. Literature was identified through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar using keywords including inclusive internships, supported internships, disability and employability, and work-integrated learning. Only original and authenticated sources were included. The selected literature was analysed thematically to synthesise evidence related to outcomes, program design, employer engagement, and policy contexts.

### Suggestions:

Based on the review findings, educational institutions should actively include inclusive internship programs within their curriculum to better prepare students with disabilities for employment. Employers need regular sensitisation and guidance to create inclusive workplaces and understand reasonable accommodations. Policymakers should strengthen support systems by providing consistent funding, training for job coaches, and clear guidelines to ensure inclusive internships are accessible and sustainable.

### Limitations:

This review is based on previously published studies, which vary in research design, sample size, and outcome measures. Most of the available literature focuses on students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, limiting generalisation to other disability groups. Additionally, many studies report short-term outcomes, with limited evidence on long-term job retention and career growth.

### Conclusion:

Inclusive internships play an important role in connecting academic learning with real employment opportunities for students with disabilities. The reviewed studies show that when internships are supported, inclusive, and well-coordinated, they improve employability skills, confidence, and employment outcomes. Strengthening institutional support, employer involvement, and policy frameworks can further enhance the effectiveness of inclusive internships and promote equal employment opportunities.

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