

The ABDN internships: fostering belonging and future prospects through work experience

Regina Jaschke, Alisdair McKibben, Ellen Minshull, Gayle Thomson – Careers and Employability Service

“Paid work is now a necessity for most students, not a choice.”

Rose Stephenson, Director of Policy and Strategy at HEPI

As Careers practitioners, we are often asked the same questions by students:

- How can I find a part-time job related to my degree?
- How can I find paid experience in my area of interest?
- How can I build relevant skills when I don’t have time to volunteer?

We understand that any part-time work can be an extremely valuable way of developing skills, however, we also know that working in some sectors and for too many hours can have a detrimental effect on students’ wellbeing, sense of belonging and attainment while work which is perceived as more meaningful has a positive impact on students (HEPI report 195, *Student Working Lives*, 2025¹).

In addition, finding part-time work has become increasingly difficult in a challenging labour market: changes in labour laws as well as local challenges in Aberdeen – heavily dependent on the energy industry, which is experiencing a significant downturn – have reduced opportunities in “traditional” part-time job sectors such as retail and hospitality.

How can we ensure that our students have opportunities for meaningful, paid part-time work which complements their studies, supports their development and gives them the opportunity to apply their knowledge beyond the classroom?

The ABDN internships programme is a key building block in our effort to address these questions. We have developed two strands:

- University internal projects: these range from three to six months in duration and are sourced both from our Academic Schools and professional services. These are funded centrally by the University.
- Employer partner projects: these are sourced from charities, SMEs, and sectors where finding paid experience can be difficult for students, for example, nature, the creative sector and the arts. Our target sectors are also aligned to the regional development plan. These internships are funded through income generated through our careers fairs.

All our internships are open to all current full-time University of Aberdeen students and capped at 20 hours per week, with some at 10 hours per week) to ensure that students can maintain a work-life balance while gaining professional experience and skills, and that we do not exceed visa restrictions.

Our poster sets out the stages of the internship process and the support we have put in place, from application to post-internship reflection. Participation figures by Academic School, year group and fee category have also been included.

The success of our internship programme is undeniable: we have received almost 5,000 applications since the programme’s inception in 2024, which has allowed us to engage with a large number and wide range of students. All our interns have provided positive feedback on their experience. In particular, students reported that they were made to feel welcome, included and valued by their host department/organisation. They also report that their confidence has increased and that they have developed a wide range of professional skills.

In addition, the external partner programme has also allowed us to strengthen our local network and build connections with employers who are not often regarded as employers of graduates and would not otherwise have engaged with our institution. University internal projects have also supported departments with specialist skills in challenging financial times, and has also strengthened students’ sense of belonging.

We do, however, also recognise that, while the ABDN internships have had a positive impact on many students, there are also gaps: we can only offer opportunities to a relatively small number of students every year. International students are not as successful in the selection process compared to Home or Rest of UK students. We are working actively to address these issues through additional support in collaboration with our Language Centre, and by enhancing the work-based learning provision at the University of Aberdeen.

If you would like further information on our programme, then please visit our (student-facing) [ABDN internship web page](#) or contact r.jaschke@abdn.ac.uk.

¹ A recent research project at the University of Aberdeen on the impact of part-time work on students has confirmed this at a local level. A report will be available later this summer.