

AspIT

Evaluation of an IT education programme for young people with Asperger syndrome

Evaluation performed by the Danish Evaluation Institute - EVA

1 Summary

After six years developmental work at the local level the AspIT education programme is now offered all over Denmark. The programme is specifically aimed at young people with Asperger syndrome, who would like to complete a vocational IT education programme.

This evaluation aims to reveal whether the programme is suitable for its purpose, and if it has been implemented as planned. The evaluation also investigates if the results obtained so far are in line with the stated objectives of the programme.

The summary presents the main assessments and recommendations contained in the evaluation.

Conclusion

The AspIT programme is a new and innovative step in youth education. The evaluation clearly shows that the programme builds on a pioneer spirit, empathy for the target group and a profound dedication of all involved parties. Teachers and school leaders are very keen to maintain and further develop the educational quality of the programme. Both graduates and their employers are very satisfied with the course of the programme. The evaluation also shows a sustainable organizational framework and governance that reflects very well the specific size and characteristics of the programme. Responsibilities and obligations are clearly defined and the organizational structure leaves space for central management and planning, but at the same time the partner schools are independent and are given joint ownership and a suitable level of decentralization.

The programme was established only six years ago and has become nation-wide within a few years. The implementation process is not yet finalized, and the results obtained so far are not expected to fulfil yet the long-term requirements.

Main recommendations

The evaluation has led to the following recommendations for further development of the programme:

Clarifying the core values of the programme

The day-to-day running, management and development of the programme should be rooted in some clear and widely accepted core values. To ensure this, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) recommends that the core values of the AspIT education programme are clearly specified. This to avoid that the eight institutions that offers the programme at this stage move in different directions and come up with different contributions, and that they have various interpretations of the programme aims. Clear and broad core values will also help create a common identity across the institutions, ensure common referral and assessment procedures and identical procedures of subject specialization.

Making adjustments from experience

The evaluation reveals the need for adjusting and updating e.g. the module descriptions, the procedures of knowledge sharing and teachers' competence developments. EVA recommends to implement these adjustments as soon as possible, to ensure the teachers get the best possible working conditions and a clear framework of development.

Thinking ahead - keep the ambitions but be realistic

The results obtained by the first two teams of graduates are not in line with the programme goals as put forward by the organizers. EVA believes there are two main reasons for this. One is that the goals are very ambitious, and the other is that the first programme courses suffered from some beginners' difficulties. The

institutions need to work on a long-term basis with common and realistic goals in order to ensure their credibility towards students, stakeholders and municipal funding sources. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to ensure the proven results being in line with the goals put forward.

2 Introduction

AspIT is a vocational IT education course for young people with Asperger Syndrome. The course programme was developed at Vejle Business College in Jutland, Denmark. Today the programme is offered at eight educational institutions all over Denmark (including the small island Bornholm, where the first group of students were enrolled in January 2011).

On behalf of the AspIT steering group the project manager Ole Bay Jensen asked the Danish Evaluation Institute EVA to evaluate the education programme. This report summarizes the evaluation results, based on interviews with managers, teachers, students who completed the programme and educational institutions in the Danish cities Skive, Vejle, Odense and Copenhagen. Peter Toft, project manager, and Birgit Gamborg, evaluation consultant, from EVA completed the evaluation and wrote the report.

2.1 AspIT in brief

The idea behind AspIT is to give young people with Asperger Syndrome or similar developmental disorders an opportunity to complete a vocational youth education programme within the IT field, after they have completed the Folkeskole. Students are admitted on the basis of referral and assessment procedures that will clarify their potential and motivation to study and develop their IT competencies and abilities.

Lessons are organized with the aim to support the individual student's specific IT competencies, interests and needs. Focus is very much on differentiated teaching, performed in small groups of four to eight students. During the three-year course programme the student will specialize within one of four areas: techniques, software construction, visualization or quality assurance. This will enable the student to determine his or her focused talent.

The programme aims to ensure the students get a permanent affiliation to the job market within the IT branch or other sectors where IT solutions are needed. They will develop their IT competencies, but also their social and personal competencies to manage in the labour market, and therefore internships are highly valued in the programme. The internship module is called work adjustment training (in Danish: Væksthuset) and also aims to strengthen the students' work abilities within their focused talent area.

The programme is divided into a basic course (1st semester) with an introduction to all IT modules and basic IT skills. The 2nd and 3rd semesters are dedicated to more detailed studies within the four main areas to identify the student's focused talent within one of these. The last three semesters are divided between ordinary lessons, work adjustment training and internships. The split between school lessons and internships leans against the principle of dual training that is well-known within the Danish system of vocational education.

Asperger Syndrome

Only students with Asperger Syndrome (a milder version of autism) can participate in the AspIT programme. There are various levels of Asperger Syndrome, but persons with Asperger have in general a normal to high level of intelligence. The diagnosis indicates difficulties in understanding social interaction and sometimes also limited social intuition. The person might also find it difficult to carry out ordinary day-to-day activities such as personal hygiene or the like. An outside person often finds him or her a bit nerdy. Persons with Asperger might have a very strong interest in one particular field that they will study and exploit in details. Asperger often entail other diagnoses such as phobias or ADHD. The person will most often need some tools and strategies for social interaction. However, persons with Asperger are very individual, like everybody else, in terms of needs, reactions and preferences.

The education programme - history and development

The AspIT model results from six years of developmental work, funded by the rate adjustment pool from the Danish Ministry of Education, with almost DKK 20 million during the period from 2005 till 2010. The work began back in 2005 as where Vejle Business College and the local commercial development association began to collaborate in this field. In 2005 the team was granted DKK 9.7 million during a three-year period, to develop and establish the education programme at the business college. The first group of students was enrolled in August 2005.

An educational method was developed in the course of the three-year trial period from 2005 to 2008, and the programme was established in Vejle. The project entered the next three-year period (2008-2011) with the aim to develop a national education programme. Vejle Business College was allocated another DKK 9.6 million from the rate adjustment pool, to consolidate the project during the three-year period and develop a national, uniform education model for young persons with Asperger Syndrome. Today the programme is offered in eight educational institutions. The latest one was introduced at the island of Bornholm this year. A competence centre has been established, and its main task is to maintain and develop the quality of the model. The centre elaborates materials and courses and plans the programme course. It is run in the form of an association, where all the institutions that offer the programme are mandatory members. As such, the rights and obligations put forward in the partnership contract with the AspIT competence centre also apply to the institutions. The competence centre is lead by a steering group with a representative from each institution.

AspIT is a special youth education programme that falls under the Danish Act on youth education for persons with special needs (Lov om Ungdomsuddannelse for Unge med Særlige Behov), Act no. 564 of 6.6. 2007). The student's municipality funds the three-year programme for the total amount of DKK 750.000, exclusive of transport, per student.

4 Results so far

The AspIT programme is now six years old, and the model is known all over Denmark. At the same time, the first students from the institution in Vejle have graduated, so it is possible to study the preliminary results from the institutions in terms of accomplishment and employment rates.

4.1 Work objectives

AspIT has a number of work objectives set out to maintain, supervise and prove the students' work ability, as stated below.

Work objectives

Internships

All students complete an internship of at least 24 weeks in one or more companies that wish to employ them after the course. The internship gives the student more specialized skills within his or her focused talent.

Employment rates

Each group of students (5 students per group) should fulfil the following employment rates after the programme:

- 6 months after the programme three graduates should be employed
- 12 months after the programme at least four graduates should be employed
- 18 months after the programme at least four graduates should be employed on a permanent basis.

Terms of employment

18 months after the programme the graduates should aim to work on these terms:

- A third of all graduates work full-time on ordinary terms
- A third of all graduates work part-time on ordinary terms
- A third of all graduates work with some kind of support, e.g. in a flexible job.

As indicated in the text box, the work objectives are set out within three areas: internships, employment rates and terms of employment. The objectives for the employment terms will change gradually every sixth month until 18 months after the students have graduated. The objectives are evaluated after 18 months, when the employees are expected to fall under one of the three groups of employment terms. Thus, a number of clear guidelines are set up for the partnership schools to follow in order to meet with the objectives.

Internships

The internships are sometimes named VFU (in Danish Virksomhedsforlagt Undervisning), indicating that teaching takes place in the company. All involved schools had or will have students in VFU this year. However, a few students in Copenhagen have not yet proven themselves ready to VFU/internship, e.g. because they do not attend on a regular basis. All schools have found the companies needed for the internships.

Employment rates

Only students from Vejle have finalized the programme so far. Table 2 shows their current employment rates.

Table 2

Employment rates, graduates

Group 1	
(4 graduates from summer 2008)	
Group 2	
(5 graduates from winter 2009)	
Group 3	
(5 graduates from summer 2009)	
Group 4	
(2 graduates from winter 2010)	
Group 5	
(4 graduates from summer 2010)	
Employed	4 3 3 1 1
Started a higher education programme	0 1 2 0 1
Unemployed	0 0 0 0 1
Receiving a pension or treatment	0 1 0 1 1

Source: Fact sheet from AspIT in Vejle.

All graduates from group 1 are employed; however this is the only group that has achieved the work objectives for the employment rates. Three graduates from group 2 and 3 are employed, but only one from group 4, so the work objectives for the employment rates have not been achieved in these groups. Group 5 finalized the education programme less than six months ago, so it is too early to see if the objectives will be achieved for this group. Based on these figures, EVA considers the work objectives for employment rates are only partly achieved.

Terms of employment

Since the work objectives for the terms of employment are evaluated 18 months after the students have finalized the programme, we can only see if the objectives have been achieved for group 1 and 2. Table 3 shows the terms of employment for the employed graduates from these groups.

Table 3

Terms of employment

Group 1	
(4 employed graduates)	
Group 2	
(3 employed graduates)	
Number of full-time employees on ordinary terms	

0 0

Number of part-time employees on ordinary terms

1 0

Number of employees with support - e.g. in a flexible job

2 3

Source: Fact sheet from AspIT in Vejle.

Even though one of the work objectives is to have one third of all employees working full-time on ordinary terms, it appears from table 3 that none of the employees work as such. One employee works part-time on ordinary terms. The five remaining graduates from group 1 and 2 have flexible jobs or the like. So the work objectives for the terms of employment are only partly achieved as well.

Are the objectives realistic?

The teachers and school leaders that were interviewed have two different views on the question whether or not the objectives are realistic. All except one of the representatives from the steering group and school leaders are confident that the work objectives can be achieved. However, they agree that the level of ambition is quite high and that the objectives need to be re-evaluated, if it turns out that they cannot be achieved. The project manager explains:

If the work objectives are not realistic, we will need to adjust them. We name AspIT the first IT education programme in the world for young people with autism, so we do not have much experience to lean on (...) We have set the objectives at a very high level, but I believe they can be achieved.

But not everybody thinks the work objectives can be achieved. Most of the teachers and one of the school leaders interviewed are actually not convinced. They explain their view by the fact that the students are at very different individual levels, and in spite of a high academic level they still find it difficult to understand social interactions and manage in a company. In their opinion, most of the AspIT students, even the best ones, will find it difficult to manage a full-time job.

The teachers also agree that the work objectives should include higher education as well. As one of them points out: *The competence centre needs to include higher education programmes (...) This is just as important as employment.*

So the teachers agree that it is just as important to start a higher education programme as it is to find a permanent job, but the work objectives do not reflect this. The text box shows that three graduates are enrolled in a higher education programme. The teachers are convinced that the accomplishment of the AspIT programme will give the graduates the knowledge and competencies needed to continue in higher education, if they are motivated to do so. One of the graduates started a professionally oriented higher education programme and confirms this view:

The AspIT programme gave me the necessary academic skills to prepare for the computer science education programme that I am doing now. I can highly recommend it!

So the AspIT programme has helped this young student, both to obtain academic knowledge and competencies within computer science and to create a day-to-day routine at the higher education institution. The teachers also believe that the AspIT programme makes it easier for the students to embark on a higher education programme, and the work objectives should reflect this view.

EVA recommends

- that the AspIT Competence Centre collects experience from the partner schools about employment rates and terms of employment, when the students start graduating from the other partner schools. Based on this experience the centre should initiate a critical review of the work objectives.

- that the AspIT Competence Centre investigates if graduates who start a higher education programme will be able to accomplish this. Based on this, the centre should consider adding higher education as an objective for the programme as well.

The recommendations aim to ensure the teachers and school leaders in the different institutions work towards a set of consistent and realistic objectives and visions for the AspIT programme. At this point they do not agree whether or not the objectives are realistic, and since they see higher education as a criterion to be fulfilled, it is important to agree on this.

4.2 Completion and drop-out rates

The completion rate for the programme can be found only for the graduates from Vejle, since the other partner schools do not have any graduates yet. The drop-out rates however, can be found for all the schools. 20 students have graduated from Vejle since summer 2008. This is not quite in line with the expected objective of five graduates per group, i.e. 25 graduates at this point. The groups following the programme in Vejle now have between zero and five drop-out students. The sixth group had quite a high drop-out rate of 5 students, which lead to some changes in the assessment procedures. Since then, AspIT in Vejle had one group with two drop-outs, one with one drop-out and three with no drop-outs. So the drop-out rate has fallen significantly after the changes in the assessment procedures that were mainly concentrated on the students' work abilities. Teachers and school leaders in Vejle agree that there are now far more consistency in the admission procedures, so in case of doubts about a student's work ability, he or she is no longer admitted. The students' work abilities are also evaluated regularly during the programme course, and in case of doubts the school will have to withdraw the student from the programme.

The other partner schools have only limited experience with dropouts, since there is only one drop-out for each of them, and in one case it was not even a drop-out, but a shift to one of the other schools. One of the partner schools also had three students who shifted between the groups for shorter or longer periods.

Reasons for dropouts

There are close relationships between teachers and students in the partner schools, since the groups are quite small, and therefore the schools are well aware of the reasons for dropouts - these are in general similar to each other in all schools. The students are divided into two main groups: one in which they have major personal problems because of their handicap and therefore cannot accomplish the programme and another one where they choose to shift to another education programme. Few students also drop out because they are not motivated to finish their studies.

EVA is of the opinion that the AspIT programme in Vejle did not fulfil the expectations of five graduates per group, as the average number is only four per group. On the other hand, the partner schools have shown only a low dropout rate so far. All schools agree on the reasons for the drop-outs.

EVA also estimates the partner schools to be well informed about the reasons for dropouts, which is useful when it comes to referral and assessment procedures, because it will help them keep the right admission level.

4.3 Internships

The education model includes a total of 24 weeks' internship (also referred to as VFU (Virksomhedsforlagt Undervisning)). Students will shift between practical training in the company and lessons in the classroom. The overall aim with the internship is to ensure the student gets a permanent job in the company. Furthermore, the student will gain specialized competencies within his or her focused talent and will become part of a professional and social work environment. The student needs to accomplish the 2nd semester, the quality assurance module 1 and the work adjustment training (Væksthus) module at the 3rd semester before the internship. Work adjustment training focuses on individual learning and the student's focused talent. After this the student will do internships in one or more modules, from the 3rd to the 6th semester. Several students from the AspIT programme in Vejle already fulfilled internships, and the partner schools have also started internships for their students, following the same training model.

How to find and keep the internship companies

The partner schools need to find enough companies for the internships. One of the steering group members mentions that this responsibility lies with the schools, *because the person who visits the company and facilitates contact needs to be familiar with the student, the programme and the company.*

Experience from Vejle shows the importance of knowing both the company and the student very well in order to find and keep an internship. Therefore, it is crucial to find the perfect match between the student's competencies and the tasks to be solved in the company.

One or two teachers from each of the partner schools act as consultants and will initiate contact with the internship companies. This means they will first contact the company with the aim to get an internship agreement, but they will also follow up and contact and visit the company regularly before, during and after

the internship. Since all this takes place at the local level, the partner schools will organize the procedure in different ways, according to local circumstances. The competence centre supports their work by offering the teachers to exchange experiences with the consultant in Vejle, who has several years of experience within the field. He is also the contact person in the group of consultants that meet from time to time to exchange good and bad experiences among the schools.

So far all partner schools have found the internship companies needed for all the students. There have been some second thoughts along the line, but all in all it went well. One of the school leaders explains:

(...) actually we are very careful in selecting the internship companies. The internship should fulfil the students' professional and personal needs and expectations, so it takes some time to find the right company. But we were positively surprised, because after all we do face a period of financial recession at the moment, and in the light of this we are actually managing quite well.

It is generally agreed that it is quite demanding to find and keep the internship companies, but it works out if appropriate resources are allocated for the purpose. The partner schools have carefully selected their consultants, being aware that a profound knowledge of the labour market is of utmost importance.

EVA believes the consultants know very well how to facilitate contact with the local companies. However, teachers and school leaders find it is a huge and demanding task to find the right matches between students and companies. It is the impression of EVA that the consultants work hard and consistent to find new areas in the labour market that suits the AspIT students and vice-versa, even though the financial crisis complicates the work.

Organizing internships

Internships are organized according to the individual student's needs and expectations, so each period will vary in length and contents of work, both in the company and in the classroom. After the internship the students return to school for another period of work adjustment training, so they can test their professional and personal competencies in order to finally define their focused talent. The work adjustment training gives the students an opportunity to work in practice with the professional and personal challenges they have been faced with during the internship.

There are some disagreement among the teachers and school leaders interviewed, concerning the necessity and the function of the work adjustment training. The internships is a way of gently pushing the students away from the sense of security they have in the classroom and challenge their work abilities. A teacher explains: *The benefit of an internship is that we can gently push the students away from the school and pull them back again. Their needs are very individual. Actually many companies want to keep the students, which is a good sign of success.*

The teachers see a clear advantage in the work adjustment training, as it might help the students to obtain some of the competencies they need in a number of specific fields. On the other hand, some of the consultants say they wish to take on all teaching of the intern. A consultant explains:

(...) AspIT will not be able to supplement with much knowledge of relevance to our company, but will only be able to provide some general information, which is not relevant for our current intern. The AspIT teachers cannot provide the specific knowledge that we need. Therefore, we find it a clear advantage if it is agreed that we take care of teaching the intern.

According to some of the consultants, the intern's chances to get a permanent job will increase significantly, if the company takes over all teaching and training and thereby gets influence on which competencies the intern should acquire. Some companies already took over all teaching and training of their interns. Based on the interviews with teachers, school management and companies; EVA reveals some opposite views concerning the responsibility of teaching and training during the internship. But in cases of disagreement the parties have agreed on a solution that fits everybody's wishes and needs.

Recommendations

EVA recommends:

- that the AspIT Competence Centre looks at the organization of the internships and the work adjustment training and their impact on each other.

The recommendation aims to clarify the need for a common decision that all interns take part in the work adjustment training, or if an individual adjustment of the internship would be better, meaning that some of the interns do not need to take part in the work adjustment training during this period.

Graduates' view on internships

The graduates agree that the internships have been instructive. Some of them found it was a huge challenge - in fact some had to shift to another company, e.g. because the office environment was too overwhelming for them. Others had very positive experiences and actually got a job in "their" company after the internship.

During the internship the students developed both at the professionally and personally. They acquired a lot of professional knowledge. One of them explains:

The internship gave me an in-dept insight into my work field. It took me only a short time to develop the programme in the classroom. The company spends months on this so I learned how to better deal with major projects. I have really learned about task management and communication between the different units, etc.

The graduates really developed the general knowledge acquired in the classroom during their internship, where they solved tasks within their focused talent area. Most of them also found that the competencies acquired in the classroom were very useful and that the chances to further develop these during the internship was one of the best experiences at all.

The graduates also experienced a better personal understanding of the functioning of a company, which is in line with the objectives of the internship. Some found it was a big challenge to meet new people, and others found it hard to keep an overview of all the tasks. But they all feel they received all the support they needed. Some students got support from their counsellor in the beginning, but after a while they did not need this anymore. They all felt the support was available whenever they needed it.

The graduates were all happy with their internships and feel they have learned a lot. Both AspIT and the companies have fulfilled the expectations and requirements from the students, and both parties provided the necessary support to help them solve the tasks and find their way in the office environment.

It is the impression of EVA that the graduates in general find their internship very fruitful, and that both professional and personal challenges have been met with in the best possible way.

Needs and motivation to welcome AspIT interns

Representatives from the companies highlight three main reasons for their needs and motivation to welcome an intern from the AspIT programme: their social responsibility, a good professional opportunity and the financial incentives. Some of them mention the social responsibility as a main factor. Several companies have introduced policies that aim to include everybody in the job market, so therefore they take on their social responsibility and offer jobs to people who might not be included otherwise. Working together with AspIT is one way to live up to this policy.

Most companies are also motivated to welcome an AspIT intern, because they have a number of tasks that it might be difficult to get other staff members to solve. One of the company representatives explains:

We have some test assignments that some of our staff members find a bit boring, so we thought we would find out if someone from the AspIT programme could be interested in taking care of these.

Some of the companies therefore see good opportunities in collaborating with AspIT, because the interns can solve tasks that might otherwise remain unsolved.

Some also look at this as a good financial incentive, because an AspIT intern can solve their tasks at a cheaper rate than the other staff members. But in general the social responsibility and the chance to solve specific technical tasks are factors of higher importance that generate more motivation than the financial aspect.

The interviews reveal that most of the companies are motivated to receive AspIT interns, especially because of the chance to solve the tasks they need to have solved. However, it is also clear that the companies needed to consider thoroughly before taking on the arrangement, mostly because they were not sure if they could offer the appropriate support to the intern, both professionally and in terms of social and physical work conditions.

Experiences from the companies

The company representatives all explain that they had good experiences with the interns, and if they did not already hire an AspIT graduate, they consider doing so. They also say that it did require some extra resources to receive the intern, but not more than it would take to hire a new staff member under normal circumstances. Everybody thinks that the requirements put forward to the companies in terms of guidance and work conditions are very reasonable.

The interviews show that the companies had quite different experiences in terms of collaboration with staff from the AspIT programme. Some collaborated very well and had a good dialogue with the AspIT people. One of the representatives explains:

I think the collaboration worked out very well. AspIT took good care of their students and they work well with the business community, so there is a good connection between the students and the companies. They also provide good follow-up work in all areas.

But other companies have different opinions - mainly because they felt a lack of contact with staff from the AspIT programme. One of the company representatives explains that his company had to initiate most of the contact with AspIT. But the situation improved after it became clear to the AspIT people that there was a problem and the company became more and more familiar with the programme. One of the graduates also expressed a need for more information from AspIT during the internship, since the duration of the stay was not really clear and it was difficult to find out when to return to the school for the work adjustment training.

One of the companies expressed a need for better support to handle the intern's handicap:

We could have used some support and information about how to best handle the intern's handicap. The handicap makes it harder for the person to fit into the work environment and collaborate with others, because it is not part of his or her professional skills.

The company would like to create better links to AspIT with the aim to help the intern facing the challenges of Asperger Syndrome at the work place. The representative underlines that an external person could be assigned to take on this role, since the intern shifts regularly between different working groups, and therefore some valuable knowledge might be lost in the process, if an internal staff member should follow and support him.

The representatives thus express different views of their collaboration with AspIT. EVA believes this reflects the diversity of the internships. None of the companies felt the communication with AspIT was too extensive though, which shows the importance of good and comprehensive communication between the parties.

All representatives feel very satisfied with the interns' professional competencies, and they also believe they have solved all tasks very well. Most representatives also feel the interns have demonstrated good insight into business life, but some still think that the AspIT staff could have worked more with this part of the programme. However, they agree that the interns' knowledge about business life in general will vary a lot, because they are all individuals. The companies will of course always prefer people with a good sense of business life.

Overall, the representatives all think that the internships have been a successful experience for their companies.

One of them explains:

I really think the arrangement is a great success. It is fantastic to hire some people, who might otherwise have to live on early retirement benefits, to solve some of the difficult tasks.

Several representatives highlight the meaningful purpose of receiving an AspIT student in the company.

Some of the other staff members were a bit sceptical in the beginning, but they quickly became familiar with the arrangement. The interns quickly became a part of the team and felt socially and professionally welcomed. EVA finds that the company representatives are very positive towards the AspIT programme and the whole arrangement. EVA also finds the education programme of high importance, even though some companies found it was a challenge to organize an ideal internship course and to communicate smoothly with the AspIT staff.

Recommendations

EVA recommends:

- that the AspIT Competence Centre do some experience exchange and then considers how to create good and comprehensive communication strategies with the companies during the internships, with the aim to ensure both parties (companies and interns) feel the communication with AspIT functions well during the internship.

The mentor courses

AspIT offers a mentor course to selected staff members from companies that receive an intern. In this way the staff members can learn about Asperger Syndrome and what is required from the company to ensure a successful arrangement. During the course the staff members can also meet and exchange experiences with representatives from other companies.

The interviews reveal that all companies have been offered to take part in the mentor courses, but only around half of them actually took the offer. Those who did not take part in the mentor courses explain that they would have liked to go, but lack of time and resources prevented them to do so.

There are different opinions among those who did take part in the mentor courses. One found it was very informative and useful and he learned a lot about Asperger, but another thinks that his company could have managed fine without the course.

EVA concludes that the companies' opinions about the mentor courses depend partly on the staff members' knowledge about Asperger Syndrome and partly on the course of the internship. If the company had good experiences with the intern, they do not feel a great need for the courses, but if they experienced problems and challenges, they are more sceptical and want to get more information about how to handle a person with Asperger.

Challenges

The partner schools find that the work with finding the necessary number of companies is progressing well, but in spite of this the interviews with teachers, school leaders and companies also reveal a number of challenges. The teachers believe the process is determined by the state of the economy, so companies might suffer a great deal during recession times, and they have only limited resources and opportunities to receive interns. But according to one of the consultants it was easier for the staff at the AspIT programme to find the number of internships needed during the financial crisis in 2009 and 2010, than it was for staff working in other education programmes offered at the business schools. But in general the consultants see times of financial recession as a problem for the AspIT staff, since the success of the programme depends on their collaboration with the companies.

Some of the company representatives believe the AspIT staff could benefit from addressing the issue of social responsibility when they contact new companies. The consultants believe they should work to disseminate information about Asperger. Chances to make the companies receive AspIT interns are much better if the companies know more about it, and if they see it as an opportunity to practice their social responsibility. Interviews with the consultants reveal two different views regarding the consequences of the intern's handicap for the company. Some think the AspIT staff ought to play down the importance of Asperger, while others think they should inform the companies more detailed about the fact that Asperger is a handicap that influences the students' work life significantly. These contradictory views might be caused by the fact that the interns are of course individuals with individual needs and competencies, but they do however reflect the challenge that lies in explaining the consequences of having an intern with Asperger. It can be difficult to find the appropriate balance, so that AspIT prepares the companies thoroughly to receive the intern, but without overwhelming them so they might fear they do not have the resources to deal with this.

Based on the interviews, EVA finds that the AspIT people should ensure the companies feel they are properly informed about the consequences of Asperger in terms of the intern's work abilities.

Recommendations

EVA recommends:

- that the AspIT Competence Centre produces information materials specifically addressed to the companies about Asperger Syndrome and the impact on the students' work abilities. In addition, the centre should come up with their views and reflections on the individual intern.

The purpose of the recommendation is to ensure the companies get sufficient knowledge about the handicap and the intern, so they are better prepared to organize the internship and possibly later on also a job.

4.4 Employment rates

As mentioned earlier there are 20 graduates from the AspIT programme in Vejle, and so far 12 of these have a job, cf. table 2 and 3. All employed graduates work part-time on ordinary terms or in a flexible job or the like. They work within various types of business, e.g. in schools or in service or IT companies.

Graduates' view on employment rates

All the interviewed graduates are very happy with their job. One of them decided to continue in higher education, and he is happy with this decision and the challenges put forward to him. The employed graduates work part-time, i.e. 24-30 hours per week and everybody is happy with this. One of them explains: *Actually I almost wish I had fewer work hours at this stage, because my job requires a lot of psychological resources.*

Even though a fix-term job requires a lot of resources, everybody appreciates it and feel good at their work place and with their job tasks. They feel the companies have received them very well and they are well integrated into the work community. The companies have taken their needs into account and have created good physical conditions for them, e.g. offices with only a few others around them. They were not too overwhelmed with tasks at the beginning, so they had time to become familiar with the job. They think AspIT has given them a number of opportunities that they were not aware of before they started the programme.

One of the employed graduates explains:

I don't think I would have got my job if I had not completed the AspIT programme. The education really opened up some doors to me.

EVA believes that the AspIT programme is of special importance to the graduates, since they all feel it has opened up some doors to them. It is tough work from time to time to be part of a work place, and they do not want to work more hours than they already do. But the job is satisfying and enhances their life quality, and they really appreciate this.

Reasons to employ an AspIT graduate

The companies are motivated to employ an AspIT graduate for two main reasons: they get an opportunity to have some specific technical tasks solved and they get the feeling of taking on social responsibility. It goes hand in hand with the reasons to take on an intern.

The graduate has been through an internship in the company, before he or she is employed. If the company does not employ their intern after the internship, another internship in a new company will be organized in agreement with the local municipality, so that the education programme is in reality extended.

The company representatives explain the importance of knowing the intern well, before he or she is employed, so the internship is essential to the further job opportunities. The other staff members know the graduate and know his or her abilities to solve different tasks. One of the representatives explains:

We got to know our intern very well during the internship, and he became familiar with a lot of our tasks, so it was quite easy to take the next step and employ him afterwards.

So if the company knows that the AspIT graduate can help solve a number of concrete tasks, the motivation to hire him or her is of course much stronger. The graduate often solves specific IT tasks that other staff members find as routine work and therefore are not so keen to take on. This motivation factor is in line with the motivation to receive interns.

Moreover, several companies feel a social responsibility to hire an AspIT graduate, because they want to help a person find quality and meaning in life.

Experiences from the companies

Representatives from the companies believe AspIT is a great success, and they are pleased to have an employee who graduated from the AspIT programme. The fact that the employee has worked as an intern is of course an advantage, because he or she knows the work and feels more prepared to ask questions. The tasks are no longer so concrete, because the graduate becomes more and more independent.

Representatives are all very satisfied with the graduates' IT qualifications. One of them says an in-service training course was needed, but that all new staff members need this. Most of them are also satisfied with the graduates' insight into normal business life and their ability to interact with the other staff members.

Challenges

All company representatives feel the collaboration with AspIT was good, and that the AspIT people created a good link between the student and the company. Those who have hired graduates also found some challenges though, e.g. one of the companies had some problems with the municipality, since it was difficult to get an approval to hire the graduate in a flexible job.

The interviews also show another even bigger challenge when hiring an AspIT graduate, namely the lack of proper follow-up. Some representatives would like to see better follow-up from the AspIT people to ensure the graduate can continue in the job. The representatives feel that the graduates tend to stay at the same level, and that the companies could need some support to help them move on and further develop their skills and abilities, so they remain a labour market asset. The AspIT programme is specific in the sense that students become focused on one specific company, so that they are vulnerable towards changes, company bankruptcies, market fluctuations etc. This could be solved, at least to some extent, if the AspIT people could follow up with the employed graduates to further develop their competencies.

EVA finds it would benefit the graduates a lot, if the AspIT people would regularly follow up on their employment rate and terms of employment to support their further professional and personal development,

but also to help the companies handle the challenges of having an AspIT graduate in their team. This might also help AspIT to better fulfil their business objectives.

Recommendations

EVA recommends

- that the AspIT Competence Centre follows up in a more systematic way and in collaboration with the companies, on the graduates' work situation in relation to terms of employment, competence development and challenges.

The objective is to ensure an on-going focus on the graduates' competence development and continued affiliation to the labour market.