

## A view from the bridge: institutional perspectives on the use of a national internship scheme (JobBridge) in Ireland's National Cultural Institutions

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**Abstract:** Ireland's National Internship Scheme, also known as JobBridge, was in place between 2011 and 2016, and in excess of 40,000 internships were commenced during that period across the private, public and voluntary sectors. This study examines the use of JobBridge and other internship schemes in five of Ireland's National Cultural Institutions during a time of high unemployment and an extended recruitment moratorium in the public sector. The findings were based on a series of interviews with arts managers within host organisations to broaden the field of research on the use of internships in the arts and cultural sector by focussing on institutional perspectives. The paper concludes that JobBridge had many short-term benefits for the National Cultural Institutions consulted, but that the scheme was a short-term solution to a much greater staffing crisis in the public and cultural sector, as evident by the highly qualified and experienced jobseekers knowingly undertaking internships with no progression routes within those organisations.

**Keywords:** JobBridge, internships, unemployment, national cultural institutions, passionate labour, social capital.

### Introduction

On 18 October 2016 Minister for Social Protection Leo Varadkar announced the winding down of the controversial national internship scheme JobBridge. In place since 2011, the scheme has been subject to varying views on its effectiveness in supporting the labour market, with the Department of Social Protection consistently affirming its role in coping with job losses in the wake of economic collapse. As with other sectors, arts and cultural organisations have widely availed of JobBridge and its supports to the labour market, especially following the extension of the scheme to local authorities in 2013, although precise data on the exact number of arts and cultural JobBridge interns is elusive.<sup>1</sup> However, the scheme has also been the target of much public criticism and numerous investigations since its inception, often on the grounds of low levels of payment and employer exploitation of the scheme across public and private sectors (Kelly, 2016). The legacy and impacts of JobBridge were therefore the subject of immediate debate following Varadkar's announcement. In his own statements to the press Varadkar defended some outcomes of the scheme, whilst also acknowledging it was 'far from perfect' and in need of replacement (Doyle, 2016; O'Dwyer, 2016).

The closure of the scheme has been accompanied by the publication of the Indecon *Evaluation of JobBridge Activation Programme* (14 October 2016), the second comprehensive report by Indecon into the scheme, following its predecessor in 2013. As with Indecon's previous reports, the arts and cultural sector is not segmented as a specific host organisation 'type', making extrapolation of its data onto the cultural sector difficult (as data is classified according to categories such as civil service, community, local authority, non-commercial semi state, public body, voluntary, etc., all of which likely include cultural organisations of various kinds). That

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notwithstanding, of particular relevance to the arts and cultural sector is the 2016 report's fifth key recommendation: 'There is merit in a significant reduction in the number of interns taken on by public sector organisations unless these organisations have the potential to offer future jobs to interns' (p. xii). This recommendation follows observations of a disparity between subsequent employment rates of the public and community/voluntary sector in comparison with the commercial sector.

In light of these recent findings and the cessation of JobBridge, this essay seeks to offer some qualitative insight into the experience of JobBridge at public sector institutions, by presenting the findings of a short study into the use of JobBridge by a selection of National Cultural Institutions (NCIs).<sup>2</sup> The Indecon reports, as with others this essay will review, have largely (and understandably) concentrated on the experience of JobBridge interns themselves. However, this essay aims to augment this information by focusing on the perspective of cultural employers managing internships in the area of arts administration, during a time of restricted staffing resources and progression routes. It will assess the benefits and weaknesses of the JobBridge scheme from the perspective of employers in the cultural sector; examine the use of the JobBridge in comparison with other internship schemes; address the challenges for NCIs posed by the public sector hiring moratorium; and identify perceived impacts of the scheme on the jobs market in the cultural sector. With the recovering economy now heralding the end of the public sector recruitment moratorium, and an increase in funding for the National Cultural Institutions and the Arts Council in 2015 and 2016 (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015, 2016), the past lived experience of arts managers in managing internship schemes – the 'view from the bridge' – offers valuable perspectives that can inform the development of future employment pathways.

### Background

The JobBridge scheme, also known as the National Internship Scheme, was an Irish government initiative introduced in 2011 at the time of the highest level of unemployment since the beginning of the Irish economic recession in 2008. The aim of the JobBridge scheme was 'to assist in breaking the cycle where jobseekers are unable to get a job without experience' (Department of Social Protection, 2015a). The scheme involved full-time six- or nine-month internships with host organisations in the private, public and voluntary/community sectors for candidates who had been receiving jobseeker's allowance for at least three months. Interns maintained their existing social welfare entitlement and received an additional weekly stipend of €52.50<sup>3</sup>, payable by the Department of Social Protection [DSP], the body that also managed and administered the JobBridge scheme<sup>4</sup>.

Since it was launched on 29 June 2011, the perceived advantages and consequences of the scheme have been the subject of much public debate. While positive findings show that over 79% of interns gained have paid employment at some stage since their JobBridge internship (Indecon, 2016, p. iv), issues have been raised regarding the exploitation of interns (O'Rourke, 2014), job displacement (Collins, 2013; Murray, 2015), the ambiguity of policy and terminology surrounding internships (Lalor, 2013; Boughton, 2014; Holmquist, 2014) and failure by the DSP to adequately monitor host organisations using the scheme (Gartland, 2015; O'Halloran 2014). In acknowledgement of these concerns, the DSP commissioned an independent evaluation of JobBridge in 2013 from the economic research organisation Indecon. While this extensive report concluded that JobBridge had been successful in achieving movement off the Live Register, it also acknowledged dissatisfaction amongst participants and offered several key recommendations for revising the scheme, among them the need 'to improve support

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mechanisms for the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market... [and enable] host organisations to have the option of a more flexible scheme' (Indecon, 2013, p. xiii).

Unsurprisingly, the DSP primarily used the Indecon report to defend the scheme against public criticism, most frequently citing its findings that 61% of interns participating in the scheme had progressed into employment at the time of the report's publication (DSP, 2013a). On foot of this statistic demonstrating that 'JobBridge is playing a significant role in helping people back to work' (DSP, 2013b), in 2013 the scheme was expanded to local authorities, with the aim to amplify internship opportunities with local arts organisations. This was done in association with the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, with the objective of building on

a long tradition of informal mentorship within the arts community... [and extending] the level of support that local authorities can give to cultural organisations at a time of constrained resources. (DSP, 2013b)

This expansion came during the fifth year of the government moratorium on recruitment that was first imposed in 2009 on all areas of public services, including the National Cultural Institutions.<sup>5</sup> The moratorium was originally intended to be a short-term measure until employment numbers in each sector fell 'to the appropriate level', but remained in place until October 2014 (Labour Relations Commission, 2013, p. 13).

JobBridge was neither the first nor the only intervention of the state into supporting employment and training in the arts and non-profit and wider sectors. Other schemes have included Community Employment, Tús, and the Gateway Programme, however JobBridge was 'the only activation measure available to short term unemployed' (Indecon, 2016, p. 92). Nevertheless, JobBridge's high levels of take-up, with 12,560 internships commenced by November 2012 (Indecon 2016, p. 5); contentious public reception; and use to support the labour market at a time of unprecedented financial collapse warrant a particular focus on its outcomes and impacts. It is hoped that this small-scale study of one particular dimension of JobBridge's function and effects – that of the experience of managers working with JobBridge and other internship schemes within the NCIs – will add further texture to the assessments now taking place as the scheme formally draws to a close.

### Methodology

The research that informs this essay was carried out in two stages. The first stage was a literature review that considered the existing major reports evaluating the JobBridge scheme in the context of the current body of knowledge around the themes of social capital, passionate labour and exploitation, and internship policy. The second stage involved a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the National Cultural Institutions. In total, five organisations from amongst the eleven NCIs<sup>6</sup> were selected for the study, based on public records of their use of the JobBridge scheme. All five institutions were also employing the JobBridge scheme at the time of interview, in addition to using one or more alternative internship programmes. Whilst not a comprehensive overview of NCIs' use of JobBridge – as this research took place within the context of an MA dissertation – this sample nonetheless offers a strong selection of NCI perspectives across a range of art forms and services (museums, performing arts, archives).

Interviewees were selected because of their direct experience of managing interns and internship training schemes. Four of the interview subjects had direct experience managing JobBridge interns within their department: Helen Beaumont, education and outreach officer at the National Museum; Jenny Siung, head of education at the Chester Beatty Library; and in-

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interviewed jointly, Tom Quinlan and Helen Hewson, keepers at the National Archives. A further two interviews were conducted with contributors who could offer a comparative perspective on the use of alternative internship schemes. Phil Kingston, community and education manager at the Abbey Theatre, was interviewed on his experience of managing interns on the Tús<sup>7</sup> programme; and Dr Marie Bourke, former head of education at the National Gallery, gave an insight into her department's independent internship programme, which she herself had founded in the early 90s.

A clear limitation of this study was its exclusion of intern perspectives at the corresponding NCIs. Lack of forwarding contact details for many previous interns, and the practicalities of canvassing such a large population within the study's timescale, led to the choice to focus on institutional perspectives. Importantly, however, the bulk of published research to date has primarily focused on interns' perspectives, and the voice and perspective of the employer is more frequently omitted – an imbalance this study sought to redress. Therefore whilst this research cannot be taken as wholly reflective of the full scope of the scheme's outcomes – either in terms of all NCIs, the wider arts/cultural sector, or in correlating both intern and employer perspectives – it does nevertheless fill a gap in sharing the lived experience of arts managers working with JobBridge and similar schemes.

### Evaluating the JobBridge scheme

The ongoing use of internships is an important and topical issue in the context of current social and economic developments, and has drawn increasing academic, public and media interest. JobBridge is a government initiative unique to Ireland, but analysis of the scheme by the DSP prior to 2016 was limited to only one evaluation commissioned in 2013. Increasing concern about the scheme and its effects encouraged trade unions and advocacy groups to conduct independent parallel research, contributing significant reports with a narrower focus on the use and outcomes of JobBridge. Despite this, the author's analysis of existing evaluations of the scheme revealed some limitations in terms of methodology, plurality of perspectives and analysis of data specific to the cultural and public sectors.

The first major independent evaluation of JobBridge was published by Indecon in April 2013, which examined the use of the scheme broadly across four sectors: private, public, community/voluntary, and unspecified (Indecon, 2013, p. 16). Problematically, the cultural sector could fall across any of these categories, owing to a variety of potential legal structures. While the 2013 Indecon report details findings of an extensive survey of both interns and host organisations, there is only one case study presented of a public sector host organisation, from which comparisons might be drawn with National Cultural Institutions. This case study offers very little detail, despite the organisation in question having taken on eighteen JobBridge interns (Indecon, 2013, p. 81). The public sector experience is noticeably neglected overall in the Indecon report, beyond passing references to possible consequences of the moratorium on employment opportunities in the sector (2013, p. ii, 15, 19, 59). The absence of data on public sector organisations is a weakness of the report, considering almost a quarter of JobBridge internships undertaken to that point had been in the public sector (Indecon, 2013, p. 111).

The more recent and final 2016 Indecon report aimed to deliver an evidence-based evaluation on 'the suitability, effectiveness and relevance of the JobBridge Activation Programme' (2016, p. 1), using varying methodological tools to assess three key outcomes of the scheme. Firstly, a counterfactual impact evaluation monitored a control group to determine the likely

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employment outcomes in the absence of the JobBridge scheme, of which it concluded that 'most of the benefits in terms of employment outcomes would have occurred in the absence of the Scheme' (2016, p. viii). The results do however suggest 'much more positive impacts for JobBridge than has been evident for many other labour market activation programmes' (2016, p. iii). This is interesting when considered in light of another distinguishing feature of JobBridge amongst other labour market activation programmes, being that it is 'the only activation measure available to short term unemployed [people]' (2016, p. 92). Secondly, an 'economic cost-benefit evaluation' was undertaken (2016, p. 1), which returned results suggesting that JobBridge only offers a 'net direct financial benefit for the Exchequer' if interns enter into employment that lasts for two or more years following their participation in the scheme (2016, p. 80). Finally, and most relevant in this context regarding its use in the cultural sector, Indecon carried out a participant survey assessment 'to ascertain the views and progression outcomes of interns and host organisations' (2016, p. 47). Notably as was the case for the 2013 report, the response rate to the Indecon survey was significantly higher for interns (33.5%) than for host organisations (23.3%) (2016, p. 47). Indecon cites that these survey findings provide 'a very strong foundation for the research' because 'all of the interns were given an opportunity to input' (2016, p. 47). However, it is unclear whether all host organisations had the same opportunity to contribute to the survey, which suggests a limitation on the insights presented there regarding the experience of host organisations of the scheme.

Indecon reports that the methodology for assessing this third outcome is particularly sound because of the very large number of respondents it received, stating that 'the survey evidence is much stronger than could be obtained from selective anecdotal material or from the results of very small samples' (2016, p. 47). While this may be true for the overarching purposes of the Indecon report, it is remarkable that the research shows that nearly a third of interns surveyed were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with JobBridge. While perhaps unsurprising, it is important to acknowledge that interns who were not currently in employment expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction (2016, p. 59). We know from Indecon's research that the progression rates into employment overall are greater for those who undertook internships in the private sector than in public sector or community and voluntary organisations (Indecon, 2016, p. 52), and this is to be expected given that the public sector recruitment moratorium only recently came to an end. However, an extended methodology that allowed for subsequent case studies, or further contributions from those interns and host organisations who expressed dissatisfaction with the scheme, would surely have offered greater insight to help shape Indecon's recommendations for change in this report.

This is particularly significant given Indecon's fifth recommendation in 2016, the most pertinent in the context of the National Cultural Institutions. Indecon advises 'there should be restrictions on the number of interns taken on by public sector organisations unless they have the potential to offer interns future jobs' (2016, p. 89). This is despite nearly half of the host organisation survey respondents citing a 'very important' or 'important' benefit of the scheme being that it 'overcomes restrictions on increasing employment' in their organisation (2016, p. 48), although only 6.7% of host organisations surveyed are Public bodies. Furthermore, the combined percentage of total internships in Public, Voluntary, Local Authority or Non-commercial semi-state host organisations is only 14.15% (2016, p. 9). It seems discriminatory to significantly reduce interns in Public bodies going forward, without investigating further the considerable amount of host organisations in other sectors who equally seem to lack the potential to offer future jobs to those interns.

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Further assessment of the areas of dissatisfaction with the scheme could also shed light on the findings showing that a majority of interns expressed discontent with the value of the top-up payment provided by JobBridge (2016, p. 86), demonstrating the interns' estimation of the value of the work they were contributing to their host organisations. Indecon recognises this concern in relation to the top-up payment, noting that 'interns are making a valuable input, and in some cases may after an initial period be undertaking similar activities to paid employees' (2016, p. 88). This statement echoes the wider industry concerns around defining internships, avoiding job displacement, and balancing the benefits received by both intern and host organisation. Yet, nearly 59% of host organisations surveyed stated that 'the most important reason [for participation in the JobBridge scheme] was that it enabled them to evaluate potential future employees' (2016, p. 48). This could indicate a risk of job displacement if employers are regarding internships as extensions of their recruitment process at the expense of the Exchequer, and without having to follow due diligence and HR procedure to protect those interns.

The grey area between the activities and contribution of interns and their status as 'interns' or 'employees' in their host organisations is mirrored by a lack of clarity or consistency in Indecon's 2016 report around the terminology used to refer to the JobBridge scheme and its participants. In the length of the report, the following variations are used to describe the JobBridge internship (the Scheme, the JobBridge Activation Programme, the Programme, trainee work experience, internship work experience), without clarification behind the variety of terms used. This echoes other findings on the consequences of the ambiguity of terminology (Lalor, 2013; Boughton, 2014; Holmquist, 2014), highlighting the dearth of clear policy guidelines detailing how internship and employment contracts should be distinguished. However, in a way Indecon's sixth recommendation addresses this concern by suggesting that JobBridge internships should be capped at three month terms, a time-frame which would allow for 'significant work experience benefits' for the intern, and after which time the interns should be hired as employees or their internship should be extended at the cost of the organisation (2016, p. 90).

Advocacy groups investigating the use of the JobBridge scheme in relation to specific sectors or socio-economic groups identified similar failings prior to the publication of the 2016 Indecon evaluation. A report published by The National Youth Council of Ireland (Doorley, 2015) surveyed and interviewed interns aged 18-25 years on their JobBridge experience to deepen knowledge of the scheme's outcomes for young people. However, Doorley's report omits the perspective of host organisations altogether (2015, p. 11), although the recommendation 'to enhance and reform the scheme to improve quality and support progression to sustainable employment' (2015, p. 29) would surely benefit from input by the organisations responsible for achieving these aims.

In a similar vein, a report published by the Education Division of IMPACT trade union was 'prompted by growing fears...at the improper use of the JobBridge scheme within the [education] sector' (Murphy, 2015, p. 3). In contrast to the Doorley 2015 and Indecon reports, the fifteen interview participants in the IMPACT 2015 study were a well-balanced sample group of 'academic, policy, trade union, non-government organisation and claimants groups' (Murphy, 2015, p. 5), although more detailed information about the interviewees is not provided. Overall, Murphy echoed Doorley's recommendations, stressing the need to dissolve the 'one size fits all' nature of JobBridge and 'reframe, resize and refocus internships in Ireland' (Murphy, 2015, p. 7). The IMPACT report stressed that as the Irish economy continues to recover and employment opportunities increase, the use of schemes such as JobBridge should be

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reviewed to ensure they were still relevant and viable pathways for jobseekers and host organisations in each sector (Murphy, 2015, p. 4). The DSP welcomed this suggestion and, in April 2015, advised that this feedback would be incorporated later in the year into 'an in-depth econometric evaluation of jobseeker outcomes from a range of activation programmes, including JobBridge' (DSP, 2015b).

In contrast, there has been minimal research undertaken regarding the use of JobBridge in the cultural sector, despite an Arts Council partnership with the DSP and local authorities that aimed to facilitate the scheme's expansion into the cultural sector (DSP, 2013b). In January 2014, Visual Arts Ireland published what it termed 'best practice guidelines for internships', in response to complaints by interns regarding their experience of JobBridge and other internship schemes (VAI, 2014, p. 8). Ninety-one individuals responded to a nationwide survey on internships, and provided some details of their experience. The authors also consulted with sixteen host organisations, including several of the National Cultural Institutions. However, VAI's report does not specify the data collection methods of the consultation process or explain the selection of organisations consulted, and their qualitative comments are summarised in very general terms. Ultimately the best practice guidelines presented (2014, p. 14-6) almost wholly address the needs and perspective of interns, rather than those of the host organisations, excepting their legal obligations in terms of health and safety, Garda vetting, annual leave, etc. Additionally, while the report declares that 'a strategic aim of internships should be to ensure that employment in the arts is seen as a sustainable career choice' (VAI, 2014, p. 8), it does not offer specific recommendations as to how internships can be managed by organisations to support a healthier and more balanced labour market.

Other arts resource organisations, such as Theatre Forum, have regularly featured sessions on precarity of labour and internship culture at annual professional conferences; however, this has not translated into data collection or reports on cultural labour, apart from that of artist practitioners. The recently published *Irish Museums Survey 2016*, the first survey of Irish museums in a decade, included for the first time questions on usage of JobBridge and other employment schemes (Mark-FitzGerald, 2016, p. 39-42). Overall it noted that Community Employment was the most common scheme utilised by museums (32.1% of respondents), followed by unpaid internships (25.6%) and JobBridge (24.4%), but more detailed information (apart from a few qualitative comments) was not pursued. The Arts Council has also rarely intervened with respect to employment issues in the arts, and failed to deliver on the initial promise of a 'toolkit of best practice' for cultural employers engaging JobBridge interns (DSP, 2013b). Perhaps ironically, the Arts Council's latest strategy document *Making Great Art Work* (2016) omits any mention of work in the cultural sector itself, beyond that of the individual artist and the internal governance of the Arts Council. With the wrapping up of JobBridge as a government programme, there is some danger that its impacts to date on the cultural labour market will go unevaluated. Therefore, the sharing of information and experience of interns and organisations is vitally important in adding to our understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

#### **A view from the bridge: employer experiences of JobBridge internships**

Much press attention has focussed on whether JobBridge offers participants valuable work experience and improved corporate knowledge and skills. It is worth remembering that the purpose of the scheme's expansion into cultural organisations was twofold: offering work experience to potential interns, as well as offering new forms of support 'to cultural organi-

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sations at a time of constrained resources' (DSP, 2013b). An important consideration is the form this support takes, and the extent to which benefits are derived by employers as a result of taking on JobBridge interns. This includes agreeing the appropriate duration for any internship providing temporary staffing solutions, to avoid potential recruitment inertia. In the cultural sector, the increasing number of skilled candidates available to arts organisations on a voluntary basis has been acknowledged as being of particular benefit to employers, and of consequence for interns themselves who encounter a high level of competition for places on these schemes (Lalor, 2013, p. 31). In contrast, a study on the impact of internships on other stakeholders within cultural organisations indicated that incidences of job displacement, unclear employment terms, and the time-consuming supervision of voluntary staff often reduced the overall benefit of any contribution made by interns to an organisation (Siebert and Wilson, 2013, p. 716-7). These studies informed the author's interview framework as detailed in the methodology, the findings of which will now be presented in detail.

### Experiences managing internships in five National Cultural Institutions

The research findings discussed hereafter are based on interviews with the following arts education professionals, who agreed to be interviewed, quoted, and identified within this study:

- Helen Beaumont, education and outreach officer at the National Museum;
- Jenny Siung, head of education at the Chester Beatty Library;
- Tom Quinlan and Helen Hewson, keepers at the National Archives;
- Phil Kingston, community and education manager at the Abbey Theatre;
- Dr Marie Bourke, former head of education at the National Gallery

Their views and perceptions are compared and contrasted throughout to the findings of the 2013 and 2016 Indecon reports on JobBridge, particularly the latter, given its recent publication and summative nature.

In the first instance, the qualitative research carried out for this study supported Lalor's theory (2013) that internships in the cultural sector are as beneficial for employers, and in some cases arguably more so, than for interns. There were several benefits perceived by employers using JobBridge and other internship schemes in the National Cultural Institutions, albeit to varying degrees. Firstly, in all cases organisations experienced an element of either direct or indirect value as a result of hosting an intern. An interesting spectrum became evident: the interview subjects who were most strongly affected by the staffing restrictions in their organisations (Beaumont, 2014; Siung, 2014; Kingston, 2014) also described their interns as contributing to the core work of the organisation. At the National Museum, the Abbey Theatre and the Chester Beatty Library, interns assisted in carrying out day-to-day delivery of outreach programmes; at the latter organisation interns also assisted in the management of the Library's social media platforms and membership programmes and which served to offer 'training opportunities for interns as well as address areas [of administrative support] that needed attention' (Siung, 2014). At the National Gallery, participants on Bourke's independent graduate internship scheme also contributed to the delivery of the organisation's public outreach programme, but it was stressed that the intern's involvement was primarily to offer 'training and experience' (Bourke, 2014). It was cited that educative tasks were allocated to JobBridge interns at the National Archives solely 'to offer people a bit of experience...and keep their skills current', albeit that the product of an intern's work could be 'mutually beneficial' in some cases - for example, digitisation projects could ultimately be added to the Archive's online

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catalogues (Quinlan, 2014). While in all cases, it was apparent that interns provided work of value, the contributors' estimation of the significance of that value to the organisation varied, from the provision of essential resources, to unsolicited but convenient by-products.

It was also noted in some cases that the interviewees expressed concern about the nature of work being undertaken by interns, when organisations had suffered extreme job losses. For example, Beaumont stated that in relation to the staffing restrictions resulting from the moratorium, 'JobBridge [interns] are not supposed to replace permanent staff...but how do you not have somebody doing work that somebody paid used to do, when you have those kind of losses?' (Beaumont, 2014). Such comments reflect a trend observable in the museum sector more broadly: in the *Irish Museums Survey 2016*, 40.6% of respondents across 118 Irish museums reported they were 'very dependent' on voluntary or unpaid labour (Mark-FitzGerald, 2016, p. 41). Another respondent noted that public demand of free cultural outreach services increased during the recession (Siung, 2014), while the number of paid staff to deliver these services remained stagnant or decreased. This resulted in an unsustainable workload for many education departments, which in turn prompted the use of internship schemes (Siung, 2014; Beaumont, 2014; Kingston, 2014).

These observations relate to a second benefit for employers identified in the research findings: the correspondence between the contributions made by interns of valuable work to each organisation, and the prior abilities and skills of those interns. In theory, the JobBridge scheme's top-up payment structure<sup>8</sup> should offer a broader spectrum of candidates to organisations and bring those furthest from the labour market closer to the workforce. This would also circumvent the prevailing issue of unpaid internships in the cultural sector, which excludes candidates who cannot afford to work for free (Siebert and Wilson, 2013, p. 716). However this author's research again supported Lalor's theory (2013, p. 31): according to interviewees, the demand for internships offered by the National Cultural Institutions was very high, with many applicants exceeding the minimum education (degree-level) and skillset requirements set by the organisations. The resulting high calibre candidates applying for these internships were likely to already be closest to the labour market. This mirrors data that has been reported by Indecon in organisations using JobBridge across all sectors. National figures in 2013 showed that 40% of JobBridge interns had a primary degree and nearly 75% had more than two years of employment prior to taking part in the scheme (Indecon, 2013, p. 12-3).

This study's original research revealed that in some cases, the number of applicants for each JobBridge placement was so high that it required multiple interview rounds (Siung, 2014). This gives an indication of the level of competition for these placements, and the level of discretion and selection available to the organisations taking on interns. Despite many applicants having already completed multiple internships, some employers remarked that remaining close to the labour market by undertaking another internship was considered preferable by interns to being unemployed. At the National Museum, for example, Beaumont noted that exit interviews with interns had consistently reported that participants felt placements were valuable and worth doing; in one instance, a JobBridge intern wrote that the placement 'greatly helped me grow as a person and repair some of the harm being unemployed can cause to your self-esteem and confidence' (Beaumont, 2014). As a result of the high interest in these internships, other interviewees reported that the JobBridge scheme offered the organisations 'very highly qualified people' whose skills 'matched the organisation' and whose contribution was 'highly valued' (Siung, 2014).

In addition to their corporate value, in some cases interns were described as providing a psychological and morale-boosting benefit. This was a surprising result of the study, as it

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was originally anticipated that host organisations might have experienced tension within the institutions as a result of offering internships, especially while staffing restrictions remained in place in the public sector (as per Siebert and Wilson's findings, 2013, p. 716-7). In other cases, the presence of interns was described as having more neutral effects on the work environment: in the National Archives and the National Gallery, internships were described as mainly educative in nature, and interns as supplementary, not integral, to core staffing. However, in the case of institutions where the prescribed scope of internships was stretched to aid in delivering the organisation's core activities, the interns' presence was also said to 'increase the amount of imagination, contribution and collaboration in the room' at the Abbey Theatre (Kingston, 2014); bring a 'new energy and new enthusiasm that lifts everybody' to the National Museum (Beaumont, 2014); and simply add to the resources at the Chester Beatty Library, which had been significantly reduced during the period of the recruitment moratorium (Siung, 2014).

The positive environmental effect of internships on some host organisations demonstrates an unexpected outcome of government internship schemes that has not been reflected in evaluation of other public services subject to similar staffing crises (Indecon, 2013; Murphy, 2015). However, the range of varying institutional experiences of JobBridge reported by respondents also supports the recent suggestion that the application of JobBridge across various industries in a 'one-size fits all' method is unsuitable in many cases, and needs to be revised accordingly to cater for the needs of different organisations (Doorley, 2015; Murphy, 2015). Even those benefits perceived as 'positive' by host organisations (e.g. the infusion of new perspectives by the presence of interns) run the risk of being superficial or over relied upon in the long term, if they are not managed and acknowledged as part of an overall staffing strategy. Employers could ideally be supported to build internship schemes into the organisation's strategic planning, to ensure they are creating job opportunities for these interns who will have valuable corporate knowledge, and who should be encouraged to return to the organisation when future job opportunities are made available.

Contributors to this study also identified the inflexibility of JobBridge internships as a weakness of the scheme from the perspective of the cultural institution, particularly in relation to the fixed and often problematic duration of JobBridge internships, and their relation to the possibility of subsequent employment. While JobBridge can take the form of either six- or nine-month internships, the average JobBridge placement lasted nine months (Burton, 2014). The interview findings showed that in two cases the organisation wished to keep the intern on after their nine-month placement had finished, although there was an understanding that internships 'can't be open-ended' (Beaumont, 2014). In these examples, interns successfully delivered core work that might previously have come under the remit of paid roles, but the hiring moratorium prevented these organisations from offering interns a paid position (a situation interns were made aware of from the outset). This resulted in the organisations losing their investment in experience and knowledge at the end of each nine-month internship period (Beaumont, 2014; Siung, 2014). This form of 'brain drain' in the publicly-funded sector was echoed in one of the comments on the *Irish Museums Survey 2016*, where a museum respondent noted the difficulty in keeping excellent workers, and was resigned to a role where they 'endeavour to give them as much varied experience as possible so that they can apply for full time positions elsewhere' (Mark-FitzGerald 2016, p. 42). This once again highlights the aforementioned critical dearth of sector-specific data within the Indecon reports, which prevents knowledge of the extent to which cultural sector internships resulted in employment within the sector. Anecdotally, in terms of whether previous interns had gained employment, interviewees of this author's research reported that: some past interns had progressed into

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employment for cultural organisations in Ireland or abroad (Beaumont, 2014; Bourke, 2014; Quinlan, 2014); others pursued freelance opportunities (Siung, 2014); several engaged in further study (Beaumont, 2014; Bourke, 2014; Kingston, 2014.); one intern engaged in voluntary work in the sector (Kingston, 2014); and one entered full-time employment in a different sector (Beaumont, 2014); nevertheless, it is difficult to determine how representative these responses are within the wider context of internships in the sector.

It is yet to be determined why JobBridge was initially developed to offer six- or nine-month placements rather than any other duration, and a call for explanation of this 'random sort of figure' (Hewson, 2014) was echoed by many contributors to the research (Beaumont, 2014; Siung, 2014; Quinlan, 2014). Bourke indicated that the twelve-month scheme she had independently developed for the education department at the National Gallery was, in her experience, the optimum internship length. A year-long programme marks the maximum recommended duration of internships on the international spectrum of best practice (Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum, 2013, p. 9), and this longer duration is also aimed predominately at graduate internships (CIPD, 2010, p. 7). Without any obligation for a cooling off period, the recruitment timeline for Bourke's scheme was staggered to facilitate a community of interns within the organisation and a 'gentle overlap' of outgoing interns providing handover training to incoming interns (Bourke, 2014).

While job displacement has often been at the centre of public criticism of the JobBridge scheme, it is worth considering the technicalities surrounding the use of this term. In the case of JobBridge, displacement has been defined as any occasion

where the internship opportunity being advertised is replacing an existing job vacancy or where a company terminates the employment of a staff member and then seeks to take on an intern to cover the duties previously undertaken by that staff member. (Burton, 2013)

This description falls within a grey area in the case of the institutions interviewed for this study, where owing to the restrictions of the moratorium, respondents observed that 'there aren't any jobs to be taken' (Beaumont, 2014). However, the research showed that the resources provided by JobBridge interns were sorely needed in some of these institutions, indicative of a workload that was exceeding the capacity of each organisation's existing staff. The maximum internship duration therefore caused problems for organisations that needed ongoing support (Siung, 2014; Beaumont, 2014). This was further complicated by the cooling-off period of six months before which a different JobBridge candidate could be offered the same internship; a sensible control rule initially implemented to prevent displacement and exploitation by organisations of interns and the JobBridge scheme, during a time of low job opportunities in these same companies. However, following a recommendation by Indecon (2013, p. 121) this rule was adjusted so that host organisations could be exempted from this cooling-off period if the most recent intern 'moves directly into employment, either with the host organisation or another company' (Burton, 2014). Yet, there was no possibility of exemption by direct employment for employers in the National Cultural Institutions operating under an inflexible recruitment moratorium. Furthermore, it was reported that a large proportion of the employers' time was spent training up interns whose placement would end several months later, resulting in the loss of corresponding corporate resources (Beaumont, 2014; Siung, 2014).

Interestingly, between the 2013 and 2016 Indecon reports, the position on optimum internship length has flipped. The 2013 report recommended that longer internships would 'maximise the learning for the intern', as employers prefer to hire candidates with at least a year's experience (Indecon, 2013, p. x). Indecon suggested the introduction of twelve or fifteen-month JobBridge internships whereby the employers would be responsible for contributing the top-up payment for the additional months, rather than the State (2013, p. x). While this comment

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appeared to refer to the scheme as a whole, in reality, this alternative would only relieve the State of the top-up payment in the case of the private sector. The proposed extension, mooted in 2013, was met with protests regarding potential job displacement, and the cap on a nine-month maximum duration of each JobBridge internship remained in place. More recently, in a reversal of position, Indecon recommended that the maximum period of trainee/work experience (supported by public expenditure) should be capped at three months, after which interns should be paid or hired (Indecon, 2016, p. xiii). However, the 2016 report justifies this position by noting that 'in periods of very high levels of unemployment, nine- or even 12-month internships may have been valid but this no longer applies' (p. xiii). The extent to which the arts/cultural sector no longer has 'very high levels of unemployment' is highly debatable. In any case, it is clear from the 2016 report that levels of dissatisfaction with pay and conditions of JobBridge interns generally has prompted Indecon to recommend the payment of minimum wage (at least) following a three month internship. Whether arts and cultural organizations, including the NCIs – several of which received small increases in grant-in-aid in the 2016 budget – can or will follow suit, remains to be seen.

### **JobBridge: compensation and employment pathways**

While one justification for the introduction of JobBridge into the cultural sector in 2013 was to continue to deliver on the scheme's policy of helping to get unemployed people back to work, the expansion of the scheme was also presented by the DSP as a logical step for cultural organisations, which have 'a long tradition of informal mentorship' (DSP, 2013b). This trend was also apparent in the research for this study, as the interview subjects offered examples of a rolling and generational culture of unpaid employment in the sector, themselves having done 'plenty of work for nothing' (Kingston, 2014), and acknowledging that within the NCIs, whether through JobBridge or other schemes, internships 'offered an opportunity to gain experience in areas of interest as well as provide training, and were the way a lot of people started their careers in the arts and cultural sector' (Siung, 2014). However, in the case of the recent JobBridge participants, rather than starting their careers with an internship, interviewees indicated some interns already possessed significant previous work experience. The research revealed that in many cases the interns provided skilled support to the cultural organisations in the form of a staffing stopgap.

Government schemes such as JobBridge and Tús were preferred by most commentators over those that offer no compensation at all, as they provided some financial support and removed barriers to access for those 'who could not afford to do an unpaid internship' (Beaumont, 2014). As Beaumont also noted, facilitating internships are an important form of the National Museum's access provision to the public, and are valued by the Museum as a means of supporting professional development in the sector. However, informants were also of the view that these nominal top-up amounts were not meeting an acceptable level of financial compensation (Beaumont, 2014; Siung, 2014), and it was expressed that there was a desire for 'some system whereby graduate interns could be paid a small stipend per internship, which would give those who are more disadvantaged greater opportunity' (Bourke, 2014). Bourke indicated that JobBridge internships were only considered for use in the National Gallery's education department on a case-by-case basis, as and when graduates made enquiries as to whether such opportunities could be made available in the department, but stressed that 'this did not preclude the scheme being used elsewhere in the Gallery' (2014). Bourke expressed that an additional reason for not using JobBridge in her department was that the criteria for her 'highly refined' internship scheme required candidates to be recent graduates of Art History, and interns could therefore avail of the opportunity to generate some income alongside their

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unpaid internship by working casually as guides within the National Gallery (Bourke, 2014).

Such means of additional earned income opportunities were not available in the other organisations interviewed, and several of these contributors demonstrated a heightened concern for the intern to maximise learning gains as an alternative form of compensation for their valued contribution to the organisations, as in one case 'it would feel like exploitation and I wouldn't be able to sleep at night' (Kingston, 2014). The structured nature of the National Museum's internships in the Education department, for example – which include learning contracts establishing mutual expectations, on-going processes of evaluation, and exit interviews – evidence how careful management of the JobBridge experience was pursued to ensure a high quality of experience in spite of the low levels of possible compensation (Beaumont, 2014).

Despite the concern expressed by contributors with regard to cultural organisations accepting a temporary culture of reduced-cost labour<sup>9</sup> in times of severe staffing restrictions, it is essential for these organisations and the sector as a whole to consider the potential consequences on the job market in the long term. The perpetuation of a culture of free or reduced-cost labour undermines recruitment competition between organisations, and normalizes unpaid employment. This latter shift has been publicly acknowledged by interns in Ireland, with some describing unpaid internships as 'a necessity' and 'an investment' (Holmquist, 2014). This is a particular concern in the cultural sector where the biggest employers have been restricted by a recruitment moratorium, and smaller arts organisations have limited paid opportunities available. It has been argued that paid entry-level and graduate positions in the cultural sector are at risk of being subsumed into internship positions if jobseekers have previously been competing to offer unpaid work of equivalent value to employers (Holmquist, 2014).

The issue of job displacement has been of ongoing concern in the two Indecon reports. For example, in 2013 public sector organisations were the least likely (0.6%) to have taken on a paid employee in the absence of the JobBridge scheme (Indecon, 2013, p. 86). This result could be attributed to the long-term public sector hiring restrictions at the time the report was undertaken, further reflected in the evidence that the public sector organisations were also least likely to have considered employing interns in the absence of the JobBridge scheme (Indecon, 2013, p. 86). While the 2016 Indecon report does not offer sector specific statistics on potential job displacement, it does acknowledge 'evidence of some level of displacement in a minority of cases'. However, the report goes on to estimate a relatively high but precautionary level of the scheme's job displacement at a rate of 29.1% (2016, p. 67), to take into account the methodological shortcomings of the DSP's internal audit report on the JobBridge scheme which concluded that 'it was not possible to verify or not that the internship was displacing a potential job vacancy' (2016, p. 63). Rather than adhere to 'general employment law requirements' JobBridge operated on a reliance on host organisations to self-declare compliance and be subject to random inspection visits, a decision which Indecon determines reasonable 'given the nature and scale of the JobBridge scheme' (2016, p. 63). However the Indecon report suggests that 'a more targeted Programme with a smaller number of host organisations' (2016, p. 91) would facilitate their recommendation that enhanced measures of monitoring should be included in any new government initiatives to target the resulting vulnerability of the scheme as regards identifying and preventing potential job displacement (2016, p. 63). Such a recommendation highlights once again the lack of legal framework relating specifically to the legal protection of interns in Ireland, which if in place could better inform and guide the development of clear guidelines on engaging interns, as recommended by Lalor in her analysis on the status and regulation of unpaid personnel in the cultural sector (2013, p. 32).

The discrepancy between transitions to paid employment within the public, community, and

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voluntary sector, versus its commercial counterpart, were starkly evidenced in the 2016 Indecon report. According to their survey of more than 10,000 previous interns across JobBridge, only 19.8% of interns hosted by public sector organisations, and 19.5% in the community and voluntary sector, went on to employment in those same organisations, in comparison with 31% of interns in the commercial sector (Indecon, 2016, p. 52-3). Overall rates of employment were also lower outside of the commercial sector: 77.8% of former interns in public sector organisations had gained employment of any kind, and 72.3% of those in the community and voluntary sector, versus 81.9% in the commercial sector (Indecon, 2016, p. 53). This is a clear indication that prospects of advancing to paid employment within these sectors was significantly worse, leading to the 2016 core recommendation warning that 'as part of the proposed targeting there should be restrictions on the number of interns taken on by public sector organisations unless they have the potential to offer interns future jobs' (Indecon, 2016, p. xii).

The lack of consistent segmentation of Indecon data into sectors hampers the ability to draw conclusions about the cultural sector overall. Nevertheless, this information indicates significant consequences for access to employment in the sector through the ongoing use of JobBridge and other internship schemes.

### Conclusion

The findings showed that internship schemes have been readily established in the National Cultural Institutions included in this study. Overall, it would appear that JobBridge had many short-term benefits for the National Cultural Institutions consulted, with the scheme providing highly skilled interns who contributed work of value and boosted morale in departments that had suffered severe staffing restrictions during the recruitment moratorium. However, there were also strong indications that qualified and experienced jobseekers were knowingly undertaking internships that were not leading to paid positions, a point reinforced by the 2016 Indecon data. This highlights that the dearth of job creation for graduate and non-managerial roles at NCIs is of major concern, and will likely have long-term consequences for the sector. In some cases of this study, there was a perception of the scheme as a short-term solution to a much greater staffing crisis in the public and cultural sector. It was nonetheless expressed that restrictions on the duration and overlap of JobBridge internships were a disadvantage of the scheme for those same institutions that considered themselves under-resourced, and who had come to rely upon such schemes. Despite this, the research revealed feelings of unease by contributors as regards the continued use of the scheme by highly capable and qualified candidates, and the prevailing culture of unpaid internships during a time of economic recession. Therefore the increased dependency on internship schemes should be a matter for both internal assessment and wider sectoral discussion, which should be aligned with the creation of real progression routes within cultural organisations as the economy recovers.

With the recruitment moratorium now lifted and a boost in funding announced for the National Cultural Institutions (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015, 2016), it is recommended that specific attention be focussed on further evaluation of the use of internships in cultural organisations. While it is unclear whether JobBridge will be substantively replaced or simply follow in the direction of previous similar government schemes and 'quietly disappear' (Bourke, 2014)<sup>10</sup>, the presence of internships within cultural organisations (paid and unpaid) is unlikely to evaporate. Evaluation of other experiences of JobBridge (and other schemes) may offer insight on preferable duration of internships and progression routes, as well as developing systems of equitable compensation. Consultation of cultural stakeholders and employers in the sector, using a qualitative interview methodology, could also offer key data for analysis of outcomes to expand on the research findings yielded here. A collaborative research and

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evaluation approach between representatives of the Departments of Social Protection and the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional and Rural Affairs, as well as the Arts Council and the local authorities that have been managing the scheme's expansion at a regional level, could provide a strong basis to address all outcomes of the use of JobBridge and other internship schemes in the cultural sector. This research could feed into a timely informed and dependable toolkit to be distributed by the Arts Council, which to date has not substantively addressed the issue of internship culture and employment at the organisations it funds. Ultimately, leadership at national and regional levels would benefit both host organisations and interns, and provide a much-needed framework for the future creation of real pathways to work in the Irish cultural sector.

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### NOTES

1. Segmentation of JobBridge data by Indecon (carrying out analyses on behalf of the Department of Social Protection) is divided variably, but often across the three broad categories of private sector/commercial organisations; public sector organisations, and community and voluntary sector organisations. Data specific to arts/cultural organisations (subsumed within the last two categories particularly) cannot unfortunately be extracted.
2. This essay is based on research carried out as part of an MA thesis in Cultural Policy and Arts Management at University College Dublin, 2014.
3. As of September 2016.
4. FÁS, The Irish National Training and Employment Authority, originally administered JobBridge. However, FÁS was dissolved in 2013, at which point JobBridge came under the full remit of the DSP.
5. There are eleven National Cultural Institutions in Ireland. A Director of each of these organisations sits on the Council of National Cultural Institutions, a statutory body established under the Heritage Fund Act, 2001.
6. The NCIs comprise the National Archives, National Library of Ireland, National Museum of Ireland, National Gallery of Ireland, Arts Council, Heritage Council, Irish Museum of Modern Art, National Concert Hall, Chester Beatty Library, Abbey Theatre, and Crawford Art Gallery.
7. The Tús scheme began in 2010 and provides 12-month part-time (less than 20 hours per week) work placements in community and voluntary organisations for people who have been unemployed for at least 12 months. Managed by the Department of Social Protection, Tús allows candidates to maintain their social welfare payment while receiving a small weekly stipend of about €20 (Citizens Information, 2014).

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8. JobBridge interns receive an allowance from the Department of Social Protection equivalent to their current Social Welfare allowance plus an additional €52.50 per week for the duration of the internship. This top-up payment is made by the DSP and organisations must not pay top up contributions.

9. The term 'reduced-cost labour' is used to refer to JobBridge here, as the DSP is responsible for paying the weekly stipend, and therefore the JobBridge labour comes at a reduced-cost basis to the organisation, whose primary indirect costs include staff time and management of internships.

10. Bourke stated on her experience of managing interns at the National Gallery 'for quite a number of years we did work with Manpower and Fás, and then those schemes just, with the Celtic Tiger, seemed to quietly disappear' (2014).

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