

Unpaid work experience rife in Australia – report

January 18 2017

Unpaid work experience is widespread in Australia, with more than half of young adults having undertaken an unpaid placement, according to research conducted for the Federal Government's Department of Employment.

The research, the first of its kind in Australia, found that among those aged 18-29, some 58 per cent had undertaken at least one episode of [unpaid work](#) experience in the past five years. Overall, the research estimates a third (34%) of Australians aged 18-64 have done so.

Of those who undertook unpaid work experience, 36 per cent said their most recent placement lasted more than a month. One third had undertaken a single internship or placement, while 21 per cent had undertaken five or more episodes in the past five years.

The results are consistent with previous studies, including a [2013 report](#) commissioned by the Fair Work Ombudsman. These have suggested internships are becoming increasingly common and that there are both opportunities and costs associated with participation. But unlike the new report, those studies were not able to provide clear estimates of the prevalence of unpaid work experience in Australia.

The researchers, Dr Damian Oliver of UTS Business School, Professor Paula McDonald of QUT, and Professor Andrew Stewart and Associate Professor Anne Hewitt of Adelaide Law School, surveyed a nationally representative sample of people of working age.

"Internships can certainly provide a useful bridge between education and work", said Professor Stewart. "They can allow employers to test out potential staff and [young people](#) to get a taste of what a job might be like. But the more prevalent they become, the more important it is to ensure that they are properly managed and regulated."

People in the survey did work experience in all kinds of industries, and for many different reasons, the researchers found. For some it was part of their education or training, while others undertook it to maintain access to [social security benefits](#). But a significant number of unpaid internships or job trials are being organised by job-seekers themselves, or established by organisations for their own purposes.

Overall, respondents reported very high levels of satisfaction with their unpaid work experience, especially when undertaken through a university or vocational education and training provider. Most thought that their most recent episode would help them to find employment, improve their networks, determine if a field of work was right for them, and develop their understanding of career opportunities in that field.

"Participants mostly thought that the unpaid work experience had improved their skills and enhanced their employment prospects ", said Dr Oliver. "One in four respondents reported that they were offered paid work by their host organisation."

However the survey results did not give any clear indication as to whether participating in work experience improved a person's chances of finding a job.

What the survey did reveal, on the other hand, was an "access gap". The results suggest that young Australians from lower socio-economic backgrounds (as defined by their parents' highest level of education) were less likely to participate in unpaid work placements. So too were

those from regional areas, compared to people living in capital cities

Professor McDonald said this could "contribute to higher levels of social stratification and inequality if unpaid work continues to expand and becomes an essential prerequisite for securing ongoing employment".

Professor McDonald said the survey showed that there were costs involved in securing internships that could exclude people who are economically disadvantaged, such as travel and equipment costs or having to give up paid work elsewhere in order to take up the unpaid [work experience](#).

"There's a great degree of willingness from young people to participate in internships", said Dr Oliver. "The challenge is ensuring that those who struggle to afford an unpaid placement aren't excluded from employment opportunities."

More information: Unpaid Work Experience in Australia Report, December 2016: www.employment.gov.au/news/unp...report-december-2016

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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