

Opinion: It's time we stopped exploiting interns and paid them for the hours worked

July 3 2023, by Anne Hewitt



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Many people, at some stage in their search for a career, have worked for free in return for some much valued experience. But it's surprisingly hard to find exact numbers.

A 2016 [national survey](#) of 3,800 Australians found more than half (58%) of respondents aged 18 to 29 and more than a quarter (26%) aged 30 to 64 had done [unpaid work](#) at least once in the previous five years.

There is [also data](#) suggesting more than a third (37.4%) of Australia's university students are doing courses which involve real work as part of their tertiary studies. In 2017 that amounted to 451,263 work-related learning experiences.

This is not uniquely Australian. In 2013 an [EU survey](#) of 12,921 people found 46% aged from 18 to 35 had done at least one internship, with more than half of those being unpaid.

Why people are prepared to work for free

So why are so many people around the world signing up to do unpaid jobs, in the guise of traineeships, internships or work experience.

One reason must be the strong promotion of internships as a step from education to employment. Employers have frequently identified [practical experience](#) as an important factor in deciding who to hire.

Internships have also been enthusiastically endorsed by many [universities](#) plus [industry and government](#) as a way to help students develop relevant skills to move into the graduate labor market.

With these groups backing internships, is it any wonder so many students and graduates believe an internship is essential to securing graduate employment? But there's a downside to internships stakeholders are reluctant to discuss.

Not everyone can get an internship

When internships are either a prerequisite for professional accreditation or pseudo mandatory—you can't get a job without one—then only those who have completed a placement can enter the profession.

Those who [can't afford to do unpaid work](#) or lack the connections to secure a placement, may be left behind. This can be a tragedy for the individual, whose dreams of work in a particular industry might be dashed.

As well, the proliferation of unpaid (or low-paid) internships has the potential to have a much broader impact. It risks [entrenching existing disadvantage](#) and limiting diversity in professions.

It may also displace paid employment and undermine labor standards, as employers replace paid workers with a revolving door of interns who are treated as "[cheap dead-end labor](#)".

This is not a theoretical concern, there is [evidence](#) some of Australia's tertiary students face obstacles which limit their capacity to secure or complete internships.

This [includes](#) disadvantaged students, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, [rural areas](#), those who are Indigenous and others who cannot do work placements required to get professional accreditation.

These poor outcomes are driving calls for reform. The European parliament [recently endorsed](#) a proposal to amend the 2014 Quality Framework for Traineeships requiring all trainees in EU countries be fairly remunerated.

What is being done to regulate internships

On top of this, a growing number of countries have increasingly tough regulations regarding internships. For example, France banned open market internships in 2014, and now only allows regulated internships which are completed by a university student as part of their studies.

The French regulation sets out stringent supervision requirements from both workplace host and university and obligations for payment when the internship exceeds a set period. Belgium, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovenia have also implemented specific laws requiring [payment](#) for open market traineeships.

The EU's response to concerns about unpaid internships highlights the need for Australia to consider its position.

Currently, [Australian regulations](#) fail to regulate internships in any comprehensive way.

Instead, there are piecemeal rules dealing with isolated issues such as protecting interns against discrimination or harassment or ensuring universities' [internship](#) courses meet set standards.

While these issues are important, dealing with them in isolation does not resolve the broad and complex issues internships raise.

The future of unpaid work

Most stakeholders value internships so they are likely to continue. Therefore, we need to consider how they can be regulated to reduce negative outcomes and maximize the benefits. This will require a [national debate](#) to answer a range of difficult questions, including:

- what do we think the value of work is, and what is the impact of allowing unpaid work on individuals and society? Are we

prepared to accept this impact?

- who should pay for training and skills development: individuals, employers, or society?
- who in our workplaces should be protected by labor laws and who should be excluded?

Once we have these answers, we can decide what the role of internships in Australia should be, and craft a regulatory regime to achieve that. Perhaps our conclusion should be, as articulated by the EU parliament, that it's time we stopped exploiting interns and paid them a fair day's pay.

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