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Doctorates without borders – Academic online freelancers and their earnings

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Abstract: This paper examines hourly rates and earnings of 427 doctoral-educated Academic Writing and Research freelancers on Upwork, the world’s largest online freelancing website. Academic research is a highly specialised endeavour and PhD graduates often struggle to find employment that matches their specialist knowledge. National labour markets are “thin”, with few local buyers and sellers in specialised areas. This creates difficulties matching demand and supply, particularly in developing countries. Online freelancing websites bring possibilities for highly skilled academics to utilise their specialised skills in a larger global market, but also threatens the traditional training and maturation process of academic careers.

Paper: The academic labour market is often characterised by strong national defining elements for entry and progression. Competition for entry into academic careers is primarily within a national market, with new PhDs competing for a limited number of positions. Where international markets exist, they involve mobility (or threats of mobility) between national career structures. For example, conceptual studies of international academic labour markets focus on the bifurcation between a small “globally employable elite” with global freedoms, and those bound to the national labour market (Marginson, 2007, 2009). However, the rise of online freelance websites offers a genuinely international labour market place where access does not involve mobility or formal contracts of employment.

When discussing the differential impact of technology and online outsourcing on work, de Groen and colleagues (2016) distinguish between the local vs global provision of services, and low vs high skilled work. Most research on outsourcing and the ‘gig’ economy focuses on low or semi-skilled work that is coordinated online and provided locally (e.g. Uber) or coordinated online but provided remotely (e.g. Amazon’s Mechanical Turk or general outsourcing of IT, customer services, etc.). Studies on highly skilled workers are largely absent. This paper will focus on hourly and lifetime earnings of doctoral-educated freelancers engaging in academic research work, including changes in hourly earnings over the course of a one-year period.

Data

Upwork is the world's largest only freelance website where (often highly educated) freelancers compete for task and project-based work, including academic research projects, with rates of pay largely detached from local labour market structures. Academic research freelancers are those in the Upwork database with "PhD" in their profile and "Academic writing and research" in their work category (3,070 results). Freelancer data was initially drawn from the Upwork website in August 2018 and again for a sample of freelancers in June 2019. 902 freelancers had earnings in August 2018 (29%), the remaining 2,170 freelancers (71%) had no completed projects. This article will focus on 427 freelancers with earnings and complete profiles.

Table 1. Academic research freelancer characteristics

Characteristic

Hourly rate

Amount earned

Success Rate

Region

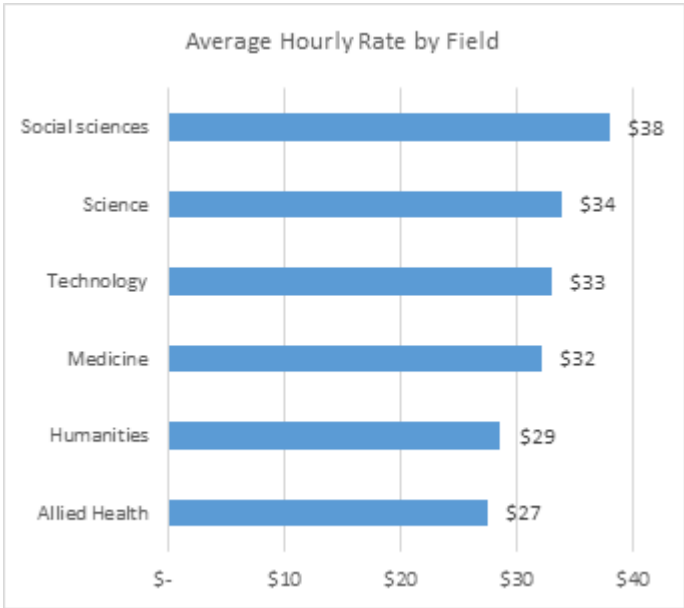
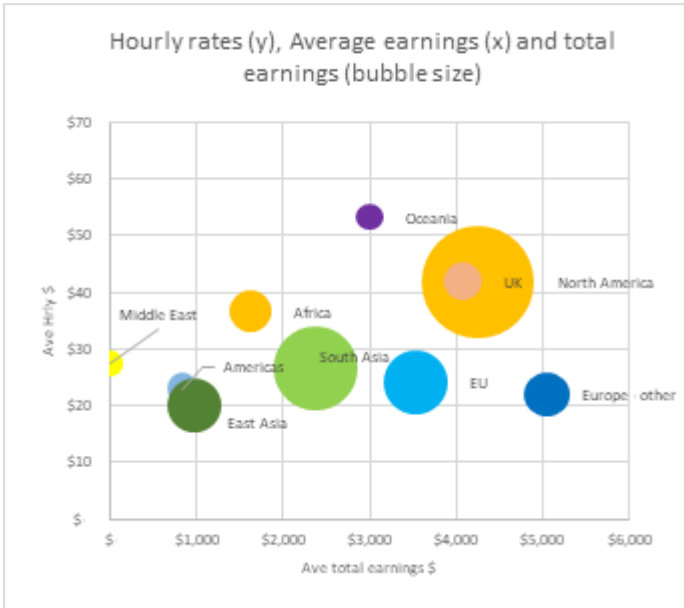
PhD year

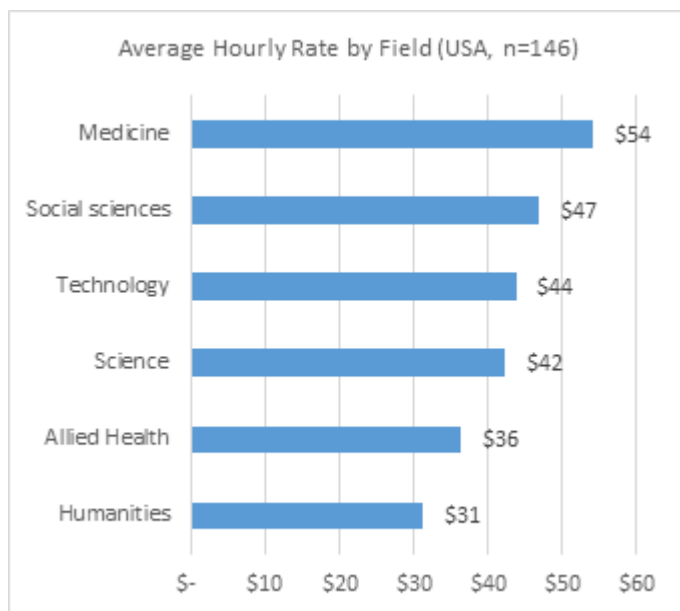
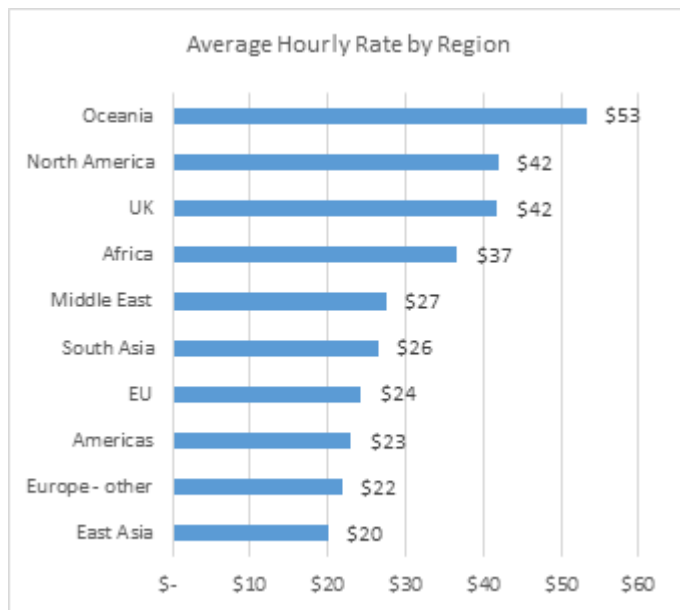
PhD field

Results

Three quarters (75%) of freelance researchers had no earnings or had earned less than \$1,000 USD (7%) in August 2018, but 42 freelancers (10%) had earned in excess of \$10,000 USD and 10 in excess of \$50,000 USD. North America was the main region for freelance researchers (35%), followed by South Asia (20%), EU (13%) and East Asia (9%). North America also generated the around half of the total earnings (~\$750,000, 50%). Freelance hourly rates are compressed across countries compared with regular entry-level academic earnings, where academics in wealthy countries may earn up to ten times more than these in developing countries (Altbach, Reisberg, Yudkevich, Androushchak, & Pacheco, 2012). Oceania had the highest hourly earnings (\$53 per hour), followed by North America and the UK (\$42), with the lowest rates in East Asia (\$22) and Eastern Europe (\$23). Hourly rates were highest in the social sciences (\$38) and lowest in non-medicine allied health fields (\$27), however,

there is an interaction between country of origin and hourly rate. Within the USA, rates vary from \$54 in Medicine to \$31 in Humanities.





Of the 42 profiles with earnings in excess of \$10,000 USD in August 2018, 40 still had active profiles in June 2019. The average hourly rates increased from \$43.60 in August 2018 to \$46.80 in June 2019, including one freelancer who reduced their hourly rate from \$80 to \$60. Future analyses will examine how hourly rates are associated with reported success rate, years since PhD and total earnings, as well as those earning less than \$10,000 USD.

Discussion

The “unbundling” of teaching from research, and the potential to separate routine research tasks (e.g. data cleaning, transcribing, basic statistical analysis and reporting) from more advanced analytical tasks, increases the potential for online outsourcing. This brings about possibilities for highly skilled academics to utilise their specialised skills in a larger global market, but threatens the

traditional training and maturation process of academic careers as certain tasks typical of research assistant positions become open to international competition. The suitability of UpWork for outsourcing will likely increase as more freelancers join UpWork, complete work and gain reputation, and offer an increasing range of specialised and advanced skills. However, academic freelancers in high earnings countries will likely face lower earnings than those in regular, or even casual, academic employment. The suitability of university authorship and research integrity policies may also become more complicated as research performance becomes less transparent. Future research may investigate the motivations of freelancers and their preferences, as well as the motivations and geographical locations of clients hiring academic freelance workers.

References

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