

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Participation in paid, unpaid and 'hidden' internships at six months after graduation: Are some graduates excluded?

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Research Domain: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract: The role that graduate internships play in social mobility and/or socio-economic reproduction has been the subject of considerable debate in the literature. There has been a dearth, however, of reliable quantitative evidence on the extent to which those from disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from participating in different types of internships. Not least because of difficulties identifying and quantifying internships in regular surveys. Building on previous research (Hunt and Scott, 2018) this paper examines the extent to which graduates from different backgrounds engage in paid, unpaid and 'hidden' internships (i.e. those reported as 'voluntary' jobs) soon after graduation. In doing so the research examines the question of whether those from lower socio-economic groups are disadvantaged in accessing internships and, consequently, in the scramble for graduate jobs.

Hunt, W. & Scott, P. (2018). Paid and Unpaid Graduate Internships: Prevalence, quality and motivations at six months after graduation. *Studies in Higher Education*,

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Introduction

Graduate internships are one means by which individuals can gain advantage in a congested graduate labour market (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Smith, 2010). They are thought to improve employability by providing valuable workplace experience, developing networks and industry specific knowledge and skills (CIPD, 2010; Lawton and Potter, 2010). At the same time there are concerns about exploitation of young aspirants and that unpaid internships exclude those without the requisite financial resources and social networks from accessing key industries and professions (Milburn, 2009, 2014). There is growing evidence that unpaid internships after graduation do not help in the graduate labour market and may in fact have negative consequences for employability (Holford, 2017; Purcell et al., 2012; Hunt, 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence that questions of access go deeper than

simple questions of affordability with social class playing a major role in determining who has access to the best opportunities (Hunt and Scott, 2018a; Holford, 2017). Thus, there is clearly a need to understand the extent of the practice and to further explore patterns of participation and access.

Existing quantitative data on the extent and patterns of participation are limited. Evaluations of government-backed schemes are outdated and may not be representative of wider practice (Mellors-Bourne and Day, 2011; Oakleigh Consulting Ltd. and CRAC, 2011) whilst more recent estimates using Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data have failed to capture internships accurately or account for item non-response when considering pay (Sutton Trust, 2014; Holford, 2017; Montacute, 2018).

Recent research using the 2011/12 DLHE (Hunt and Scott, 2018b) found:

- 25% of 'voluntary workers' were doing jobs not usually associated with voluntary work (e.g. graphic designers, journalists, management consultants and PR professionals) and therefore could be assumed to be unpaid internships;
- around 50-58% of internships were unpaid (up to 80% in some occupations/industries);
- there are notable differences between paid and unpaid internships in terms of access, motivations and qualification requirements.

Recent figures from the DLHE suggest that self-defined internships are rising and the proportion that are unpaid may be declining (Sutton Trust, 2014; Montacute, 2018). However, these figures do not take account of 'hidden internships' and more research is needed to examine whether the decline in unpaid internships is real or whether they are simply being rebadged as 'voluntary' positions. Furthermore, up-to-date research is needed to investigate the question of whether disadvantaged groups are being excluded from internships.

The research reported in the current paper employs and builds upon a reliable methodology for identifying graduate internships carried out at six months after graduation using 2-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and 4-digit Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. This includes internships reported as 'on an internship' in the survey, as well as 'hidden' internships: activities reported as 'voluntary work' but not in occupations or industries normally associated with the voluntary sector (Hunt, 2016; Hunt and Scott, 2018b). Examples of 'hidden' internships in the 2011/12 data include: graphic designers, journalists, management consultants and PR professionals.

The analysis presented shows the true extent of engagement in graduate internships at an embryonic stage of graduates early careers and the extent to which these experiences are paid or unpaid in different occupations and industries. The analysis also examines participation in internships among graduates from different socio-economic groups and examines patterns of advantage and disadvantage in access to the best internships.

Research questions and methods

The research involved secondary analysis of data from the 2016/17 DLHE: a census of employment and education activities of leavers from UK higher education institutions (HEIs) six months after leaving – and examined the following research questions:

- 1) What is the extent of 'hidden' internships and has it increased/decreased?

2) What is the true extent of paid and unpaid graduate internships at 6 months and how has it changed?

3) In which industries and occupations are paid and unpaid internships most common?

4) What are the participation patterns in internships and which factors are related to (dis)advantage in access?

A refined definition of 'hidden internships' was developed using the most recent data available from the DLHE. This enabled a more accurate and up-to-date estimation of the extent of paid and unpaid internships than reported elsewhere (e.g. Sutton Trust, 2014; Holford, 2017; Montacute, 2018). Measuring internships in this way allowed a more accurate estimation of how participation in the practice has changed over time and a detailed examination of participation patterns among disadvantaged groups.

The analysis employed multinomial logistic regression (a multivariate analysis technique) to investigate which factors predict participation in paid and unpaid internships (including social class, ethnicity, age, gender, grades and type of institutions studied at) while holding other characteristics constant.

By examining the above research questions the findings help further academic debates about disadvantage in transitions into employment and the potential role internships play as either a bridge to social mobility or as a mechanism of socio-economic reproduction.

This research is particularly timely as, from this year the change to the 'Graduate Outcomes' survey means that only internships engaged in at 15 months after leaving university will be captured, missing any completed before this timepoint: the majority. Thus, the 2016/17 DLHE presents possibly the last chance to investigate participation in paid, unpaid and hidden internships at a key early stage in graduates' careers, and allows us to compare trends since 2011/12.

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