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Capitals and Compromises: How students use unpaid work to facilitate career mobilities

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Unpaid work increasingly enables students and graduates to experience career-related mobilities – social, geographical and between jobs and sectors. This experience may take the form of internships, work placements, work experience, volunteering and other activities and may take place locally, nationally and internationally.

This qualitative research paper explores the lived experiences of twenty-four students and recent graduates who undertook various unpaid work experiences. It illustrates the everyday challenges and opportunities they encountered and how they navigated such ‘career mobility opportunities’ within a fast-changing and often confusing labour market. However, many such opportunities are unpaid or facilitated by personal and family contacts, all of which can further disadvantage individuals who do not have the money or contacts to support them. The research considers how HE professionals can best prepare and support students to access, make sense of and utilise their experiences beyond simply collecting content for their CV.

Full paper

Social policy decisions and market conditions relating to higher education, work and careers guidance have impacted strongly upon

students and recent graduates with both intended and also unintended, unforeseen consequences. Many big data surveys emphasise the negative impact, particularly upon less advantaged individuals (for example, inequality of outcomes based on gender, ethnicity, disability and geographical location). This research, whilst acknowledging this context, sought to foreground stories of successful social and geographical mobility and to evaluate the university support and intervention strategies which had a positive impact.

This qualitative research project used interpretive phenomenology which aims to explore, understand and represent structures of shared experience. Most participants were the first in their family to go to university and/or from lower socio-economic groups.

This research is informed by interpretive phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) as well as sociological theories relating to structure and agency (Bourdieu 1986, Giddens 1984). Concepts from the fields of career studies and psychology such as 'boundaryless career' (Arthur 1994), 'planned happenstance' (Krumboltz 2009) and 'psychological contract' (Rousseau, 1995) also help to explain ways in which students and graduates navigate their transition to the world of work.

Findings

The research highlights how unpaid work is a pervasive aspect of student life and can take many forms. Pressures of juggling unpaid work with studies had implications for physical and psychological wellbeing, particularly for mature and less affluent participants. Many reported episodes of anxiety during or as a result of career mobility experiences. Despite most of the participants being 'non-traditional' students (e.g. new universities, first in the family, other WP criteria) most of them were successful in attaining first class degrees and top graduate roles within 18 months. This may be attributable to university initiatives which gave them an advantage (Funded Ethical Placements, Employability module & Leadership Programme).

Social relationships were pivotal to the way in which students accessed, learnt from, coped with and mobilised opportunities. Other people, particularly parents, HE professionals and unofficial workplace mentors, were often cited as highly influential and inspirational in facilitating opportunities and supporting participants during them.

Through unpaid work, students spanned geographical and occupational boundaries, expanding their horizons and applying their knowledge and skills in a range of contexts before settling into a career. They balanced compromise and sacrifices with the optimism of long-term gratification, i.e. they were prepared to work unpaid at this stage of their life/career but expected it to be a transitional arrangement. Some felt misguided when this meritocracy did not readily materialise.

The concept of boundaryless careers was illustrated as participants crossed spatial, temporal and sectoral borders. There was often a symbiotic relationship - beneficial to the participant and to the host organisation. Participants often found their experiences surpassed their expectations of instrumental 'CV building', some even describing them as 'life-changing'.

Recommendations

Unpaid career mobility experiences can be highly valuable to students and graduates, not only in helping them to become more 'employable' but also in more fundamental ways which prepare them to be adults and good citizens - locally, nationally and globally. However, appropriate and timely support is needed in order to help them to access and make the most of these experiences.

1. HE professionals need to be aware of and acknowledge the wider lives and activities of individual students (e.g. work, care commitment, aspirations and experiences of geographical mobility) and account for this in teaching and guidance.
2. Transition and mobility can be inherently unsettling. Students need to develop a range of life-skills which will help them in the world of work and are also more generally relevant, for example, coping strategies, information literacy, cultural competence, financial management, problem-solving and

decision-making.

3. Concepts such as social mobility, career capital and psychological contract are key to transition. Explicitly labelling and critically exploring them with students is likely to help them to understand and navigate challenges.
4. 'Graduate Outcomes' survey acknowledges it can take a while to settle into a first career and that success can mean more than just an initial 'graduate job' and high salary. so Higher Education should also prepare students for longer term career management

Conclusion

This research took place during a time of seismic change both in the lives of the individuals and the landscape of Higher Education, examining how individuals proactively exercised social, geographical and career mobilities. This is even more important now, as we recover from the effects of the pandemic, Brexit and cost of living crisis – particularly for graduates at the start of their careers.

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