

Text 3

Half of all student internships still unpaid

The Guardian, September 5th 2011

Nearly half of all internships undertaken by university students are unpaid, according to latest figures.

A survey by university careers agency Graduate Prospects asked 22,000 UK graduates between 2006 and 2010 if they did any work experience while studying for their degree. More than 70% reported they had secured some form of experience, often by taking on casual paid work. Others did unpaid voluntary work or secured an internship. Of the internships undertaken 43% were not paid.

Chief executive of Graduate Prospects Mike Hill said: "Despite the hype around unpaid work experience placements over the last few years, we can see from this study that a huge proportion of interns still have to work for free."

Earlier this year the TUC, backed by the government and several major employers' institutes, published the first code of best practice for high-quality internships. It states that companies offering a placement of six weeks or more should pay the national minimum wage (NMW) - currently £5.93 for those aged 21 and over and £4.92 for 18-20s - to an intern if they are contributing to a company, have a list of duties and are working set hours. However, NMW legislation does not cover internships undertaken by those in full-time education, offering a convenient legal loophole for employers seeking to take advantage of unpaid student labour.

Even so, Becky Heath, chief executive of interns' rights organisation Internocracy, claimed the report showed how "the erosive culture of unpaid internships is affecting students as well as those who have graduated and are looking for work". She added: "Although many employers are very conscientious about taking on young people, in many instances students are required to get work experience and this is exploited by unscrupulous employers. It's a trend which will only continue to grow as support for young people is stripped away. With the scrapping of the future jobs fund, many students and graduates are forced to do placement after placement of unpaid work, all for the hope of a decent job."

The Prospects survey also showed that nearly a third of students found their internships through family or friend networks - almost as many as those who secured placements through their university careers services.

The issue divided prime minister David Cameron and his coalition deputy Nick Clegg earlier this year, with the Lib Dem leader arguing that the practice of giving work experience to personal acquaintances is a bar to social mobility.

Separate figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that 28% of graduates who left university in 2007 were still not in full-time work three-and-a-half years later.

2686 signes