Work Experience

exploiting the dream

Work experience can be a double-edged sword. As part of a properly recognised course it is an invaluable way to gain the hands-on experience required to secure that crucial first job. But this should never mean months of unpaid exploitation at the hands of ruthless employers enjoying free or cheap labour.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is the first organisation to work with journalism students to produce best practice guidelines for the treatment of those on work experience. These guidelines will become a key campaigning tool for NUJ members as we work to end the exploitation of those entering the profession.

Journalism training has always had a strong emphasis on work experience to hone students' skills and help them build contacts. The NUJ recognises that students can benefit hugely from well-structured work experience placements to practice existing skills, learn new ones and experience journalism in a practical, rather than theoretical, environment.

However, in recent years work experience has grown from a short placement as part of a recognised course to months of unpaid or poorly paid work which can continue long after a student has become fully qualified.

This practice is unlawful. Media organisations use unpaid work experience placements for months at a time as a way of employing qualified staff for no money. If the work is good enough to be published then the journalist is good enough to be paid.

A comprehensive survey among student and former student members of the NUJ showed they have had enough of being exploited. The NUJ, with more than 3,000 student members, is giving a voice to student concerns.

Jeremy Dear,
General Secretary

What really happens?

More than 500 student and ex-student members of the NUJ were surveyed. Among the findings were:

- A period of work experience was a compulsory part of the qualification for 67.5% of students; 44% of these students also went on to undertake further work experience after gaining their qualifications.
- Nearly 60% of students are instructed by their college to undertake more than a month's un-paid work.
- On average, students are undertaking work placements in at least three different organisations. However, eight students had been to more than five different organisations and some often returned to the same organisation more than once.
- Nearly 70% of students received no expenses during their work placement. Many were required to travel to research stories and still received no compensation.
- More than 80% of students on placements had their work published or broadcast during their work experience placements. Of these, 82% did not receive any payment.
- 72 students were promised a paid position once they had completed a period of work experience. Only 50 students were actually offered a position after the placement.
- Only 31% of the students have found full-time work since completing their training.

> "At my local paper I was given several bylines including a front page exclusive but I was not even offered payment for my travel expenses."

What the students said

"I have found the experience of getting a foot through the door very disconcerting. I have had to leave work placements to earn money, just so I can actually afford to be on a placement. Having my work published with a byline was a great experience but if you're not paid for your work it is difficult to gauge whether it is of any value."

"I thought there was a chance of a full-time job within the company at the end of my work experience, but they were actually making people redundant. I was helping with the increasing workload. I think that work experience should be more regulated to stop companies taking advantage of students in what is a very competitive industry."

"It is unbelievably competitive and there is a bias towards people who can afford to just hang around and work for free. Also, there is a major bias towards people who have relatives who work in the industry who can get them work experience through alternative routes. What this means is that they are more likely to be able to stay on as there is not a long queue of people behind them waiting for their two weeks of work experience. I personally think work experience and making contacts is the only way to get anywhere but I didn't realise quite how long it would take."

> "I did try to find work experience after graduation, but found it difficult to find something part-time that would fit in around my family obligations (I am a mother of two young children). It seems most organisations are unwilling to offer flexible or part-time work experience."

What the law says

HM Revenue & Customs insists that all work experience placements are covered by the National Minimum Wage regulations. Only students on work placements of up to one year that are endorsed by their university or college as being beneficial to the coursework, some apprentices, some trainees of government-funded schemes and those of compulsory school age are exempt from the minimum wage.

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Employers offerings such placements, even for much shorter periods, require a letter from the student's college confirming that the work placement is of benefit to the student.

All other work experience placements are covered by the minimum wage – even employers offering unemployed workers work experience to help them improve their CVs must pay the minimum wage for that worker's age.

Some people doing work experience may be entitled to a wider range of employment rights including protection from discrimination, unfair and wrongful dismissal. They may also benefit from laws governing working hours, rest periods and holidays.

If in doubt email: *training@nuj.org.uk*

For further advice see *www.thompsons.law.co.uk* or *www.dti.gov.uk*

MY LIFE AS THE 'WORK EXPERIENCE GIRL'

I'm an MA Journalism graduate and as a student spent a month working on the Sunday magazine of a national newspaper.

The magazine had at least three full-time work experience positions at any one time, two of whom receive a £50 a week stipend. I was told I was not eligible for the stipend as I was doing 'a different sort of work experience'. I insisted that I was told I would get it, and that other students on my course who had done work experience at the paper had received it, and I was finally given it (although it was made clear that I was creating 'a problem' and that 'this sort of thing' would need to be ironed out in future).

My duties mainly included sorting the post for several hours a day. The manner of most of the other staff was superior – they treated me like a servant. One of the staff who had been away on holiday said to the editorial assistant upon his return: 'Send the work experience girl over - I have post that needs opening.' I was allowed to do some online research for articles, but when I asked if I could write something I was told I could have a go but not to spend much time on it and that it was for the 'real journalists'.

One day I was told I had to cover the phones at lunch until some of the other staff came back from their lunch together – it was 3.30pm before I was allowed to go to lunch myself.

I didn't want my time to be entirely wasted, so on my last day I asked the newspapers deputy managing editor for some careers advice and she agreed to meet with me. In our meeting she told me I was too old to be a trainee journalist (at 26) and that I was 'quite pretty so didn't need to wear such short skirts'.

The whole experience was degrading and awful - I hated going to work each day but was determined to stick it out for the experience. I have been on several other placements and thought I knew what to expect, but I was totally unprepared for the way I was treated.

In the end I wished I had left on the first day - it was certainly made clear that I was expendable and that there were many others who were keen to take my place. Staff were very rude to me, barely spoke to me at all and if they did they often forgot my name and called me something else or just referred to me as 'the work experience girl'.

NUJ work experience guidelines

1 Work placements should be for a minimum of two weeks. In exceptional circumstances, when the student is moving between a number of placements, one week may be sufficient.

2 Unpaid work placements should normally be for no more than four weeks. Paid work placements may be for six weeks, or longer if part of a sandwich course.

3 The firm offering the placement should identify a responsible individual to whom the student reports and feeds back. That person should be readily available or available at regular and known times. That person should produce a brief report at the end of the placement covering the experience gained, work done and standards achieved. An alternative or additional sources of support should be identified and communicated to the student should the person given responsibility not be available at any time.

4 Expectations of what the student will be able to do should not be set too high and some flexibility should be allowed. Different students, at different stages of their course, will have different ability levels. At all times, students should be carefully supervised. The work placement should be planned to ensure the student experiences a wide range of activities with a mix of observing, working with a staff member and working alone.

5 Students are not fully-trained journalists and should not be expected to carry out duties that put them in danger and at risk to their health and safety, such as door-stepping or going undercover when there is a risk of violence.

6 Students must be covered by the employer/client's insurance for all relevant risks, including but not limited to public and legal liability and injury.

7 Students must not be asked, or expected, to act in any manner that may cause a breach of the NUJ's code of professional conduct or the relevant industry code, such as those of the Press Complaints Commission or Ofcom.

8 Students should be coached in a positive and constructive manner. They will learn better from their mistakes if they are shown by example the right way of doing things.

9 Part of the work experience is to be part of the editorial team. Students should be encouraged to join in all the editorial team's activities, including, where possible, social and other outside work activities.

10 Regardless of payment, students on work placements should be able to claim reasonable expenses. The process for claiming expenses should be explained clearly. Students should not be out of pocket. If necessary employers should provide an advance on expenses.

11 Before the start of the placement these details, plus any other administrative matters, such as normal hours of work, shift patterns, security passes or other employment issues, should be put in writing to the student and his/her course tutor, where appropriate.

WHAT CAN YOUR CHAPEL DO?

- Incorporate the NUJ work experience guidelines into your chapel agreement.
- Make those on work experience aware of the guidelines.
- Display best practice guidelines around your office or college.

BEST PRACTICE

1 Students on work placements should be paid at least the minimum wage or an appropriately higher rate in high-cost areas.

2 Where no wage payment is made, students should be paid at least the standard/customary rates for the title/programme/publisher for a licence to print any articles/photos or broadcast any material and shall not assign copyright.

3 When a student's work is published or broadcast they should get an appropriate byline or other credit.

4 As part of the training process students will be fully involved in the editing of their work; the reasons for changes made will be explained; and their right to defend the integrity of the published or broadcast version will be respected.

5 Where publishers offer students one-day placements so they can "taste" particular specialisms, such as science journalism for example, the same terms should apply.

UNACCEPTABLE PRACTICE

1 It is unacceptable for students on unpaid work placements to be used to fill gaps in staffing or to replace freelance cover.

2 It is unacceptable for students to get little or no journalistic practice and simply to be treated as an office junior, running errands and fetching and carrying for others.

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