

## Unpaid internships amount to social discrimination

Written by Emily O'Reilly on 9 November 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

A champion for the rights of interns, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly says that interns must be paid, as unpaid internships perpetuate a cycle of 'privilege following privilege'.



Emily O'Reilly | *Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

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Any young person looking for a job these days is under a great deal of pressure.

Following graduation they can no longer expect to find secure employment directly: instead they need to pad their CVs through various internships.

Without gathering such work placements, it is unlikely they will even be called to interviews for full-time jobs. This state of affairs might be acceptable if all conditions were equal.

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However, when internships are unpaid there is an injustice in the system, as young people must then find the means of working for free while paying for rent, transport, food along with the myriad other costs of living in any society.

It means that people from well-off backgrounds, who are in a position to work without being paid, have an advantage.

The injustice is then perpetuated, as those fortunate enough to be in a financial position to take internships are the ones more likely to gather sufficient experience to make their CVs attractive to future employers.

Aside from initiating a vicious circle where 'privilege follows privilege', unpaid traineeships also mean that employers are not necessarily attracting the best candidates but simply those with sufficient financial resources.

“When internships are unpaid there is an injustice in the system, as young people must then find the means of working for free while paying for rent, transport, food along with the myriad other costs of living in any society”

This specific issue landed on my desk when my office received a complaint about the European External Action Service (EEAS) not paying trainees in its foreign delegations.

This meant that those applying for these traineeships - which are highly sought after - had first to be sure they could pay travel, insurance and other costs. It amounted to de facto social discrimination.

The EU is founded on the value of equality, while discrimination - such as on the grounds of social origin - is prohibited under the Charter of Fundamental Rights. On issues of values and fundamental rights, the EU administration should be leading by example.

We asked the EEAS to start paying the 800 or so trainees it has in delegations all over the world. It, and then the budgetary authorities, agreed, and a new policy was put in place at the beginning of this year.

I hope this results in greater access for young people of all backgrounds. I also hope it will have the practical benefit of allowing the best candidates to apply for the diplomatic service, which, as I saw during my inquiry, makes good use of the trainees in its delegations.

Other issues matter too. Trainees should be involved in meaningful work and they should be covered by internal policies such as those on whistleblowing.

This not only protects them, but it also encourages them to embrace a culture of ethics and openness throughout the entire organisation. Good traineeships allow young people to gain experience, help them to decide which career direction to take and teach them how to navigate different workplaces.

Organisations profit from having recent graduates bringing new ideas.

Trainees should not be considered as cheap or free labour, but for what they are: an integral, useful and welcome part of an organisation that should be paid for their work.

### **About the author**

Emily O'Reilly is the EU Ombudsman

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