

## **Ireland Has A Free Work Problem.**

**The unpaid work placement culture is unethical and it is harming our students.**

By Patrick Kellegher

Shauna Carter, a fourth year nursing student, sits and recounts the thirteen hour shift she had just completed in The Mater Hospital in Dublin City Centre. Her journey begins with a drive to UCD, where she parks her car and then completes the 40 minute bus ride into town, as this is cheaper than paying the daily €15 parking fee in the Mater. Shauna details the initial process of the handover at 7:30am with the staff from the night shift, followed by her first lap of the day around the ward to introduce herself to today's patients. She pauses for a moment to jovially



recount her experience today of a man who removed his pad (filled with faeces) and threw it across the room. She then continues to detail her observation checks, consisting of standard procedures such as checking blood pressure and heart rate. Once she's completed that, Shauna does another lap to make sure that all patients have eaten, are washed, are

in clean clothes with fresh pads, and then she tends to her patients' individual needs. Then she repeats this process again until her shift ends at 8:30pm that evening. When she finally finishes her shift thirteen hours later, Shauna gets the bus back to UCD to her car, drives 30 minutes from UCD to her home, and tries to make the best of whatever rest she can get before waking up at 5am the next morning to repeat the same process again. They are long work days filled with manual labour and mental challenges for any nurse. But Shauna is a student nurse, which means she does all of this for free.

## **The ins and outs of unpaid placements.**

Work placements have become an integral aspect of many third level education courses within Ireland. The most common setup for how these placements work is as follows: students will leave campus (usually in their third year), and spend an extended period of time working in a full time position for a company in their field of work. There are, of course, many other ways in which students partake in work placement. For example, in most healthcare courses there is a large emphasis on placement, with placement hours taking up a chunk of course time almost every semester. Work placements are a hugely beneficial opportunity for students to gain full-time experience at a company before they leave college to start their careers. However, there is one major snag in this set-up: a large number of these placements are unpaid.

The legal implications behind this issue can be tricky. Since there is no technical legal definition of an ‘internship’ in Ireland, it can make protecting rights a slightly convoluted issue.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this marked lack of a definition, the Workplace Relation commission clearly states that a company does not have a legal right to take on students as full-time workers without paying them a fair wage:

*‘Apart from the employment of close family relatives and the engagement of registered industrial apprentices, there is no exemption in law from the obligation to pay the national minimum hourly rate of pay. Therefore, national minimum wage rates apply to work experience placements, work trials, internships and any other employment practice*

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<sup>1</sup> Kavanagh, Ruairí. 2023. ‘The Law on Unpaid Internships: Know Your Rights’, *Gradireland* <<https://gradireland.com/careers-advice/internships/law-unpaid-internships-know-your-rights>> [accessed 15 December 2023]

*involving unpaid work or working for room and board, regardless of the duration of the engagement.*<sup>2</sup>

If it is clearly stated in writing that these types of unpaid work placements are prohibited, why are they so commonplace? Anecdotally, it seems the most common answer to this question is ‘they just are’.

### **How does this lead to students being taken advantage of...?**

One might wonder who is to blame for this happening so frequently. When speaking about the topic to the University Observer, UCDSU President Ruairí Power stated: *‘We are opposed to unpaid internships on principle...we will continue to focus on localised efforts to ensure remuneration for work placements.’*<sup>3</sup>

Ella, a fourth year Radiography student in UCD, recalls how in her first year of unpaid placement there was an Instagram account setup by students that posted public complaints about the lack of pay. However, this form of organised protest was put to a stop after the college found out about it and told off the student organisers. It seems that most students aren’t aware of their rights when it comes to getting paid for work they undertake, and those who are aware are shut down relatively quickly. When asked if the college ever presented any justification as to why these students are expected to work for free, Ella explains: *‘No, and the students don’t ask either,*

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<sup>2</sup>‘Unpaid Work’. [n.d.]. *Workplace Relations Commission*  
<[https://www.workplacerelements.ie/en/news-media/workplace\\_relations\\_notices/unpaid\\_work.html](https://www.workplacerelements.ie/en/news-media/workplace_relations_notices/unpaid_work.html)>  
[accessed 15 December 2023]

<sup>3</sup> Finn, Sophie . 2021. ‘Unpaid Internships: Exploitative, or Essential?’, *University Observer*  
<[https://universityobserver.ie/unpaid-internships-exploitative-or-essential/#google\\_vignette](https://universityobserver.ie/unpaid-internships-exploitative-or-essential/#google_vignette)> [accessed 15 December 2023]

*I think it's just a part of the course that people take for granted ...we all are in agreement that it's wrong but that's just the way it's set up. There isn't really anything we can do about it'.<sup>4</sup>*

TUD even describes work placements on their website as a 'cost effective solution to recruitment needs'<sup>5</sup>. TUD student Aoife, who partook in a six month fully paid work placement in Dublin airport last year, went through a slightly different process to find her placement. She explains how she didn't apply for the college recommended organisations and instead sourced her own job interviews for positions in her field of work. She did not mention that it was a college work placement until midway through the interview after pay had already been discussed. In Aoife's own words, *'when you say work placement, businesses hear "free work"'*.<sup>6</sup>

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One would expect that due to the pay disparity, the distribution of work and responsibilities would be a lot less for those on placement compared to full time staff. However, more often than not this is not the case.

Molly, a fully qualified secondary school teacher, worked full time in a school unpaid for two years as part of her Professional Masters of Education programme. During her two years as a student teacher, Molly led her own classes to state exams, planned her own lessons, and even wrote exams and reports for classes that she did not teach herself. The way that the student

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<sup>4</sup> O'Neill, Ella. 2023. 'Unpaid Placement Interview One'

<sup>5</sup>Dublin, T. U. [n.d.]. 'Work Placements | TU Dublin', *Tudublin.ie*  
<<https://www.tudublin.ie/for-students/career-development-centre/work-placements/>> [accessed 2 January 2024]

<sup>6</sup>Cashin, Aoife. 2023. 'Unpaid Work Interview Four'

teacher system is set up is that the fully qualified teachers in a school will hand over a number of their classes to the student teachers. So, let's say for example that a teacher has a 22 hour a week contract. If they hand 4 of those hours over to a student teacher, the teacher with the 22 hour contract will still get paid for the full 22 hours, despite the fact that a number of their classes are being taught by somebody else, who is not getting paid for their work.

Molly explained how the only opportunity available for student teachers to get paid is if they take on additional 'subbing' hours, which is essentially sitting in and supervising a class if another teacher is absent. Though opportunities do vary from school to school, one student



teacher shared her experience in a private school in South Dublin, where there was an opportunity to be paid by supervising an after school study programme. This student teacher denied the school's request to supervise this programme due to it being outside of school hours and already

having too much on her plate with balancing her college work and her school work. The student teacher recalls receiving pushback from the school's vice-principal, who claimed that '*the only reason this programme can run is because PME students offer to run it*'. Despite this pushback, the student teacher did not partake in running the after school study programme. She was not offered a contract the following year and sought a position in a new school.

## **The financial complications.**

This expectation of unpaid labour inevitably leads to students being put in precarious positions with regards to managing finances. Many students have to resort to seeking a part time job on top of their full time work placements just to manage to stay afloat. Despite this being the only option for a lot of students, it is often met with criticism from institutions. Student nurse Shauna has had experiences where she has gotten in trouble from clinical placement coordinators for mentioning that she has a part-time job outside of placement hours. This is due to students being expected to not work any more than their prescribed hours in an attempt to ensure that the students are capable of providing sufficient quality of care. But in Shauna's case, she needs her car to get to placement, and her car insurance is due next week, and her placement does not pay her - so what option does she have other than to seek payment from an outside source?

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Molly shares a similar experience from her days as a student teacher, when she had a lecturer who was allegedly very judgemental of anyone who had a part time job on the weekend due to her belief that if you were working at the weekend then you were not giving your all to your masters programme.

*'There was absolutely no consideration given to the fact that a lot of people actually have to work at the weekend to afford to survive. It was almost treated as if "well you should have thought of that before you started [the masters programme]"'*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Kellegher, Molly . 2023. 'Unpaid Work Interview Two'

In lieu of a part-time job, some students rely on grants to assist them financially during their periods of unpaid work placement, however these grants are minimal and not available to everyone. The only widely accessible grant is the SUSI grant, which is only available for students whose household earns underneath the yearly threshold, but even the SUSI payment only pays maintenance for undergrad students. Which essentially means if you are a masters student, such as a student teacher, you will receive money to pay a small portion of the masters fee, but you will not receive the same monthly payment from SUSI that students in undergrad education will receive. There is also the option of a government funded €50.79 weekly allowance available for student healthcare workers who are required to move away from home to undergo their placement. It is labelled as an '*accommodation allowance*', and adds up to just over €200 a month.

With such little financial assistance available for students who are partaking in unpaid placements, it begs the question of what the colleges are doing in order to aid their students. Ella and Shauna, both students in medical fields in UCD, shared similar stories of being offered minimal to no choice on the location of their placement. Ella's first placement was in Wexford City. Due to this being nearly 100 kilometres from her home, she had to temporarily stay in a hotel for four weeks, which was paid for out of her own pocket. Shauna shares an anecdote about a friend of hers whose apartment burned down during her placement. She was not able to afford new accommodation and due to strict rules about missing placement, she had to finish the rest of it while couch surfing around Dublin city. In response to concerns from students about the logistical difficulties of having to relocate for a non-paid placement, UCD released a statement to

students stating: *‘Please note that financial difficulties and accommodation costs on placement CANNOT be considered in allocating clinical sites.’*

### **The reality.**

Unpaid work placements are an unfortunate reality in our country. Gaining employment post-grad has become such a competitive field that having experience is generally a necessity, enabling companies to profit off of a revolving door of students’ unpaid work. Host employers are required to treat students in the same way as they treat their other employees. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions states that *‘as an intern - provided you are doing work of value to the employer, have a similar level of supervision and responsibility as the rest of the workforce - then you are likely to be entitled to be paid at least the national minimum wage regardless of what title your employer has put on you.’*<sup>8</sup> Yet despite this, amongst other written legal obligations for employers to pay all of their workers, the culture of students providing unpaid work is rampant within the Irish education and professional system.

Expecting young students to provide their skills and time whilst investing their own money under the guise of ‘gaining experience’ is not a sustainable or ethical practice. It leads to financial difficulties, exhaustion, and a resentment towards employers from students all before they have even graduated from college. It is a problem with no solution on the horizon, yet we are already seeing the emotional and financial effects on our young students starting out in their careers.

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<sup>8</sup>Congress, Irish. 2019. ‘Congress - Irish Congress of Trade Unions» Home Page’, *Irish Congress of Trade Unions* <<https://www.ictu.ie/>> [accessed 18 October 2023]



Ireland has a free work problem, and with the rising cost of living and a housing crisis with no end in sight, it is becoming abundantly clear that the problem must be addressed in order to create a positive, secure future for our country's young people.

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