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'He who is silent is taken to agree': University careers services and the problem of unpaid graduate internships

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Unpaid graduate internships (UGIs) are a controversial feature of the UK graduate labour market. Drawing on Watts's socio-political ideologies, this article examines how university careers services and practitioners engage with this issue in policy and practice, using data from interviews with careers managers and practitioners. It reveals that practitioners are sometimes reluctant to engage directly with the *ethical* issues surrounding UGIs, and that some careers interventions which support individuals may arguably help to perpetuate this unfair practice. I contend that careers professionals nonetheless have a moral duty to take action on UGIs, putting ethics at the heart of their work.

Introduction

The Sutton Trust recently reported that, while government figures estimate that there are 'up to 70,000 interns in the UK at any one time', '51% of employers fail to pay their interns at least the adult minimum wage' (Monacute, 2018, pp. 1-4). For university careers professionals, UGIs present a moral dilemma. Despite the widespread sense that they are unfair, some practitioners view them as a 'reality of the labour market', considering that (as client-centred professionals) they have a duty to inform their clients that unpaid work may be necessary to succeed in the most competitive sectors. And recent debates on social justice in careers practice in the academic literature (notably Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2018 and 2019), have yet to make a tangible impact in most careers services, which are busy juggling their commitment to students and graduates, their relationships with employers and the increasing pressures of internal and external employability metrics.

This article contributes to both the literature surrounding unpaid internships and the growing body of work on social justice in careers practice, by examining the relationship of careers services with UGIs through an 'ethics' and 'justice' lens. It draws on empirical data from my unpublished master's dissertation, which questions whether UGIs are unfair from a moral perspective, and explores how careers services and individual practitioners engage with this issue, using Watts's four socio-political ideologies (1996) as a framework. In this research, I exposed some of the underlying ideas, values and beliefs which can inform individual practitioners' stances and actions in relation to UGIs (sometimes on an unconscious level), as well as practices which may adversely impact the UGI issue in unseen ways.

My aim here is to explore some of the findings from my research, and to put forward some possible recommendations for careers services and practitioners who wish to engage effectively with the issue of UGIs.

When citing my data in this article, I refer to interview participants as 'Interviewee 1' etc.

Watts's socio-political ideologies

Tony Watts drew attention to the highly political nature of careers work, arguing that:

> [Careers education and guidance] operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which such life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them.
>
> (Watts, 1996, p. 351)

To illuminate the role of careers practitioners in reinforcing or reducing inequalities, Watts outlined his four socio-political approaches to careers education and guidance (see table below).

Table 1: Four socio-political approaches to careers education and guidance

	Core focus on society	Core focus on individual
Change	Radical (social change)	Progressive (individual change)
Status quo	Conservative (social control)	Liberal (non-directive)

Source: Watts (1996, p. 227)

I use Watts's theory as a framework for analysing careers services' and careers practitioners' engagement with UGIs, as it illuminates the ways in which values, decisions, activities and interactions with different stakeholders are not politically neutral. Rather, they are inextricably linked with what happens in the labour market, and have a direct and indirect impact on the future of graduates, individually and collectively. It is for this reason, I argue, that what careers services and practitioners say and do with regard to UGIs matters, and should be subject to moral scrutiny.

A brief outline of the Watts framework will set the context for the rest of the article. Both the 'liberal' and 'progressive' approaches focus on the *individual*. The 'liberal' approach emphasises *individual choice*, while the 'progressive' approach focuses on *personal growth*. Traditionally, Watts (1996, pp. 352–3) contended, careers guidance has been characterised 'in *liberal* terms as a *non-directive* process […] strongly influenced by the models of non-directive counselling developed by Carl Rogers (1961)' [italics in original]. Emphasis is on the freedom of the individual to make their own career decisions, with guidance facilitating that process. 'Progressive' (individual change) approaches in careers work include initiatives to raise the aspirations of students and graduates or to help them develop skills or gain experience to make them 'more employable', thus improving their chances in the labour market.

In an economic downturn, Watts argued, the ideas of 'choice' and 'opportunity' come under pressure, and the socio-economic backdrop against which career work takes place becomes more apparent, resulting in more 'conservative' type careers interventions, which could include promoting less desirable opportunities, and encouraging students to be 'more realistic' in their career ambitions. Finally, a 'radical' (social change) approach would involve challenging the current social order, by for example adopting an advocacy role for students and graduates, lobbying for change, or confronting unfair employment practices.

Research methodology

Informed by a constructivist perspective, my approach was one of critical inquiry (Crotty, 1998, p. 157), since I sought to go further than simply exploring different viewpoints, and challenge commonly held assumptions, values and socio-political ideologies and structures.

Employing qualitative research methods allowed me to gain a rich understanding of the various ethical and moral perspectives on UGIs. I interviewed careers service staff whose job function brought them into contact in some way with the issue of UGIs. To select appropriate research subjects I used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Denscombe, 2003, pp. 15–6). I then conducted semi-structured interviews with heads of careers services, careers managers, careers advisers, employer engagement and placement practitioners at three different types of university in different geographical regions of England. My interview guide included questions covering the same broad themes for all participants:

- Views on UGIs and reasons for those views
- Views on the role of careers services and individual practitioners in relation to UGIs
- Examples of how informants had engaged with this issue in the past (e.g. in a guidance interview, advertising an internship opportunity, creating a policy document).

I also examined the formal policies of these institutions in relation to UGIs, as well as any relevant information on their careers website.

I then conducted a thematic analysis of the various ways in which practitioners engaged with the issue of UGIs, using Watts's socio-political ideologies as my framework.

Forms of engagement with the UGI issue

UGIs touch on many facets of careers services' operation, and my interviewees discussed aspects ranging from vacancy advertising policies and advice on internships on the careers website, through to conversations with employers regarding their recruitment practices, how careers advisers address UGIs in guidance and the provision of bursaries for unpaid work experience. My findings showed careers service engagement fell mainly within the 'liberal' or 'progressive' Wattsian categories, with a few examples of 'radical' approaches. None of my interviewees had adopted an intentionally 'conservative' ideological approach. Nonetheless, there *were* instances in which careers activity risked becoming unintentionally 'conservative', as I will illustrate in the following sections.

The 'liberal' approach: *We will give you all the information you need and then you can choose your own path*

Several of my interviewees talked of students and graduates being 'grown adults', and stressed that the role of the careers service and individual practitioners was to provide the necessary information regarding UGIs, and then to allow clients to make their own choices. One service had a page on its website on unpaid work experience. This provided information for students about the rights of workers and the national minimum wage and advice about how to assess whether the experience will be useful and avoid exploitation, leaving the reader to make her own decision. This chimes with Watts's 'liberal' socio-political approach, as it 'holds to the ideal of respecting and valuing the right of individuals to make their own informed decisions' (Watts, 1996, p. 353).

One careers manager explained she felt her service was justified in advertising UGIs of up to four weeks in duration, because resourceful graduates could 'work on the weekends, work evenings' and 'find solutions' for that period of time (Interviewee 1). In her view, this was a reasonable choice for graduates to make. Her stance was arguably 'liberal'– a belief that students were free to choose or reject this course of action – it was simply a question of motivation. It could also fit with a 'progressive' (individual change) approach, emphasising individuals' need to push themselves (with careers service support) to do whatever is necessary to achieve their career aspirations; in this case, undertaking a UGI.

Many of my interview subjects with a student-facing role also referred to the tough economic climate or highly competitive nature of certain sectors. They emphasised the importance of presenting a *true picture* of the labour market to clients, so they didn't have unrealistic expectations of what was required to get into their chosen career. One careers adviser explained this uncomfortable situation thus:

> In the current climate, if we said to students: 'Our advice is don't do unpaid placements', I'm not sure that's really helping them when they're going to be up against people, if we're talking about the creative sector, who have done unpaid work experience. It's a very difficult one for us.
>
> (Interviewee 2)

These comments suggest that the responsibility of careers practitioners is chiefly to ensure their clients are fully informed of their rights and options, then leave them to make the right choices for themselves. The phrase 'knowledge is power' springs to mind. It also chimes with careers advisers' commitment to impartiality in careers guidance. However, some clients,

particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may feel they cannot realistically afford to take up UGIs (so, not a choice at all). If, for example, a careers adviser suggests that it may be difficult to break into journalism without doing unpaid work, her client may feel her only option is to give up on that career aspiration altogether. According to Watts (1996, p. 353), one of the criticisms of the 'liberal' approach is that it 'masks inequalities in society by making them seem matters of individual choice'. Thus, in attempting to present a 'true picture' of the current situation regarding UGIs, but not challenging the status quo, careers advisers may risk veering towards a more 'conservative' approach, inuring individuals to what they see as the reality of the graduate labour market.

However, careers professionals are very well aware of the structural barriers in the labour market faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and every careers service in my study had put measures in place to try to help them.

The 'progressive' approach: *We know the labour market is unfair, so we're offering this to help you boost your employability*

The Office for Students (OfS) requires universities to submit plans setting out 'how [they] will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education' (OfS, 2020).

Several of my interviewees referred to tailored initiatives instituted by their careers service for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, which aimed to create a more 'level playing field', enabling those students to obtain some of the advantages enjoyed by more privileged students. These ranged from dedicated events for WP students (e.g. workshops focussing on confidence building and alumni networking events) to bursaries for WP students undertaking unpaid or low paid work experience.

These can be seen as examples of a 'progressive' approach, in that they focus on improving the career prospects of the individual students or graduates who participate in them. Such schemes were clearly very popular with both students and staff. However, some interviewees reported that participation in these opportunities by WP students was variable, and that, realistically, only a relatively small percentage of their university's WP student population would access and benefit from them. This brings to mind one criticism of the 'progressive' approach, namely that 'encouraging some degree of movement of individuals within the status hierarchy merely reinforces the hierarchy itself, with no benefits for those who remain at the lower levels of it' (Watts, 1996, p. 354). In other words, these initiatives – while they undoubtedly help the individual students and graduates who participate in them – do nothing to change the system.

Moreover, in providing these bursaries, careers services could be accused of endorsing and helping to perpetuate the unfair practice of UGIs, and even unwittingly contributing in a small way to reducing the number of *paid* graduate opportunities available (Pennington, 2010). Therefore, bursaries for unpaid work experience may serve to unfairly disadvantage those graduates without access to them in the graduate labour market. This links closely with Watts's other criticism of the 'progressive' approach: that it 'places more pressure on the opportunity structure by raising expectations which this structure may be unable to meet' (Watts, 1996, p. 362). It seems likely that, as long as graduates are driven to take on unpaid experience to give themselves an advantage, the UGI phenomenon will grow, with graduate recruiters often favouring candidates with the longest work experience. Because they cannot afford to work unpaid for lengthy periods of time, graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds are left unable to compete.

The 'radical' approach: *We know the labour market is unfair, so we will help you to challenge injustice and play our part in trying to change the system*

If there are issues with liberal and progressive approaches, what is the alternative? In my interviews, there were only a few examples of practitioners who reported adopting a 'radical' approach (in Wattsian terms); for example, challenging employers directly over UGIs, or advocating on behalf of students or graduates who had been exploited. One careers adviser reported that she had advised a graduate of

her rights in relation to UGIs in a guidance interview and discussed with her how she could challenge her employer.

It is clear that these more 'radical' approaches come with their own risks for those involved. While many of the practitioners I interviewed were very well aware of the injustices surrounding UGIs, there was a sense that (irrespective of their personal views on the matter) challenging employers who wanted to offer UGIs on moral grounds was *professionally inappropriate* for them. In cases where they had to inform employers they were unable to advertise UGIs, most were more comfortable referring to their careers service's policy and the national minimum wage legislation. For employer engagement staff, recruiters are key stakeholders, so maintaining positive relationships is considered of prime importance. 'I don't quite get into the moral side,' one internship officer told me, 'because that's not a discussion for me on the phone with an employer' (Interviewee 3).

Most of the careers advisers interviewed also felt it was not their place as careers professionals either to advise graduates to take action over an unfair UGI, or to personally act on behalf of individual clients or the broader graduate body. Just as graduates can be deterred from taking action against employers of unethical or illegal UGIs (perhaps from fear of being branded as troublemakers and 'blacklisted' in their chosen career sector), careers practitioners too are aware of this potential consequence for their clients. One careers adviser explained why she believed that even informing graduates about ways they could challenge employers over UGIs was a risky strategy, given the relative powerlessness of new graduates:

> My fear is that you're creating a rabble-rouser who has not yet started their career, and then is essentially trying to fight a system that will just drop them like a hot potato… Imagine the student going into a law firm or a marketing firm and saying: 'See that internship you're giving me, it's highly illegal. I'd just like to point that out, and I'm going to sue you.' You know, if it's a small enough industry it's a risk for them to challenge it, a massive risk.
>
> (Interviewee 4)

However, if careers practitioners hear graduate clients' experiences of exploitative UGIs without telling them how they can fight this injustice, they risk falling into a 'conservative' approach, 'habituat[ing] entrants to the workforce to the requirements of capital' and 'reconciling people to their roles' (Watts, 1996, p. 353). Thompson supports this view, claiming that advisers cannot 'sit on the fence':

> There is no middle ground; intervention either adds to oppression (or at least condones it) or goes some small way towards easing or breaking such oppression. In this respect, the political slogan, 'If you're not part of the solution, you must be part of the problem', is particularly accurate.
>
> (Thompson, 1992, cited in Mignot, 2001, p. 117)

In my view, this compels careers professionals to take a stand on, and actively engage in, the *moral* issues surrounding their work, including UGIs, however uncomfortable this may be.

Should careers services be doing more to tackle the unfairness of UGIs?

As we have seen, there are several understandable reasons why careers services and practitioners can be reluctant to take a stronger stance on UGIs, ranging from a belief that they have little power to impact this structural feature of the labour market, to concerns about being unprofessional and jeopardising impartiality or relationships with employers.

Moreover, outside pressures, such as the metrics of the Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey (at the time of my original research), can influence the stance of some careers managers towards UGIs, with one admitting: 'Whether it's a paid or unpaid internship, if it does happen accidentally to fall over the census period, we are capturing it as good DLHE and therefore it's going to help us.' (Interviewee 5).

Additionally, a number of practitioners in my study indicated that they felt ill-equipped to provide appropriate guidance to graduates regarding UGIs, or to challenge unfair employment practices, suggesting a

possible training need for careers professionals.

However, interestingly, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Code of Ethics states that its members have a responsibility to 'address and challenge inequities where [they] encounter them' (AGCAS, 2020). This may suggest a more robust approach than simply not advertising UGIs or informing students of their rights regarding unpaid work.

Careers professionals should also reflect on whether upholding the principle of impartiality means 'accepting the rules as they are'. It could be argued that practitioners should develop a clear ethical stance and use that (rather than an unchallenged, inequitable status quo) as a basis for true client-centred impartiality. Moreover, by attempting to remain 'neutral' on the injustices of UGIs, careers professionals risk signalling to others that they do not have any moral qualms about them. (Note the maxim: 'he who is silent is taken to agree'.) Since the careers service may be viewed, by students, employers and colleagues in other parts of the university, as an authority on graduate careers and the labour market, such a message could have damaging consequences.

Recommendations for more effective engagement with the UGI issue

There are a number of ways that careers services and practitioners could engage more effectively with this issue. Below are a couple of key areas which could be explored further.

Direct intervention options – educating, challenging, lobbying and advocacy

While this would be a matter for discussion within individual institutions, careers services and practitioners could explore various direct intervention options, with the aim of challenging the unfair practice of UGIs at different levels of the system (i.e. at individual level, with groups or organisations, and at societal level). The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (STF), proposed by Arthur and McMahon (2005, pp. 208-222) provides a useful basis for careers practitioners to 'consider multiple systems of influence' and explore ways to 'move beyond a[n exclusive] focus on individuals to a focus on addressing many of the organizational and systemic forces that have an impact on the career development of individuals'. The authors argue that, far from being powerless to change the system, through 'the dynamic process of recursiveness' and the interaction between system levels, small interventions by careers practitioners can have a big effect.

For example, in relation to UGIs, an employer may decide to pay her interns as a result of a careers practitioner making the ethical and business case for doing so (*lobbying*), or as a result of being *challenged* by a graduate who has been advised and coached by a careers practitioner. The employer's actions may then influence other employers to change their approach, setting a small ripple effect in motion across the system.

However, according to Arthur (2005, p. 144), 'careers practitioners often lack understanding about what it means to be an advocate and what kinds of activities might lead to social change'. My research findings also indicated a possible training need for some careers practitioners, which could be addressed through a tailored ethics and social justice professional development programme. Another positive move would be for careers services to inculcate a culture in which policies and practices are critically debated and challenged from an ethical and social justice perspective.

Adopting a 'critical' pedagogy' approach to UGIs in careers education

While careers education and curriculum interventions were not mentioned explicitly in my interviews, it could be argued that a general focus on employability metrics could encourage an instrumental, or 'progressive' (in Wattsian terms) approach to careers education: in other words, a curriculum which aims to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to improve their employability, without challenging underlying socio-political structures. A more 'radical' alternative would be a 'critical pedagogy' approach (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991). For example, careers education

modules which include a focus on work experience and routes into graduate jobs could engage students in critical discussions about the ethics of UGIs, how they are situated in the labour market, and their implications not just for their own career development, but also for their peers and society in general. Such an approach may prompt students to reflect more deeply on the wider implications of their own actions.

Conclusions

It is clear that careers services are performing an almost impossible juggling act, trying to abide by the law and balance the needs of their different stakeholders – for example, individual students and graduates wishing to get into competitive sectors who *can* afford to undertake UGIs, and those who *can't*, the graduate recruiters they work with who wish to promote their opportunities, the wider university and government. This can lead to conflicts of interest, requiring difficult ethical decisions, which undoubtedly explains the eclectic mix of socio-political approaches adopted by services and practitioners in relation to UGIs.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach which careers services could adopt as a blueprint to engage with the issue of UGIs both ethically and effectively. Arguably, there is a role for most (if not all) of the Wattsian socio-political approaches in careers policy and practice, depending on the context. However, my research suggests that the more 'radical' approaches are currently under-developed in current university careers practice and merit further exploration.

To conclude, I would contend that careers services are not politically neutral entities; rather they are inextricably connected with what happens in the graduate labour market. Therefore they have a responsibility to develop policies and practices which help to tackle injustices within it. This means that, as well as helping our own students and graduates get ahead in the system *as it currently is*, we need to play our part in making the system fairer for all.

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