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## **Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships**

### **Abstract**

This article explores a significant yet curiously understudied form of transnational mobility as practiced among the highly qualified in Europe, namely the international internship. We argue that an international internship can be an ambivalent stage within youth transitions. While possibly providing a potential point of entry into a 'dream' career path, the economic and emotional costs of such undertakings also need to be accounted for, including an offsetting of professional stability and deferred rather than accelerated labour market entry. At the same time, international internships have the appearance of a response to a need for personal development and exploration. Taking on board these perspectives, we suggest that the international internship be considered a form of 'mobile moratorium,' expanding on the possibilities associated with this conceptualisation. For young people in the European Union, this form of exchange also provides a means to engage in intra-European circulation while simultaneously pursuing personalized success. We investigate this proposition through analysis of data collected via an online survey, providing illustrations of what the international internship experience means for professional development and personal exploration.

### **Keywords**

Internship; graduates; transitions; Europe, young adults, international careers, mobility.

## **Words**

8977 (only figures excluded)

## **Introduction**

In this article, we look at internships in international NGOs and supranational institutions, discussing the implications of this mobility modality for highly educated young people across Europe. While often presented as a means of initiating a professional career, internship mobility also brings with it economic and emotional risks. Those who move abroad may be driven by their dreams without full awareness of the difficult circumstances they may soon face due to the limited support of offer and the lack of any guarantee about future career development. Therefore, we argue that greater attention needs to be focused on the costs alongside the potential benefits of this form of exchange. While it is intuitive to grasp why we refer to an element of precarity in doing an internship, it may be less clear while we also mention a certain degree of privilege that these interns face. By this, we mean mainly the fact that the career towards which these internships are oriented are high careers; that they require high level of qualification and a certain social capital only in order to be found, together with (most of the time) foreign language(s) proficiency. Also, being often unpaid or very poorly remunerated, they imply the existence of private funds in order for the intern to be able to afford the cost of living in predominantly costly European cities. All these elements define an entry selection in these career paths.

In sociological terms, we also interpret this hybrid form of work as encompassing several aspects key to composing an 'opportunity structure' (Roberts 2009) for educated youth in Europe. We also recognize that there is an inherent precarity in internship due to its

'naturally' short-term constitution, as well as being a synergy of work and learning, with an underlying assumption that an imperative exists to seek out such situations should one wish to be regarded as a specialist worker, even when there is awareness that the future employer may not be the organization hosting the internship. Therefore, rather than seeking a career on the basis of purely personal preferences, a path is followed to a place *where* one can learn what a 'serious' career is all about, with these international organizations presumed to be operating at a very high level of specialisation. These locales might also be in themselves constitutive of a geography of 'spatially-organised power relations' to which young people from peripheral regions are subjugated (Pilkington and Johnson 2003: 261). Given such conditions, the aim of this paper is to explore the complex ambivalences that underpin such internships, drawing on conceptual material from a rich body of prior literature.

General structural issues related to geographical mobile youth are confronted here, with possible side aspects of falling into an exploratory, time-taking domain considered. To discuss this idea, we borrow ideas from Erikson's social psychology approach, leading us to position 'moratorium' as a central feature in spatialized youth transitions. In our case, the mobility experience can be used as an occasion to 'pause' and 'look around', finding meanings that may help one understand future orientations. We believe this is a distinctive element in youth mobility scholarship, which we wish to contribute to on-going debates in this field.

More specifically, in explaining why graduates pursue international internships, 'mobilizing' their education-to-work transition represents an attempt to exercise a specific form of agency, expressed in terms of interculturality or even cosmopolitanism. Within the European Union, young people in particular are exposed to a narrative that strongly implies that intra-European circulation provides a means to access personalized success and career development (Recchi 2015). In reality, it is not only the recent migrant crises and processes

around Brexit that are creating new horizons, and therefore new spatial planning imperatives. The highly competitive nature of many career paths means not everyone succeeds, bringing a potential squandering of social and economic capital, not to mention delaying labour market entry for those who do not 'win'. We therefore suggest that a certain degree of caution needs to accompany this discussion to counteract a narrative that is 'too-celebratory' and excessively 'self-referential' (King 2018, 2), that cannot possibly be matched by the reality of what is usually an existentially challenging experience.

Addressing the point that 'very little has been said about the potential role of international travel in attempts by young people to [...] *prolong* experiences of childhood and youth (Waters et al. 2011: 459-460), we contend that mobility research would benefit from discussion of various nuances in the construction of international careers, and how they interrelate with wider personal ambitions of self-exploration during transitions to adulthood. For instance, Leonard et al. (2016) in sociological research on internships underlines that 'while work and leisure are often conceptualised as distinct, and separate areas of young people's lives, it is clear that some base their choices about work *in tandem* with those about culture and identity' (2016: 384). In this way, mobility as well as the choice of a career path that may seem particularly uncertain and obfuscated, can be seen in itself as an element of a (youthful) lifestyle.

In this article, we take seriously the implications that can arise from the incorporation of mobility into transitions, using the international internship as an anticipated entry mechanism. Unlike other groups of mobile young people in Europe such as Erasmus students, international interns are a curiously under-studied cohort. In substance, this form of cross-border exchange involves highly talented individuals moving to international agencies in cities including London, Paris, Brussels and Geneva to obtain experience in a cosmopolitan work

environment. While the intention revolves around the intention to enhance career prospects, there is also a risk of encountering precarity due to the often parsimonious conditions that interns endure, including a lack of basic social and economic support.

As we explain further in the methods section, this study can only be exploratory due to lack of large corpus of data available and the scattered nature of the phenomenon across Europe. However, we think it is important to reflect on this case study even with limited resources in order to gain access to a mobility modality that explicitly characterises itself as exploratory, and contains elements of both reproduced precarity and privilege. The first of these two aspects inevitably links the experience to the hardship entailed in moving across Europe to 'jobs' that offer limited job security. The second, relates to access being related to socio-economic pre-requisites, and the fact that early career graduates enjoy a level of freedom in experimenting with new work roles not socially allowed in other groups.

The originality of our study is also tied to the distinctly European character of the phenomenon under investigation. Although internship is a global practice, a relatively high level of free movement exists between EU countries and affiliated regions, opening-up possibilities for international circulation that do not exist at equivalent levels in other parts of the world. Also recognized is a policy dimension: the hope that practices such as international internship can generate political capital for the European institutions, not least as a symbol of European free circulation. The idea of a common supranational European space is in fact central to many of the discourses circulated by the European institutions, with the mobile intern a potential concrete manifestation. However, this is hope not reality, and that EU policy discourse has a nasty habit of lacking critical engagement does not mean that international internship is unproblematic. This is one reason why concerns about internship quality have led to a response of sorts, with various pressure groups now campaigning for more rights and

better working conditions (see also Cairns et al 2017). Such a situation means that we are engaging with a topical issue, of relevance to policymakers, stakeholders and European young people considering undertaking internships abroad.

### **Prolonged Transitions**

It is widely presumed that in recent decades, young people have tended to delay the assumption of 'adult roles', in both the private and the public sphere, meaning they leave their family and form new ones, as well as they complete education and enter the labour market, at a much later point in the life course than before (Shananan 2000). Such apparent procrastination is especially relevant for Southern European youth; however, the phenomenon is spread across Europe (Cavalli and Galland 1996). This is a stark feature of youth labour market entry as access requirements increase and, at least in western societies, people study longer and devote more time to job searching even once reasonable levels of education are attained. Invoking the idea of prolongation in the process of labour market entry, namely the deferment of full employment, recognizes the significance of temporality in transitions to work, particularly where there is what may be a voluntary if unintended postponement. That short term youth mobility can be linked to migration and stable insertion into the labour market is obviously an element to be taken into consideration, although accompanied by an uncertain timeframe. Neither is the idea that some form of moratorium is taking place within transitions a new one; it is in fact relatively well established within youth sociology. Finding desirable forms of work can often be a question of how much time is waited until what is perceived to be the right opportunity comes along, thus self-determining the point in time at which a young person feels they ought to definitely begin a career. In a study of young Swedish working abroad temporarily, mobility was found to be create 'fail-safe'

situations, namely as a postpone strategy for deferring long-term planning adulthood (Frändberg 2015: 562).

We can also view this practice as a self-elected effort to remain within a state of pre-labour market entry with a view to engaging in meaningful forms of self-realization. With mobile interns, there is also the opportunity to reject spatially static career choices and draw upon a global, or European, field of future work possibilities. Mobile and/or cosmopolitan lifestyles may be considered attractive for young people, as opposed to more sedentary work opportunities that give the feeling of being 'stuck' in a given locality (Benson 2011, 2012, Farrugia 2019), in line with what Cresswell calls 'nomadic metaphysics' (2006), mobility becomes an essential part of career construction, located between privilege and disadvantage (Loacker and Sliwa 2015).

Reflecting further in terms of the salience of mobility to this process, the preceding remarks can be viewed as a positive interpretation of mobile moratorium stages: as voluntary and personally meaningful, constituting a constructive way of investing time prior to 'actual' labour market entry. Important skills and capacities can be developed; faculties that will be utilized throughout a subsequent career. For highly qualified young people, the idea may also be to update and acquire skills that might appeal to a wider range of future employers, and gain knowledge about future job opportunities; in other words, heighten employability in a manner akin to what is sought in other mobility exercises associated in the EU with the Erasmus programme (see Cairns et al 2018). On the other hand, such young people will be wasting their time and money should such benefits not to emerge, needlessly delaying the start of their careers.

## **The Mobile Moratorium**

The theoretical focus of our discussion is upon the idea that young adults may engage in international internships within the transition to the labour market as a means to begin an international career, whereby an international internship is supposed to represent the first level of engagement. In particular, we wish to discuss the idea that such internships may be undertaken as mobile moratorium. As implied above, this decision represents an attempt to use mobility to direct a career trajectory into an internationalized field of opportunities through strengthening the spatial dimension of an education-to-work trajectory (see also Tomaney, 2014; Plöger and Kubiak, 2018). In this sense, there is activation of an imaginative aspect of personal agency, centred upon what has been termed ‘the mobility dream’ (Cairns et al 2017).

In talking about a mobile moratorium, though, we wish to open-up a variety of possible meanings of this ‘mobility dream.’ Drawing on Threadgold (2019), Howie et al. state that ‘For many young people entering adulthood today, owning a home, having children and working in stable employment are doubtful and uncertain possibilities. It may be that working for enjoyment and pleasure is a better risk management approach’ (Howie et al 2019: 10). This position resonates with the search for inhabiting, albeit temporarily, what can be considered ‘cool places’ according to a youth - or youthful - sensibility (Dalsgaard and Gram 2018). King (2018) offers a range of theories to interpret new European migrations, among which we find not only an intersection of migration with youth transitions but also the possibility to interpret them under the umbrella of ‘liquid migration’, whereby, harking back to the work of Bauman, the accent is put on loose relations with factors such as family formation and access to the labour market, while more importance is put on such aspects as flexibility, spontaneity, temporality and, for what concerns the specificity of young people, a condition of singleness which may be seen as not carrying out the burden of family care (see

also Lulle et al. 2018), therefore entailing more apparent freedom. This magmatic state may in a way be assimilated to what Andy Bennett, importing the work of the French thinker Michel Maffesoli (1996), has called in youth subculture theory the 'neotribe' (1999), namely a companionship characterised by loose relationships and fluidity. In this vein, Robards and Bennett have written about the notion of 'neo-tribal wandering' to talk about 'a process through which individuals in late modernity experience multiple and varied instances of temporal social bonding as they strive to connect with and engage in a more permanent form of social bond' (Hardy et al. 2018:6, see also Robards and Bennett 2011).

Whatever the perspective taken, it is often easy to neglect contextual factors such as the competitive nature of (international) careers for the highly qualified in Europe. Being an international intern is an exceptional pursuit, and not everyone can succeed to the same extent. This aspect evokes the idea of a 'rat-race' that has become familiar to career construction in neo-liberal contexts. However, when anticipated success does not arrive, we have a potential slowing down of the transition.

In a slightly more technical sense, youth studies literature has started to look at the role of mobility in 'turning points', or significant events in the life of young people with respect to their transition to adulthood (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016, Krzaklewska 2019, Thomson and Taylor 2005, Robertson et al 2017). In these mechanisms, mobility is seen as 'becoming' (Tran 2016). In a study of migrant hospitality workers, Alberti (2014) has talked about 'mobility power' as a form of resistance to degrading work. In this, transnationality is actively used to employ broad strategies. There is a wealth of literature, not necessarily tied to the so-called 'mobility turn' (Urry 2006), which emphasises the importance of travelling as a part of a 'cosmopolitan Bildung' (Cicchelli 2011, Salazar 2014); this literature stresses that for young people to discover the world and themselves, travelling is a central mean. Travelling

and mobility also allow to discover oneself through discovering the other (Snee 2013) and this is very important in the context of transitions research (see also Frändberg 2015). Moreover, mobility can become a lifestyle choice (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, Tomaney, 2014; Plöger and Kubiak, 2018) which goes beyond the possibility of imagining a better life for oneself (Salazar 2014, Benson and Osbaldiston 2014), blurring the boundaries between work and leisure (Cohen et al. 2015). The salience to youthful lifestyle justifies, inter alia, why this is considered a growing area of research (see also some specific invitations to move in this direction by Farrugia and Wood 2017 and Robertson et al. 2017).

Yet, a focus on mobility in the study of youth is a relatively new approach. Youth transitions studies usually see significant events as mostly pertaining to either the completion of education and the beginning of employment and the separation from the family of origin to form a new family or a couple life (Shanahan 2000, Settersten 2002). Multiple moves are particularly increasing among young people (King and Williams 2018), dismantling the idea that moving equates engaging in one single, monodirectional, movement. What is less novel in this approach, however, is the recognition that young people may need to take their time to do their own exploration of so called 'adult roles' - in the contexts of this study, measuring themselves against a career. This is a feature that falls into what Erik Erikson termed 'psychological moratorium' (1958), and that has been followed in various nuances by scholars such as Eisenstadt (1964), Côté and Allahaar (1994), du Bois Reymond (1998) and Arnett (2004). Moratorium is described as a societal permission to decelerate that it is granted to young people - as opposed to other groups - with the motivation that they need to take directions which will have a long lasting impact on their life. This is therefore assumed as sort of generational need, and the 'becomings' of youth taking place within it as a central element (Worth 2009).

Looking at the work sphere, short-term employment - and next to that, internships - have certainly been seen as stepping stones in the construction of a career, one that young people may want to try out to see if they feel suited for the kind of career that these opportunities may look like as giving access to. If we consider international internships as a formative experience, they can be viewed as opportunities to develop an orientation about the career one may want to pursue, and more generally, to have a look around in a way that defers ultimate choices, while enjoying experiences that may be fulfilling per se, beyond any strategy of career construction. The elements of 'playfulness' (Erikson, 1968: 157) and 'provoking lightness' (Erikson 1968: 184-185) are also very important for a moratorium to take place, and distinguish it from other forms of 'time taking', next to that of self-exploration and self-development (as, for instance, in the work of Conradson and Latham 2005 and Prazeres 2017). Obviously the forms through which the moratorium takes place in current contexts may vary, but the eventual lack or weakness of the 'playful' element should suggest a conceptual redirection, for instance in the form of 'waithood' (Cuzzocrea 2019).

We contend that the heuristic potentials of mobility research, which is attentive to 'the dynamics, ongoing day to day production of space in everyday lives as they become entangled with material objects' (Sheller 2017: 631), is high in looking at what we term the 'mobile moratorium'. Likewise, wider political underpinnings of mobility regimes (Kesselring 2015) ought to be considered in youth transitions processes. Thus, we think this way of conceiving of these experiences has particular value for the readership of 'Mobilities', as similar mechanisms have been studied in relation to education, or gap years and international students (Vogt 2017; Snee 2014), but not with hybrid forms of work such as internships. Studies on students highlight in part different outcomes in the lives of young people, given that young people still in education move within a protected shell, while internships may be

undertaken after formal education is completed. In the second place, our focus is of interest because mobility studies may easily continue to ignore the curiously understudied group of qualified young people who engage in international internships, this group falling outside the sort of mobility that is traditionally more appealing in this research area. It is in this intersection that we locate our work, along the lines of a growing literature on youth and mobility.

### **Context and methods: the International Internship in Europe**

Due to the absence of robust and comprehensive statistics relating to international internships in the European context, we lack details regarding the prevalence of this form of circulation and its impact on graduates' careers. Studies in the field of Economics have however implied that an internship can be a 'stepping stone' or a 'dead end' within a career trajectory (Nicholson 2018, Booth et al. 2002; Scherer 2004). Such studies, thus, recommend imposing caveats on the value of internship, international or otherwise, resonating with accounts presented in popular media (see, for instance, the work of Holford 2017, Owens and Stewart 2016). The under-developed state of the research field, and a lack of evidence-based critique, may help explain why the perception of international internships might be unduly influenced by what are basically publicity materials issued by institutions that stand to profit from hosting placements. Such accounts will seek to downplay the power differential between intern and host; an imbalance that helps explain why an internship position can become intrinsically precarious due to inadequate or negligible economic and social support.

To better explain the prominence of international internships in the European context, we will first look at some of the aforementioned publicity materials, supplemented by four interviews conducted during 2016 in Brussels with individuals from international agencies

that host interns, including high profile Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The interviewees were an HR professional from a NGO with various branches throughout the world, two people working for pressure groups and organizations in the field of youth mobility in Europe and one of the founders of an association which provided examples of innovative strategies that may help to counteract intern exploitation. All interviews were conducted in person, fully recorded and transcribed. Discussion covered the ambiguous place of these exchanges within the field of intra-European youth circulation; such movement cannot, for instance, be codified as student mobility due to the lack of engagement with a tertiary education level institution or definitively regarded as work due to the absence of an employment contract. This puts the international internship into an indeterminate category between work and study; extracurricular or intersecting with mobility practices associated with leisure, such as holidays and gap years. Being defined as 'training' is an alternate approach, but implies a structure within the internship experience that may not be present, not to mention the issue of certification.

For what concerns the views of international interns, our target audience consisted of young people from different European countries, all of whom had recently undertaken an international internship, meaning that there was a retrospective focus in the research design. As stated previously, there is no systematic or robust statistical information on prevalence, meaning we cannot conduct analysis of secondary data or establish baseline parameters for a representative study. This adds to a general difficulty with studying 'many of the new mobilities that are short-term, sequential and cyclical -and characteristics especially of young people's movements (King and Williams 2018: 2). Our research was therefore only be explorative. The geographical dispersal implied by the nature of the research topic, with respondents distributed across Europe, also ruled out face-to-face interviewing with interns.

We therefore decided to create an online platform, Google docs, to host our questions, which was active between April and July 2017.

Respondent recruitment consisted of making direct requests to possible participants at events where international interns were in attendance or via relevant social media platforms; for example, webpages maintained by the Global Interns Coalition, EUInterns4Interns and Repubblica degli Stagisti. This extended to taking advantage of our own prior experience of working at European level, including involvement with European institutions, including the European Commission, Council of Europe and United Nations, and different NGOs. For this reason, most of those who participated had direct contact with the authors, and therefore an opportunity to discuss the aims of the study. Some imbalances also emerged in this process, especially the predominantly female constituency of our sample. While without statistics we cannot confirm that the international internship is a predominantly female undertaking, our experiences strongly suggest that this may indeed be the case in the European context.

After three months of diligent work, we managed to collect data on 57 different internship experiences. In regard to socio-demographics, 70 per cent of these cases were female, with an age range of between 23 and 41 years old at the time of completing the questions. All were highly qualified, with 73 per cent having a Master's degree and 13 per cent a PhD as highest level of educational attainment. Social Sciences was the most popular academic field of study, with 47 per cent of cases, followed by Humanities (30%) and Engineering (13%). In regard to where these internships were undertaken, the most popular locations were, as might be expected, European capitals and centres of trade and geopolitics, including Brussels, Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, Geneva and Strasbourg. However, private

sector organizations also featured in 23 per cent of cases, including a number of private language schools and transportation organizations. Finally, in respect to duration, the documented internships lasted between one and ten months, usually three months (27%) or six months (27%).

In establishing research questions, in addition to descriptive issues that accounted for around half of the inquiry (e.g. education and work experience, mobility experience and socio-demographic background), we explored two basic propositions: firstly, that an international internship can be a positive experience in regard to strengthening an individual's employment prospects; secondly, undertaking an international internship involves hardship, especially in relation to financial costs. Our aim is hence to provide a balanced perspective, avoiding the mistake of emphasising only positive outcomes, or disguising difficulties implicit in this form of mobility. The material itself was initially analysed using breakdowns provided in Google docs, with additional offline work conducted by the authors.

### **Debating internships in Europe**

Drawing on our interview material, we found that a contentious idea is whether internship providers – who usually offer either unpaid or low paid placements – do so within or in alternative to education. In the words of the founder of an internships association: '[...] You have the effect that people just go to kind of subscribe to fake universities, you know, like in Kosovo or in Taiwan or whatever [...] and as they like, [they] can have an agreement in the internship because they need [stability].' In order to be an effective tool of access to the labour market, in the words of the same informant, there is a need to:

[...] guarantee quality internship and change the mentality of people and create a positive sense [of] flexibility and transparency, so the ranking that you have, yes, this is one of the best employers in Europe [...]. Ok what is behind, you never know, yeah, so here no, everything will be transparent, so it's the same criteria that the employer will be evaluated according to some criteria and by the interns as well.

Debate over internship quality is also present at European Policy level. For example, the European Commission proposal COM 2013 857 aims to introduce a Quality Framework for Traineeships, and follows a similar logic to that of recognition for youth work. A response to the perceived lack of quality within internships has also been forthcoming from groups representing interns. In Italy, for example, the pressure group *La Repubblica degli stagisti* [Interns' Republic] has put forward an articulated seven-point plan. These ideas include the belief that interns must be young and without significant previous work experience, be few in numbers, at least in private firms, and with a concrete possibility of employment after finishing the internship. The educational component should also be evident, with each intern having a tutor and the possibility to participate in the life of the organization. And interns should receive some sort of remuneration, between 250 and 500 euros net per month. Unpaid traineeship should only be for students who are still at school, in the context of the ministerial programmes, and not exceed six months in duration or be renewed.

These aims are best regarded as aspirational, but the basic premise is one of seeking to take some of the precarity and the risk of exploitation out of internship. However, such provisions do not make explicit reference to international interns, whose needs may be more complex due to the additional costs and challenges of 'working' abroad for short and

unpredictable times. There are, for example, consequences for the timing of basic elements of constructing a career, and a life, and more broadly making oneself comfortable in a particular place. This point is explicitly discussed in an interview with a professional working for an organization in the field of youth mobility in Europe:

Getting a pension or getting a loan, buying a house or all these things are a bit more difficult and you hesitate a bit more in doing them [...], and also you might question the sense of belonging to a place where you are and the citizenship, the engagement in society [...] they sometimes question how can they manage to be active locally and know what is going on. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, there are people, they are talented and do it but you need to have some more skills in order to, not only face the cultural shock, not only the everyday business of living in another country, but also integrate at the level of engaging with the country that we are not originally from.

We might argue that constant effort is required just to 'stay in the game' of living in another country; an additional burden not present to the same extent among non-travelling interns. Bringing to light these existential challenges helps us to put into better perspective the experience of doing an international internship, and unpredictable outcomes from exercising mobility reveals a complexity that is inherently hazardous. While the potential benefits can multiply quickly, like in the game, it is also possible to lose everything with one false move.

## **International Interns' Experiences**

These propositions will be explored further in the ensuing discussion, which looks at outcomes emerging from our research with international interns; personal and professional development considerations, then the issue of potential hardship and precarity.

### *Personal and Professional Development*

At the outset, it is important to consider why international internships are undertaken, identifying prominent reasons. In our work on intra-European mobility among the highly qualified, we have argued that both personal and professional considerations come into play during the decision-making process, these issues often being inseparable, meaning that a sense of individual fulfilment can be as strong a motivation as the prospect of improving labour market chances (Cairns et al 2017). By personal development, we refer to the explorative dimension of the mobility exercise; trying out new experiences in a new place, with a view to expanding one's outlook on life or simply meeting people from different cultures. While this feeling may have close associations with leisure, literature on forms of mobility such as gap years implies that a peripatetic interregnum can provide space for internal reflection on problems and possible future directions, as well as leading to an expansion of one's social life (see, e.g. Vogt, 2017). In this sense, we wish to know if similar processes apply to international interns. Professional development on the other hand is more self-evident, with enhancing one's future employment chances in a chosen field paramount. Both these issues matter as internships in particular sectors – for instance, third sector – have

been noted as being regarded as having 'a sense of purpose', rather than being merely instrumental (Leonard et al. 2016), and resonate with the conceptual idea of the 'learning migrant' (Williams 2007).

In regard to which faculty mattered most to the respondents in regard to their motivations behind becoming an international intern, Figure 1 confirms that 'personal interest' is by far the greatest motivation, with 36 cases out of 57 citing this factor as the main consideration. What this finding implies is that the personal/explorative dimensions of internship have a bearing upon the decision to undertake such moves, somewhat contradicting the idea that economic considerations are paramount. This may explain why they are willing to pay a price – in economic and perhaps other – terms for the 'freedom' to be an intern. Other respondents did however cite more pragmatic reasons. 15 respondents had undertaken an internship that was part of an educational course; that is, a move abroad that was integral to their undergraduate or postgraduate degree programme. However, it was notable that only one person selected 'career advancement' as their main reason, providing a relatively clear confirmation of the prominence of more personal factors.

Insert Figure 1 here

We might also interpret these outcomes as demonstrating a certain playfulness in regard to the practice of international internship in the sense that fulfilling personal interests might trump more 'serious' concerns. To explore this theme further, another set of questions looking at the role of international internship in fostering personal and career development.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2 presents outcomes from two of these questions, that relate to the role of the internship in career development and personal development respectively. Results suggest that international internship is a means to foster personal rather than professional development among the respondents, corresponding with the view established previously. Over half of those surveyed (29 cases) regarded their internship as having a major impact on their lives in this respect, although only a small minority (four cases) stated that there had been 'no impact' made on their career.

This issue was also explored in an open question included on the questionnaire, which provides additional insight. One finding that emerged relates to expectations of career development from the internship, which seem to be limited, a position that in some cases was demonstrated by personal experience or observing others' lack of success in the labour market after an internship. In fact, with the exception of one respondent who declared that '[internship] completely changed my life and it helped me find my path', all comments were critical of the experience in regard to its ability to help access job opportunities. In some cases, this was linked to the inability of the international internship to *directly* lead to a job; for example, one respondent had the following to say about her experiences:

Subsequent to the internship, I applied for jobs in the same NGO several times and each time I was told I didn't have enough experience. This was despite the fact that the job description perfectly matched my CV.

Also captured in these comments is the sense that the internship represents an intermediate phase between education and work. For example, in the following view:

In general terms is it a crucial situation to be outside of your traditional boundaries. I'm doing my PhD, so is not an internship in real terms, but an academic foreign experience with major consequences for my entire formation (not just in academical terms).

This provides support for the 'internship as moratorium' idea, expressed in terms of taking a time out, in this case, from a PhD programme. Other concerns voiced were more negative and related, ironically, to the fact that organisations used interns to replace staff, thus reducing the number of job openings available, or the lack of value in the experience. For example, 'I was given plenty of responsibility, which was good for learning, although sometimes it felt I was replacing a paid staff.' Another issue was the fact that organizations use interns for symbolic purposes; to present *the image* that they support job opportunities for graduates. For instance, 'It seemed that the company sent me abroad using my work as an "advertisement" of other activities they wanted to sell.' This is a position this respondent felt uncomfortable with, particularly considering her somewhat limited level of engagement with the organization.

*Precurity and Exploitation?*

In evaluating the feedback provided, the key issue emerging is one of ambivalence, allied to a sense of fatalism in regard to their expectations. Words and expression used convey resignation to inevitable hardships and a lack of certainty in regard to outcomes. Particular prominent is the repeated use of the verb 'try' and indications of persistence, most prominently in the willingness to undertake consecutive international internships, suggesting that one thing that cannot be question is their own personal effort. Therefore, they may show signs that they are being 'exploited' but know that this comes as part of the 'job.' Significantly, they do not seem to take this personally but rather attribute their relative vulnerability to the realities of neoliberal labour markets characterized by a high level of competition and precarity. This explains why they themselves are able to rationalize their marginal positions, while other parties may look upon their 'work' as problematic; for example, agencies campaigning for interns' rights. From their own point of view they are taking advantage of what is on offer, however imperfect, even if this means being taken advantage of by host organizations.

Nevertheless, we do need to provide balance, and confirm that we have some success stories, indicating perhaps that those who responded to the open question may not be indicative of broader trends. One of our closing questions asked, 'Did you find a job as a result of doing this internship?' A total of 15 cases answered in the affirmative. While not constituting a majority, this is a substantial number of success stories, with one further respondent indicating that she had obtained a PhD scholarship as a result of her internship. And in evaluating these results, the view of international internship is generally positive rather than negative, with the most outstanding findings emphasizing the personal development dimension.

In looking at the ‘downside’ of the international internship experience, and harking back to some of the issues emphasised by the interviewees in Brussels cited previously, concerns exist in regard to the quality of the experience, with emphasis upon precarity and exploitation. In regard to the former, this involves a lack of basic work protection and access to welfare, as well as no pay or low pay for one’s work. The latter scenario can involve not only a lack of economic recompense but also being ‘forced’ to work in sub-standard conditions or even suffer abuse in the workplace. Precarity among highly qualified young people is also a central motif in the media critique of this form of intra-European circulation and the driving force behind political activism on this issue, including several high profile social media campaigns, but as the results discussed to date indicate, this assumption needs to be questioned. It may also be that difficult working conditions limit the potential for new skills to be learnt. For example, one intern mentioned that ‘I couldn’t afford to learn a new language during my internship because I was too busy working a second job to support myself.’ However, not all interns occupy precarious positions or endure exploitation, and it may be the case that a certain amount of hardship in the short-term is endured in anticipation of better conditions in the longer term.

Insert Figure 3 here

Looking at this issue in more practical terms, we ask the respondents about support received from host institutions. Figure 3 provides an indication of how much financial support was received during their placements and the presence of practical support in covering housing and travel expenses offered. What these results confirm is that just under half of

respondents (23 out of 57) received no financial or practical support whatsoever from the host institution, with only a small minority reporting that they had been adequately supported; for example, four respondents received a full salary. This situation is therefore consistent with allegations made by activists seeking to establish payment for internship. In regard to who is making up the shortfalls in support, the simple answer was that it was the interns themselves; in fact, only five respondents reported not having used their own financial resources.

### **Discussion and Conclusions: International internship as ‘mobile moratorium’**

With this investigation, we are able to consider some of the ramifications that emerge from this form of ‘mobile moratorium.’ On the one hand, personal concerns feature prominently in regard to motivations and outcomes, configuring aspects of a ‘mobile transition’ (Shanti et al. 2017). On the other, in respect to the allegation of precarity, we have signs of a lack of support. However, it was not universally so, and other conversations that took place with interns during the course of conducting the research revealed that costs were expected as part of the experience rather being seen as a problem. Moreover, coming from a well-off background, for at least some interns, worked as insulation against hardship.

What does come across more vividly is the idea of international internship as a relatively playful stage in the journey from education to work. Experiences that early career qualified young people may want to engage in order to follow a desire to experiment with different roles, situations, establish new acquaintances - at work and outside of work, while enjoying the overall learning experience. For this reason, we would argue that such experiences are indeed a form of moratorium, with the effect of delaying labour market

access and prolonging the transition, rather than easing this passage. These internships hence come at a social and economic cost to the participant, but one that is accepted as part of the 'deal', an interpretation that does not sit comfortably with the unproblematic image of international internship presented in publicity materials, or more negative reports from the media and pressure groups lobbying on behalf of interns. While we accept that an international internship can be 'fun,' we nevertheless still have concerns, specifically that international interns are ceding control of their career, even if for a short time, to host institutions that prioritize their own interests. And while there may be the impression that the intern is able to exercise a degree of agency over what happens during their placement, negative experiences may outweigh the benefits.

New mobilities can be seen as axes along which disparity grows (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). The element of 'playfulness' and 'provoking lightness' of the moratorium experience (as stressed in the original Erikson's definition, 1968), and which we see in the mobile moratorium, may contribute to concealing potential exploitation that interns may not even be aware of. What seems to make the experience palatable for participants is a strong orientation towards personal development, making the experience more 'touristic,' with the added carrot of the prospect of promising to initiate a cosmopolitan career. In a best case scenario the internship can be the first step in an international work trajectory within the host organization or related institutions within the same location or occupational sector. However the competitive nature of the exercise and emphasis on personal interest also mean the intern becoming stuck in a 'trap of passion' (Murgia and Poggio 2014), although that expectations may be low to begin with can help offset disappointment.

While we recognize that this particular moratorium phase probably only affects a relatively small number of individuals, and is entered into voluntarily, should the international internship become regulated into a more accessible and stable format, as per the demands of certain lobbyists, it may become a more mainstream experience. This in turn might lead us back towards the 'niche' conceptualization of youth transitions, akin to the idea from psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) of a psychosocial interval within which a young person can find his or her place in the world through self-experimentation. A mobile transition phase may then transform itself into purposeful procrastination, emphasising personal development rather than the enhancement of labour market entry dimensions such as employability (see Côté and Allahar 1994; Arnett 2004).

We can also see potential for exploitation to which we should not be blind as researchers; and in fact similar warnings have been elaborated in the analysis of student mobility (e.g. Beech 2018). But the very same interest which motivated us to conduct this study, i.e. to understand how conditions and experiences of youth change under the assumption of a mobile transition, leads us not to over-simplify the moratorium metaphor through viewing it through an entirely pejorative lens, since the relative meaningfulness of the experience in terms of contribution to career development may in fact be what is actually desired. In other words, economic factors do not necessarily take a leading role in deciding to undertake an international internship, as is the case in other transition phases (see also Cairns 2014, Cook and Cuervo, 2018; Halfacree, 2004). In order to further investigate these matters, we advocate for more empirical data to be collected to substantiate the meaning, at times contradicting, of transnational mobility within the transition to adulthood (Frändberg 2015) or more general the life course; but also, for a closer dialogue between reflections on the meanings of mobility with studies of youth transitions.

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