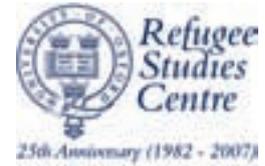


Internships: rite of passage for students of forced migration?



Currently studying for a Master of Science in Forced Migration, we come from many countries but share a common tension – between a stubborn idealism and a deep-seated realism. Present in our respective research areas is an awareness of the humanity of those we study, of the ramifications and toll of uprootedness, dispossession and survival. Yet despite, and perhaps, because of this realism, we remain idealists in our desire to effect change. Our idealism, however, is firmly rooted in recognition of the necessity and value of professional and field experience and exposure, as we begin to chart our career paths. Internships – with NGOs, international agencies or governments – provide a crucible where our ideals engage realities and where our skills, knowledge and enthusiasm can make tangible contributions.

The most valuable internships are enriching for current and recent students and organisations. Organisations influence thinking and approaches to responses to forced migration and help students entering the world of work grapple with the complexities that inevitably arise. Internships enable students to gain valuable work experience, understand organisational structures and have exposure to office or field work environments. Organisations share their knowledge and impart responsibilities, and students, in turn, provide much needed assistance. Many even return for future long-term work. Hands-on training is invaluable for students embarking on a myriad of careers, whether in academia, journalism, law or public service.

We thus have great interest in obtaining internships and are aware of the doors that can open for us. There are, however, many challenges and constraints affecting our ability to take up an internship offer. Organisations seek unpaid interns primarily to assist them with their workloads and we appreciate they offer knowledge and experience in

lieu of salaries. However, there are real financial constraints for many students. Many organisations are located in capitals where the cost of living, accommodation and public transport is exorbitant. Health and accident insurance is another barrier, for recent graduates are often of an age when they are no longer covered by their parents' policies but unable to take out their own cover, particularly if they are non-nationals of the country where they undertake an internship. Many students are already burdened by loans they have taken out to finance their studies.

While as graduate students we seek internships as an initial venture into our areas of interest, we find that a majority of them require applicants to have already acquired such coveted experience – a Catch 22 situation making such opportunities virtually inaccessible to many. With visa restrictions and the unpaid nature of most internships, gaining such experience is especially challenging for students from developing nations. We are concerned that the barrier of citizenship further perpetuates the North-South divide – an irony, given that this field aims to confront global inequality. A field as challenging as forced migration requires contribution from people with diverse backgrounds. Organisations seeking interns should not only seek graduate students but should widen the applicant pool to attract those with a myriad of lived experiences and knowledge of local effects of forced migration. Is it not paradoxical that financial means, education and favoured nationality influence the possibility of professionally engaging with the struggles of the underprivileged?

Internships could be made more accessible if agencies offered assistance with visa applications and modest financial aid – in the form of transportation vouchers, low-cost or subsidised insurance and assistance in locating temporary affordable accommodation. The issue is not about paying interns

– for we understand the benefits we receive in lieu of monetary compensation – but rather, it is about having structures in place that can enable interns to dedicate themselves to such projects without taking on further financial burdens.

To address these challenges, increased cooperation between agencies, academic institutions and governments is crucial. The drive and initiative of students should be matched by a cross-institutional commitment to lowering barriers in order to ensure the introduction of fresh ideas from committed and knowledgeable students.

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