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The intern economy in the cultural industry: an empirical study of the demand side

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ABSTRACT

Internships are work-based learning experiences, but when they are unpaid and become the standard after formal education, they imply an opportunity cost and could add to the formation of obstacles to the socio-economic mobility that (public) education should seek to attenuate. The present study consists of an evaluation of the intern economy in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Based on data of over 900 available positions in the cultural industry, we examine the demand for internships by organisations and address issues such as substitution and efficacy in the intern economy. We discuss our findings in light of some proposed misconceptions regarding the education-based meritocracy, related to the diminishing role of educational credentials in hiring decisions, the changing role of education in socio-economic mobility, and the overlooked role of employers that prioritise the productive efficiency of their organisations over equal opportunities.

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Internships; cultural industry; demand; socio-economic mobility

Introduction

The ‘fairness of the intern economy’ has become a topic of debate and lawsuits, by which the entertainment industries have not remained unaffected (Frenette 2015, 351; Fink 2013). Unpaid internships in particular have turned into a source of ethical and legislative concerns (McHugh 2017). Such concerns converge with the rising precarity or the financial, social and existential insecurities exacerbated by the flexibilisation of labour markets (Lorey 2015; Kalleberg 2009; Castells 1996). Combined with worries about employability after education (at times related to the devaluation of educational qualifications, cf. Jackson 2007) and debts incurred through student loans, new entrants to labour markets are likely to experience the symptoms of precarious employment and labour market insecurity: uncertainty about future employment, income instability, erratic work schedules, the lack of a safety net and collective representation, worries about health, struggles in finding an appropriate work/life balance, etc.

Internships, especially uncompensated, could add to the formation of obstacles to the socio-economic mobility that (public) education should seek to attenuate (McHugh 2017; Perlin 2011; Jackson 2007). As expressed by Discenna (2016), unpaid internships ‘exacerbate the problem of wealth inequality by inculcating in our youngest workers the expectation that a certain amount of unpaid labor is a necessity for “success” in the contemporary economy.’ Unpaid internships imply an opportunity cost that makes graduates from lower social backgrounds better off with paid equivalent or other work (McHugh 2017). Therefore, internships, especially extra-curricular and after-school, could make graduates dependent on parental assistance. Empirical studies have begun to report differences in post-graduation job outcomes (including positions and earnings) by socio-economic

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background (Martin and Frenette 2017; Oakley et al. 2017; Witteveen and Attewell 2017), providing evidence for social class inequalities at the end of education.

As noted by Martin and Frenette (2017, 1492), any 'field that places a strong emphasis on social connections, self-promotion and assertive personalities could magnify inequalities by offering further advantages to groups that already enjoy an abundance of material and symbolic resources.' One such field is the cultural industry, in which success has been evidenced to be reliant upon the mobilisation of financial and social resources (Scott 2012), sometimes more readily accessible for graduates with affluent parents (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). Indeed, precarious labour opportunities have regularly been associated with the cultural and creative sectors (Banks 2017; Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013; Bain and McLean 2013; De Peuter 2011; Oakley 2011; Ross 2008), in which difficult entry processes, job instability and low-wage jobs appear as the downside against the autonomy and self-effectuation that cultural work generally offers (Menger 2003). McRobbie (2004) typifies the 'pleasure-pain axis' in creative work as one that entails a trade-off between fun work, non-monetary rewards, existential gratification and social status. When autonomous work is the preference of the worker, it reflects a bottom-up initiation of work flexibilisation, but flexibilisation is also instituted top-down, 'with employers and the neoliberal states supporting them motivated to transfer the market risk to individual workers and to save indirect labor costs' (De Peuter 2011, 420; Lorey 2015).

Scholars have highlighted the increasing social acceptance and even ubiquity of engaging in unpaid work in the cultural industry (Banks 2017; Ashton 2016; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; Figiel 2013; Frenette 2013; Siebert and Wilson 2013; Rolston and Herrera 2000). In addition, internships within this industry have also been found to be associated with questionable employer practices, including 'low or poor learning content; poor working conditions; inadequate compensation; using trainees as substitutes for regular staff; repeatedly renewing traineeship contracts without offering a permanent position' (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012, 5). If, indeed, in the cultural industry unpaid internships have become the norm while raising obstacles to socio-economic mobility, and if the effectiveness of internships (O'Higgins and Pinedo 2018; McHugh 2017) is generally low, questions should be raised about the true value and cost of such practices. It becomes highly problematic when unpaid internships grow into an obligatory 'rite of passage.' In fact, within culture, unpaid internships have been evidenced to be the 'only route into the sector' (Siebert and Wilson 2013, 712).

While accounts of the experiences, preferences and behaviours by interns and graduates on the transition from school to work in the cultural industry exist (Cuyler and Hodges 2016; Figiel 2013; Frenette 2013; Siebert and Wilson 2013), the demand side of internships has remained relatively understudied. For an employer, internships can provide cost and flexibility advantages: internships generally entail human capital usage at the cost of training, and, if paid, payment is lower compared to regular jobs (McHugh 2017). In addition, internships provide flexibility as long-term employment commitments must not be made, so interns who do not meet the performance standards of an organisation can be easily dismissed. In this manner, internships could be considered an effective recruitment tool that helps employers hire only well-performing individuals (McHugh 2017). However, questions as to what extent employers in the cultural industry make use of internships, which employers do so, and why and how they do so, remain largely unaddressed. Answering these questions leads to insight in the demand side of internships in the cultural industry and in its working conditions, also in terms of exclusiveness.

The present study consists of a quantitative account of the intern economy in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Based on data of over 900 available positions in the cultural field advertised in year 2015, we examine the demand for intern workforce by organisations and address issues such as substitution and efficacy in the intern economy. Overall, research highlights noteworthy differences in intern labour markets among nations, due to differences in legislation and labour market conditions for temporary workers (O'Higgins and Pinedo 2018). Belgium is a country with less liberal employment protection legislation compared with the Anglo-Saxon countries from which most insights in internships in the cultural industry originate: the United Kingdom (Siebert and Wilson 2013; Holmes 2006), the United States (Cuyler and Hodges 2016; Frenette 2013; 2015; Rolston

and Herrera 2000) and Australia (McHugh 2017; Daniel and Daniel 2013; Bridgstock 2011). As such, studying the demand for interns in Belgium adds to existing supply-side studies of 'internship efficacy' and to insights that originate in settings that are more liberal.

Literature

Work in the cultural industry

Work in the creative economy has been described as 'affective labour', which refers to the 'immaterial labour' typical for so many service industries that is based on relationships and incites feelings of wellbeing, connectedness, passion and excitement (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000): many workers in the cultural industry experience a strong affective attachment to arts and culture, and at times also a 'fan experience', similar as within sports (Hawzen et al. 2018). Such 'fan-worker' duality is a clear manifestation of the 'tendency in late capitalism to refashion labour as love, "the grind" as the goal, and cruelty as optimism' (Hawzen et al. 2018, 201; McRobbie 2016). Despite increasing evidence of the drawbacks of work within the cultural sector, such as underemployment, low pay and even health problems caused by high levels of uncertainty (Bain and McLean 2013; Comunian, Faggian, and Jewell 2011; Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2011; Comunian, Faggian and Li 2010), young aspirants nevertheless find the industry a highly appealing work environment. Abundant research reflects aspirant workers' continuous efforts to enter such an oversaturated labour market and the opportunities they accept, which often comprise a set of unpaid work experiences, including internships (McRobbie 2016; Frenette 2013; Lingo and Tepper 2013; Ball, Pollard, and Stanley 2010). Whereas the flexibility and insecurity of the general labour market have been related to the rise of global competition, neo-liberalist policies and the aftermath of the recession following the 2008 Financial Crisis (Burgoon and Dekker 2010), such features have been identified in the cultural labour market for over thirty years (Wassall and Alper 1985). Cultural economists and sociologists provide several explanations for the predominance of flexible employment within the cultural labour market.

First, cultural work is labour-intensive (Baumol and Bowen 1965) and project-based (Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2011), exemplified by exhibitions, festivals and movie productions, which upsurges the need for a flexible and temporary workforce. As explained by Maertz, Stoeberl, and Marks (2014, 130), 'Interns are often well-suited to help with value-added emergent or "back-burner" projects that would not otherwise be done, at a far lower labour cost while simultaneously allowing full-time employees to focus on more immediate priorities.' Additionally, the uncertainty of demand for any new cultural good (the 'nobody knows property' described by Caves 2000) influences the behaviour of organisations that may want to transfer the business risk onto the contingent workforce by using short-term, part-time or freelance contracts, thus by underemployment (Ross 2008; Menger 2003).

Second, it has repeatedly been argued that the cultural industry is characterised by a structural oversupply of both creative works and creative workers (Menger 2003; Caves 2000). Among the reasons for the oversupply of creative workforce are the attractiveness of the work, the occupational ambiguity and the lack of a uniform credentialing system of educational attainment: a wide array of degrees and experiences allow the entrance to creative labour markets (Lingo and Tepper 2013). This oversupply, in combination with the appeal of creative work, implies that artists as well as non-artistic workers may be ready to accept lower pay and generally worse working conditions compared to workers with similar educational levels employed in other sectors (Menger 2003). Culture is among those fields where many workers remain motivated and continue producing despite the fact that unpaid work is not exceptional and is rather inevitable (McRobbie 2016). In the case of (amateur) artists, the intrinsic motivation and absence of feelings of disutility from work could serve as suitable explanations for this phenomenon (Throsby and Zednik 2010). However, those factors alone do not suffice to explain the motivation of unpaid interns in culture, who might also be motivated by future career prospects and financial gains within the industry. Hence, intern labour

has been described as ‘aspirational labour’ fuelled by a strong belief that the success and reward for present efforts will arrive in the future. Duffy (2016) notes that ‘aspirational labourers’ feed their ‘future-oriented reward systems’ with easily accessible and inspirational success stories of those who ‘were discovered.’ Taken together, the surplus of creative workers, the prevalence of project-based work, the particular motivational drivers of cultural workers and the reward systems they are willing to accept, pave the way for employers to use the labour readily provided by interns. As many cultural organisations are under continuous financial pressures, cost-effective and flexible labour forms such as internships become particularly appealing.

Cultural employers

Employers in the cultural industry include organisations in heritage, performing arts (music, theatre and dance), literature, (audio-)visual arts (including the movie industry). Peterson and Anand (2004) differentiate between three forms of organisation that shape cultural products: (1) the bureaucratic form, characterised by long-term projects/purposes, and a clear division of labour and authority; (2) the entrepreneurial form, with short-term projects/purposes, unclear division of labour and authority; and (3) a mixed form that entails short-term projects but a long-term purpose, and a clear division of labour and authority. Regardless of the form of each cultural organisation, most of them share one distinctive characteristic: the ‘axiological duality’ or essential tension created by the need to combine an artistic logic with a managerial logic (Daigle and Rouleau 2010). The artistic logic entails values such as pleasure, creativity, sensitivity, uniqueness and autonomy. It is the lifeblood of cultural organisations and being successful on the artistic front leads to a respectable reputation (Cray, Inglis, and Freeman 2007). In contrast, values such as order, measurement, calculation and routine prevail within the managerial logic (Daigle and Rouleau 2010). Performing well in the supporting functions of the organisation or ‘humdrum’ tasks (Caves 2000) leads to financial sustainability (Cray, Inglis, and Freeman 2007). In line with this dual logic, organisations employ different workers for artistic and humdrum or operational tasks. It is expected that most interns will be engaged in operational work.

The intern economy

The ‘Intern Economy’ (the joint demand for and supply of internship positions) has become a growing yet controversial labour market phenomenon that affects different sectors of the labour market in many industrialised nations (McHugh 2017; Discenna 2016; Frenette 2013, 2015; Fink 2013; Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012). In its essence, an internship entails a legally-compliant arrangement between an employer – who receives the opportunity to train and assess a potential employee – and an intern – who obtains on the job training and work experience. Providing employers with human capital at the cost of training (McHugh 2017), internships have been argued to be a solution to the soaring rates of youth unemployment that hit the labour market after the 2008 Financial Crisis (Therborn 2014). Yet, the vulnerability of young people’s position and the fierce competition not only for regular jobs but also for internship opportunities within tight labour markets have severely diminished the advantages of internship conditions noted above. These days, young people are frequently expected to accept sub-standard work conditions of entry-level positions because these are considered to be an investment in their future careers. Out of fear of others taking those positions and losing the prospects of working in any particular industry, young people sometimes believe that refusing those conditions may be a waste of the resources spent on education (Hawzen et al. 2018). As such, research has added several nuances to the optimistic win-win discourses about the intern economy (Frenette 2013; 2015; Siebert and Wilson 2013; Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012), pointing at a variety of concerns, including the lack of quality of the internship experience (McHugh 2017), the ambiguity of existing legal frameworks (Hawzen et al. 2018) and the adverse socio-economic consequences of the phenomenon (Perlin 2011). These have also been acknowledged by the European Union:

Socio-economic costs arise if traineeships, particularly the repeated ones, replace regular employment, notably entry-level positions usually offered to young people. Moreover, low-quality traineeships, especially those with little learning content, do not lead to significant productivity gains nor entail positive signalling effects. Social costs also relate to unpaid traineeships that may limit the career opportunities of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Council of the European Union 2014, 1)

The supply of internships is supported by prospective interns as well as governments and education institutions. Young people are eager to do internships mainly to acquire the credentials believed to enhance their chances to bridge the 'wide gap'¹ between education and employment. For similar reasons, governments are willing to financially, administratively and juridically support such work placements, using labour market and lifelong learning policies at the national and supranational levels of governance, with the example of the European Erasmus+ programmes (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012). Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been tasked with enhancing the employability of their graduates (Moreau and Leathwood 2006) for which the integration of internships in their curricula could serve as a valuable tool (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012), for example within the framework of the Bologna process (Sin and Neave 2016). The demand for internship workforce comes from employers whose interests mainly lie in economic considerations, because internships reduce the costs of labour, serve as a recruitment tool and enable innovation by attracting young and energetic workers to their organisations (McHugh 2017; Maertz, Stoeberl, and Marks 2014). At times of educational expansion, especially in situations where a large number of similarly qualified candidates are looking for jobs, employers benefit less from the certifying and signalling roles of educational qualifications and may find a solution in internships. Educational qualifications can certify the forms of knowledge, expertise and skills that individuals have acquired, and they can serve as a signal that someone is likely to possess 'attributes relevant to his or her productive capacity that are not in themselves directly observable' at the recruitment stage (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005, 11). These typically include high motivation and perseverance, the ability to learn quickly, or other attributes that are desirable in potential employees that cannot be known before hiring someone (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Internships can act as a screening device that help employers overcome the insecurity that they may experience as a result of the democratisation of higher education and the popularity of specific programs.

Internships defined

The notion 'internship' is a rather weakly defined form of work-based learning (Bailey, Hughes and Moore 2004). There is no agreed international definition of what constitutes an internship, and the extent to which internships are regulated by law varies across countries (O'Higgins and Pinedo 2018; O'Higgins 2017). The EU uses the notions 'internship', 'traineeship' and 'stage' interchangeably, and defines them as 'a limited period of work practice, whether paid or not, which includes both learning and training components, undertaken in order to gain practical and professional experience with a view to improving employability and facilitating the transition to regular employment' (Council of the European Union 2014). Comparing EU-27 nations, Hadjivassiliou et al. (2012) found that several nations did not have any legal definitions at all or lack a 'concept generally accepted or common understanding of a national definition' (p. 54). Nevertheless, researchers have identified three common characteristics of internships among the EU-27 countries: '(i) the general educational purpose; (ii) the practical element of learning; and (iii) the temporary character' (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012, 4). Maertz, Stoeberl and Marks (2014, 125–126) propose 11 key dimensions of internships, suggesting enormous heterogeneity: (1) remuneration; (2) form of employment (full-time or part-time, seasonal employment, employment during studies); (3) educational status of the intern; (4) academic course credit; (5) academic requirements; (6) internship arrangement (intern-employer /intern-school-employer); (7) clarity and planning of tasks; (8) work format (project-based/job-based); (9) mentor or sponsor within HEI; (10) mentor or sponsor at work; (11) future full-time employment opportunity foreseen.

According to Frenette (2015), internships originate in apprenticeships, arrangements that are generally more educationally ambitious and longer than internships, and in which the exchange of training for work takes centre stage. Important variations as to the links with educational curricula and the learning content characterise current internship practices (Bailey, Hughes and Moore 2004). Internship outcomes have been noted to be ambiguous because of the discrepancies of the learning content and the vagueness of the general educational purpose (Council of the European Union 2014; Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012). Moreover, not all internships are organised and/or monitored by an educational institution, leading to questions about the prevalence of the educational purpose. Possible exploitation could start with the ambiguity in definition, because it allows for interns to be engaged in unpaid or low paid labour without any learning content (Frenette 2013; Perlin 2011).

Internship efficacy

McHugh (2017) coins the notion ‘internship efficacy’ to delineate internships that lead to beneficial outcomes including improved placement rates, additions and complementarities to classroom learning, and financial benefits. Human Capital Theory (Becker 1993) suggests that the experience and network acquired through internships could provide qualities that are favourably assessed in the labour market. Hence, internship experience can be used by job applicants as a signal of quality, career-relevant work experience and future productivity, and increase the chances of obtaining paid full-time employment within an organisation or a field (McHugh 2017; Daniel and Daniel 2013; Rolston and Herrera 2000). Additionally, internships have the potential to contribute to refining career choices in terms of personal fit within a field, and to mitigate positive or negative stereotypes about a potential workplace (Ko and Sidhu 2012; Perlin 2011).

According to McHugh (2017), the features of internships that contribute to internship efficacy include compensation, supervisor behaviour (mentoring and support) and work content. Although evidence is limited, it has been demonstrated that the content and developmental value of internships tends to differ between paid and unpaid internships, partly explained by the more prominent role of supervision and mentorship in the case of paid internships: when employers pay for internship labour, they are more committed to providing guidance to their interns, which increases the developmental value of the internship (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018; McHugh 2017). Furthermore, job pursuit intentions with the host employer have been shown to be higher for paid internships, suggesting that employers hosting unpaid interns may forego potential talent (McHugh 2017). In contrast, unpaid internships often fail to provide substantive benefits to interns, such as developmental values, skill acquisition, articulation of vocational interests, identification of career aspirations and viable employment options or genuine information about the host organisation (McHugh 2017; Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012).

Methods and data

In order to explore the demand side for intern workforce in the cultural industry, the present study considers the available cultural work in a major region in Belgium. Our study makes use of job advertisement data to address questions such as the extent to which cultural employers make use of internships (rather than employment) and which employers do so, and to infer why and how (in terms of supervision, compensation and content) they do so. Addressing these questions will provide additional insights into the working conditions within the cultural industry, and the extent to which internships add to an intern economy that fuels precarious work conditions.

Data collection

We used a database of work opportunities advertised over the course of one year in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Analysing job advertisements has proven to be an effective method for

analysing employers' requirements and attitudes towards positions as well as the labour market in general (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020; Discenna 2016; Jackson 2007). Advertisements serve as a filtering mechanism and the first step in the screening process of the prospective applicants, and they can lead to inferences about how employers communicate the attributes required for positions they hold available (Jackson 2007). The data used for the analyses were provided by the government agency responsible for cultural affairs in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB). FWB hosts a popular and distinctive website (<http://www.culture.be>) used by many aspirants seeking work in the cultural field (confirmed by an informal consultation of graduates within the networks of the authors), and where any organisation can publish job, internship and volunteer opportunities. The website's usage, public and free access for employers and jobseekers, the simultaneous publication of internship and job positions, and controls and validation by FWB make it a high quality source on internship data in this industry. During the year 2015, 1035 adverts were published. After data cleaning (removing 120 volunteering opportunities and 10 incomplete job or internship adverts and duplicates), 905 adverts were retained for the analysis. We consider this number as an approximation of all available job and internship positions in the Wallonia-Brussels region of Belgium.

Data analyses

The analyses of the internship and employment adverts were executed using mixed methods with the content analysis software Atlas.ti 8.0, the statistical software package SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Our data consisted of numerical values and text strings in French. The textual data were prepared for analyses in Atlas.ti 8.0, including its Word Cruncher function. The software proposes built-in 'stop word lists' that are omitted from counts, so that analyses can more easily identify significant keywords in a document. We did some re-coding of the data; for example, we clustered the initial fourteen creative sectors into seven² overarching sectors, and we categorised the types and the requirements regarding education and experience of the 905 positions into consistent and all-comprising categories.

Empirical setting

In Belgium, an intern is defined as 'any student who, as a part of an educational program, organised by an educational institution, is in fact engaged in work at an employer, under similar conditions as the workers employed by that employer, in order to obtain professional experience' (Royal Decree 2004). While this legal definition is restricted to students, it does not stipulate if the internship should entail any educational content within the experience. As Belgium has a complex division of governance and responsibility, which for cultural and educational affairs lies with each of the country's three linguistic communities, the scope of the present study is limited to the Belgian French speaking community which is geographically situated in two regions of the country: the Brussels and Walloon regions.

Findings

Internship demand

In 2015, cultural organisations in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) advertised slightly more internship positions ($n = 472$) than actual job positions ($n = 433$) (Table 1). Organisations seem to have diverging preferences for either workers or interns. Specifically, youth and education organisations (often subsidised) and interdisciplinary organisations were more likely to be seeking regular employees, whereas organisations operating in the performing arts, heritage, audio-visual arts and visual arts sectors posted proportionally more adverts for internships than for actual employment. Performing arts organisations and interdisciplinary organisations (including festivals) had most

Table 1. Proportions of internship and job positions per sector in FWB.

Sectors	Internship positions	Job positions	Total per sector	Internship/total
	n	n	N	%
Youth & Education	20	100	120	16,7%
Literature	22	28	50	44,0%
Performing arts	105	65	170	61,8%
Visual arts	93	26	119	78,2%
Audio-visual arts	58	20	78	74,4%
Heritage	52	22	74	70,3%
Interdisciplinary	67	108	175	38,3%
Other	55	64	119	46,2%
Total positions	472	433	905	52,2%

vacancies (Table 1). The performing arts (music) and heritage (museums) sectors had previously attracted researchers' attention because of their intensive use of interns (Frenette 2014; Holmes 2006), which can be explained by the labour-intensive nature of the sectors and the prevalence of project-based work within those sectors. In our data, the sector that demonstrates the largest proportion of internship positions relative to total positions, is that of the visual arts where the demand for internships is over three times as large as the demand for regular workers (Table 1).

Looking more closely at the 119 advertisements within the visual arts sector, it becomes clear that most internships are offered by art galleries (69%) (Table 2). Many art galleries are small- or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and reflect the entrepreneurial form of cultural organisations characterised by a relatively small size, the intertwining of work and responsibilities among a small number of employees, and low levels of hierarchy (Peterson and Anand 2004). These characteristics, in conjunction with their private for-profit status, allow galleries to easily integrate interns and could explain their preference for interns over employees, which gives them cost advantages. The art market (including art fairs and auction houses) could be quite appealing to aspirant workers, which may exacerbate the social class distinction in the cultural industry (Martin and Frenette 2017). As the Belgian capital (Brussels) is included in our dataset, internship practices in the visual arts may lead to the social class disparities as observed in other metropolises' cultural employment, such as in London (Oakley et al. 2017).

The total number of adverts per organisation is weakly yet significantly positively correlated with the current number of employees (Pearson's $r = .178$, $p = .004$), suggesting that larger cultural organisations are more likely to provide positions. Job positions taken separately show a moderate significantly positive correlation ($r = .305$, $p < .001$) with the number of employees. In contrast, the correlation between the number of employees and internship adverts is not significant ($p = .394$), besides being weak and negative ($r = -.053$): the willingness to employ interns is not related to the size of the organisation (Table 3).

A significant negative (yet weak) correlation ($r = -.134$, $p = .031$) between the number of job adverts and the number of internship adverts suggests the presence of a slight substitution effect between regular employment and internships. In other words, cultural organisations could appear to

Table 2. Proportions of internship and job positions in the visual arts sector in FWB.

Sectors	Internship positions	Job positions	Total per subsector	Internship/total
	n	n	n	%
Art galleries	64	16	80	80,0%
Artists	9	0	9	100,0%
Art fairs and auctions	8	1	9	88,9%
Exhibition Centers	7	0	7	100,0%
Museums	1	5	6	16,7%
Other	4	4	8	50,0%
Total positions	93	26	119	78,2%

Table 3. Pearson's *r* correlations between current employees and adverts.

		1.	2.	3.	4.
1.	Number of employees	1			
2.	Internship positions	-.053	1		
		.394			
3.	Job positions	.305**	-.134*	1	
		.000	.031		
4.	Total positions	.178**	.697**	.617**	1
		.004	.000	.000	

n = 259

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

at times hire interns and employees interchangeably. However, this correlation could also be explained by organisations' unwillingness or lack of capacity of being simultaneously on the lookout for interns and employees. Out of the 448 organisations that published positions in 2015, only 10% (n = 47) published both internships and regular employment offers. A large proportion of organisations (206, 46%) published only job offers, while a slightly smaller number (195, 44%) were recruiting only interns. When two or more adverts are published by the same organisation (n = 151), most (69%) recruit either employees or interns, but not both. This finding can be explained in different ways. Either the types of positions reflect organisations' needs and capacity: whereas some organisations could be in need of consecutive temporary (internship) labour, other organisations may be growing and in need of new staff members. Yet, the preference for either internships or fixed staff positions could also reflect organisational cultures, with some organisations more inclined to hire permanent staff compared with others that prefer loose and temporary engagements with interns.

Internship efficacy

We now turn to examine 'internship efficacy' which originates in features such as supervision, compensation and work content (McHugh 2017).

Supervision

In a report for the European Union, Hadjivassiliou et al. (2012) classify internships based on how they are administered and monitored as 'open market', 'educational' and 'active labour market policy' internships. During our coding, it became clear that categorising internship adverts according to the three types was challenging (Table 4). Only 4% of 472 internships can be clearly identified as 'open market' internships as they explicitly target graduates, and 6% are by definition educational and explicitly require an internship contract with a Higher Education Institution. Another 4% of the advertised positions could be attributed to an active labour market policy developed and regulated by the government. In 16% of the internship positions, the applicant could be either a student or a graduate. The majority of internship adverts were not easily ascribed to those categories (12% were unclear in their requirements, 25% mention a preference (not a requirement) for a higher education

Table 4. Types of internships.

Clearly educational	29	6%
Active labour market policy	19	4%
Clearly open market	19	4%
Open or educational	77	16%
Student status mentioned	150	32%
Higher education diploma mentioned	120	25%
Unclear	58	12%
Total	472	100%

diploma and 32% mention the preference for a student status). Many employers are thus not explicit in their specifications and requirements. The lack of clear references to internship contracts could indicate a lack of organisations' awareness of the internship regulation, and possibly a lack of commitment. The indistinct formulations in the adverts could also indicate that from the point of view of employers it is not that important whether the internship attains any educational goals.

From further analysis of the demand in the labour market, it is clear that job positions are more likely to require previous experience than internship positions (Figure 1). However, also in four out of ten internship adverts, previous experience is appreciated, wanted or required, which underwrites the Eurobarometer research that six to seven out of ten aspirant workers in Belgium did more than one internship (TNS 2013). These numbers could also indicate that employers may prefer people with experience because they require less training, which is in contrast with the idea of an internship as a work-based learning experience (Bailey, Hughes and Moore 2004).

Compensation

Out of 472 internships, only 27 adverts (6%) indicate a form of remuneration, with only five mentioning an explicit amount (with max. 650EUR per month). Remunerating interns in Belgium is not legal if the intern is executing the internship as part of a study programme. However, if the internship is within the scope of the Professional Immersion Convention and the intern is at least 21 years of age, there is a compulsory remuneration of 751EUR per month. Employers do not seem to follow the legal guidelines very strictly. Some follow 'volunteer' regulations to compensate their interns (with a compensation of up to 33,36EUR/day). The proportion of unpaid interns appears higher in the cultural sector than in other sectors: Eurobarometer indicates that across all sectors 19% of interns in Belgium are paid (TNS Political and Social 2013) while only 4% of the internships in our dataset fall within active labour market policies that allow remunerations. In sectors where resources are limited, compensation could come in other forms: aspirant workers may value guidance by a mentor, examples that professionals set, or other aspects that make the internship a unique learning experience (McHugh 2017). For example, internships could provide interns with inside knowledge and skills needed for cultural work, with access to a social network, which is extremely important in the cultural industry (Scott 2012), and with the hallmark of a work experience at a particular institution. The popularity of internship positions at galleries is in this respect noteworthy: while a clear education for art dealer is non-existent, an internship comes close to an apprenticeship during which a student learns from a proficient practitioner, albeit unpaid.

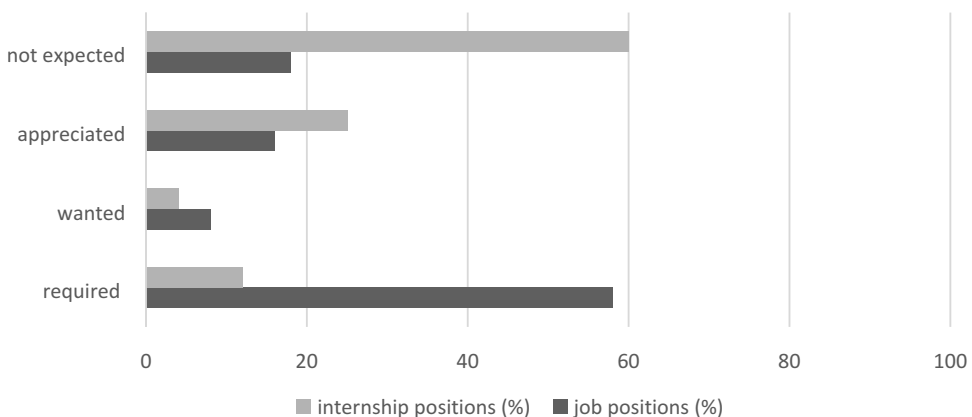


Figure 1. Previous experience for internship and job positions.

(Hawzen et al. 2018), journalism (Discenna 2016) and culture (Frenette 2013; 2015), research points at significant heterogeneity in terms of labour market conditions (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2012). Realities such as the substitution of regular work by internships and the obstacles to socio-economic mobility that originate in the unequal access to internship opportunities, manifest differently across sectors/industries. Our study of internships in the cultural industry in the French-speaking part of Belgium highlights that the relative proportion of internships versus regular employment is high (almost equal in 2015). There are several reasons why industries may have a high demand for internship positions: an overall lack of resources, the prevalence of short-term project-based work, needs for specific skills, or a mere habit. Our study also highlights that a large majority of internships in the cultural industry in Belgium are unpaid (94%), and when paid, payment is low. When confronted with large numbers of candidate interns who appear satisfied with symbolic rewards for on-the-job-training, cultural organisations may perceive that merely hosting those interns is sufficient compensation to many young graduates that seek entry positions. A trade-off between financial compensation, interesting work, and (what could be) effective supervision is not uncommon in internships in various sectors (McHugh 2017). Whereas unpaid internships could cast a shadow on the image of a single organisation (that could become perceived as less attractive or even as an unfair employer), reputational harms are unlikely to follow from the lack of payments in the cultural field. The cultural labour market is tight with higher levels of people willing to work than there is actual demand for people; and internships seem to be a practice supported by the entire sector. On top of that, in the cultural industry, being a wealthy organisation can be a signal of having the wrong priorities, because organisation reputation resides in other factors, such as their artistic quality (Daigle and Rouleau 2010).

The observation that a great share of cultural organisations expect previous experience, casts doubt on the intended learning outcomes of many of the offered internships – originally implying human capital usage at the cost of training. It also points at a larger problem, related to the devaluation of educational qualifications, and leading to a changing role of education in socio-economic mobility. According to Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills (2005), the ‘liberal theory of industrialization’ (e.g. Kerr 1983) as well as the academic and political discourses in several modern societies have long accorded to education the function of a ‘determinant of life-chances’ by its role in the mediation and promotion of class mobility (p. 10). However, evidence is accumulating against the idea that modern societies are destined to become education-based meritocracies⁴ in which the social selection (particularly in employment) happens on the basis of educational achievement (Jackson 2007; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). In liberal theory, the role of employers has regularly been overlooked, and also the management literature has started to articulate the roles of organisations in societal economic inequality (Bapuji, Ertug, and Shaw 2020). Eventually, the employers are the ones defining job requirements and making hiring decisions; their actions are not so much directed towards the development of an education-based meritocracy, but rather towards the productive efficiency of their organisations (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). While liberal theory expects employers to make recruitment decisions based on credential performance in higher education, it has been largely ignorant of employers’ needs and the diminishing value of education to employers making personnel decisions (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Educational qualifications have lost part of their value as a screening device in advanced societies, because for the majority of jobs they have become a *conditio sine qua non* (= credential inflation, Van de Werfhorst and Andersen 2005) rather than a differentiating factor (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020). Together with the increasing number of qualified candidates for various types of occupations, and some contextual factors such as the loose connections between education and careers and the lack of involvement of employers in curriculum design (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020), these are reasons to expect that employers no longer rely on educational qualifications and use other selection criteria and screening devices in their hiring decisions, which can include previous experience and internships. This trend (the expansion of education) leads to a reduced role of signalling attributed to education, and thus to weakening effects on class mobility, because

when many more individuals possess educational qualifications, it becomes less evident for employers to rely on educational achievement as a signal of qualifications (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). As a result, employers look for alternative signals, some still education-related, such as the field of study, the type instead of the level of education, and the prestige of the education institution (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Other types of signals may also be taken into account, and this is where internships come in.

In at least two ways internships risk to disrupt the functionality of education in class mobility. First, internships can serve as an alternative qualification, either *certifying* someone's acquisition of knowledge and skills, or *signalling* that an individual possesses certain attributes that are viewed as relevant for her/his productive capacity in any future job (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Employers have been found to place a great emphasis on 'job readiness' as an alternative for formal academic credentials (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020), and accumulated internship experiences could serve as a qualifier of past experience. As McHugh (2017) explains, young graduates from underprivileged backgrounds may find it difficult to engage in unpaid internships, because of the serious opportunity cost they imply. Therefore, while the value of educational achievement as a qualifier diminishes, that of on-the-job experiences may rise, leading to disadvantages for individuals who cannot afford unpaid work after graduating.

Second, internships provide potential future employers with the opportunity to assess current interns' attributes. This screening potential has been considered to be one of the essential roles of internships: it allows employers to go further than only assessing someone's achievements (for example, academic credentials mentioned in a job application), and also assess actual abilities and other personal characteristics. Nevertheless, studying job advertisements, Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills (2005) find that requirements of employers do not only relate to actual abilities, but also to 'attributes referring less to what individuals could do than to what they were like' (p.16), ranging from character and behaviours, to presence and appearance. In this manner, internships may well lead to discrimination at work, if the economic, cultural and social benefits or disadvantages accruing from someone's class background (Jackson 2007) manifest in people's lifestyles and networks (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020) come to play a role in employers' hiring decisions.

In the cultural industry, a sequence of internships post education appears to have become a ubiquity for new entrants (Martin and Frenette 2017; Siebert and Wilson 2013). When a sequence of unpaid internships starts to become an entry barrier into a field, it also starts to add to the precarity of work. As recent research has found, some candidates aspiring to work in sports have suggested that an internship is something they themselves should be paying for, instead of the other way around (Hawzen et al. 2018). While this practice was not uncommon several centuries ago in relation to apprenticeships that trained people for crafts and trades (Frenette 2015), today, it sounds rather provocative. When substitution of proper paid employment by internships and the exclusion of those who cannot afford to work for free become endemic, it is not superfluous to raise the antecedents and consequences of the current 'Intern Economy' as part of the political agendas.

Increasingly, questions related to socio-economic mobility and the role of educational qualifications in it are being addressed by the usage of secondary data. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007), for example, use national statistical data for cross-cohort analyses, and Brown and Souto-Otero (2020) use big data from 21,000,000 job adverts to analyse the role of education, skills and other indicators of 'job readiness' in employers' decisions' within the UK labour market. Such systematic investigations stand in contrast with our study that has been exploratory and inductive in its approach to available data, which could be recognised as a limitation. Future research, either investigating the peculiarities of the creative labour market or the role of internships in hiring decisions by employers more generally, could rely on such secondary data as well. Additionally, in order to reliably assess the value of educational qualifications vis-à-vis other signals of prospective employees' quality (including internship experience) in recruitment decisions of organisations, primary (survey-based) data collection methods are apt.

Conclusion and implications

Academic research has started to report that differences in post-graduation opportunities and outcomes are contingent upon the social background of graduates (Martin and Frenette 2017; Oakley et al. 2017; Witteveen and Attewell 2017; Discenna 2016; Perlin 2011; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). One field in which precarious work has been largely recognised, is the cultural industry (Banks 2017; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; De Peuter 2011; Oakley 2011). A number of studies address the precariousness of internships in the cultural industry (Martin and Frenette 2017; Ashton 2016; Daniel and Daniel 2013; Figiel 2013; Frenette 2013). Even if it is known that many aspirants seek to enter cultural labour markets because of their appeal, and many of the possible implications of the internship economy in terms of its impact at the individual level are understood, studies have not fully grasped the reasons why organisations (in the culture industry and beyond) make use of internships, how they differentiate work and internship opportunities, and how they relate to 'internship efficacy' (O'Higgins and Pinedo 2018; McHugh 2017).

By exploring primary data based on job adverts in the Belgian Walloon-Brussels region, we infer that organisations are enticed by cost advantages and the substitution of paid labour by free labour. Our analyses also suggest that work content can be challenging and learning goals could be met. Additionally, they suggest that the intern economy relies on the market mechanism of demand and supply, and that many of the protagonists are not too concerned with complying with regulations. Even if tentative, these findings suggest that the intern economy in the cultural industry may come short in terms of its efficacy (McHugh 2017).

Implications of the study address the various stakeholders that contribute to the ambiguity that characterises today's intern economy: interns, employers, supervisors, higher education and governments (Frenette 2013). While there is a general agreement that students' employability needs to be enhanced, the views are not consistent in relation to the kind of skills or processes this entails and who should be responsible for the outcomes (Sin and Neave 2016). Based on the analysis of a range of Bologna Process documents, Sin and Neave (2016) find that policymakers and employers transfer the responsibility and the costs of employability onto the individual; in contrast, students portray themselves as the victims of unfavourable contextual factors, claiming that HEIs 'have failed to re-design degrees with employability in mind' (p. 1459); the key concern of HEIs is the fear of the vocationalisation of higher education if they are to cater for the immediate needs of the labour market (Sin and Neave 2016). However, employability alone does not suffice to explain the excess supply of intern labour in the cultural industry and beyond. Based on large-scale longitudinal survey data in the United States, Martin and Frenette (2017) find that, paradoxically, higher levels of academic and career skills after graduation converge with longer post-graduation job searches. Such findings are in line with micro-level explanations for the declining role of education in mediating socio-economic mobility through employers' hiring practices (Brown and Souto-Otero 2020; Jackson 2007; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005) and suggest that the intern economy is affected by a market failure that originates in the democratisation of higher education with greater numbers of graduates that cannot easily access popular sectors. Particularly in the sales and services sectors, and the leisure, entertainment and hospitality industries, the significance of academic qualifications has been found to be limited (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Such phenomena result in the vulnerability of many new entrants to the cultural labour market, and the exclusion of aspirant workers who cannot afford free work. Sound debates about the future of work in the creative economy require the consideration of the substitution and exclusion by means of internships, which intend to add to graduates' employability yet turn out to depreciate the employability of the underprivileged by being an obstacle to their socio-economic mobility. Public policy for 'increasing equality of opportunity and levels of social mobility' (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005, 27) must ensure that 'employers recruit for jobs, not class positions' (Jackson 2007, 378). If advanced economies care about 'creative justice' (Banks 2017) in service sectors such as the cultural industry,

with fairer and more equalitarian practices, the organisation of internships should **remain** on their policy agenda.

Notes

1. The notion 'wide gap' (*le grand fossé*) was coined by a Belgian entrepreneur and human resource consultant Jean-Paul Erhard to illustrate the different perceptions between the universities and the business world during a discussion on internships (RTL Belgium, 2016, 26 May).
2. Categorisation into seven sectors: Visual arts, Audio-visual, Performing arts (theatre, music + dance), Heritage (heritage + museums), Literature (library + publishing house & bookshop), Youth & education (permanent education + youth), Interdisciplinary (cultural centre + centre of expression and creativity + interdisciplinary).
3. Because of the large content of the database (in French), full texts were not translated to English before the analysis.
4. The term 'meritocracy' was coined by Young (1958), with merit being referred to as a combination of intelligence and effort, for which educational achievement could serve as a proxy. We refer to Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills (2005) and Jackson (2007) for a critical account of the relationships between merit, education and social origins and destinations.

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