



# Bectu submission to Making Work Pay call for evidence on unpaid internships

Bectu briefing • September 2025

*The following outlines the submission from the Bectu Sector of Prospect to the Department for Business and Trade's call for evidence on unpaid internships and internships paid below the National Minimum Wage (NMW), and other roles which may be unpaid or paid below the NMW.*

## Internships in the creative industries

Genuine work experience can be a positive thing to support workers into the industry, but too often across the creative industries, workers are taken advantage of.

The competitiveness of creative work, combined with informal hiring practices and a short term, freelance, project model of contracting, has created an environment where unpaid work is normalised across the creative industries. A 2018 report by the Sutton Trust found that 86% of interns in the UK's creative sector were unpaid.

Analysis of the 2022 Employer Skills Survey finds that the Creative industries employers are more likely to have had someone on a work placement<sup>1</sup> compared with all industries. A total of 37% of creative industries firms had offered any type of work placement, compared to 30% across the economy.

But only 24% of graduates, and 6% of school leavers, who complete a work placement are then taken on by a creative firm, less than across other sectors<sup>2</sup>, suggesting that the creative industries are using work placements to plug staffing gaps rather than as a meaningful way of supporting new entrants into a creative career.

A recent survey of 5,597 creative industry workers carried out between February and March 2025 found that more than a quarter of all creative industry workers (26%) say they interned to get into the creative industries.

While these were a mix of paid and unpaid positions, their exploitative nature is clear through the limited access afforded to workers from marginalised backgrounds. In the same survey, Bectu found that those from working class backgrounds (23%) were less likely to come through this route than those who were not (30%), highlighting their prohibitive nature.

We also found that those in London were more likely to have interned to get into the industry (30%) than those from other regions and nations (21% in Wales, 19% in the West Midlands, 22% in the South West), with opportunities concentrated in the capital, and high housing and living costs acting as a further barrier to those from outside the M25.

Despite many benefitting from internships, creative industry workers are clear that unpaid internships should not be continued. In Bectu's survey of 5,597 creative industry workers, 94% agree that all interns should be paid at least minimum wage.

Unpaid work is a broader issue in the creative industries, with 39% of survey respondents saying that they have felt pressured to work for free. The view that creative work is a 'labour of love', the freelance nature of much work, as well as the importance of contacts and connections in finding

work can make it difficult for individuals to challenge unpaid expectations without risking reputational damage or missed opportunities.

Many workers, particularly those early in their careers, are made to feel that unpaid work is the only way to “get a foot in the door.” In our survey, half (49%) of those who have spent two years or less working in the creative industries said that they felt pressured to work for free.

The freelance nature of much work in the creative industries can also obscure the amount of unpaid work being carried out, as freelancers straddle different employment statuses and tax categories; they can be PAYE, workers or self-employed, depending on the role. Because internships have no legal definition, and employment rights, including the right to minimum wage, apply depending on a worker being an employee of limb b worker, any unpaid work that is classified as freelance may fall into grey areas of employment rights enforcement. This should be considered in determining how genuine work experience or shadowing is classified against work that should be remunerated.

There is a clear need for greater enforcement to protect workers against unlawful employment practices and the exploitation of free labour. The creative industries offer an example of where statutory minimums are not followed and non-compliance is widespread. There is a clear role for the fair work agency in better enforcing minimum wage rules, but more broadly work must be clarified from internships as genuine learning opportunities.

We have not offered a view on the precise length of internships as it depends on the nature of the internship. Properly paid summer internships of up to 3 months work well in some sectors, where they exist as part of broader path to secure work or further training. For example these are common in the energy and defence sectors. However, the government must make sure that in allowing these scheme, it does not leave open loopholes for low quality exploitative internships, like those often found in the creative industries.

## Work Trials

Assessing candidates through trial work is often used in the creative industries, we believe that the Government must set out clear guidelines in order to avoid the exploitation of workers. While interview tasks to understand a candidate’s suitability are often a useful tool for the hirer, where a business can directly benefit from the outputs, this is not an assessment, but work and needs to be remunerated as such.

In the creative industries, pitching a design or concept may also leave workers open to the exploitation of their intellectual property. Because self-employed workers are not entitled to the minimum wage, they also need to be considered in how trial shifts might be used to exploit their labour. Freelancers are frequently contracted on short term jobs lasting anywhere from a few hours, so trial work may undermine their earning potential.

Work trials must be genuinely necessary to evaluate an applicant’s core abilities, confined to essential skills, and limited in duration to less than a couple of hours. They must also not serve to the benefit of the business other than in assessing an eligible candidate.

## Voluntary workers

Genuine volunteering is a beneficial thing for many people and communities, however, across the creative industries, volunteering roles can entail undertaking work that should be paid, while volunteers doing this work for free are not only denied remuneration but also rights that accompany genuine employment.

This is exemplified in the context of festivals. While volunteers have historically been used in large numbers by UK festivals, including venues and operators at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Bectu believes that in many instances, volunteers are being used for work that should be paid. The union’s position is that any role critical to the delivery of the service should not be filled by volunteers.

Using volunteers in service critical roles a safety concern for both volunteers and patrons, for example, in 2023 the Union highlighted the use of volunteers at Doune the Rabbit Hole festival (DTRH) in Stirling, Scotland, which not only used volunteers but requested volunteers to pay a deposit of up to £145. This covered some safety-critical roles such as 'build and break' volunteers will be constructing stages, building roads, erecting marquees and fulfilling technical backstage roles – many of which require specific training, insurance and PPE, amongst other requirements.

Moreover, people from ethnic minorities, with disabilities, and from lower income households are less able to afford to volunteer. The practice therefore perpetuates the unacceptable idea that the arts are only for those from certain ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds. No one should think that they must volunteer as a way to gain experience and/or entry into an industry. Trainee places should be paid and properly supervised and managed, and recruited for on a diverse basis.

## Work shadowing

Work shadowing can be beneficial for workers to better understand different types or roles, learn new skills and gain experience. However, the parameters for what constitutes shadowing must be extremely clearcut. Bectu's Intimacy coordinator (IC) branch, for example, provide the following guidance on shadowing:

- *A shadowing IC should not do any work for the production or IC, even if they are happy to do so.*
- *A shadowing IC is not paid, but should also not pay to be present.*
- *However, shadowing may be one part of wider mentoring or learning that may include the trainee paying a fee.*
- *ICs should do all the relevant checks with Production and artists before involving a shadowing IC.*
- *A shadowing IC may need to sign appropriate paperwork (e.g. NDAs) before being privy to documentation or arriving on set.*
- *Shadowing may include the following.. All parties involved should be made aware that there will be a shadowing IC present beforehand:*
  - *Being cc'd on relevant correspondence before shooting day.*
  - *Sitting in on Zooms or calls with directors, actors, costume or other departments.*
  - *Observing actor check-ins in trailers before shooting.*
  - *Observing the IC on set.*
  - *Closed Sets will likely not include a shadowing IC, but they may be allowed access to a monitor (again, with relevant permission and transparency), and given updates from the IC between takes.*
  - *Shadowing ICs should be fully debriefed about the content and given space to step out where needed. Early experiences of being on set for intimate content may be overwhelming. Keep this in mind when choosing scenes that are appropriate to shadow.*
  - *Have open discussions prior to shadowing taking place, about what is expected from the IC and the shadowing IC, to avoid miscommunication or difficulties arising on the day.*