Unpaid work and internships as employability strategies of early career professionals

Accessing relevant workplace exposure through unpaid work appears to be an increasingly critical feature of graduate employability for early career professionals. Ubiquitous in the education to work trajectories of creative professionals such as artists and journalists, anecdotal evidence suggests that in the context of an increasingly competitive and precarious graduate labour market, unpaid work may be becoming increasingly commonplace in other fields of endeavour. However, the contours of these shifts, particularly the value of the practice in facilitating the development of skills and capacities considered desirable by employers, has received relatively little empirical attention. Through the theoretical lens of employability, this study examines the complex patterns of opportunities and challenges that are created for and by urban planning students in Australia in gaining relevant exposure to work, with a particular emphasis on internships and other unpaid work. The study extends extant literature in three ways. First, the findings yield new knowledge of how choices around unpaid work are practised and shaped. Second, the study challenges current understandings of employability as a theoretical construct, which has typically neglected unpaid work as a means through which employment-related capacities can be acquired. Third, the study informs education policies and practices governing unpaid work and other pre-graduation work experiences for early career professionals.

Unpaid work has become a topic of increasing concern amongst those interested in how young people transition from education to work. Often undertaken in the form of internships or episodes of 'volunteering', unpaid work appears to be an increasingly entrenched feature of the graduate employment landscape in developed economies (Browne, 2014; Kearney, 2013; Figiel, 2013; Perlin, 2011). The practice sees participants using unpaid 'exposure to the world of work' (Australian Government, 2013: 8) as a means of bridging the so-called graduate skills gap (Hills et al., 2003) and attracting the attention of prospective employers by establishing themselves as productive workers who can be trusted (Smith, 2010). Reactions to this shift in transitional employment have been mixed. Advocates underscore the benefits of increased workplace exposure in enhancing graduate employment prospects through the development of professional networks and interpersonal, social and professional skill sets (Gault et al., 2000; Gault et al. 2010; Knouse & Fontenot 2008). Others however, highlight the potentially problematic aspects of the practice, including the exploitation of young people desperate to secure employment in an increasingly tight labour market (Allen et al., 2013; Cieslik and Simpson, 2013; Curiale, 2010). Tensions arise between safeguarding early career professionals from exploitation, preventing further social and economic class divide, and providing students with genuine opportunities for gaining employment. Unpaid work also raises complex policy concerns (Gregory, 1998). For example, there is ambiguity about what kinds of pre- and post-graduation unpaid work is lawful, especially with respect to work experience undertaken outside formal work-integrated-learning arrangements within a course of tertiary study.

Debates about the value, quality, and necessity of unpaid work are of particular concern in the context of higher education; a sector which is expected to produce graduates who have the appropriate skills and dispositions to ensure economic development (Wyn, 2009) and who are 'oven-ready' and 'self-basting' (Atkins 1999). In a more crowded and competitive

graduate labour market where credential inflation is rife (Tomlinson, 2008; 2012), universities are under increasing pressure to find ways to supplement theory with real-world professional work experience to produce work-ready graduates (Universities Australia, 2014). Meanwhile, employers are being called upon 'to provide opportunities for young people to gain exposure to the world of work' to improve 'their employability' (Australian Government, 2013:8). Such programs are considered to be increasingly vital for employee recruitment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Employability can be understood as the package of skills, personal attributes, knowledges and experiences that provide an individual access to employment (Pool and Sewell, 2007). Some young people are turning to unpaid work as a means of enhancing their employability (Tomlinson, 2008).

Despite increased policy rhetoric and attention by the media and higher education sector (Browne, 2014; Cullen 2011; Universities Australia, 2014) to enhancing work exposure and experience and hence, the employability of young people, there has been insufficient empirical attention paid to the range, prevalence, nature, or value of unpaid work (Frenette, 2013; Smith, 2010; Stewart and Owens, 2013). There is a pressing need to understand how unpaid work functions as an intermediary and increasingly normalised transition between higher education and paid professional employment and the implications of this. This study utilises in-depth interviews with a cohort of Australian university students aspiring to careers in urban planning; a context where there is emerging anecdotal evidence of a trend toward increasing pre-employment professional work experience, including participation in unpaid work. The study applies an individual as well as contextual analysis of unpaid work experiences for these early career professionals in their transition from tertiary study to professional employment.

The study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, it the reveals the propensity for and motivations behind early career professionals engagement in unpaid work

as a deliberate strategy for enhancing graduate employability. Second, the study challenges current framings of employability as a theoretical construct in the broader context of graduate labour market concerns. Finally, the findings reveal new insights about the role of universities, employers, professional bodies and early career professionals themselves, in the normalisation of unpaid work, thereby informing education policies and practices governing such practices.

Employability

Graduate employability has been defined as 'the perceived ability to attain sustainable employment appropriate to one's qualification level' (Rothwell et al., 2008: 2); a definition that we have expanded in this article to include full-time employment in a specific occupation or discipline. The concept of employability more broadly can be traced back to Kanter (1995) who believed that workers who invested in new opportunities that contributed to the accumulation of human and social capital, improved their skills and made their abilities evident in a network of firms, would experience enhanced employment security. Tholen (2013) outlines both mainstream and alternative views of graduate employability evident in the literature. In the mainstream view, employability is the measure of how well the individual has succeeded in matching their human capital profile to labour market demands (Thijssen et al., 2008); a seemingly advantageous capacity in a fluctuating, uncertain economy in that it enhances a worker's long-term marketability (Smith, 2010). Here, education, training and other skill acquisition is primarily an investment made by autonomous individuals who strategise their actions based on benefit-to-cost ratios (Tholen, 2013). Such accounts typically understand employability as 'absolute' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) and able to be objectively measured and improved through the accretion of skills, knowledge and experience.

In contrast, rather than viewing employability as the sum of an individuals' human capital, alternative accounts regard the construct as relational, contextual, conflictual, and structured by opportunities, inequalities and power relations embedded within social contexts (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Tholen, 2013). This view is consistent with concerns that policy approaches to graduate employability have tended to focus too much on the quality or qualities of individual graduates while giving limited recognition to the influences of labour market and occupational structures on employment and the ways in which opportunities for graduates are framed, for example, by gender, ethnicity, social class, or the perceived status of university attended (Allen et al., 2013; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Jackson 2014; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Rothwell et al., 2008, 2009). Chillas (2010) for example, argues that in the UK, education and employment are tightly coupled, with graduates from different types of universities entering different levels of occupation. A similar argument is that the demand for individuals with degrees in particular subjects varies not only according to market conditions but to perceived status differences between vocational areas (Rothwell et al., 2008) or university attended (Rothwell et al., 2009). This alternate perspective understands employability to be 'relative' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) and influenced by factors beyond the individual. Indeed such a view recognises that an individual may be employable, that is to say that they may meet all of the objective measures of employability in terms of education and experience, but may still fail to secure appropriate employment due to an oversupply of suitability qualified graduates or a lack of graduate employment opportunities. As Brown and Hesketh note 'the reality is one can be employable and unemployed' (2004: 217). The outcomes of employability can thus be understood to be subjective and dependent on contextual factors. Employability then not only depends on whether one is able to fulfil the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers. Taking the supply and demand of labour into account challenges the

idea that credentials, knowledge and social status alone will guarantee a good position in the labour market, let alone a positive graduate employment outcome.

As the brief review here has suggested, what precisely constitutes graduate employability varies across the literature. However, four core elements feature prominently. First, disciplinary content knowledge and skills, sometimes referred to as 'hard skills', are common across employability models (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Pool and Sewell, 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2004). These attributes are primarily acquired through formal education and training. Second, work experience, or workplace awareness, is considered an essential component of employability (e.g., Bennett et al., 1999; Pool and Sewell, 2007). Employers are thought to value individuals who have work or life experience, especially if they have been able to reflect upon that experience and articulate and apply what they have learned (King, 2008; Pool and Sewell, 2007). Third, soft or generic skills are strongly emphasised in current employability frameworks, including such capacities as communication and enterprise skills, efficacy beliefs, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-reflection, meta-cognition and decision learning (Bennett et al., 1999; Pool and Sewell, 2007; Yorke and Knight, 2004). These capacities are typically acquired through informal socialisation processes in families, schools and through work experience, rather than via formal education. Fourth, employability is thought to require career enhancing capacities, including opportunity awareness, career decision making skills, and job searching and job getting skills, including resume writing, interview techniques and self-presentation competencies (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Pool and Sewell, 2007). The state of the external labour market and personal circumstances such as family responsibilities, also feature in some frameworks (e.g., Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

Despite the specification of an increasing array of capacities thought to constitute employability, the concept remains relatively under-developed in terms of what it actually

means to individuals in the context of their experiences, aspirations, and their ability to compete in the external labour market (Rothwell et al., 2009). The current study puts the observable into the discussion (Tholen, 2013) and responds to Tymon's (2013) call to solicit the views of students and graduates about employability, with a particular focus on unpaid work. In doing so, the study makes two distinct contributions to the employability literature. First, although work experience is an accepted dimension of employability, unpaid work experience is rarely explicitly considered in current employability models and subsequent policies, which tend to focus on the ability of a worker to demonstrate a set of transferable skills within a generic work environment (Pool and Sewell, 2007; Rothwell et al., 2009). Indeed, the particular type of work experience required to enhance one's employability in the tightening graduate labour market is an analytically underappreciated dimension of both employability and graduate employment debates more generally (Smith, 2010). Through the lens of employability and the voices of early career professionals, the study builds new knowledge about the complexity of decisions to engage in unpaid work and identifies the potential personal, professional and sectoral implications of these decisions. This contribution in turn informs notions of employability in the context of graduate labour market issues more broadly. The second contribution of the study to the literature on employability is its focus on the ways that choices around unpaid work are shaped by a range of factors including personal biography, labour market conditions and disciplinary norms.

Methods

The data reported are from a larger study concerned with the formative and transitional work experiences of young Australians (aged between 16 and 26). Unpaid work emerged as a significant strategy for enhancing employment for the planning cohort in particular.

The profession of planning is part of the broader built environment industry, and is distinct from other professions within the industry such as architects, engineers and

surveyors, in that their contribution to shaping cities and regions is through the planning and management of development and services rather than through the direct design or construction of infrastructure.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways is unpaid work practised as a deliberate strategy for enhancing graduate employability?

2. How is participation in unpaid work shaped by individual and structural dynamics such as personal biography, labour market conditions and professional norms?

3. What are the implications of participation in unpaid work, for employers, parents, professional organisations, educational institutions and early career professionals themselves?

Sample and Procedure

In-depth semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted with a sample of students currently enrolled in an urban and regional planning degree in Australia (n=20). The majority of participants were in their final year of undergraduate study. Participation was solicited through planning courses across three public university campuses in south-east Queensland: one elite, one based in a regional centre, and one in a suburban capital city setting.

Interview questions were designed to elicit how choices about work, particularly unpaid work, were practised as a deliberate strategy for enhancing graduate employability and how these choices were shaped by biographical, job market and disciplinary factors. Interview questions included biographical information (e.g., parent's occupations; financial position; school education; prior professional and non-professional work experience);

perceptions of personal employability; and strategies utilised to improve employability[1] in the transition from study to professional careers; and the economic, personal and social implications of these strategies.

Analysis

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The analysis followed Tholen (2013), who calls for an approach to understanding graduate employability which utilises both micro-level analysis, which considers how employability is subjectively experienced and understood, and macro-economic contextual analysis associated with structural and institutional issues. Guided by the central tenets of employability theory, we first searched the transcripts for evidence of the enhancing value of deliberately engaging in pre-graduation unpaid and paid professional work; that is, what young people believed professional workplace exposure offered them that could not be attained through other employability strategies such as study and non-professional work in sectors such as retail and food service. Second, using phenomenological analysis and guided by our research questions, we then coded the data for evidence of (1) the nature of paid and unpaid work experience in which participants engaged; (2) the structural and individual rationales driving this participation; and (3) the broader impacts being felt as a consequence of these choices.

Results

The results are structured around three themes denoting, from the perspectives of young people themselves, the utility of professional work experience for employability. While paid professional work experience was clearly preferred, unpaid work was considered to offer advantages over and above: (1) paid work in non-professional contexts, including low- or semi-skilled work in retail, hospitality or labouring where many Australian school- and

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[1] The term 'employability' was not used directly in the interviews. Rather, questions were framed using language such as 'getting a job as a planner when you graduate' or 'securing employment after university'.

university-aged youth are employed; (2) discipline specific skills and knowledge developed via tertiary and/or training qualifications gained through university or vocational education institutions; and (3) career development and management capacities developed through peers, parents, social media or education networks.

Enhancing employability beyond non-professional work experience

Young people are typically employed in what have been termed 'McJobs', which are low-skilled, low-paid jobs in the routine service industry jobs with limited career prospects (Gould, 2010). Student participation in these part-time jobs is often promoted on the grounds that in addition to earning money, it assists with the development of important interpersonal and time management skills, as well as positive traits that will enhance their future employability (Mortimer, 2010). Traditional employability models also promote this idea of transferable or portable skills which are developed through a mix of professional and non-professional work and life experiences (Davies, 2000). Some students, such as Dante, were optimistic that their non-professional work experience would provide them with important transferrable skills that would be valued by prospective professional employers.

> I know it's only working [in a supermarket] but I've developed really good customer skills, teamwork skills. I'm in a position where I'm constantly giving feedback, requiring performance stands to be met, and that's a lot of the criteria that [planning] jobs at council and in the state government require (Dante).

For many other students however, there was a fatalistic sense that non-professional work paid experience did not provide any point of distinction or advantage in gaining professional employment, despite the range of experiences gained through their non-planning part-time (or even full-time) employment prior to taking up study. Nina, for instance, was ambivalent about the value which professional employers placed on her non-professional work experience. Based on her recent job-seeking experiences, she remained unconvinced that it improved her employment prospects.

I thought I had a pretty good resume because I've done quite well in uni and before that high school. I thought the 10 years that I'd worked for the same employer [bakery]… would show commitment and all that sort of stuff… I sent it off to about 20 different places. No one was even considering it. (Nina)

By contrast, pre-graduation professional work experience, even if unpaid, was considered to be an investment in graduate employability that would confer positional advantage, or what was referred to as an 'upper hand', on those who had engaged in non-professional work but not professional employment experience. This sentiment was pervasive throughout the sample, so much so that participants who had never experienced any difficulty securing non-professional paid work were more than willing to engage in significant periods of unpaid work. Further, even those with significant non-professional work experience were very willing to do additional unpaid work following graduation in order to secure paid professional employment as a planner.

I can get jobs that aren't professional jobs easy as…But trying to get a professional job is going to be a lot harder…To get experience and a foot in the door I'd happily take on work experience if I can't get a job… It's a long time to go without money. (Nigel)

The results showed that participation in unpaid work amongst this cohort was extensive, including 18 instances across 15 interview participants. This compared to 13 instances of paid professional work experience across eight interview participants. We found several instances of students who were concurrently studying, undertaking paid or unpaid professional work experience, and paid non-professional work, in order to minimise their risk of post-graduation unemployment. Dante, for example, had elected to keep his job at a supermarket while working for a local council because he was 'worried that in six month's time [he was] going to be left empty handed'. Marissa had also retained her part-time hospitality job at a tavern due to the precarious nature of her professional employment.

Marissa's concerns were further fuelled by questionable employer practices and these were echoed across several other interviews. Her fear was that ''he [the employer] could drop [her]…because there's not enough business at the moment.'

These young planners on the cusps of their professional careers felt an intense pressure to find professional work after graduation and expressed a willingness to do almost anything to overcome what Adrian termed 'the obstacle from student to professional planner'. To graduate from university and be compelled to continue working in a non-professional job such as food service or retail was seen as a failure. Sonya asserted for example that while she was willing to work in a 'normal' retail or hospitality job until she was successful in achieving a planning career, she hoped it 'didn't come down to that after such a long degree'.

Others joked that they 'would work for free for the first three years' if they had to in order to secure work because they were 'talking to people now who graduated three years ago and still haven't got a job' (Adrian). While these attitudes speak to the very real fear of being unable to secure a professional position at any cost and a claim to not 'mind how much I get paid at the start' to 'get a foot in the door' (Sonya), participants expressed strong and almost universal concerns that a four year degree would result in a wage that was 'less than what you've been paid working at part-time [non-professional] jobs' (Jacob).

In addition to forgoing income, some participants were willing to 'pay' for the chance to undertake unpaid professional work experience. In Australia, insurances are required for all paid and unpaid workers. In cases where students engage in a paid non-professional job, in retail or food service for example, these costs would be covered as a matter of course. They are also paid by universities if the unpaid work is undertaken in the context of a mandatory work-integrated-learning program or if the unpaid work is directly relevant to the studies being undertaken. However, because unpaid work outside these parameters is a grey

regulatory area, students were often asked by potential 'employers' if they would be willing to cover their own insurances if not covered by the university.

Enhancing employability beyond tertiary education

As access to and achievement in university education has increased, employers and students have sought alternative means to differentiate between graduates with identical academic qualifications (Waters, 2009). Distinguishing graduates along the lines of university status is one of these strategies (Jackson 2014); an issue not lost on the participants in this study, who sought to either capitalise on, or overcome the burden of, university attended in order to stand out from other graduates from their own and other institutions. Professional work experience, including unpaid work, was seen as one way to overcome employer preferences for certain universities over others and the particular structure and focus of a given degree programme. Some participants such as Joann, who believed the challenge was to be able to 'prove that I am more than…the way the uni shapes the degree', had also chosen to complete double degrees (e.g. environmental science and planning) to give themselves 'the broadest employment prospects' (Joann). In addition to double degrees and unpaid work, further study such as a PhD in planning was also discussed as a potential strategy to secure post-graduation planning work.

> I'm happy to go and do anything really. Just to get my foot in the door, but I'm not confident that the skills that I acquired at uni will be enough to get me in the door compared to other people with higher GPAs and higher everything else. (Elsa)

As well as longer periods of unpaid work, students also used other compensatory strategies to offset attendance at a lower status university. Tanya, for example, despite her extensive practical experience, had secured a professional mentor who she hoped would be able to provide access to other professional contacts and 'steer her' in the right direction to

overcome the stigma of not having attended an elite university. Caleb agreed that many employers employ graduates from a preferred university but also suggested that the high school they attended could have a further positive or negative influence on employer's attitudes and ultimately on employment outcomes. For example, there was a perceived preference for those who had attended elite private schools – commonly referred to as the old boys/girls network. The labour market advantage conferred through elite schooling also rested on existing social networks which are addressed in the following section.

Despite the importance they placed on their degree, respondents believed that attending university alone could not adequately prepare a planner for the workplace. For example, Adrian felt strongly that his unpaid professional work experience had better prepared him for the world of work than his studies, and that without it:

> '…headed straight out into the field, I would have felt bad that I didn't know anything. Why should they [employers] have to deal with me not knowing anything when they could hire someone with experience?' (Adrian)

This belief that study had underprepared them for professional work was common and many agreed with Tanya's observation that through their professional work experiences they had learned more 'about what planners do' than they had through their university experiences. Most participants were strong advocates of the importance of pre-graduation professional work experience, because unlike theory learned through the degree, 'that's where you learn most of what you're really going to be doing' (Tanya). Across the cohort interviewed, there was a strong sense that the right to be paid as professionals had to be earned and there was a tacit acceptance that payment for practicums or work placements should be at the discretion of the employer:

> To me it seems like telling them how much you'd like to be paid, I think it's a little bit rude. Like they definitely need to get to know your work ethics and how you produce work before deciding to pay. (Anna)

Indeed, even Mei, the only student interviewed who had not undertaken any professional work experience, suggested that she intended to try unpaid work first and would not seek to be paid until she had enough experience to be worth being paid.

It is important to note that students viewed unpaid work not as a bargaining chip that could be used to leverage higher salaries when a paid job was eventually secured, but as an employability strategy that was a pre-requisite to entry to lower rungs of the profession. Even with what would amount to three or more years' worth of professional work experience, Caleb believed that it wouldn't elevate his pay, but rather give him 'a look in to get the job'. A pessimistic, or perhaps realistic assessment of the labour market also drove an acceptance that graduate planners were not in a position to demand a certain salary or particular employment conditions.

> I'll just be happy to get a job, just accept anything, as bad as that sounds…because I know there are not a lot of jobs at the moment. (Jessica)

This despondency over the 'grim' state of the labour market had driven many to take on unpaid work in an effort to enhance their employability. There was a nascent recognition that the ability to gain a job in planning was impacted by external factors and that labour market and broader economic change 'can affect your employability' (Joann). For instance, some participants believed that universities were graduating too many planners relative to market demand and that this was negatively impacting on their ability to secure a job.

Enhancing employability through networking and contacts

It was not just technical planning skills that were seen to be gained through work experience. It was also 'the social skills that you build up [in the workplace]…' (Adrian). Indeed, cultivating professional networks was seen to be a vital part of being able to secure professional work in the longer term and/or paid professional work experience in the shorter term. Nigel for example, who did not have extensive networks in the industry, described how

he had unsuccessfully contacted more than 60 local councils across eastern Australia in an effort to secure post-graduation employment. Work integrated learning electives (practicum placements) in particular, which offered unpaid work experience of 20-30 days at one institution and 300 hours at the other, was seen as a way of enhancing employability through gaining both valuable contacts as well as relevant experience. Joann for example claimed that her ability to secure a competitive paid internship with an international company was based on her previous unpaid professional work experience in the industry.

Ironically, a form of circularity was apparent in relation to networks and professional contacts. That is, while unpaid professional work conferred advantages over non-professional paid work, networks of professional and personal contacts were often necessary to actually acquire *unpaid* work. Christof, for example, had contacted more than 50 companies before he was offered unpaid work experience. He explained that in the beginning he was hopeful for paid experience and initially didn't explicitly tell potential employers that he would work for free. However, after a month of unsuccessful approaches he indicated to prospective employers that he was willing to work in an unpaid capacity.

Personal contacts who work in the professions, or those developed through familial and social networks, were seen as particularly vital. After unsuccessfully approaching 20 different employers and going through what she termed 'official channels', Nina was eventually able to access unpaid work experience through her 'grandfather's sister's husband's brother or something'. Dante, who accessed paid work as a planner through personal networks, observed that when getting a job in planning 'it's not what you know, who you know'.

Meanwhile, Adrian described people like Nina, Nigel and Dante as 'centipedes' with 'a fair few feet in the door' and recounted his experience of a local council where some students had 'managed to sneak their way in' through their contacts, even though there were no positions officially available. Unfortunately, he felt that as an Asian immigrant with non-

professional parents he had 'zero feet' and had to work hard to build his professional networks without the assistance of contacts through family or friends.

Discussion

This study examined the complex patterns of opportunities and challenges that are created for and by planning students in Australia in gaining relevant exposure to work, with a particular emphasis on internships and other unpaid work. The disciplinary context of planning was ideal in which to explore how unpaid work is emerging as a normative practice amongst some early career professionals in that anecdotally, the growth of the phenomenon appears to be relatively recent. The analysis for the study was underpinned by an assumption that participation in unpaid work was likely to confer particular advantages in securing professional employment that traditional components of employability, as outlined in many frameworks in the literature, do not. The findings were consequently framed around three themes, each signifying how participation in unpaid work enhanced employability beyond the traditional routes, (non-professional work experience; knowledge and skills developed through tertiary education; networks and social contacts) typically outlined in employability models. The data confirmed that for these particular students, unpaid work was indeed an increasingly common—indeed, near universal—practice, as demonstrated by the current scope and depth of engagement by participants and for some, their future intentions to undertake unpaid work for even longer periods. For participants, relevant professional workplace exposure was seen as a vital pre-requisite to the acquisition of employment following completion of their degree. Where paid work experience could not be secured, unpaid work constituted a proving ground for future employability, allowing students to 'audition' for 'real' jobs in some firms (Smith, 2010), or to demonstrate to other employers their capacity to work in the specific occupational field.

The consequences for young people of participation in unpaid work were often not trivial. Some students experienced genuine hardship in managing the demands of unpaid work alongside full-time study and paid employment in non-professional jobs. Students were also aware that the university they had attended, including its perceived status, reputation and brand image, was likely to influence perceptions of graduate employability (Rothwell et al., 2008; 2009), and this affected consequent choices around unpaid work. There was also a distinct tone of anxiety that ran through the interviews, including a fear of failing to live up to expectations of what a university degree would or should offer in terms of employment prospects, and a resignation about accepting exploitative practices in exchange for a greater chance to enter their chosen field in the future. Finally, although all participants were committed to pursuing a career in planning, some expressed regret with their choice of discipline or the university they had attended.

Unpaid work as a component of employability

The currency and assumptions underpinning particular components of employability have been questioned. For example, the particular type of work experience required to enhance one's employability in the tightening graduate labour market is an analytically underappreciated dimension of both employability and graduate employment debates more generally (Smith, 2010). This is despite relevant work experience during undergraduate studies being a strong predictor of positive employment outcomes (Oliver 2011).

A clear and aligned theme in the findings of this study was that skills or capacities acquired through non-professional work experience, such as retail, labouring or food service jobs where young people are typically employed, are perceived as having little value by employers seeking graduates in professional spheres. Paid non-professional work was

consequently undertaken almost exclusively as a money-earning strategy to cover living expenses, rather than as an activity which built skills, experience, networks or knowledge.

The gradual expansion of participation in unpaid work in the planning discipline in Australia is consistent with a point made by Brown and Hesketh (2004) which is that employability is a relative as well as absolute notion, where opportunities for graduates competing in the graduate labour market depend not only on their own skills, experience and abilities, but also on how other graduates conduct themselves (Tholen, 2013). In essence, while most employability models downplay differences in the power of individuals and social groups to enhance their employability at the expense of others, the value of one's credentials depends on how one stands relative to others in the job market (Brown and Hesketh, 2004: 217). We found ample evidence here of this mismatch between normative notions of employability and the reality of student experiences, including assessments of the likelihood of securing graduate employment in the future being made relative to peers and significant efforts by students to differentiate themselves from other graduates. Achieving this differentiation however, prompted clear tensions between the acknowledged benefits of gaining relevant workplace experience and a grudging awareness of potential and actual (self) exploitation.

Also relevant to notions of employability is that participation in paid and unpaid relevant professional work did not by itself allow for differentiation, because the practice had become largely ubiquitous in this cohort of students. Rather, these early career professionals were increasingly feeling pressured to engage in longer periods of unpaid work experience than their peers, and to secure such experience in higher status organisations or companies. Other strategies used to been seen as more desirable to employers included working towards high grade point averages, enrolling in post-graduate degrees and double degrees, and electing to study particular topics in an honours program. Hence, the study suggests how

unpaid work expands, when universally practiced in an increasingly absorptive way by a particular occupational or disciplinary field. That is, when most or all graduates undertake unpaid work, this creates a new benchmark for others, if they want to compete, to follow.

A significant critique of the concept of employability is its underplaying of social and political contexts in which graduates seek employment, with the implication that failure to secure a self-fulfilling occupation can be presented or experienced as the fault of the unsuccessful individual (McCash, 2006). In this respect, employability is only viable for those who possess the requisite educational background, training, and cultural capital to pursue it (Kossek, 2000). Due to the promoted benefits of work experience and because the practice has become naturalised, many students, employers and educators may be unaware that unpaid work experience has the potential to challenge legal and ethical boundaries. There is a genuine lack of understanding and clarity about the legality and legitimacy of unpaid work in Australia, particularly in relation to work experience undertaken outside, or as a complement to, formalised education-based arrangements (Stewart and Owens, 2013). This ambiguity is not unique to the Australian context and the majority of discussion about unpaid work experience, particularly unpaid internships, has been generated from US (e.g., Bacon, 2011; Burke and Carton, 2013; Curiale, 2010; Frenette, 2014; Gardner, 2012; Perlin, 2011; Tucci 2012) and UK perspectives (e.g., Davis, 2010; Figiel, 2013; Holmes, 2006; Hope and Figiel, 2012; Siebert and Wilson, 2013). In contrast to the US in particular, the proliferation of and subsequent discussion about unpaid work and internships in Australia has been relatively more recent. Enforcement of the US *Fair Labor Standards Act*, through the application of a six-part test used to determine employment status, known as Fact Sheet #71 (Bacon 2011), has been patchy (Tucci 2012). However, a recent and very high profile case where a federal district court judge in New York ruled in favour of two unpaid production assistants on the 2010 movie *Black Swan* (Perlin 2013), points to a greater recognition of the

problem. Australia also saw the first legal action relating to unpaid work very recently where a media company was fined AU$24,000 in early 2015 for underpaying employees that it had wrongly classified as volunteers under the *Fair Work Act (Workforce* 2015).

Conclusions

Our analysis of the patterns of opportunities and challenges that are created for and by urban planning students in Australia in gaining relevant exposure to work, has raised a number of broader concerns relevant to graduate employability. While accounts of graduate skills make important contributions to the understanding of graduate employment, their analytic concern is supply, with demand treated as blunt, aggregated and abstract (James et al., 2013). The lengths taken by some of the students in the sample to engage in unpaid work—at the expense of paid employment—suggests a major problem with the supply of graduate jobs. This is rarely acknowledged in broader youth labour market rhetoric, yet underpins the types of commensurate individual-level responses young people make to attempt to effectively compete in such an environment. A key challenge however is to reconcile the tensions that unpaid work experience raises, especially where there are high levels of reported satisfaction and willingness to participate by young people, even outside mandated course requirements. A significant complexity in reconciling this tension is that safeguarding early career professionals from potential exploitation by closely regulating unpaid work may have the perverse consequence of depriving students of opportunities for gaining professional experience and diminishing individual prospects for employment (Gregory, 1998: 253).

Universities are likely to play a key role in reconciling such tensions. For unpaid work to be legal in the Australian context, it usually needs to be embedded in a formal, accredited training or educational program. As the findings here demonstrated, it is through degree courses that many unpaid work and internship opportunities are facilitated, and where the necessary attributes of employability, at least in the professional fields we examined, are

acquired. For most students, work integrated learning opportunities embedded in educational courses were the primary, though not the only means through which they gained relevant workplace exposure. Hence, we argue, somewhat ironically, that training and education remain critical to employability, not only in terms of the skills and knowledges they impart, but also because education is a conduit to accessing relevant work exposure. Although there remain unanswered questions, such as about how well employability enhancing activities map onto actual employment and mobility trajectories and how these differ by class, race and gender (Smith, 2010), it is clear that unpaid work is deserving of greater attention at both the theoretical and empirical level but also by those charged with safeguarding the employment rights and conditions of early career professionals.

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