Researching Unfree Student Labour
in Apple’s Supply Chain

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Introduction

Student internships are typically required for meeting educational qualifications in the fields of medicine, hospitality and tourism, creative industries, and media and communication studies, among many others. In China, such internships are mandatory in the realm of vocational education. With the availability of a potential labour pool of nearly 20 million vocational school students nationwide, some employers such as Foxconn Technology Group – the world’s largest manufacturer of high-tech electronics products on contract with Apple and other global brands – have coerced student interns to work day and night on the assembly line. Working and living in the factory-cum-dormitory complexes, the young students must comply with the Foxconn internship programme on pain of not graduating. At a time of rising costs and an aging population, companies are incentivised to tap into the cheap productive labour of interning students to maximise their profits. Student interns are unfree labourers, who face multi-layered pressures from schools, companies and local governments in transnational manufacturing. This chapter further assesses how this emerging student worker regime impacts labour standards and the future development of a globalised economy.

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Previous research on the commodification of education has shown that, under China’s market reforms since the 1970s, vocational schools have diversified their funding sources by expanding student enrolment and engaging in business partnerships (Kuczera & Field 2010; Li & Sheldon 2014; Loyalka et al. 2015). The quality of teaching and learning varies widely. In under-resourced and poorly governed schools, many students play with handsets and online games, read comic books and even sleep through ill-prepared lectures, with disillusioned students dropping out altogether. Vocational schools are thus stigmatised as ‘holding tanks’ for ‘bad students’ who have failed in the mainstream education system (Woronov 2016; Ling 2015).

When looking at the school-to-work transition, I focus on the institutional practices of student internship programmes and the lived experiences of interns. Under Chinese law interning students are not classified as employees: the legal status of interns remains that of students (Ministries of Education and Finance 2007; Ministry of Education et al. 2016). For Guy Standing (2011: 16), ‘internships are potentially a vehicle for channelling youths into the precariat’, which begs the questions: is a precarious intern economy comprised of teenage vocational students expanding in China? Are businesses within global supply chains becoming dependent on China’s intern economy?

Fieldwork in China

While investigating the loss of more than a dozen employees’ lives in a spate of workplace suicides at Foxconn throughout 2010, I came to learn about workers’ struggles, including the struggles of interning students. Between 2011 and 2012, I interviewed 38 student interns from working-class rural migrant families and 14 teachers from eight vocational schools participating in an internship programme at Foxconn, the largest student internship programme in the world. In addition to face-to-face interviews, I did undercover research inside Foxconn dormitories and worker communities. In food outlets, Internet cafes, basketball courts, discos, shopping malls, parks and the Foxconn Employees Care Center, I met with workers and student interns, as well as a smaller number of human resources managers, teachers and government educational officials. The interns were eager to talk about their studies, working lives and anxieties about their future. I supplemented semi-structured interviews with workers’ monthly wage statements, employment contracts, internship agreements, employees’ handbooks, company publications (including newspapers, magazines, recruitment posters, notices, annual reports and press releases) and government data (including educational directives and labour laws and regulations). It became clear to me that provincial governments provide special funds for schools that meet Foxconn’s labour quotas, thus firming up close ties linking local governments, schools and corporations.
As I expanded my field research from Sichuan and Guangdong to the eastern coastal provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang in August and November 2016, I learned that labour agencies – also known as dispatch firms – have undertaken new forms of labour subcontracting, including the dispatch of student interns to factories and service workplaces (see also: Crane & LeBaron in this volume). The quasi-employment arrangements of interns, who occupy an ambiguous space between being a student and a worker, result in the super-exploitation of Chinese youth whose internship opportunities are being squandered, and who with ever greater frequency serve as cheap and disposable labour – all while learning no marketable skills.

Student internship and labour informalisation

China’s educational and labour systems in student internship governance have been changing rapidly. Until the early 1990s, graduates from vocational schools were assigned to urban state-owned enterprises and hence enjoyed a high level of job security. With the increase of economic reforms, privatisation and enterprise restructuring, this government-planned job assignment system was phased out (Hoffman 2001). A fresh graduate is now assumed to have full responsibility for his or her own career in a competitive labour market. Different terms of work and employment, differentiated by one’s educational credentials and social status, thrive in ‘flexible’ workplaces (Kuruvilla et al. 2011).

The mass recruitment of students as ‘interns’, ‘trainees’ and ‘apprentices’ has increasingly drawn attention from academics and labour non-governmental organisations. Lu Zhang (2015) showed that the ranks of ‘temporary workers’ – such as agency labourers and student interns – had been growing in step with pressure on industry to cut costs and intensify labour. At the assembly factories Zhang surveyed, temps earned one half to two-thirds of formal employees’ wages and received far fewer welfare benefits. In particular, auto production has been further streamlined by the use of lower-cost contingent or non-standard workers, on the one hand, and the application of advanced robotic technologies replacing human labour, on the other hand. Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee (2010: 513) insightfully summarise that the multi-tiered employment system is problematic not just from the perspective of subcontracted workers who lack job security, but also from that of regular employees, who encounter greater difficulty in making ‘collective demands on their employers’, as they now must compete with student interns and dispatch labourers.

The current author, Ngai Pun and Mark Selden (2015a) drew on their multi-year investigation of the labour conditions at Foxconn to highlight the critical role played by Chinese local governments in manipulating internships through direct school policy interventions. After the tragedy of 12 young worker suicides at
Foxconn from January to May 2010, the company temporarily halted open recruitment of labour at its large facilities in South China. A human resources manager dismissively commented that the policy was to prevent the entry of those who would jump to their death for company compensation. However, Foxconn did not halt the employment of teenage student interns from all over the country. If a student is found emotionally unstable or seriously ill, the front-line manager can ask the responsible teacher to take the student back. In this way Foxconn attempts to avert the risk of suicide and monitor labour conditions with the assistance of teachers, who report to company managers and stay on site throughout the internship (Smith & Chan 2015). Moreover, government officials take the initiative to assist big investors to recruit student interns on demand. Interns, unlike their co-workers, are not free to leave work at any time upon reasonable notice. The students must comply with the Foxconn internship programme in order to graduate. Working hand in glove with provincial, municipal, district, and township and village governments, Foxconn blatantly subverts China’s internship regulations designed to protect students and assure that their career needs are served.

Student interns often face restrictions on their ability to exert rights, but on occasions when they have organised, they have exercised power and leverage within global supply chains. Student interns and their co-workers at the Honda (Nanhai) auto-parts plant, for example, went on strike between May and June 2010, paralysing the entire close-knit, just-in-time supply network of Honda from within China (Chan & Hui 2014; Pringle 2017). At the time, interns made up the majority of the 1,800-person labour force (Lyddon et al. 2015). In the labour process ‘foremen offer little in the way of instruction despite the fact that the work at the factory is considered to be a part of the interns’ education’ (Butollo & ten Brink 2012: 426). In spite of the power asymmetry between managers and workers, including interns, the strikers – with support from concerned academics and labour activists – won a big wage increase for both workers and interns. Importantly, the interns and workers interacted as friends and colleagues, going to work every day by company shuttle buses and living in the same collective dormitories. Such an environment can prove conducive to strategising solidarity actions (Friedman 2014), but since interns are typically only short term, sustainable organising with other workers can be difficult (SACOM 2012; DanWatch 2015; China Labor Watch 2016, 2017).

What remains understudied is the complex power structure faced by unskilled student interns amid the growing competition for good jobs, and the deepening collusion between vocational schools, labour agencies and local governments in shaping the internship system. As my research data reveal, employers utilise student labour, which is coordinated by local officials as well as by private agencies through subcontracting, to maximise staffing flexibility and profitability. This constitutes a manifestation of the persistent labour unfreedom and inequalities in a volatile global market.
The disconnect between students’ majors and internships

Chinese vocational schools offer employment-oriented courses for eligible applicants who have completed nine years of schooling. While the number of vocational high-school students (grades 10–12) doubled from 11.7 million in 2001 to 22.4 million in 2010, by 2014 it had dropped to 18 million nationwide (Ministry of Education 2015). The official goal for 2020 is to reverse this trend by recruiting 23.5 million students – i.e. 50 per cent of the nation’s senior secondary student population (Ministry of Education 2010a: table 1) – into three-year vocational programmes.

Vocational schools follow the work–study model, emphasising the integration of education with production, as stated in China’s 1996 Vocational Education Law. For students, the key question is the quality of teaching in the classroom and in internships among a wide range of vocational training programmes. A 6,000-student vocational school that trains equipment and machinery technicians proclaims its mission to be: ‘Master one skill, create a career. Master one skill, make a blue sky.’ Similarly, in a larger school specialising in auto repair and mobile mechanics, the recruitment brochure elaborates on the importance of studying real skills:

Our country has a good policy so that families in difficulty pay no tuition!
To look for a job without learning technical skills is a lifelong mistake!
It is best to have a skill in this world, to save you if times get tough!
Parents with foresight have their children learn skills!

The schools’ marketing campaigns focus on offering prospective students the skills to provide a solid foundation for career building and lifelong security. According to the government, good internship programmes are participatory, contribute to students’ growth and development, and relate to their field of study. By contrast, my first-hand research reveals that the interns’ work positions at Foxconn are not related to their field of study, nor are they designed to develop lifelong skills for student interns.

In Foxconn’s integrated Digital Product Business Group (iDPBG), exclusively serving Apple, 28,044 ‘student interns’ from over 200 schools were working alongside employees in Shenzhen city in 2010. This was a sixfold increase from 4,539 interns in 2007 (Foxconn Technology Group 2010a: 23). Nationwide, Foxconn used the labour of 150,000 student interns – 15 per cent of its entire million-strong Chinese workforce – during the summer of 2010 (Foxconn Technology Group 2010b: 2), dwarfing Disney’s College Program, often cited as one of the world’s largest internship programmes with more than 50,000 cumulative interns over 30 years (Perlin 2012: 6).

2 The vocational school brochure, in the original Chinese, is on file with the author.
In the eight vocational schools, between 2011 and 2012, 38 interviewed interns were studying arts, construction, petrochemistry, automotive repair, herbal medicine, horticulture, secretarial services, computer science, business management, accounting, textiles, electronics and mechanics, among others. Only eight of them, barely one-fifth, were in their third and final year, i.e. when internships are supposed to take place. Their average age was 16.5, just above China’s statutory minimum working age of 16. In terms of the length of internship, the 14 teachers I interviewed who were dispatched to Foxconn revealed that the company internships were often extended to meet production needs, ranging from three months to a full year, with scant regard for the students’ training needs. A 16-year-old Foxconn intern said:

Come on, what do you think we’ve learned standing for more than ten hours a day manning machines on the line? What’s an internship? There’s no relation to what we study in school. Every day is just a repetition of one or two simple motions, like a robot.

(29 November 2011, Shenzhen city, Guangdong province)

Interns at Foxconn are required to work 10–12 hour shifts, six or seven days a week during peak production months. The 2007 Administrative Measures for Internships, however, state that ‘interns shall not work more than eight hours a day’, and the 2010 Education Circular specifies ‘interns shall not work overtime beyond the eight-hour workday’ (Ministries of Education and Finance 2007; Ministry of Education 2010b). Not only must interns’ shifts be limited to eight hours, but all their training is required to take place during the day to ensure students’ safety and physical and mental health, in accordance with the Law on the Protection of Minors. This law – which was revised in 2012 and promulgated in 2013 – aims to protect young people under the age of 18 and ensure their balanced development and healthy growth (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress 2012). Article 20 stipulates that schools, including vocational schools, shall ‘cooperate with the parents or other guardians of minor students to guarantee the students’ time for sleeping, recreational activities and physical exercise, and may not increase their burden of study’. In reality, Foxconn student interns aged from 16 to 18 were subjected to the same working conditions as regular workers, including alternating day and night shifts and extensive overtime, defying the letter and the spirit of the law.

In explaining the design and purpose of internships, a teacher showed me the following school letter addressed to parents:

Participation in this internship will advance students’ respect and appreciation of employment, their honesty and integrity as the main part of a vocational moral education, will help students understand enterprise and become familiar with a business environment and culture, will lead students to develop employee awareness in both practice through study and learning by doing, will cultivate students’ comprehensive career capabilities, and will integrate their overall qualities and inure them to
hardship and promote endurance so that in the future they will enter the job market with a solid foundation.

(5 December 2011, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)

With its highly moral tone, this letter claims that, through the school’s assigned internship, students’ ‘employability’ in the market will be enhanced; yet it does not specify the curriculum, nor provide any information about the content of the technical training.

A 17-year-old student interviewee recalled his internship experience: ‘I enrolled in an automotive repair course in September 2009 and, according to the curriculum, the specialised course lasts for three years, with two years at school and a final year of internship.’ But less than a year into the programme, in June 2010, he and his fellow classmates were sent to Foxconn’s production site to intern for seven months. Rather than working on automobiles, he worked on iPhones. ‘It’s exhausting. It’s a waste of time’, he concluded.

Not long after the students’ return to school, the administration began arranging more internships. He recalled:

The school had still not finished planning our specialised classes, but they began setting up internship assignments. We haven’t yet completed even the core classes in our specialisation, nor have we grasped the basic skills of automotive repair. How are we going to handle an internship in an auto company?

The student was very upset. He explained:

We followed the rules and paid for three years of tuition, but we haven’t completed the professional training. The school violated the most basic agreement, contradicted the student recruitment brochure, arbitrarily changed the curriculum, treated its students’ future like a plaything, and failed in its responsibility to us. We students have not attained sufficient knowledge in our education, and come time for employment, we’ll have no competitive advantage.

(4 December 2011, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)

One school’s mission statement says: ‘Unification of school and business, unification of theory and practice, unification of teacher and technician, and unification of student and employee.’ However, this is not a seamless unification, and the discrepancy between their promise and the reality faced by interns could scarcely be larger. The responses of several interns, such as playing video games all night and not going to work on time, as well as slowing down due to loss of motivation to work, have remained a consistent pattern. Foxconn’s presentation of honorary titles such as the Outstanding Student Intern Awards – also known as the ‘hardworking bee’ prize – failed to instil stronger commitment and loyalty among interns who perceived the internship programme as squandering their education and found the work demeaning.
Forced internships

One Chinese literature teacher observed that the student intern system is not unlike the ‘contract labour system’ of the 1930s (Honig 1983). He drew a parallel with the desperate Occupation-era children and teenagers from poverty-stricken villages who were sold to labour contractors and dispatched to toil day and night under harsh conditions in Japanese-owned cotton mills in Shanghai. Laughing bitterly, he confides, ‘I’m a modern day contractor’, referring to his role as a coordinator of the internship programme. He said:

My daughter is seventeen years old, my only daughter. She’s now preparing for the national college entrance exam. No matter what the result is, I won’t let her come to intern, or work, for this company.

(16 December 2011, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)

More importantly, he states that, ‘at Foxconn, there’s no real learning through integration of classroom and workshop. The distortion of vocational education in today’s China runs deep.’

None of the 38 interviewed interns expressed any interest in working for Foxconn after graduation. If they were interested in low-skilled, low-paid assembly line jobs, one of them told me, they ‘would have started working straight away after finishing junior secondary school rather than seeking specialised training in multiple fields’. In January 2011, new workers and student interns at Foxconn’s ‘iPad city’ in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, were paid the same 950 yuan per month as everyone else, but, unlike regular workers, interns were not entitled to a 400 yuan per month skills subsidy, despite having passed a three-month probationary period. Foxconn justifies this tiered treatment by referring to the legal requirement to ‘pay reasonably for the labour of interns’, wherein what constitutes ‘reasonable pay’ went unspecified under the national regulations at that time.

Teachers are assigned by their schools to accompany student interns to their work sites. They play two roles: one is to ensure that student interns follow factory rules; the second is to help students deal with feelings of dejection at their work situation. During the entire internship, the teacher focuses on managing students’ emotions, as maintaining high morale was key to assuring a high retention rate of student interns, which was a primary criterion for assessing teacher performance. A 26-year-old teacher spoke of some students who were reluctant to go to work during the first week after arriving at the Foxconn factory:

I asked my students to manage their emotions. Calm down. Think carefully if you want to leave; won’t your parents be disappointed? I visited my students in the dorm to see if they felt okay on Tuesday night. They answered ‘not too bad’. I met them again on Friday night. They said ‘fine’. They’ve gradually gotten used to the work rhythm. Finally, when I asked if they want to leave, they replied ‘no’.

(14 December 2011, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)
A number of teacher interviewees, I eventually learned, concealed the absence of educational value in the programme in part because they were being paid not only their regular monthly salary by their schools but also an additional salary from Foxconn for their supervisory service during the internship period. During the school year of 2011–12, each teacher received an extra 2,000 yuan per month from Foxconn for their role in strengthening labour control. The student interns were therefore pressured not only by the company but also by their teachers to accept internships that violated the educational criteria of their vocational programmes.

Often when interning students fell ill, neither their teachers nor the company supervisors seemed to be able to help them. A 16-year-old girl suffered from abnormal menstrual pains while she was assigned to the packaging workshop:

I used to have relatively regular menstrual periods, but this time my period was delayed until the first week in October. I was frightened. I had such severe cramps that I was covered with sweat on the line, where it’s air-conditioned. In November and December, my irregularity and pain persisted . . . My line leader is a young man with whom I don’t feel comfortable talking about a ‘girl matter’. Further, I didn’t report my sickness to my teacher for the same kind of embarrassment.

(14 December 2011, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)

In the broader social structure, teachers were pressured to coordinate internships tailored to Foxconn, an influential corporate player in the local political economy. A teacher explained:

There’s a need to respond to the Education Department’s call to get the whole class of students organised. To take action uniformly. Because an internship is not a summer job that one gets on one’s own. Between September 2011 and January 2012, a school semester, more than 7,000 students – approximately 10 per cent of the labour force – were working on the assembly line in Foxconn’s Chengdu factories.

(2 February 2012, Chengdu city, Sichuan province)

His school sent 162 students on 22 September 2011 to undertake three-month internships that were subsequently extended in accordance with iPad production needs. Another larger school recruited 309 students, who were accompanied by only three male and three female teachers for the entire internship. This is typical of the 1:50 teacher–student ratio maintained throughout the Foxconn Chengdu internship programme in 2011–12.

Contrary to my findings, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) (2013: 5) ‘found no interns had been engaged at [Foxconn] Chengdu since September 2011’ (my emphasis). Having received annual membership dues of US$250,000 from Apple, plus well into six-figure audit fees for conducting their investigation at the Foxconn facilities (Weir 2012), the FLA had ignored the exploitative features of China’s internship programmes.

Ralph Litzinger (2013: 176) aptly notes that ‘Apple is a master at blurring truth and fiction – through its advertising, its Genius Bars, its secrecy, and its brilliantly spun corporate responsibility reports.’ In October 2016, Apple terminated its
membership of the FLA, after learning that it had aligned with ‘the FLA code elements related to employment relationship; non-discrimination; harassment or abuse; forced labor; and health, safety, and environment’ (Fair Labor Association 2016: 1). Ironically, instead of terminating the abusive student internship programmes, in 2016 Apple modified its Supplier Code of Conduct provisions to ensure that suppliers were ‘compensating student workers comparable to regular workers’ (Apple 2017: 30). The result was to tacitly legitimate Foxconn’s continued abuse of the labour of young students in the absence of any genuine internship training and in violation of prohibitions on overtime work for interns. Whether Apple’s suppliers will actually pay student interns up to the same wages as their co-workers remains a pressing issue to be investigated.

With the loss of the capacity to control the timing, location and training content of the internships, a student interviewee vented his pent-up anger by condemning the Foxconn programme for offering ‘fake internships’ and ‘forced internships’.

The labour dispatch of student interns

One compelling feature of the intern programme for Foxconn and other corporations is that student interns offer cheap labour. Because student interns are not classified as employees – even though they perform identical work to other production workers – employers do not enrol them in government-administered social security, which covers medical insurance, work injury insurance, unemployment benefits, maternity insurance and old age pensions. By dispensing with all of these benefits, the company ultimately saves money.4

During my follow-up fieldwork in the summer and autumn of 2016, I observed that several vocational schools had engaged with for-profit labour agencies to supply students to workplaces in return for labour service fees. Under the dispatch work relationship, ‘the contracting and managing entities are constructed to be severed from one another’ (Huang 2017: 250). If the dispatched student-workers were injured at work, neither Foxconn, the managing entity nor the agency would feel the need to take any responsibility, given the ambiguity and complexity of the triangular labour relations.

In China, dispatch workers had long been excluded from legal protections prior to the implementation of the Labour Contract Law, which was promulgated in June

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1 In the aftermath of young Chinese worker suicides in 2010 and an aluminium-dust explosion at the Foxconn Chengdu iPad factory in May 2011, Apple – the biggest business partner of Foxconn – was compelled to join in 2012 the auditing programmes led by the Washington, DC-based Fair Labor Association to protect its corporate image (Chan 2013; Chan et al. 2015b; Pun et al. 2016).

4 As of 2015, in Guangdong province, employers were required to contribute 29.2 per cent and employees 11 per cent of the employee’s wages to social insurance on a monthly basis (Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions 2015).
2007 and came into force in January 2008 (Chan 2009; Xu 2014; Zhang 2015). Under this new law, hiring agencies and client firms share joint legal responsibilities, and dispatch workers are entitled to receive the same pay for doing the same work as directly employed workers. The law restricts labour dispatch for ‘temporary, supplementary or substitute work’, thereby placing certain limits on labour informalisation while providing organisational flexibility. However, huge discrepancies exist between workers’ formal employment rights and the enforcement of these rights (Liu 2014; Cairns 2015).

Student interns are joining the ranks of the rapidly expanding labour dispatch force. In the city of Danyang, Jiangsu province, the private labour agency paid the student-employees an ‘internship subsidy’ of 10 yuan per hour (compared to the 15.5 yuan local minimum hourly wage standard), with the longest working month of 308 hours (under the Chinese labour law the normal working time should be 174 hours a month, plus no more than 36 hours’ overtime in any month). The labour agency pocketed the difference between the interning students’ ‘standard hourly pay’ (i.e. 10 yuan per hour) and the factory rate (which is negotiated on a case-by-case basis). For the factory boss, the use of dispatched or outsourced student workers helps to cut both administrative and labour costs.

The corporate use of student interns is now widely taken as a quick fix to the difficulties posed by rising labour costs and a tightening labour market. China’s basic wage levels, particularly in large cities, have risen substantially to reach the mid-range of Asian countries, higher than those for manufacturing workers in Cambodia, Pakistan, Vietnam and other developing countries, but far below those in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and South Korea (ILO 2016: 2). While the numbers of Chinese internal migrant workers reached 282 million in 2016, the annual rate of growth of rural migrant labour had declined from 5.4 per cent in 2010 to 1.5 per cent in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China 2010, 2017).

Barry Naughton (2014: 14, 21) shows that the Chinese economy sustained average growth of 10.4 per cent per annum between 2003 and 2012, while real wages for rural migrant workers increased by 2.5 times in the course of the decade. With the exception of 2008–9, during the deepest world recession since World War II, increases in statutory minimum wages steadily boosted Chinese workers’ incomes as the government sought to stimulate domestic consumption and lessen over-reliance on exports (Li 2016; Hung & Selden 2017). In many cities, statutory minimum wages rose almost every year. In 2014, the minimum wages in 19 municipalities, autonomous regions and provinces increased by an average of 14.1 per cent, and in 2015 the minimum wage in 27 regions increased by an average of 14 per cent (Xinhua 2016).

Under these circumstances the researched private labour agency has been responsive to growing human resources needs at ‘competitive rates’. It takes care of the hiring and management of student interns, such as the signing of labour
dispatch agreements and the payment of wages in a one-stop service, for its clients. In my interview, the human resources manager was excited to talk about his business expansion strategies. He also commented on the entrepreneurial, rather than educational, role of the teachers:

Teachers are interested in getting a cut [from student internships], too. We either have to make a good deal, or reach out to students directly through our local agents, whom we call downstream suppliers, but not via the school teacher gatekeepers. In this way, we don’t have to pay them commissions. You know what, meeting with teachers means spending on cigarettes, food and drinks, KTVs . . . all this will cost you quite a lot before you’ll get any return.

(28 August 2016, Danyang city, Jiangsu province)

Student internships are profoundly marketised. As an experiment, the dispatch agency has invested in a vocational school at the Lianyungang Economic and Technological Development Zone. The agency sends students directly to employing units in return for labour service payments from the enterprises.

Regulating China’s intern economy

Legal practitioners Earl Brown and Kyle deCant (2014: 195) argue that when internship programmes are ‘devoid of any relevant educational component and maintained solely for the benefit of the employer’s bottom line . . . interns should be afforded the full protection of China’s labor laws’. Exposés by the media have shown that Chinese interns – the youngest ones being only 14 years old – are essentially engaged in thinly disguised child labour (BBC 2012). In these ‘sheep-like internships’, interns are confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. In response, the central government finally took some measures in 2016 to protect the basic rights of student interns, who were being increasingly exploited as low-cost workers in factories, express delivery companies, restaurants, hotels, metro stations and other workplaces (China Daily opinion 2016; Lin 2016; Horwitz & Huang 2015).

Specifically, vocational schools were instructed to manage student internships in accordance with the latest regulations jointly promulgated by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the State Administration of Work Safety and the China Insurance Regulatory Commission, which superseded the 2007 Administrative Measures and came into force on 11 April 2016. Under the ‘Regulations on the Management of Vocational School Student Internships’ (Ministry of Education et al. 2016), the duration of workplace-based internships should normally be six months. On insurance benefits, vocational schools and enterprises are required to undertake ‘joint responsibility’ to provide interns with commercial general liability insurance. Moreover, the regulations require that student internships have substantial
educational content and work-skills training provisions, along with comprehensive labour protections for student interns such as eight-hour working days, no overtime and no night shifts. Above all, no more than 10 per cent of the labour force at ‘any given facility’, or no more than 20 per cent of the workers in ‘any given work position’, should consist of student interns at any point in time.

However, the Chinese central government has left intact incentives for corporations to continue to prioritise intern labour as cheap labour. With the passage of the 2016 Regulations, the statutory minimum level for paying interns is clearly specified: ‘Wages shall be at least 80 per cent of that of employees during the probationary period’ (italics added). In other words, employers are permitted to give student interns only 80 per cent of the income offered to full employees on the job, whether or not students’ productivity is less.

Fundamentally, the intricate interests shared by companies, vocational schools and local governments will not be done away with easily. Rob Lederer, the executive director of the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC), an industry association with more than 100 members around the world, acknowledged that ‘one large potential source of reliable, quality labor may be student workers’ (EICC & REAP 2015: 2). At the invitation of the EICC, Scott Rozelle, co-director of the Rural Education Action Program (REAP) at Stanford University, assisted in designing a monitoring and evaluation programme for China’s vocational schooling system since 2013 (Apple 2013: 19). The major objective is to achieve ‘responsible vocational education’, beginning with a pilot project of 118 vocational high schools in the heavily populated Henan province in central China. In July 2016, the American academic research team, with support from leaders from the provincial Department of Education, created a list of 22 credentialled vocational schools to benchmark teaching standards, school resources and student learning experiences against a set of criteria (EICC & REAP 2016).

The local government encouraged companies to select students and graduates from quality schools for internships, thereby providing economic incentives for both teachers and students to improve their performance. Cooperating schools were also promised increased government funding for long-term educational development. This is framed by the Stanford University research team as a ‘win–win–win action research’ to strengthen collaboration between the government, schools and companies (Rozelle et al. 2013). In engaging with the world’s largest electronics association, the researchers took aim at vocational schools, holding them accountable for bad learning experiences and poor internship arrangements. They have not, however, addressed the managerial abuses involving the violation of China’s internship provisions at the workplace level that I have shown to be the product of collaboration between local governments and corporate giants.
Conclusion

Student interns have become an important source of precarious workers that is growing in step with the expansion of vocational education and the informatisation of employment in China. Greig de Peuter, Nicole Cohen and Enda Brophy (2015: 331) observe that internships are ‘an entry point for interrogating contested conditions of life, labour, and learning at a historical moment when precarity is an encroaching structure of feeling’. Young and inexperienced students, along with many other kinds of low-skilled workers, face formidable challenges in the face of credential inflation, ineffective governance and the flexibilisation of production of services and goods (Lee 2016; Chan and Selden 2017). In the name of internship, they are thrust into menial work without training, or transfer, of useful skills.

Ross Perlin (2012: 23) comments that the ‘very significance of the word intern lies in its ambiguity’. Facing financial and political pressures from local government, many schools – even the better ones – are unable to shield students from internships that violate the law. At the same time, some employers went as far as renaming ‘internships’ as ‘social practice programmes’ and ‘service learning’ to evade the new law and public monitoring.

On reflection, at a time of slowing economic growth, a shrinking pool of workers and an aging population, interning students and graduates could play a significant role in China’s economic and technological development if they are protected against violations of China’s labour law, and particularly if they were to receive appropriate training leading to better jobs and higher levels of technology. Stronger labour protections – especially for teenage student workers – will require much more sustained joint efforts from the state, companies and civil society.

References

All website URLs were accessed on 19 July 2018.


SACOM (Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior) (2012), ‘Students and Scholars Demand Tim Cook Stop Using Student Workers and Ensure Decent Working