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New guidelines to define what is an ethical media internship

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) is launching a new drive to educate interns and their employers about their legal rights following growing concerns that media students and graduates are being exploited as they seek to enter a hyper-competitive industry.

MEAA, the union for creative and media professionals, in conjunction with Interns Australia, has created a new set of guidelines about legal internships and will also seek to investigate complaints and to assist students who believe they have been treated unethically or illegally while undertaking an internship.

MEAA Media director Katelin McNerney said the new guidelines were in response to numerous reported instances where students have been subjected to exploitative internship arrangements in the media industry.

A report on internships by the Fair Work Ombudsman in 2013 found that unlawful unpaid work was particularly prevalent in the media industry.

In one high-profile case in 2015, Melbourne-based Crocmedia was fined \$24,000 in the Federal Court for breaching minimum wage provisions by failing to pay two young interns who worked in its office for 20 months between 2011 and 2013.

McNerney said the new guidelines had been developed to clearly delineate a genuine learning experience from one that simply takes advantage of young graduates desperate for a foothold in the industry.

“Internships have long been recognised as a valuable way for students and graduates to gain meaningful practical experience and training in their chosen career in media, communications and related fields – but they should never be a source of free labour,” she said.

“Far too often, unpaid work is used by media companies to take advantage of young graduates desperate for a foothold in the sector. This is not acceptable.

“Internships should provide practical hands-on industry experience in a closely supervised environment for a finite period of time – not an opportunity for an employer to replace paid workers with unpaid ones.

“The new guidelines prepared by MEAA are simple to follow and will help define what is ethical and lawful internship.

“In addition to informing students of their rights, MEAA wants to work with employers to reach common agreement on how interns are employed in the media industry to prevent exploitation.”

McNerney said MEAA was keen to engage with tertiary institutions to raise awareness among media and communications students of their rights.

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Dimity Mannering, executive director of Interns Australia, said:

“Empowering employers and interns with information is crucial to reversing the phenomenon of unfair internships. With no clear laws on internships in Australia, these guidelines achieve two goals – they support employers to provide fair and quality internships and they provide a reference point so that interns can evaluate their arrangements in the arts, media and entertainment.

“We are hopeful that through steps like the MEAA guidelines, we can make Australia the world leader on this issue,” Mannering said.

The Victoria and Tasmania regional director for MEAA, Carolyn Dunbar, will be part of a panel discussion on unpaid internships and unpaid work, facilitated by the Young Workers Centre, at Trades Hall in Melbourne tonight.

Students who have a complaint about a media internship can also contact MEAA Member Central on 1300 656 513 or through the MEAA website at meaa.org/campaigns/ethical-internships, where they can also download a copy of the guidelines.

For more information contact:

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