

The Southern African Freelancers Association (Safrea) stands opposed to unpaid internships

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After a spate of national unpaid internship offers and the resulting debate on social media in South Africa, Safrea feels that it is necessary for the organisation, as a representative of media freelancers and with a healthy student membership category, to clarify our stance on the matter.

“Safrea is strenuously opposed to unpaid internships,” says Clive Lotter, chairperson of the Southern African Freelancers Association (Safrea). “It is widely accepted that it is exploitative for organisations to benefit from the professional activities of suitably qualified individuals without fairly compensating them for their work. While the experience and workplace understanding gained might be invaluable to the intern, a company should not be able to allocate a portion of its entry level work to free labour.”

He explains that unpaid – or poorly paid – internships are also a way of propagating the cycle of privilege, and excluding those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a growing movement away from this practice globally, as only interns with considerable financial support at home can afford to work for free – support that is usually limited to the privileged upper echelons of society. These internships are doubly exploitative if they require interns to have their own transport or computer.

“This exploitation is even less palatable in a nation like South Africa, where the legacy of the past means that those who are most economically disadvantaged are black people – and a situation where a suitably qualified individual would have to donate their time as well as find transport and equipment to serve the needs of an organisation is unfair and flies in the face of transformation,” says Lotter.

He adds that it is important to note that while many media professionals working today might have, themselves, benefited from the experience gained by “paying their dues” in unpaid internships, times have changed and social consciousness has evolved. “It is no longer considered to be acceptable to further perpetuate and entrench privilege either professionally or socially,” he concludes.

Safrea remains opposed to unpaid internships in any form.

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Safrea is the Southern African Freelancers Association. We provide advocacy, support and resources to freelancers in the media and communications industry, and provide tools, training and networking to freelance professionals.

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