

Between a Promise and a Salary: Student-Migrant-Workers' Experiences of Precarious Labour Markets

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of non-EU/EEA student-migrants orienting in precarious labour markets in Finland. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with working student-migrants holding a temporary legal status, the article examines the incidence of unpaid work within a variety of contractual settings and sectors. The findings suggest that exploitation with regard to the subjective capacity to produce is facilitated through the imposition of unpaid work hours on legally constrained migrants in precarious employment. The findings contribute to the sociological analysis of the increasingly fragmented figures of labour as well as to the study of unpaid work as a driver of precarisation.

Keywords

exploitation, legal status, migrant workers, precarity, student-migration, unpaid work

Introduction

International students have been associated with highly skilled migration and highly skilled work (e.g. She and Wotherspoon, 2013). However, there is a growing body of research focusing on the input of student-migrants in low-paid precarious work and their experiences as ‘middling transnationals’ (e.g. Maury, 2017; Neilson, 2009; Robertson, 2013; Rutten and Verstappen, 2014). It is also implied in recent research that at a time of tightening restrictions on family and labour movement to Europe, student migration may well remain the only feasible option, and that it consequently destabilises the perceived homogeneity of student-migrants as a group (Luthra and Platt, 2016).

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The focus in this article is on the work experiences of non-EU/EEA student-migrant-workers in Finland. Based on qualitative data consisting of in-depth interviews with student-migrant-workers, it assesses the extent of unpaid labour within a variety of contractual employment relations in different work sectors. The article asserts that unpaid work plays an increasingly influential role in the employment of student-migrants holding a temporary legal status in Finland. Thus, the shaping of the figure of the student-migrant-worker becomes entangled with the performance of unpaid work, which consequently increases the availability of labour to capital.

The article extends the analysis of ‘contractually fragmented figures of labour’ (Alberti et al., 2018: 452) and the close relationship between precarious and unpaid work (Baines et al., 2017) in contemporary labour markets, thereby making a twofold sociological contribution. First, it analyses the spread of unpaid work in various employment relationships, demonstrating how such work becomes unavoidable both in the process through which student-migrants strive to gain highly skilled work experience and in the precarious work they undertake to secure the renewal of their student permit,¹ hence, extending beyond an analysis of unpaid work posited as a voluntary form of self-exploitation in the context of contemporary precarisation (e.g. Armano and Murgia, 2017). Second, the article contributes to the theorisation of unpaid work in the context of contemporary capitalist accumulation in demonstrating how some work is pushed outside the formal waged relationship: it is posited that unpaid labour is an extension of paid employment and consequently reflects foundational forms of exploitation. The analysis points to the relevance of examining the increasing role of unpaid labour in contemporary capitalism in which value is appropriated and extracted from social relations, collaboration and activities not configured as labour or constructed as unpaid (Dowling and Harvie, 2014; Harvey, 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019).

In what follows, the research topic is positioned in relation to earlier research on unpaid labour, proceeding with a description of the diversifying labour markets in Finland. A theoretical discussion on exploitation precedes the methods section, the reporting of the findings and the conclusions.

The spread of unpaid labour

Labour-market uncertainty is growing in the capitalist economies of the Global North, coincident with the dismantling of the standard model of employment associated with the Fordist regime based on full-time, long-term employment with a single employer backed up by employment security (Vidal, 2013; Vosko, 2010). From a historical perspective, the so-called standard model of employment was short-lived and by no means universal. Standards of security and rights at work were always selective, generally applying to males and citizens but excluding women and migrants (e.g. Vosko, 2010). Nowadays, precarious work characterised by part-time, temporary and zero-hours contracts, as well as dependent self-employment constitute the norm (Rubery et al., 2018).

There has been an increase in unremunerated work (Simonet, 2018) simultaneously as work increasingly is split into blocks and short shifts spread over the working day interspersed with hours of unpaid waiting, and into piecework paid by the completed task, often demanding additional unpaid labour (Baines, 2004). Furthermore, forms of

voluntary work and sharing economy, as well as open-source projects, constitute the basis of a new post-waged work regime in which unpaid work is a source of value extraction (Van Dyk, 2018). As Dowling and Harvie (2014: 883) argue, ‘capital’s lifeblood is unpaid work’, resulting in the construction of areas of labour and resources that are external to the market in the form of unpaid housework, for instance (Federici, 2012). Indeed, as Marx (1990: 751, 451) states in *Capital I*, capitalists are constantly looking for something ‘provided by nature free of charge’ such as the extraction of natural resources or using ‘the socially productive power of labour [that] develops as a free gift to capital’ in forms such as skills and collaborative practices (Harvey, 2017: 95).

As Simonet (2018: 114) notes, even if in its *juridical* sense unpaid work deviates from the definition of employment, as a *phenomenon* it is certainly not opposed to employment. On the contrary, it is justified in the name of employment (Simonet, 2018), especially in workfare-based social policies that encourage the introduction of unpaid internships (Viren, 2018). Moreover, the reduced role of the state in social reproduction serves to increase the need for unpaid work in the realms of the home and the community that consequently forms a basis for capital accumulation (Dowling and Harvie, 2014). The spread of non-waged work thus serves to increase the amount of unpaid social labour and to minimise the necessary labour, in other words to decrease the share of total revenue allocated to the labour force (Viren, 2018).

Recent studies have described the function of non-waged work as purporting to enhance individual employability (Allen et al., 2013; Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017), many of them with a focus on creative work and the proliferation of unpaid internships (e.g. Shade and Jacobson, 2015). The incidence of unpaid work has been conceptualised as a ‘political economy of promise’ (Bascetta, 2016: 35), and as ‘hope labour’ with the prospect of future paid work (Alacovska, 2017; Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Moreover, unpaid work in the creative industries (Shade and Jacobson, 2015) and non-profit organisations (Baines et al., 2017) is highly gendered. Social class, ethnicity and racialisation also affect the prospects of undertaking unpaid work masked as ‘self-sacrifice for the love of the job’ (Allen et al., 2013: 443; Baines et al., 2017), the consequence of which is self-exploitation (Armano and Murgia, 2017).

There is, however, a gap in research on the structural forms of unpaid labour and its role in capital accumulation. There is a tendency in the literature to analyse different areas of unpaid work such as housework or creative work separately, or simply to approach it as an outcome of workfare policies. The article at hand therefore addresses the need for a careful analysis of unpaid work in its contemporary and multiple forms from the everyday perspective of living labour.

Diversified labour markets

Labour markets nowadays are global and cannot be analysed solely within a national framework. However, to locally situate the analysis the student-migrant-workers in question are positioned in relation to the labour market in Finland.

The employment situation in Finland reflects the general transition towards part-time and temporary work. In 2017, for example, more than 16% of 15–74-year-olds were working part-time in Finland, compared to an average of 20% at the EU level. The

amount of part-time work has grown in almost all sectors, but especially in the service sector, and it is increasingly undertaken reluctantly because of the lack of full-time jobs (Luukkarinen, 2018). Furthermore, temporary agency work is the employment sector that is expanding the most (Statistics Finland, 2018). Self-employment has also increased, and in 2017 comprised 7% of total employment. This trend unfolds alongside the splitting of work between several employers and the rise of the platform and sharing economy in the EU (Koramo et al., 2017).

In 2014, around 6% of the Finnish workforce aged 15–64 years had a foreign background. Members of this group of employees, compared to their counterparts with a Finnish background, are less likely to get an expert job, but are more likely to work in the service or sales sector, to have part-time contracts or contracts of a fixed duration, and to have atypical working hours. The relative proportion of people with a foreign background was highest among those working as cleaners and housekeepers (23%), in catering (18%) and as service and sales workers (11%) (Sutela, 2015).

Earlier research has demonstrated that student-migrants constitute a substantial proportion of the migrant workers in Finland (Könönen, 2019; Mury, 2017). In 2016, of the 21,061 international students in Finland (7.7% of the total number of graduate students), more than half were living in the country on a student permit. In 2018, 5202 first-time permits were issued to students, compared to 7687 work permits and 9009 related to family ties (European Migration Network (EMN), 2019). The top three nationalities among these three groups, respectively, were Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese (student permit), Ukrainian, Indian and Russian (work permit) and Russian, Iraqi and Indian (family ties) (EMN, 2019). Of the foreign graduate students, 77% came from non-EU countries, notably Asia (45%) and Africa (10%) (Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAGE), 2018). Given the serious lack of statistics on migrant labour in Finland (Könönen, 2019: 789), the numbers of student-migrant-workers are only indicative. Research findings indicate an employment rate of around 50% among international students, both during their studies and after graduation (Laine, 2017; Shumilova et al., 2012). The officials at the Finnish Immigration Service (n.d.), who are responsible for issuing work and student permits and who were interviewed for this research, estimated an employment rate among holders of a student permit of 80%, which indicates the importance of waged work for these people compared to other international students. Within the most common fields of study among international students, graduates in technology succeed best on the labour market whereas graduates in business and governance have less bright prospects (CIMO, 2016). However, the statistics give no indication of whether or not the jobs reflect their holders' qualifications.

Contemporary exploitation

This article traces the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and non-work within the fragmented work arrangements of student-migrants, the aim being to articulate how paid and unpaid activities become deeply intertwined in contemporary capitalism. For the sake of clarity, unpaid work is approached as 'formal unpaid work' in contrast to 'informal unpaid work' within the reproductive sphere, despite the porousness of the formal/informal divide (Williams and Nadin, 2012: 6). The analytical focus on

formal unpaid labour thus functions as a strategy for tracking the ways ‘capital works the edges between different accumulation strategies’ and how it intermingles with strategies of dividing and multiplying labour markets across and within national territories (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 244), specifically through the residence permit system. The analysis thus points out the ways in which capital manages to utilise the precarious legal status of student-migrants as well as their socio-economic status and their aspirations on the global education market to facilitate the institution of unpaid working hours, thereby positing unpaid work as an accumulation strategy.

Capital works by expropriating and ‘sucking value’ (Fraser, 2016: 169) from the out-sides of the realm of ‘free wage labour’ based on the divide between the time of labour as a commodity and of so-called free time when labour is not in the form of a commodity (Tuckman, 2005). Exploitation, as defined by Marx in relation to the industrial system, refers to the hours for which the capitalist appropriates a quantity of value without paying the worker the equivalent, hence making even the unpaid part of the wage relation appear to have been paid (Marx, 1990: 680). However, in light of the critique of the narrow focus on ‘free wage labour’, the transformations in the modalities of value accumulation and the growing pressure to be available for work (Tuckman, 2005) there is a need to revise the concept of exploitation. Value is increasingly produced beyond the limits of the waged work hours, unpaid labour thereby appearing as an extension of paid work.

According to Mezzadra and Neilson (2019), the complexities of contemporary value accumulation make it difficult to identify where and how exploitation takes place in everyday life. Therefore, in order to analyse contemporary exploitation, focus lies on the gap between subjects in terms of their capacity to produce, the use or non-use of this capacity and the accumulation of wealth beyond the control of these subjects (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019: 202). Investigation into the production of the figure of the student-migrant-worker (see also Neilson, 2009) thus appears fruitful in terms of enhancing understanding both of the exploitation of the subjective capacity to produce and of the way in which figures of subjectivity are shaped to facilitate exploitation.

Methods

Contemporary transformations of work are analysed through the lens of student-migrant-workers in Finland. I carried out thematic in-depth interviews in English ($N = 33$) with non-EU/EEA migrants with a student permit residing in the Helsinki region in 2017 and 2018. I also interviewed two members of staff at The Finnish Immigration Service (n.d.), one who was responsible for handling student permits and another who was in charge of work permits in Helsinki, to discuss any contradictions in the migration system that came to light in the interviews with the student-migrants.

The student-migrants I interviewed were 20–35 years old, and included 15 women and 18 men. They came from North and South America (3), Eastern Europe (7), South-East Asia (12), South-West Asia (5), North Asia (3) and Africa (3). The majority of them had come to Finland for educational purposes: tertiary education was still free of charge for non-EU/EEA students initiating their studies before autumn 2017. They were studying law (2), political science and communication (6), international business (7), technology (11), hotel, restaurant and catering services (2) and social and health care (5): some

were studying for two degrees or were already pursuing another degree in Finland. The participants had been in Finland for between two and three years on average, and they were all in waged work as well as doing their studies.

I used Facebook groups and university email lists, and I also visited universities in the Helsinki region to meet possible research participants. When the interview request successfully spread on the email lists, interest in participation was enthusiastic. Several participants explained that it was difficult for them to talk to friends and colleagues about challenging and complicated work experiences, and therefore the research was highly important to them. The interviews encompassed the themes of arrival, motivation, experiences of work and migration management, social life and future plans. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thereafter anonymised. I then subjected the data to thematic content analysis covering the themes of precarity, borders, discrimination and subjectivity.

Everyone I interviewed had obtained a student permit, and most of them had applied for their permit before migrating to Finland. The one-year temporary student permit requires secure means of support, which is interpreted to be 6720 euros for one year and is also required when the permit is renewed. Holders of a student permit are not entitled to Finnish social security and need to have private health insurance. They have the right to obtain gainful employment amounting to an average of 25 hours per week during term time and full-time during holidays, or in the form of a traineeship required for their degree. A person who has received a degree from a Finnish institution of higher education has the right to apply for temporary (one-year) residence for job-seeking purposes, and is eligible for a working permit without labour-market testing (Finnish Aliens Act 301/2004 – Ministry of the Interior, 2004).

Unpaid work and the blurred boundaries of employment

The student-migrant-workers who participated in the research had varying work experiences in a vast array of workplaces. Most participants were employed in the service sector as cleaners, newspaper deliverers, food couriers, care workers and warehouse workers: only a few had no experience of such jobs. However, around half of them had worked in knowledge-based start-up companies, often with a focus on sales and engineering but most of these positions were partly or completely unpaid.

Asilia, a nursing student, explained that she had been working continuously for four years in jobs such as cleaning on construction sites, dish washing and caring for the elderly.

I have been working for four years, now I'm sick. I never had time to sit down like this, to give an interview. It feels great to have time, even though I'm sick. (Asilia, 21, East Africa)

Asilia described that she was doing an unpaid internship in elderly care, working eight hours a day after which she did paid cleaning work for six hours. Her days consisted of managing work in different places to give her the income that would 'help getting the visa'. She also tried to attend private Finnish classes because the courses offered at university, according to her, were of no use. Like the majority of the student-migrants, Asilia

had almost no free time and she was overworked, carrying out tasks that weakened her health.

As Asilia pointed out, the holder of a student permit is concerned not only about making a living in general but also about having sufficient funds to be able to renew the temporary permit. In an attempt to render their precarious lives less insecure and to decrease the possibility of deportation, many student-migrants turn to flexible precarious work to give them an income and pay slips they can use when renewing their permit (Maury, 2017). These student-migrant-workers' experiences of precarity thus took shape at the intersection of their legal status, their socio-economic position, their social networks, the type of employment and their formal and informal relations with employers. Moreover, discrimination based on nationality and gender were perceived to influence the process. Dina, a law student, described the prevalence of gender and nationality-based discrimination in the low-paid sector:

I remember that my boss [said] they don't want to hire more men, they want females because it was her believe ... I don't know if it's true that females are better in cleaning rooms and do things in a nicer way. Sometimes there is also like certain like prejudice towards certain nationalities that work better. (Dina, 22, Eastern Europe)

Dina brought up the preference for women in cleaning jobs to demonstrate the way in which workplaces tend to be structured according to gendered norms (Weeks, 2011). Several other participants described how Finnish students were able to combine work in their own field with their studies whereas many foreign students had no other option than working in low-paid precarious employment both during their studies and after graduating. As a 27-year-old engineering student, Shiva, from South Asia, said: 'as a foreigner, there is a lot of, not racism, but partiality, in Finland. It's very obvious you can't get a job even if you are skilled and educated'. This points at a migrant division of work through which migrants and racialised subjects are channelled into low-waged or unpaid work placements, often according to a gendered logic (Krivonos, 2019; Näre, 2013).

Like Asilia, who was doing an internship, many of the participants were not only engaged in paid work, but were also doing unpaid work, both explicitly and implicitly. The following sub-sections analyse the precarious work experiences and the emergence of unpaid work in three different but often overlapping working arrangements: knowledge-intensive work in start-ups, service and manual work on zero-hour contracts and service work mediated through platforms. This ensemble of work experiences points at increasing precarity and the constitutive intertwinement of paid and unpaid work among student-migrant-workers.

Salaries substituted by promises

Around one-third of the research participants had worked in *knowledge-intensive start-ups* while studying in Finland. Characteristic of start-ups is the questioning of formal work control and the blurring of the roles of employee and entrepreneur (Hyrkäs, 2017).

Irina, a 23-year-old from Eastern Europe who studied international business, had worked in several start-ups, in poorly paid internships and had done transcription gigs.

Work in start-ups, she said, ‘wasn’t exactly a good source of income’ and she believed she was not paid as much as the other employees. ‘I suspect I have been given a lower salary just because I needed it to survive in Finland’, she explained. She also said that she was contracted to work 25 hours a week, according to the limits of her student permit, but that she had to work almost full time.

Low pay was the norm among the interviewed student-migrant-workers. Research evidence indicates that employers tend to take advantage of workers whose residence depends on their access to paid work, using them as a source of cheap labour (e.g. Anderson, 2010; Könönen, 2019; Maury, 2017; Vosko, 2010). Irina tried to resolve her precarious situation by becoming an entrepreneur, and started a one-person filmmaking business. She explained that at the same time she was consistently looking for more stable employment than start-ups offered ‘as you never will know what will happen to them’. Her colourful history of work also aroused the suspicions of officials at the Immigration Service, who did not believe that she was able to work in so many places in the capital area at the same time as studying in another city in South-Eastern Finland. ‘They said “if you don’t send us this information, we have to ask you to leave”’, Irina reported. Her struggle to establish her right to stay extended over more than half a year, during which time letters were going back and forth to and from the Immigration Service until her permit was finally renewed. At the same time as striving to overcome these adversities, Irina needed to start looking for other options in terms of residing in Finland as she was at the point of graduation. She continued her search for a stable full-time job that would make her eligible for a work permit.

Another participant, Saba, was educated in the field of IT and computer science, and had established a company in his country of origin before migrating to Finland to study IT. Even though he was from an upper-middle-class family, his savings were not sufficient to sustain his life and his permit to stay in Finland. He started looking for jobs in his field and was repeatedly put in touch with companies that employed students without paying them. Saba talked particularly about one negotiation he had with a potential employer.

He put me aside from the others working there, and I knew they were working for free. He said, ‘imagine working for [social media company] when they get successful you can go anywhere’. [. . .] It’s not going to work with these start-ups. His mind set was like modern slavery. (Saba, 32, Western Asia)

Instead of a salary, Saba was offered the promise of a successful future. He rejected this, and talked of the problematic way start-ups were running their businesses, comparing it to modern slavery. He also emphasised the economic value of the students’ input, and that the owners of the company were ‘being paid’ based on the ‘services’ of the students, as he put it. Eventually, however, he managed to find a paid job in the IT field through his migrant networks.

Saba and Irina were both confronted with the political economy of promise (Bascetta, 2016), which constitutes a particular feature of the current capitalist system in which acknowledgement and prestige are important. Saba was not offered any salary, whereas Irina was working part-time for a small salary in what was, in practice, a poorly

remunerated full-time job. As Curcio (2017: 92) argues, in the current system unpaid work no longer refers to the initial phase of employment but has rather become a norm that shapes workers' subjectivity and expectations. Salaries partly or completely substituted by promises of future paid work thus facilitate the creation of a pool of free or semi-free labour for capital to utilise, and constitute a source of exploitable labour.

The legal status of non-EU citizens, compared to Finnish and EU citizens, intersects with the ways in which this typically young and highly educated workforce is constituted in the knowledge-intensive sector. The working lives of non-EU/EEA student-migrants are shaped by the limits and requirements of the student permit. As Irina told me, her low salary probably reflected the fact that she needed the money to stay in Finland. This creates a difference between student-migrants who work to make a living in unstable employment relationships due to their legal status (Maury, 2017) and student citizens, many of whom work with the joint objective of gaining both experience and an income through more stable forms of employment (Aho et al., 2012). Moreover, although residents with a student permit have the right to undertake full-time work masked as unpaid or semi-free internships, they are not able to continue working full time because of the 25-hour weekly work limit. Several of the participants explained that most of the start-ups were in need of workers who could give their time, thus the visa regime was experienced as hindering the opportunities of non-EU/EEA students to engage in full-time paid work in start-ups. On the other hand, research demonstrates that unpaid internships in general seldom lead to full-time employment (Shade and Jacobson, 2015), or to any paid work (Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017).

Non-remunerated work hours

In addition to poorly paid work in start-ups, work through staffing agencies was common among the student-migrant-workers. Staffing agencies have played an important role in the gradual normalisation of just-in-time employment during the past three decades (Van Doorn, 2017). Migrant job-seekers often depend on them, but migrant agency workers usually have lower pay and poorer working conditions than other groups (Forde et al., 2015). In the experiences of the participants, *zero-hours contracts* issued by staffing agencies were usual with regard to manual and service-oriented work. Unpaid work also emerged in these working arrangements. Almost half of them had experience of the cleaning sector with its hourly-paid work. Anina was studying social sciences and worked as a cleaner for a staffing company. She was working with several other foreign students, all of whom needed to generate income at the same time as pursuing their university studies. Anina was also doing other small jobs and unpaid internships. She explained how the staffing company she worked for often tried to reduce the cleaners' hours by hinting that they were competing among each other and that they needed to work faster, and by reminding them of the possibility of being left without shifts. Moreover, the salary they received often did not reflect the number of hours worked, which the student-migrant-workers were afraid to complain about.

It was a tradition that everyone were excluded one hour probably for saving money, you can try to negotiate it and they can tell you it's your problem that you should have been working faster.

Sometimes, people who are just new they know that every day they can be fired and they state less hours than they actually work just not to get any shouting or being angry with you. They work for 10 hours and then write that they have been 7 hours and kind of work for free some time just make sure you have this job. (Anina, 24, Eastern Europe)

Anina's experience confirms several aspects of precarious work that student-migrant-workers confront: the increased pace, the demand for fast and competitive workers and the competition for shifts. Zero-hours contracts function as a way of dismantling the long-term employment relationship into gigs and tasks, hence squeezing out 'unproductive labour' by not paying for travel time and waiting time between shifts (Moore and Hayes, 2017). By their nature they make room for intensified power relations between the employer and the employees, leaving workers in constant fear of being left without shifts. This problematises the strict separation between employment and unemployment, in that not being given work shifts in practice resembles being laid off, although without a formal end to the employment relationship.

Anina explained that, to secure further shifts, some of the workers claimed fewer hours than they had actually worked. Hence, they worked a couple of hours without pay to get the cleaning done and to be seen as efficient workers. The power of the employers and their reminders of the need to work fast put pressure on the student-migrant-workers to do unpaid work, and thus to demonstrate their capacity to work and produce in order to ensure that they would get more shifts. Hence, they were coerced into undertaking unpaid work not only to ensure future work (Baines et al., 2017), but also to secure their student permits. In this sense, unpaid work counts among the strategies that staffing agencies, according to Forde et al. (2015), use to encourage flexibility and loyalty among migrant workers by giving more shifts to those who perform according to the agency's requirements.

Exploitation thereby extends beyond conventional exploitation inscribed in the work contract in that the student-migrant-workers experience the need to work some hours unpaid. Hence, unpaid work decreases the share of the total revenue allocated to the labour force (Viren, 2018), resulting in the increased availability of labour power to capital (Tuckman, 2005). This free use of labour through the imposition of non-waged hours functions to construct part of the work as outside the paid-employment relationship, hence forming an extension to paid work.

Precarious self-entrepreneurship

Besides unpaid work within start-ups and staffing agencies, the data also point at the emergence of unpaid work within the platform economy. Hun was studying electronics and had applied for many jobs connected in one way or another to his field of study, but without success. Instead, he obtained work in a restaurant that went bankrupt. The new owner, according to Hun, had a strong preference for female workers. He found himself devoid of shifts and started working through an online platform as a food courier on a bike 'with some kind of free-lance contract', as he put it. At the time of the interview, however, this was becoming physically unbearable because of the cold weather.

Work mediated through platforms tends not to constitute an employment relation but takes the form of a service agreement in which the worker is considered an independent contractor or a self-employed entrepreneur. Working as an independent contractor tends, in fact, to be extremely low paid, an employment relationship masked as entrepreneurship characterised by general insecurity over work and pay (Aloisi, 2015; Van Doorn, 2017). Because platform workers are considered independent contractors, employers escape employment obligations related to social-security payments, overtime earnings and job security. In line with the post-Fordist social contract, workers are forced to carry the risks and the responsibility of social reproduction (Van Doorn, 2017). Hun was thus economically in control of investing in and maintaining his means of production, in other words his bicycle and his smartphone, and he was responsible for any possible social and health-related costs. As a self-employed entrepreneur, he was also personally responsible for the parts of his work that were considered ‘unproductive’, such as unpaid gaps between orders or between shifts, as in the case of those employed on zero-hours contracts (Moore and Newsome, 2018). Hence, unpaid work was also an inherent part of Hun’s experiences as part of the job was constructed as extending beyond the realm of the ‘contract’, resulting in increased capital accumulation.

Hun reported that, after having spent most of his free time for the past 18 months sending job applications, he was wondering how he could make his life more bearable.

Maybe I’m also considering buying a car and maybe I can do this delivery in winter with a car [or] maybe apply for exchange to [another Nordic country] and see what it is like there and then perhaps the labour market is more friendly. (Hun, 29, East Asia)

Hun considered the options of buying a car or leaving the unfriendly labour market and going to another country. Like several other student-migrants, he experienced otherness as a form of structural misrecognition (Näre, 2013: 78) because of non-fluency in Finnish and because of being a foreigner (see also Maury, 2018). Moreover, buying a car would have required indebtedness, which is a common feature of precarious labour markets. As income decreases and the social actor is moulded according to the logic of the micro-entrepreneur, consumer debt steps in to cover for the costs of reproduction and to facilitate entrepreneurship (Fraser, 2016). However, the limitations of self-investment and entrepreneurship become particularly evident among student-migrant-workers who, because of their insecure legal status, need to mobilise their capacity to produce in varying arrangements of low-paid work interspersed with unpaid gaps and unpaid work hours in order to renew their student permits.

The figure of the student-migrant-worker

The analysis of the three different but intertwined working arrangements has demonstrated how student-migrants navigate in precarious labour markets and adjust to the unpaid work this increasingly entails. This implies constructing individual pathways in a constrained situation between precarious work and a temporary migration status. Tuan, a 29-year-old from South-East Asia who studied business information technology experienced tensions between pursuing a career while accepting low or no payment, and

simultaneously engaging in low-paid service work. As he explained, he received a 'basic salary' for working in factories and logistics, while at the same time working for a start-up. 'The start-up company is quite new, and I understand the start-up thing, I didn't require much', he said, but he was still hoping to make his way in this labour-market sector. Hence, as demonstrated thus far in this article, many student-migrants consider it important for their careers to work in knowledge-based start-ups even though adequate payment is refused based on the political economy of promise (Bascetta, 2016). For most of the student-migrants, service jobs suffice to sustain life materially in the face of 'promises' offered in the cognitively oriented work sector.

The friction between promises and a salary is further intensified by the student-migrants' legal status that generates tension between the figures of the governable student-migrant and the flexible worker. Student-migrants who need to have certain funds to renew their student permit while remaining within the legal boundaries it sets face problematic situations in a labour market that demands excessive flexibility and unpaid work. All in all, the data point towards the facilitation of exploitation with regard to the subjective capacity to produce by imposing unpaid work hours on legally constrained migrants in precarious employment.

The figure of the student-migrant-worker takes shape in these work entanglements. It is a figure that embodies the hope of achieving a desired future allowing for greater social mobility and more extensive rights than the present situation can offer. Unpaid or semi-free internships and start-up jobs serve to materialise parts of this desired future, while at the same time constituting the basis of non-remunerated production. In addition, most student-migrant-workers take on odd jobs including unpaid hours to ensure access to more shifts and to secure their continuing right to stay in the country. Here, unpaid work does not blend into indistinguishable parts of life and work as it typically does in the creative industries (e.g. Armano and Murgia, 2017). Rather, it becomes brutally visible and consciously undertaken, yet is often non-negotiable given the student-migrant's insecure legal status. In this way, the temporary residence permit and the overarching border regime facilitate the creation of student-migrant-workers as an exploitable labour force to whom unpaid work in various forms represents not only the promise of future highly-skilled paid work but also, and more generally, the promise of income in the near future.

Nevertheless, the student-migrant-worker is not a uniform or stable figure. Although most of the participants found themselves in constrained and precarious situations, not all of them experienced life in that way. Van, a 21-year-old IT student from South-East Asia, for instance, had been 'working like hell' by coding all day long while doing shifts at the Post Office and in warehouses until he managed to get a well-paid job in the IT sector. However, he recognised that not everybody was as lucky as he was: 'I'm only here on the heaven's side. I know that there are many other shades, people in unlucky positions'. The possibility of accessing the desired part of the labour market does not depend solely on individual work experience and social skills: it is also shaped by structural inequality based on gender, race, class and legal status (Könönen, 2019; Krivonos, 2019), which also limits the choice of refusing poorly paid jobs (Maury, 2018) and embracing unpaid work for the love of it (Allen et al., 2013).

Conclusion

This article contributes to the research on precarious labour markets and contemporary exploitation in two significant ways. First, in departing from the fragmented experiences of living labour, and instead of focusing on only one work sector, it posits the prevalence of unpaid work in the lives of non-EU/EEA student-migrant-workers as a driver of precarisation (Alberti et al., 2018). The three different types of work arrangement identified in the data demonstrate their overlapping experiences ranging from service work to knowledge work that incorporate the similarities of vaguely defined employment arrangements infused with instances of unpaid work, bringing forth a novel angle in the research on precarious student-migrants. These findings destabilise the image of student-migrants as a unified group of migrants on the straight path towards highly skilled work, and resonate with the development of hybrid areas of work (Armano and Murgia, 2017) that crosscut any strict separation of paid and unpaid labour.

The findings also demonstrate that the incentive to undertake unpaid work lies not only in enhancing employability and future success among the highly educated (Allen et al., 2013; Leonardi and Chertkovskaya, 2017), but also in the need to ensure more shifts, which becomes more urgent given that the right of many of the students to reside in the country is dependent on their having work. Controversially, then, implicit unpaid work in temporary and platform jobs functions as a promise of future work to secure a renewed student permit, whereas taking explicit unpaid work such as an internship constitutes a promise for future highly skilled work. The figure of the student-migrant-worker is shaped in these entanglements, confirming earlier research findings that emphasise the role of immigration policies in shaping the conditions and areas of migrant work (Anderson, 2010; Könönen, 2019). Moreover, the case of Finland is illuminating in that it demonstrates how the differential inclusion of migrants in various legal statuses is produced even in a Nordic social-democratic welfare state configured as hard on the outside and soft on the inside (Könönen, 2018). While focus has been on the implications of temporary migration status on precarious employment, this article has also pointed at gendered and racialised differentiation that structure the labour market, however, leaving room for further in-depth analyses of the intersecting modalities of differentiation and discrimination.

Lastly, the article contributes to the theorisation of contemporary value accumulation and exploitation in pointing out how the occurrence of unpaid work across different contractual statuses minimises the cost of labour in favour of increased capital accumulation. It thereby points out the friction between the capacity of student-migrant-workers to produce wealth, how it is inadequately remunerated and the way it is translated into value. The participants' experiences of reduced autonomy over their labour instituted by the border regime reflect the exploitation inherent in them and in the largely involuntary acceptance of doing unpaid work in a different way from contexts in which unpaid work reflects a love for the job (e.g. Allen et al., 2013). Hence, the inequalities inherent in the precarisation of work deriving from capital's constitutive relation with difference and the systematic production of heterogeneous exploitable figures become evident (Armano and Murgia, 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019). In conclusion, the findings imply that the imposition of unpaid labour in the lives of student-migrant-workers is part of the

global development of capitalism, which strives to appropriate and extract value produced in social relations and social cooperation constructed as non-work (Dowling and Harvie, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019).

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Note

1. The student residence permit refers to the legal document for a stay exceeding three months with the objective of studying, often referred to in Anglophone contexts as a 'student visa'.

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