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Undergraduate student experience and perceived outcomes of term-time paid and unpaid work

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from a survey on undergraduate students' term-time work at a Canadian research-intensive university. The study examines which students work, how much they work, why they do it, and the self-reported impacts of paid and unpaid work on their studies. Our analysis of survey data shows that over half of the respondents worked. More women than men worked, more domestic than international students, and more students from lower socioeconomic status families worked. Hours of work were strongly correlated with students' financial needs. The more students worked, the less time they spent studying and on other academic activities or attending classes, tutorials, or labs. Further analysis will focus more on what difference the kind of work makes to effects on studies.

Keywords: undergraduate students; academic outcomes; paid work; unpaid work

Background

The need to balance work and university studies has become increasingly important globally. A recent thematic review based on European data suggests that slightly more than half of all undergraduate and graduate students in higher education were combining studies and paid jobs (Eurostudent, 2018). In the US, almost half of college students are also involved in the labor force (US Department of Labor, 2018). In Canada, 57% of students aged 15 to 24 were engaged in paid work in 2017 (Wade, 2018). Further, most students are employed in areas unrelated to their field of study (Quintini, 2015). Most Canadian university students face pressure to engage in work while studying

because of ever-rising tuition costs and employer demands for work experience (Zeidler, 2017).

While there is much research on graduates' transitions to work, there is less focus on students' term-time work (Smith & Patton, 2013). In fact, Doogan (2009) observes that social researchers have largely ignored the rise of the student labour market. Further, in the extant literature, the impact of the intensity of term-time work on academic outcomes has been studied more than the impact of the quality of that work. This study responds to gaps in the literature on student transitions.

Literature review

A 2014 survey of 28 Canadian universities found that just over half of the "middle years" undergraduate respondents worked while studying for an average of 17 hours per week (CUSC, 2014). Financial reasons were the primary motivator for engaging in term-time work for 59% of students responding to an Ontario survey (Bristow & Nestico-Semianiw, 2014). Students also work to become more employable following graduation (Curtis, 2007; Passaretta & Triventi, 2015).

Labour Force Survey data indicate that the vast majority of postsecondary students employed during the 2009-10 school year worked in the low-wage service sector (Marshall, 2010).

Although universities are expanding opportunities for work-integrated learning (WIL) (e.g., Sattler & Peters 2013), access varies. For example, cooperative education programs usually restrict entry to students with high grade point averages (Grosjean, 2004).

The Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC, 2014) reports that 45% of middle-year university students felt their employment had a negative impact on their academic performance, compared to 19% who saw a positive impact. Negative impacts of term-time work reported by students included missing classes and tutorials, handing in poor quality or late assignments, and not keeping up with reading (Robotham, 2013). Positive impacts include the opportunity to develop time management as well as social, leadership, and technical skills (Richardson et al., 2009).

Fifteen hours of work is often seen as the point at which the benefits of working (e.g., increased structure and focus) diminish (Riggert et al., 2006). "Time poverty" may negatively impact students' academic performance (Burston, 2017) as well as their physical and mental health (McGregor, 2015). Long work hours also prevent students from engaging in campus activities beyond the

classroom, which, according to Logan et al. (2016), negatively affects students' academic performance.

Previous research suggests there are sociodemographic differences related to student work. Working-class students, for instance, were more likely to work, worked longer hours, and earned less than their middle-class peers (Callender & Wilkinson, 2003). Moreover, they were employed more often in work characterized by low pay, a lack of control, and impermanence (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). A Canadian study adds that low-income students were less likely to be involved in WIL (Sattler & Peters, 2013). A European study found that ethnic minority students worked more hours and perceived more work-study conflict (Meeuvwise et al., 2017). Similarly, a US study found that African American university students spent the most time on employment (Greene & Maggs, 2015).

Conceptual framework

Student employment has become structural; technological change and industrial restructuring in the service sector have also driven the introduction of new forms of employment that are accessible to working students (Doogan, 2009). The rise of the student labour market, therefore has implications for discussions about the growth of nonstandard employment and changes in the labour process. A few instructive studies have examined work-study conflict (Buda & Lenighan, 2005). Meevwise et al. (2017) examine work-study congruence, job control, job demands, and other features of the experiences of working students, which provide insights into the complexities of the work-study interface. Similarly, Butler's (2007) job quality framework considers work-study conflict (student jobs that deplete resources) and work-study facilitation (student jobs that enrich resources) to identify the mechanisms through which term-time work benefits or harms school performance. Our study involves longitudinal data collection, which will provide insights into the features of term-time work that enhance students' labour market experiences over time.

Research questions:

1. What are undergraduate students' term-time work patterns (including intensity and types of work), and how do they vary by student demographics (e.g., international, first generation)?
2. How are students' work experiences related to academic and other outcomes (e.g., grades, campus engagement, sense of well-being, aspirations)?

Methods and Data Sources

This paper draws on quantitative findings from a mixed methods study of undergraduate students at a large, research-intensive Canadian university (Taylor, Raykov & Sweet, 2020). Our survey module was a component of a regular online institutional survey. The Work and Study module included sections related to student work orientations, time use, work motivation, work quality, work experience, and basic demographic data. Undergraduate students who completed this institutional survey (N=7,080) were invited to participate in our survey module on their work and study experiences, and 1,733 student respondents completed it. The response rate to the Work and Study module was 24%.

Survey Results

Incidence of term-time work

Our analysis of survey data shows that 55% of respondents worked during the first school term in 2017-18. More women than men worked (59% vs. 47%, $\chi 2 = 24.482$, $p < .001$), more domestic than international students worked (56% vs. 47%, $\chi 2 = 7.215$, $p < .007$), and more students from lower socioeconomic status families worked (e.g., 61% of "first generation" students vs. 53% of others, $\chi 2 = 9.257$, $p < .002$). Also, students from upper middle and high social classes (as indicated by parental occupation) were less involved in term-time paid work ($\chi 2 = 12.428$, $p < .014$).

Male students indicate more frequently than females an intention to concentrate on their studies (40% vs. 30%, $\chi 2 = 29.042$, $p < .001$), demonstrate a tendency to work more hours when they do work, and were more likely to say they could not find work. In addition, recent immigrants (13% vs. 6%, $\chi 2 = 20.914$, $p < .002$) and international **students** (18% vs. 7%, $\chi 2 = 36.087$, $p < .001$) report more frequently than domestic students that they can't find work.

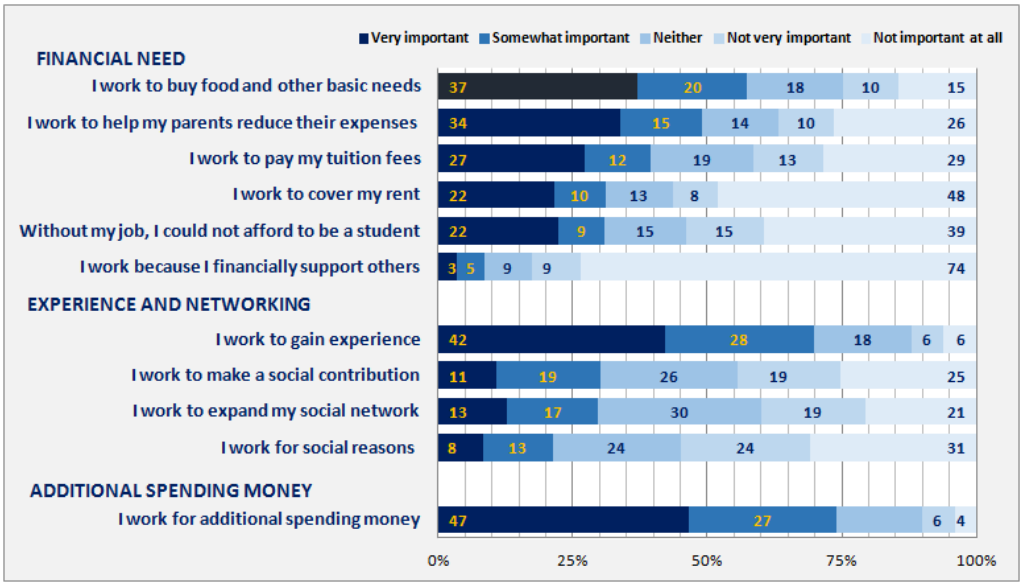
Third- and fourth-year students are more frequently employed, spend more hours at work, and are less likely to experience difficulties finding work ($\chi 2 = 165.545$, $p < .001$). As well, full-time students are employed less frequently than part-time students (53% vs. 72%, $\chi 2 = 23.557$, $p < .001$).

Approximately one-fifth of the 45% of students not working (9% of the entire sample) would like to work but were unable to find a job. Just over one-quarter of respondents worked more than 10 hours per week, while 28% worked less than ten hours. Overall, almost two-thirds (64%) of all participants were employed or actively searching for work. Also, nearly a quarter of employed students (24%) indicated a desire to work more hours.

Motivations for term-time work

Although a variety of student motivations for work were evident, students report the most common reasons are for additional spending money, to gain experience, to buy food, and for other basic needs. Corelation analysis sgows that the strongest (statistically significant) correlation exists between hours of work and students' financial needs (to cover their rent, to afford studies, to buy food and other basic needs, to pay tuition, and to help their parents reduce expenses for their education).

Figure 1: Student motivation for term-time paid work



Our exploratory factor analysis of student motivation to engage in term-time paid work has identified two distinct factors interpreted as *financial motivation* and *experience and networking* (see Figure 1). Both are significantly associated with the intensity of work, unlike working for *additional spending money*.

In the institutional survey overall, respondents report that while parents contribute most to their total funding for the university, personal savings, and employment were the next most important. Interestingly, scholarships and bursaries made up a lower percentage.

Quality and kind of term-time work

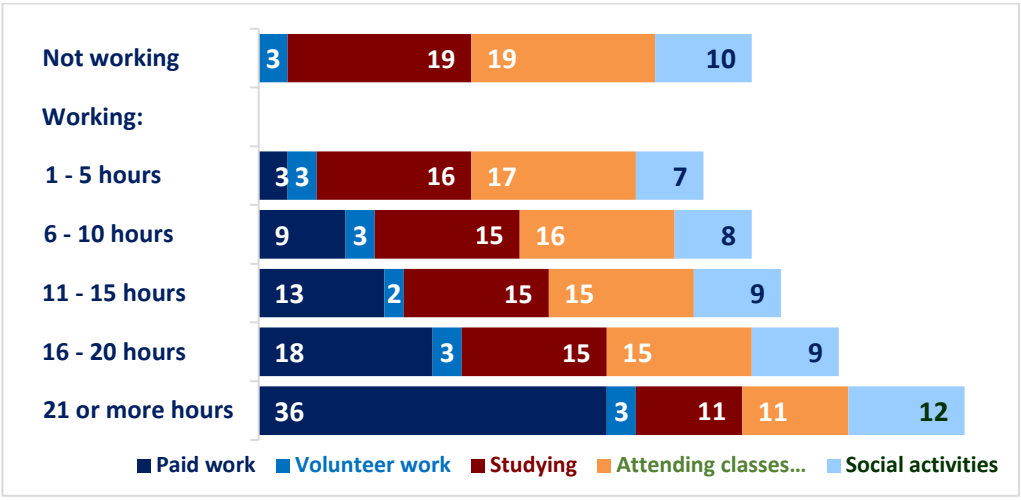
Our survey indicates that 30 % of working students were employed on campus. The top three sectors students worked in were retail (18%), accommodation, food or beverage services (18%), and teaching (16%). This is higher than the 2014 finding that only 11% of Canadian undergraduates worked on campus

(CUSC, 2014). In terms of the extent of WIL coordinated by universities, our findings suggest a small percentage of students were involved in cooperative education (10%), the local Work-Learn Program (10%), and internships (3%). Similarly, most students surveyed by an Ontario student association were in jobs unrelated to their field of study (Bristow & Nestico-Semianiw, 2014).

The impact of term-time paod work

Our study found that **students with lower grades** ('B' and 'C'), in comparison to students with higher grades ('A'), work more hours, have more trouble finding a job, and are less likely to report not working because they want to focus on studies ($\chi 2 = 28.583$, $p < .005$). As Figure 2 shows, the more students worked, the less time they spent studying and on other academic activities or attending classes, tutorial or labs. Some students appeared to recognize the negative implications of work on their studies; for example, a quarter of lower-achieving students indicated they would like to work less. Two-thirds (68%) of working students indicated that they had experienced stress or anxiety when working. Almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents to the survey overall indicated that they have experienced stress related to tuition and living expenses.

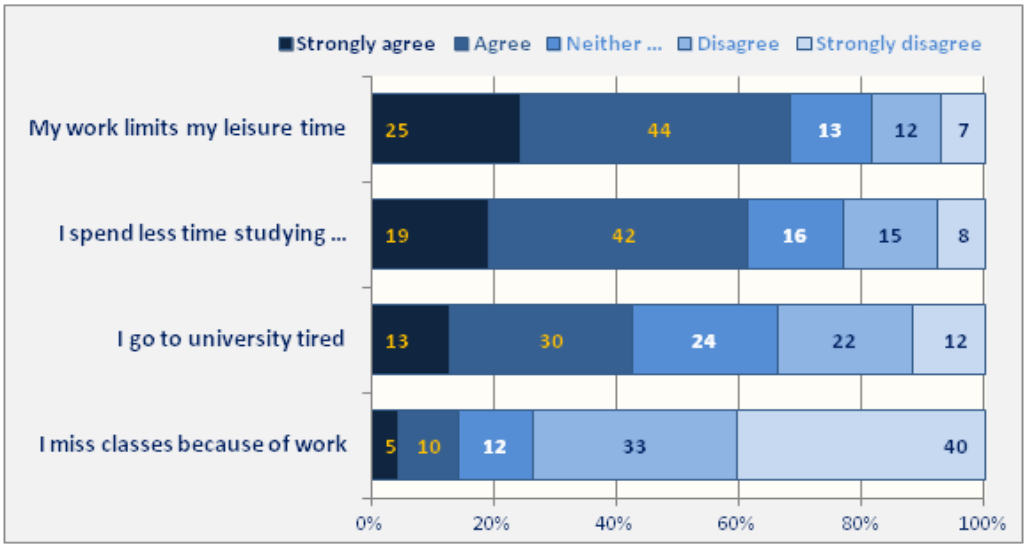
Figure 2: Average hours of student involvement in paid work, learning and other activities



Regarding the impact of paid work, as Figure 3 shows, students involved in paid work most often report that work limits their leisure time (69%) and the time for studies (61%) and that because of work, they go to university tired (43%).

One unexpected result is that despite the high incidence of stress and anxiety (68%) and fatigue (58%), approximately three-quarters of students are satisfied with their job and their relations with coworkers and supervisors (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: The impact of students' involvement in paid work



Students engaged in high-intensity paid work

The study found that although male students are less often involved in term-time paid work, they work more hours than females (M = 15.9 vs. M = 13.5, $t(930) = 3.025$, $p < .003$). Our study also found that international students (16.5 vs. 13.9, $t(830) = 2.436$, $p < .015$) and immigrant students work more hours than domestic workers, and this difference is also statistically significant (M = 15.5 vs. M = 13.6; $t(930) = 2.500$, $p < .013$). Middle class students (M = 18.1) work more hours than lower (M = 13.5) and upper/high class (M = 13.9) students ($F(2, 927) = 5.440$, $p < .004$). Further analysis will examine whether the kind of work varies for different groups. We know that first-generation students are less likely to work on campus (10 vs. 15%, %, $\chi 2 = 13.823$, $p < .001$), while international students are more likely (16% vs. 11%, $\chi 2 = 14.029$, $p < .001$).

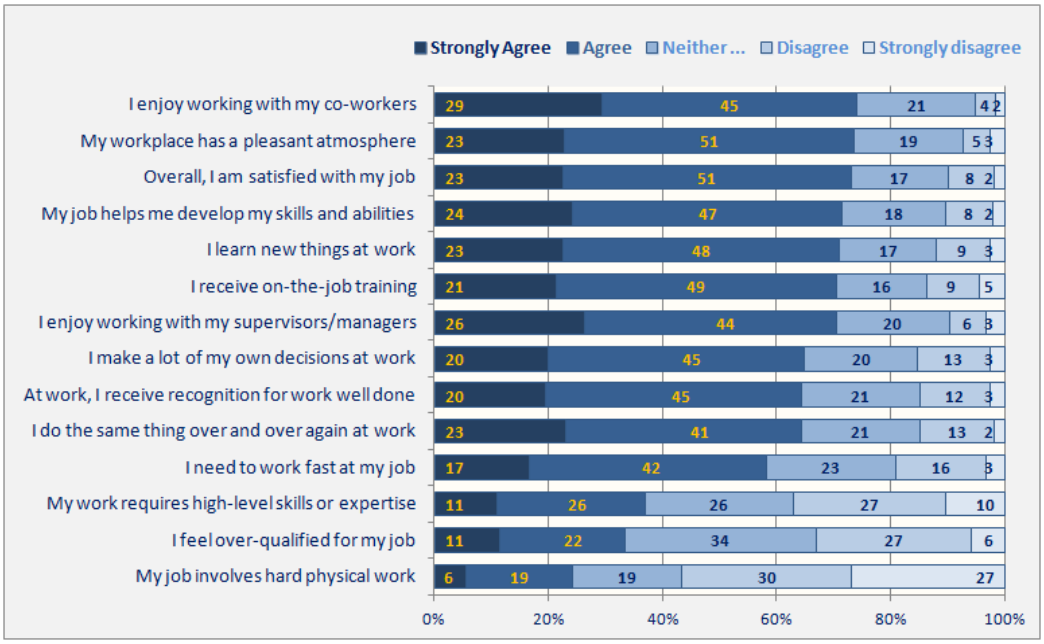
Our study also found that students involved in term-time paid work on the university campus and students involved in work-integrated learning have significantly better experiences and perceive greater benefits of such work on their learning, academic outcomes, and future careers (Taylor, Raykov & Sweet, 2020). This result is consistent with studies that explain such outcomes according to Involvement Theory (Astin, 1999), which explains the effect of students' moderate involvement in pad work as a result of students' better

integration into university life and connectedness to their peers and faculty or staff members who act as their supervisors.

Students experience of engagement in unpaid work

Results demonstrate that a considerable proportion of students participate in unpaid work (44%) during their full-time studies (Raykov, Taylor, Jamal & Wu, 2020).). Results also show that students who participated in unpaid work spent 6 hours on average in such activities. Regarding motivation for unpaid or volunteer work, most full-time students demonstrated a strong interest in participating but also many barriers that prevent them from engaging in such activities and balancing time for learning and paid and unpaid work.

Figure 4: Student work-experience



Our study also demonstrated that students who participated in unpaid work evaluated the impact of this activity on their university studies and future careers positively. According to our survey, most students report that unpaid work is closely linked to their university study program and has a robust positive impact on their plans for future professional work. Our participants also reported a significant impact of unpaid work on developing the knowledge and skills required for their future employment. The participants also reported a strong positive impact of their participation in unpaid work on developing their interest in learning and their program of study. Similar to our previous studies of volunteer work as a component of community service

learning (Raykov & Taylor, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015), our survey findings demonstrate that students' participation in unpaid work positively impacts student academic- and career-related benefits.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper provides a snapshot of working students at a Canadian university. Some sociodemographic groups of students are more likely to engage in term-time work than others; further, there are differences in the intensity of that work and type of work. Our study is particularly interested in the experiences of low SES and international students. Low SES students are more likely than high SES students to be working but are less likely to be involved in WIL. International students are less likely than domestic students to be working and more likely to be involved in WIL. While high-intensity work often has negative consequences for academic studies, further analysis will explore what difference the kind of work makes. In particular, what are the differences between the impacts of WIL and traditional service-sector student work on students' involvement in academic activities? Term-time work has become the norm in universities, and understanding the role universities should play as employers and as supporters of student workers more broadly is critical.

Acknowledgments

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