

# Student perceptions of paid and unpaid work placements: A comparative analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an educational approach that is highly authentic and meaningful, therefore, some of the challenges within can be complex. Student wellbeing has been a focal point within higher education for some years (Konstantinou et al., 2023), albeit the debate around unpaid work placements has only recently been given some scholarly attention (see, e.g., Hoskyn et al., 2023).

More generally, the wellbeing of students within higher education has received considerable international attention in response to growing concern around student mental health (Konstantinou et al., 2023; Office for Students, 2021; Pascoe et al., 2019). Students in higher education are having to manage stresses generated from expectations to perform, greater independence of their finances, growing study debt, greater independence in life, and a shift from structured learning to more independent learning expectations (Hewitt, 2019; Hicks & Swain, 2007). Research that focuses on student wellbeing in the context of WIL has been limited so far. Some recent research has explored inclusion of students from minority groups (Mallozzi & Drewery, 2019), linking stress experienced during WIL to negative wellbeing outcomes (Cormier & Drewery, 2017; Drewery et al., 2019), and how well-designed WIL experiences can enhance students' perception of quality of life (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018) and motivation to complete tasks (Drysdale & McBeath, 2014, 2018). Recently, the wellbeing debate has extended to also include WIL staff (Grant-Smith & Feldman, 2023; Jovanovic et al., 2018; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

Unpaid work placements, especially unpaid mandatory placements, are seen as controversial and legally risky (Cameron, 2018; Grant-Smith et al., 2024; Perlin, 2011). Furthermore, some national associations explicitly defining some WIL models (e.g., cooperative education) as paid experiences only, therefore, excluding unpaid placements from this model of WIL (CEWIL, 2018). Nevertheless, unpaid placements are well-established and common practice in some disciplines, for example, teaching, nursing, and social work. The debate around unpaid placements has largely remained outside the research literature with occasional attention by news media. Milne and Caldicott (2016) found that students performed well regardless of whether they were paid or unpaid and found that general expectations of them during placement were similar. McHugh (2017) explored differences in student perceptions of paid or unpaid placements and only found statistical differences between paid and unpaid placements when students had experienced both forms of placements. The review by Hoskyn et al. (2023) clarifies that paid and unpaid placements are not dichotomous and instead are two ends of

a spectrum with alternative forms of remuneration in between (e.g., costs covered, scholarships, student allowance, stipends), adding complexity to the paid versus unpaid debate.

Central to the research reported in this paper is the argument that unpaid work placements can impact WIL student wellbeing, an area underexplored in the literature. Presented is an analysis of students who recently had undertaken either a paid or unpaid work placement along with their views on their wellbeing, stress, and need for support.

## METHODS

The research was undertaken at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, which offers two broad models of WIL: work placements and non-placement WIL. Only work placements were the focus of this research.

Students were asked to complete an anonymous 20-minute online survey containing 19 agreement statements (10-point Likert scale), seven open-ended questions, and five demographic questions. The survey was sent to students nearing completion of their placements, with data collected over a 12-month period to capture the different disciplinary practices around placement timing. The survey collected payment status, including paid, unpaid, student allowance, study award (ad hoc scholarship), and costs covered. Paid work placements were wages and included an employment contract, with minimum wage requirements in New Zealand at the time of the research being NZD\$21.20 per hour.

Research ethics constraints required the survey to be sent through a third party, therefore, the number of students approached is estimated by enrolment numbers ( $n \approx 1,500$ ). There were 146 useable surveys completed, providing about a 10% return rate – given the sampling size and return rate, confidence can be held of the reliability of the findings (Fosnacht et al., 2017). Quantitative analysis was undertaken using Microsoft Excel and qualitative data were systematically analyzed for themes using the approach described by Cohen et al. (2011). Ethical research is core to achieving quality research (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018), therefore, this research used informed consent and has ethical approval (HREC(Health)2022#36).

## RESULTS

The participants were predominantly female (74%), reflecting the dominance of the teacher education in the sampling cohort. Students identified as European (73%), Māori (17%), and other (10%). Most students were enrolled in teacher education (34%), followed by engineering (13%), and business/management studies (11%), and nursing (6%), with the remainder in other undergraduate disciplines (9%), postgraduate qualifications (6%), or did not declare (21%). The average age was 25.5 years old.

Of the students, 48 experienced paid placements, 66 unpaid, with the remainder receiving student allowance, study award, or had costs covered. Students responded to a range of agreeance statements, with some significant differences between the two cohorts (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Perceptions from students who had completed either a paid or unpaid work placement.

	<b>Paid (n=48)</b>	<b>Unpaid (n=66)</b>	<b>Difference (p)</b>
Generally satisfied with my wellbeing	6.69	6.31	0.202
Satisfied with my wellbeing during placement	6.41	4.94	<b>0.002</b>
Coped well with stress	6.96	5.97	<b>0.009</b>
Financial worries caused stress	4.60	7.33	<b>0.001</b>
Physical health caused stress	5.09	5.33	0.331
Hours of work caused stress	6.40	4.85	<b>0.001</b>
Student peers caused stress	2.31	2.73	0.609
Work colleagues/supervisor caused stress	3.39	4.47	0.079
Felt supported by employer	8.71	7.49	<b>0.001</b>
Felt supported by the university	5.70	6.18	0.195
Felt supported by friends	7.59	7.84	0.308
Felt supported by peers	6.69	7.52	0.090
Felt supported by WIL staff	7.30	7.53	0.323
Felt supported by family	8.41	9.10	0.052
Importance of support from the employer	9.40	8.93	<b>0.038</b>
Importance of support from the university	6.64	8.24	<b>0.002</b>
Importance of support from friends	6.67	7.42	0.084
Importance of support from peers	6.50	7.55	<b>0.036</b>
Importance of support from WIL staff	7.29	7.53	0.323
Importance of support from family	8.15	9.04	<b>0.033</b>
I had a positive learning experience <sup>1</sup>	8.50	8.45	0.161
During placement, I had enough time for myself	5.96	4.11	<b>0.001</b>

Notes: mean results are from 10-point Likert scaled agreeance statements and statistical difference was determined using the Student T-Test. <sup>1</sup> Aggregated data from 6 learning outcomes.

## DISCUSSION

Overall placement students had a positive outlook on life and the average general wellbeing across all cohorts was 6.36 out of 10, which indicates slightly above neutral view, with no significant difference ( $p = >.05$ ) between paid and unpaid students. The neutral view of their wellbeing rather than positive view may appear to be a negative finding, however, aligns with recent views held by wider society (New Zealand Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2022). It is likely that unpaid placements do not undermine the meaningfulness of the experience (Smith et al., 2015), however, there are clear indications that it does undermine student wellbeing during placement. When comparing students views of their wellbeing during placement, unpaid students rated their wellbeing unsatisfactory (4.94), significantly ( $p = <.01$ ) lower than paid students (6.41). This unsatisfactory sense of their wellbeing is likely driven by significantly ( $p = <.001$ ) higher financial stress experienced by unpaid students (7.33) compared to students on paid placements (4.60). Qualitative data from unpaid students make mentions to struggling to meet expenses and needing to have part-time paid work during the work placement.

The stress likely also contributed to unpaid students feeling they handled stress significantly ( $p = <.01$ ) less well than paid students.

Students on paid placements experienced stress from the required hours of work significantly ( $p = <.001$ ) higher than those on unpaid work placements, which is reflected by most (60%) paid placements being 400 hours or longer whilst most (61%) unpaid placements were less than 400 hours. However, although paid students tended to work longer hours on placement than unpaid students, unpaid students felt they had less ( $p = <.001$ ) time for themselves than paid students. This seemingly contradictory finding is explained through the qualitative data where unpaid students frequently state that a part-time job during their placement was necessary to cover expenses, suggesting that the combined hours unpaid students work on their placement and on their part-time work during placement exceeds that of students on paid placements. Similarly in social work, where placements are typically unpaid, students required part-time work to meet their financial needs (see, e.g., Johnstone et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2011).

Supporting students during placement is vitally important (Rowe & Winchester-Seeto, 2022) and can vary widely in its nature. Unpaid students perceived support from the university, friends, family, and their employer as being more ( $p = <.05$ ) important than those on paid work placements, indicating that unpaid placement students are more reliant on support than those on paid placements. However, when asked if they felt supported by these sources, the only difference was that paid students felt more ( $p = <.05$ ) supported by the employer than unpaid students. Despite that all students felt moderately well supported during placement, a paired analysis comparing the importance of support and feeling of support during placements across all student cohorts regardless of payment status suggests that all students wanted more ( $p = <.001$ ) support than what they felt they received from all sources except family and peers.

The highly authentic nature of placements allows for rich learning experiences for students (Brentnall et al., 2023; Campbell & Pretti, 2023; Jackson & Cook, 2023). When students were asked about what they believed they had gained during placement, positive to strongly positive responses were provided for gaining confidence, work-related skills, sense of achievement, praise for work, and a clearer picture of the future, with no significant differences between paid and unpaid students. This indicates that placement students have positive learning experiences irrespective of their payment status, which aligns with the findings by Smith et al. (2015).

The research also collected information based on alternative sources of income, including student allowance, costs covered, and study award. These sources of income spread along the spectrum between paid and unpaid. These cohorts were small, limiting the extent of interpretation is possible, however, these cohorts generally held views about wellbeing and financial stress slightly more positive than unpaid students but less positive than paid students, indicating that even some remuneration will have some positive impact.

## CONCLUSION

Higher educational institutions need to continue to refine and review their already established student support structures, especially related to WIL and within the context of changing student needs

(Goldman et al., 2023; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). With negative impacts on student wellbeing now directly linked to unpaid work placements, the discussion around payment for placements will remain critical. This research shows that lack of payment did not detract from the meaningfulness of the learning experience, however, it did show that lack of payment negatively impacted wellbeing, caused greater financial stress, created a greater need of support from others, and caused students to have less time for themselves as many maintain paid part-time work alongside the unpaid placement. It is intended that this research will continue to inform the debate around unpaid placements and student wellbeing during WIL.

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