



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver Campus

Faculty of Education
Department of Educational Studies

EDST

Student Volunteer Work and Learning

Undergraduates' Experiences and Self-
reported Outcomes

Milosh **Raykov**, Alison **Taylor**
Sameena **Jamal** and Sirui **Wu**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- More than ever, university students are seeking voluntary as well as paid work experiences prior to graduation to help them develop skills. Unpaid work often involves different motivations and has different benefits and challenges vis-à-vis paid work. It is also less visible than paid work and tends to be given less research attention. This report follows on our earlier report on UBC undergraduate students and paid work by documenting features of students' unpaid work as well as differences in their perceptions of paid and unpaid work.
- The term “unpaid work” covers a wide range of opportunities that includes student clubs and associations, community-engaged learning, student leadership, and internships. There is a sizeable academic literature that addresses university students and different kinds of unpaid work; their motivations for engaging (or not engaging) in voluntary work and perceived benefits; differences in participation based on gender and international student status; and the issue of voluntary work and equity.
- Our Hard Working Student study contributes to this literature based on our quantitative and qualitative findings. Quantitative results come from two datasets: a pilot survey in 2018 followed by a module in 2019, both tied to the Undergraduate Experience Survey of students at UBC-Vancouver. In 2018, responses were obtained from 1,073 (62%) female and 659 (38%) male students. In 2019, responses were obtained from 1,117 (37%) male and 1,870 (63%) female students for a total of 2,987. Qualitative data include 12 focus group interviews with 37 second-year students recruited across faculties at UBC-V in January and February 2019.
- Findings from 2018 suggest that almost half (49%) of the undergraduate students were involved in volunteer work, while a slightly smaller proportion of students (44%) reported participating in volunteer activities in 2019. The average time spent on unpaid work in both years was around 6 hours per week. Our interviews with 37 working students found that even more (68%) also participated in unpaid work. Overall, our findings indicate that more female students than males participated in unpaid work, but did so for a little bit less time, on average, than male students.

- The reasons most frequently given for voluntary work were to gain career-related experience (40%) and to make a social contribution (39%). Almost three-quarters of international students surveyed (74%) also indicated that their voluntary work was important to gain Canadian work experience. Interviews add that students may also develop passion for a career through volunteer work. Common motivations for volunteer work on campus were to socialize and have fun.
- Over two-thirds (69%) of students who volunteered agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them build career-related skills. Volunteer work was also perceived to influence their further education plans (53% agreed or strongly agreed) and career plans (58% agreed or strongly agreed). Interviews add that international and out-of-province students felt that on-campus voluntary experience helped in their transition to university. However, expensive international opportunities were out of the reach of some students.
- Interestingly, more students perceived that their unpaid work had impact on their development of skills, future education and career plans, and interest in university compared to their paid work. In our 2019 survey, for example, unpaid work was reported to be more influential than paid work for developing career-related skills (69% vs 60%) as well as deciding on future education plans (53% vs 39%). Similarly, unpaid work appeared to be more influential than paid work for career plans (58% vs 45%). Unpaid work also increased students' interest in university more than paid work (50% vs 35%). Interviews suggest that greater choice of unpaid work and flexibility in conditions of work may contribute to these results.
- While our Hard Working Student research project focuses primarily on students' paid term-time work, the data reported provide an important reminder that work needs to be thought about in more expansive ways to capture the complexity of students' experiences.

INTRODUCTION

More than ever, university students are seeking work experiences to help them develop general and career-related skills before graduation (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). They gain this experience through unpaid or voluntary work as well as paid work. This report follows from our earlier report on undergraduate students' paid work at UBC (Taylor, Raykov & Sweet, 2020), and explores students' involvement in volunteer work, including their motivations for participating and its perceived benefits. Our research confirms that unpaid work often involves different motivations and has different benefits and challenges vis-à-vis paid work. It is also less visible than paid work and tends to be given less research attention.

This report begins by identifying the kinds of unpaid work opportunities that are available for undergraduate students at UBC, before turning to a review of the literature on students' unpaid work and our findings from surveys and focus group interviews.

THE RANGE OF UNPAID WORK OPPORTUNITIES AT UBC

Our survey of UBC undergraduates found that 57% worked for pay and 44% participated in unpaid work in 2019 (Taylor et al., 2020). Just as the phrase "paid work" includes a diverse array of activities, the term "unpaid work" also covers a wide range of opportunities, mostly co-curricular, that are available to undergraduate students at UBC. These fall into several categories including student clubs and associations, community-engaged learning, student leadership, and internships. Voluntary opportunities provided through the university include community-engaged learning (curricular and co-curricular, international and domestic), internships, and practicum experiences. The UBC *Careers Online* portal provides students with information on some of the paid and unpaid opportunities available at UBC and elsewhere.

Student clubs, government, and associations: Clubs at UBC usually have executive positions that are staffed by unpaid student volunteers. The wide range of clubs includes political, cultural, and academic clubs as well as hobby or sports clubs. Students may also be involved in student publications, radio, and service clubs. On-campus opportunities also include volunteering with Student Leadership events and Orientation activities. The Alma Mater Society (AMS) has a variety of roles for volunteers as representatives of student associations as well as on a variety of committees. Similarly, students often become involved with Residence Councils and Sororities as members or in executive positions. Some faculties also encourage students to provide academic peer support to other students (e.g. Science Peer Academic Coaches).

Additionally, international students at Vantage College have opportunities to participate in peer mentoring. Overall, a myriad of different kinds of voluntary opportunities, with different levels of commitment and duration, are available.

Undergraduate research: Many universities are seeking to engage undergraduates in research experiences. These may be curricular or co-curricular, international or local, and paid or unpaid. Some UBC programs (e.g. psychology and international economics) ensure that undergraduates have the opportunity to participate in unpaid research opportunities. Additionally, unpaid as well as paid research opportunities are advertised at UBC through a job portal. Most research abroad apprenticeships, which usually occur full-time in summer, are also unpaid (Wan, 2020).

Community-engaged learning: The Centre for Community-Engaged Learning (CCEL) at UBC coordinates curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students (see <https://ccel.ubc.ca/>). These include volunteer positions with community organizations throughout the year (see Trek program, <https://students.ubc.ca/career/community-experiences/trek>). Community-engaged learning opportunities may be optional or mandatory in academic courses and may occur on and off campus. For example, the UBC Learning Exchange provides opportunities for students to work with programs in the Downtown Eastside community. CCEL helps instructors develop opportunities where students work with a wide range of community organizations as part of their class requirements, for an average of 20 hours over the semester.

Unpaid internships: There is no inventory of internship opportunities at UBC since they are not centrally coordinated and many take place off campus. Some opportunities for students to explore careers are provided through faculties; for example, the Arts internship provides opportunities for students to work 8 to 12 hours a week for a 4 to 8 month term (see <https://www.arts.ubc.ca/arts-internship-program/>).

Voluntary work for admission to professional programs: In addition to the opportunities described above, many students volunteer to gain experience that will increase their chances of admission to graduate and professional programs like medicine, social work, and education. For example, “non-academic criteria” are “given significant weight” by evaluators for admission to a degree program in Medicine (see, for example, UBC MD Undergraduate program: <https://mdprogram.med.ubc.ca/admissions/evaluation-criteria/>). While there are no voluntary service hour requirements, a long-standing volunteering commitment is likely to demonstrate social concern and responsibility, among other aptitudes. Similarly, to enter Veterinary Medicine, applicants are often required to have animal and veterinary experience (for example, see requirements at University of Saskatchewan: <https://admissions.usask.ca/veterinary-medicine.php#Admissionrequirements>).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The range of unpaid work

A plethora of terms is used to describe work-education, including work-based learning and work-integrated education (Gardner & Bartkus, 2014). When the work is unpaid, writers are also concerned about the extent to which opportunities are freely chosen; the costs and benefits of particular opportunities; how opportunities are structured (formal/informal); and the intended beneficiaries (strangers/family, friends/self; Cnaan et al., 1996).

Grant-Smith and McDonald's (2018a, p. 571) diagram (see **Figure 1** below) offers a useful typology that categorizes unpaid work by purpose (educational or productive) and participatory discretion (mandatory or elective).

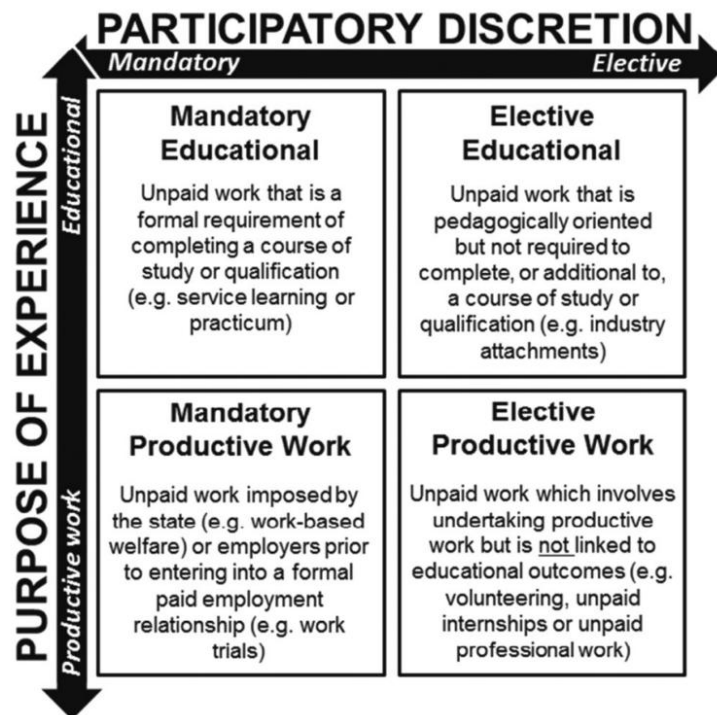


Figure 1: Typology of Unpaid Work

Unpaid work may include *formal* volunteer work (Baines et al., 2017) conducted with an organization as well as *informal* volunteer work that may include “assisting neighbours, colleagues, or friends directly through caretaking activities or providing physical labour to do house- or yard work” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 141). Unpaid work may include “work placements,

internships and practicum, course-related activities, project-based learning, and service learning that can be completed on- or off-campus and locally or overseas” (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017, p. 262). The length of unpaid work experiences varies, with some being long-term and others of shorter duration. Episodic volunteering can be “temporary (volunteering only for a short time); interim (volunteering on a regular basis but for a defined period, for example on a project); and occasional (volunteering for short periods of service at regular intervals)” (Smith et al., 2010, pp. 68-69). Particularly when it’s government-sponsored, voluntary work may come with benefits such as stipends, tuition credits, and reduced interest or interest-free loans (Volunteer Canada, 2006). On the other hand, international volunteering, which is often related to “community welfare activities, environmental conservation and research, education, construction, business development and healthcare,” may carry a significant financial cost (Cunha et al., 2019, p. 32).

From their survey involving over 4,000 university students from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA, Smith et al. (2010) found that some of the areas in which students volunteer include activities that benefit youth (e.g., volunteering as a mentor, tutor, coach, or counsellor); sports or cultural activities, university clubs/organizations, health and emergency services; community activities (e.g., conservation and animal welfare); religious organizations; and neighbourhood or activist groups. Students’ contributions take various forms including but not limited to meeting attendance, committee participation, fundraising, holding executive offices, leading teams, and engaging in manual or specialized labour (Gage & Thapa, 2012).

Why students engage in unpaid work

Variations in students’ reasons for engaging in unpaid work reflect the wide range of opportunities. The following reasons are suggested in the literature:

(a) **Career-related reasons** such as CV building for employment (Handy et al., 2010), to meet higher education admission requirements (Ghose & Kassam, 2014), and to explore career paths (Gage & Thapa, 2012). With a constant supply of graduates entering the labour market with “similar profiles and aspirations,” students often believe they need to gain “a positional advantage,” since “personal and social credentials” are becoming as important as “academic credentials” (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 59).

Gaining professional work experience before graduation is becoming more critical to employability (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018b). For example, through content analysis of over 300 Canadian job advertisements for entry-level positions targeting postsecondary graduates,

Borwein (2014) found that employers asked for over a year of work experience and over half required *job-specific* experience.

Several writers suggest that the perceived benefits of career-related volunteer work include: development of skills and professional networks; references for employment or admission to graduate programs; greater likelihood of obtaining paid employment and receiving higher salaries; the opportunity to apply academic knowledge in real life; and better time management (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Ghose & Kassam, 2014; Handy et al., 2010; Simha et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2010).

Martini et al.'s (2019) study, involving 1,006 undergraduate students in Canada, found that co-curricular experiences (including volunteering) may improve students' prospects of securing paid work after graduation. Volunteer work and extra-curricular activities at university help employers distinguish between graduates (Stuart et al., 2011). It is therefore not surprising that 24% of first-year undergraduate students, surveyed across 46 Canadian universities in 2019, volunteered in their chosen field of employment (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2019).

(b) **Altruistic, moral, or value-driven reasons** such as: the desire to help others; learning about initiatives for social justice; community development; and for family or religious reasons. The perceived benefits include satisfaction from helping others; societal trust building; an increased sense of civic responsibility; and increased intercultural understanding (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Simha et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2010).

While students may feel pressured to overemphasize altruistic motivations when reporting on their motivations for engaging in unpaid work, authors note that students' motivations also evolve over time (Handy et al., 2010). This is confirmed in our previous research (Raykov & Taylor, 2018) on university students and Community-Service Learning (called Community-Engaged Learning at UBC) where we found that while students often began placements with the aim of adding to their CVs, their commitment to the work of their non-profit partners over time also increased.

Community-Service Learning (CSL) or Community-Engaged Learning Programs often stress community development and social justice aims. Our previous survey research (Raykov & Taylor, 2018) found that over three-quarters of students (79%) who participated in CSL at a small Canadian university were motivated by a desire to contribute to their community. In addition, almost half (46%) wanted to learn more about social issues in their community. Over three-quarters of students also participated in the International Service Learning (ISL) program, primarily for cross-cultural learning and to learn more about social and global issues. In spite of

its focus on civic engagement rather than employment, our study also found that CSL had other outcomes: 40% of students said that their participation influenced their university program (e.g., taking more CSL courses or pursuing graduate studies) and more than two-thirds (69%) indicated that it was important for making career decisions. These impacts are related, no doubt, to the way classroom learning and community learning become integrated when CSL is curricular.

(c) **Social reasons** including: volunteering for fun and happiness; to make friends; or because of the influence of family members, friends, colleagues, teachers, career advisors, and/or religious leaders (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Ghose & Kassam, 2014; Simha et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2010). Perceived benefits include developing social networks and gaining recognition from others (Handy et al., 2010).

Student volunteers may also acquire a “sense of freedom” in their voluntary work (if it is chosen); a “sense of belonging” through the social networks developed; and a “sense of fulfilment” through their personal contributions (Yuriev, 2019, p. 65).

(d) **Program reasons**, such as when unpaid work is a required part of a course or program, are also common (Ghose & Kassam, 2014; Handy et al., 2010). Barton et al. (2019) and Baines et al. (2017) note that references from volunteer work are often required for, or are instrumental in, securing admission to a professional program. Volunteer work is viewed as a “demonstration of initiative, an indicator of strong motivation,” and when relevant to the program, “evidence that the applicant has a realistic sense of what the career involves” (Volunteer Canada, 2006, p. 25). For example, a medical school applicant who has done health-related volunteer work is usually seen as a better candidate than an equivalent applicant without this kind of experience (Handy et al., 2010). In such cases, volunteering is seen to signal that the applicant is compassionate, and therefore likely to be a better doctor (Handy et al., 2010). In fact, some higher education programs use volunteer experience as a screening mechanism to shortlist applicants. Absence of such volunteering experience can be an “automatic disqualifier” (Volunteer Canada, 2006, p. 25). Volunteer work can also be an eligibility criterion for scholarships, and a requirement of some academic programs. For example, law students may be required by their law school to offer pro bono legal services in the community (Volunteer Canada, 2006). Studies have also found, however, that mandating volunteering at educational institutions may dampen engagement (Ghose & Kassam, 2014).

When it is integrated into academic programs, volunteering may enable students to apply classroom knowledge to real situations. Learning in the classroom and through volunteering can be reciprocal in that knowledge gained in the classroom may impact volunteering activities

and vice versa (Barton et al., 2019). Career-related experience (whether paid or unpaid) usually influences the development of students' professional identities (Beck et al., 2015) and may contribute to higher levels of "confidence in attaining their goals, and academic self-efficacy" (Purdie et al., 2011, p. 722). Career-related unpaid work may also enable students to enhance their knowledge in particular domains, gain confidence, make informed decisions about their future career plans, build social networks in their field and, in some cases, gain academic credit (Smith et al., 2015).

Why students don't engage in unpaid work

Advantageous as it may be, not all students engage in unpaid work. Reasons for not volunteering include the following:

- It's not possible because of a lack of time; physical boundaries; lack of skills and training; and lack of transportation (Barton et al., 2019; Gage & Thapa, 2012; Phillips, 2013; Simha et al., 2011; Willems & Dury, 2017);
- Students are unable to participate in unpaid opportunities that require resources. For example, some opportunities require registration fees, relocation/commuting costs, and/or work-related clothing or equipment (R. A. Malatest & Associates, 2018). Some international opportunities require participants to pay for their own flights, accommodation, living expenses, insurance, visa, and other related costs (Bassett et al., 2019; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Grenfell & Koch, 2019);
- Certain university-based programs have minimum grade requirements to participate (R. A. Malatest & Associates, 2018); and
- Students may resist the expectation that they must volunteer to get a paid job (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014).

Students may also decide not to engage in unpaid work because: their previous experiences of volunteer work were stressful or negative; expectations are unclear; volunteer work is perceived to interfere with academic studies and/or with paid work; students believe that they are not valued in the same manner as paid staff; students don't see the value of unpaid work; and students' lack of interest, a sense of accountability, and/or encouragement to volunteer (Barton et al., 2019; Lehmann, 2012; R. A. Malatest & Associates, 2018; Smith et al., 2015; Willems & Dury, 2017).

Gender and volunteer work

Women's unpaid domestic labour has long been seen as an issue that dampens their labour market participation (Ferrant et al., 2014). In addition, several studies indicate that women volunteer more frequently than men (Fyall & Gazley, 2015). In fact, female students appear to carry higher total workloads than males when their unpaid work (including domestic work and volunteering) is taken into consideration (Beban & Trueman, 2018). Research has also suggested that women spend less time on leisure activities than men, and often combine such activities with unpaid care or household work (Moyser & Burlock, 2018). Such leisure, however, is "more fragmented and less relaxing and restorative" (p. 21). In contrast, in their study of over 600 second-year university students, researchers found that male students' extracurricular activities were primarily linked to university, and they were less likely than females to see the benefits of volunteer work for their job prospects and student outcomes (Stuart et al., 2011).

Another potential area of gender difference concerns which forms of work-integrated learning are paid and which are unpaid. While "male-dominated professions such as law, medicine and engineering do not regularly require an unpaid practicum," female-dominated professions such as social work often include this as a mandatory element of the program (Pelech et al., 2009, p. 738). In fact, engineering faculties in Canada commonly encourage their students to participate in paid cooperative education work terms, while nursing and education students are usually required to engage in a series of mandatory unpaid practicum courses in the field as part of their preservice professional training (Ralph et al., 2009). Such differences contribute to the perception that caring professions have less "value, prestige and remuneration" than other professions (Pelech et al., 2009, p. 738).

Finally, although unpaid career-related work (such as internships) may enable students to earn course credit and develop academic and/or career-related skills, opportunities tend to be less accessible to those with "heavy workloads in care work" (Beban & Trueman, 2018, p. 114).

International students and volunteer work

Some international students see voluntary work as a way of gaining work experience that is required if they decide they want to immigrate to Canada. Pathways to immigration include the Post-Graduation Work Permit (which enables international students to remain in Canada for up to three years after completion of their studies to obtain the requisite work experience for a permanent residency application) as well as other programs (e.g., Canadian Experience Class, Provincial Nominee Program, Federal Skilled Worker Program, etc.) that enable international students to gain permanent residence in Canada (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014; Bepple, 2014; Gopal, 2016).

Paid work experience in Canada increases an applicant's total points for these programs and thereby increases the likelihood of a successful outcome of their permanent residence application. Since international students have "a limited time window to find career-related work after graduation," they may work while studying to facilitate a smooth and expeditious transition to work after graduation (Bepple, 2014, p. 2). International students, however, often face challenges in securing paid work including: local employers' reluctance to hire international students; the need for work permits that can take several months to process; the cap on the number of hours students may work; academic prerequisites; lack of work experience in their home countries; lack of social networks; lack of information about how to look for a job and about job opportunities; lack of English proficiency for the workplace; and lack of knowledge of local workplace culture (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Goodwin & Mbah, 2019; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; R. A. Malatest & Associates, 2018; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). "Research has shown that when immigrants to Canada are unable to find appropriate paid work, they often volunteer their skills, time, and energy in the hope of gaining the Canadian experience that will eventually lead to paid employment" (Wilson-Forsberg & Sethi, 2015, p. 92). Voluntary work may help international students to "improve their English language skills in general as well as gain an understanding of Canadian workplace language and culturally based Canadian communication skills" (Bepple, 2014, p. 8). Unpaid as well as paid work enables international students to gain local experience and thereby enrich their cultural capital (Nunes & Arthur, 2013). If they do not plan to stay in Canada, work experience can still enhance international students' marketability as employees in their home country (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017).

Voluntary work and equity

Research suggests that student access to unpaid work is unequal. For example, Abrahams (2017) found that "many more middle-class students secured work experience or internships than their working-class counterparts" (p. 629). Students whose families depend on income from their paid employment are most disadvantaged (Bassett et al., 2019; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are unlikely to have the luxury of seeking an unpaid internship (Bathmaker et al., 2013); such positions are thus out of reach for many (Grenfell & Koch, 2019). This creates inequality of opportunity since such work opportunities are effectively only "open to those who could afford to work for free" (Smith et al., 2015, p. 159). There is concern that by encouraging unpaid internships, universities may perpetuate inequalities (Jackson & Collings, 2018; Stuber, 2009).

There are also concerns that voluntary work can be exploitative when unpaid workers are denied the "rights, protections and claims to wages and working conditions that are granted to other workers" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, as cited in Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018a, p. 562). For example, "internships are typically characterized by a student, graduate or job-seeker spending a period of time in an organization, performing any combination of productive work,

shadowing a more experienced worker, or performing low-level tasks for those who already occupy roles in the workplace or profession” (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018a, p. 559). Companies sometimes charge clients for the work carried out by unpaid interns and may use such workers as replacements for paid staff (Baines et al., 2017). Students are also vulnerable to exploitation since refusing work may jeopardise future opportunities for better employment (Baines et al., 2017). This may be particularly true for international students who need to get Canadian experience and positive references. Although our survey didn’t ask specifically about unpaid internships, this literature adds nuance to writings that focus almost exclusively on the positive aspects of unpaid work.

METHOD

This study is based on survey findings from a mixed methods study on undergraduates’ term-time work. Phase 1 of this SSHRC-funded research study included surveys of undergraduate students at UBC facilitated by the institutional research office, which administers the Undergraduate Experience Survey (UES) at UBC-Vancouver (UBC-V) to all undergraduate students in the Faculties of Arts, Science, Applied Science, Sauder (Business), Land and Food Systems, School of Kinesiology in Education, and Forestry. Phases 2 and 3 (in process at the time of writing this report) involve longitudinal qualitative data collection with undergraduate students at UBC and the University of Toronto.

Surveys

The first part of Phase 1 was a survey module attached to the UES, which was conducted in January and February of **2018**. Students were invited to participate via email on UBC’s learning management system. Students who completed this institutional survey (7,080) were invited to participate in the HWS survey module on their work and study experiences, and **1,732** (24.4%) of these respondents completed it. Responses were obtained from 1,073 (62%) female and 659 (38%) male students. The demographic distribution of participants in our 2018 sample is similar to that of the institutional population; differences regarding gender, year of study, and other socio-demographic characteristics are not significant. Our survey module asked students about their unpaid volunteer positions as well as paid work. We asked about their motivations to volunteer, hours of unpaid work, features of this work, and the relationship between unpaid work and studies.

The second part of Phase 1 was a survey module attached to the UES, conducted in January and February of **2019**, where students were again invited via email to participate in this online institutional survey. Students who completed this survey were invited to participate in the HWS

survey module related to their work and study. The number of module questions was much more limited in 2019 because the size of the UES overall was decreased in order to try to increase the response rate. Further, our access to socio-demographic data in the main survey was limited to protect student anonymity. There were also small differences in the wording of some 2019 questions based on what we learned from our analysis of the 2018 'pilot' survey. Responses were obtained from 1,117 (37%) male and 1,870 (63%) female students for a total of **2,987** in 2019. Again, we asked about motivations for engaging in unpaid or voluntary work and outcomes of that work. In 2019 we had less information about the kind of voluntary work students were doing. Since our 2019 survey includes more participants, this report focuses more on this database, complemented by our qualitative focus group data from 2019.

Exploratory statistical techniques (percentages and means) were applied to describe the incidence and intensity of student involvement in unpaid term-time work, and our analysis also included a set of bivariate comparisons of students' basic demographic characteristics and their participation in unpaid work. Differences between means are compared with t-tests and analysis of variance as well as with their non-parametric equivalents. Chi-square tests were applied to compare students' perception of the outcomes of unpaid and paid term-time work. The level of statistical significance Chi-Square tests is indicated in the following way: (***) $p < 0.001$, (**) = $p < 0.01$, (*) = $p < 0.05$, and (ns) = not significant.

Focus groups

Qualitative data collection for this mixed-methods longitudinal study is intended to span three years (2019 to 2021) and involves focus group interviews, life mapping activities, audio diaries, and individual interviews. The total sample for the study consists of 57 undergraduate students at UBC-V who were in their second-year at the time of recruitment: the first cohort consists of 37 participants recruited in January 2019 and the second cohort consists of 20 participants recruited in September 2019. Although qualitative data collection and analysis are ongoing at the time of writing this report, preliminary findings from 12 video-recorded focus group interviews conducted in January and February 2019 with the first cohort of students across faculties at UBC-V (N=37) are included in this report. Each focus group interview was attended by two to five participants and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The interviews delved into participants' thoughts about: paid and unpaid term-time work; their personal experiences of such work; everyday transitions between work and studies; and relationships between (paid and unpaid) work and study. Multiple members of the research team reviewed the focus group interview transcripts to extract relevant quotes on unpaid work that were subsequently integrated in this report.

FINDINGS

Participation in volunteer work

Our interviews with the 37 undergraduate students suggest that their voluntary work activities are wide-ranging. In some cases, their university programs provide the impetus for the study-related work they are doing off campus (e.g., law, dentistry, psychology) while in other cases participants were working in student clubs, facilities, or programs (e.g., student-run cafés, residence committees, undergraduate associations within a faculty, sororities, peer tutoring, sports). While the majority of volunteer work appeared to have some connection with the university, a few students participated in volunteer work off campus that was career-related (e.g. animal care) as well as in work that was unrelated to studies (e.g. in connection to churches or non-profit organizations).

Our surveys provide an overview of the extent to which students engage in voluntary or unpaid work. As **Table 1** indicates, almost half (49%) of the undergraduate students were involved in volunteer work during the first semester of the 2017/2018 academic year according to our 2018 survey. In our 2019 survey, a slightly smaller proportion of students (44%) reported participating in volunteer activities. These findings are similar to the results of a large-scale national survey in Canada (see Turcotte, 2015) which found that almost 44% of Canadians aged 15 years and older participated in volunteer work.

Table 1: Participation in unpaid or volunteer work

Year	2018	2019
Volunteer	49	44
Non-volunteer	51	56
N	1708	2974

Source: HWS Survey 2018 and 2019.

Table 2 shows that the average time spent by males and females on **unpaid work** in both years was around 6 hours per week. In 2019, female students reported being involved in volunteer work more frequently than their male counterparts (48% vs 37% respectively; Chi-square = 35.240***). However, male students reported spending more time volunteering (see **Table 2**). In 2018, male students reported spending 7.2 hours on unpaid work compared to 5.5 for females (t-test = 2.735**). In 2019, the gender difference was smaller and not statistically significant. Since we did not ask about household work, it is difficult to compare our findings with the literature on gender and unpaid work in its diversity. But it is interesting to note that workloads on more formal types of paid and unpaid work are no higher for female students compared to males.

Table 2 shows also that male students reported spending more time on **paid work** than females (15.9 vs 13.6 in 2018 and 17.2 vs 15.4 in 2019) as well as on **social and leisure** activities (10.3 vs 8.4 in 2018 and 9.9 vs 8.6 in 2019). The slightly lower number of social and leisure hours reported by women warrants further investigation, as do the types of unpaid work and social and leisure activities undertaken by male and female university students.

Table 2: Average hours of students' weekly involvement in various activities

Weekly hours of ...		Mean	Male	Female	t-test
... paid work	2018	14.3	15.9	13.5	3.026**
	2019	16.0	17.2	15.4	2.83**
... unpaid or volunteer work	2018	6.00	7.2	5.5	2.735**
	2019	5.95	6.3	5.8	1.33 ^{NS}
... social and leisure activities	2018	9.2	10.3	8.4	3.866**
	2019	9.1	9.9	8.6	4.05***
... attending classes, tutorials, or labs	2018	16.8	17.3	16.4	1.800
	2019	16.0	16.8	15.5	4.05***
... studying and other academic activities	2018	16.5	16.3	16.5	-.315
	2019	16.6	16.1	16.9	-1.61 ^{NS}

Source: HWS Survey 2018 and 2019.

Overall, our findings indicate that more female students than males participated in unpaid work, but did so for a little bit less time, on average, than male students. Our report of students' paid work based on the same datasets (Taylor et al., 2020) found that female students also participated more in paid work than male students did (59% vs 47% in 2018; 60% vs 51% in 2019), but for slightly fewer hours, on average (see Table 2).

Our focus group **interviews** were conducted with students who were working part-time while studying. For those who **did not participate** in unpaid work, the most common reason was lack of time. For example, we asked students to tell us how many hours they spent each week on the following activities: paid work, unpaid work, attending classes, studying outside of class, social and leisure activities, and commuting. One student, who reported working for pay for 15 hours per week and spending 30 hours on academics, 3 hours on commuting, and 20 hours on social and leisure activities each week, unsurprisingly had little time for volunteer work. Students who reported volunteering in high school sometimes gave it up when they transitioned to university because of increasing time pressures. Another reason why students didn't volunteer was related to the lack of perceived value for the required investment of time. For those in applied degrees like business, it is also likely that paid career-related opportunities were more available.

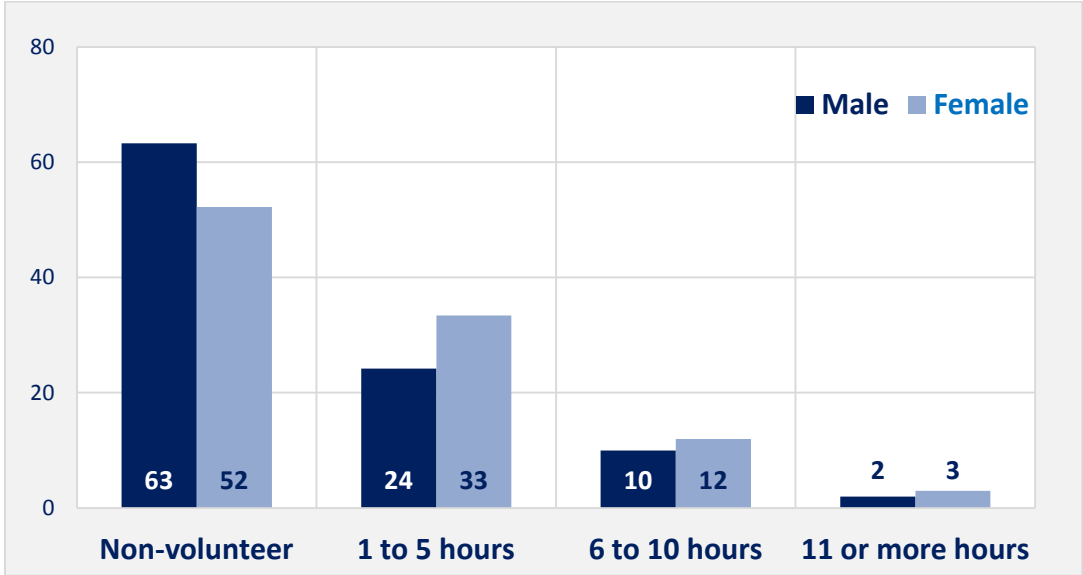
Table 3 below suggests that just over one-third of students who volunteered in 2018 were involved in what we describe as “low intensity” volunteering (1 to 5 hours per week), while this was true for just under one-third (30%) in 2019. Approximately 10% of students were involved in “medium intensity” volunteer work (6 to 10 hours per week); and a small proportion (4.4% in 2018 and 4.7% in 2019) were described as “high intensity,” volunteering for 11 or more hours per week. The difference in student participation in volunteer work between 2018 and 2019 is statistically significant (Chi-Squared = 18.9829**). It is also noteworthy that the opposite tendency is evident in the same dataset with regard to paid work participation (55% of students participated in 2018 and 57% in 2019; Taylor et al., 2020).

Table 3: The intensity of unpaid or volunteer work per week

Year	2018	2019
Non-volunteer	50.9	56.3
1 - 5 hours	34.7	29.9
6 - 10 hours	10.1	9.1
11 or more hours	4.4	4.7
N	1708	2939

Source: HWS Survey 2018 and 2019.

Figure 2: Gender and the intensity of participation in unpaid or volunteer work



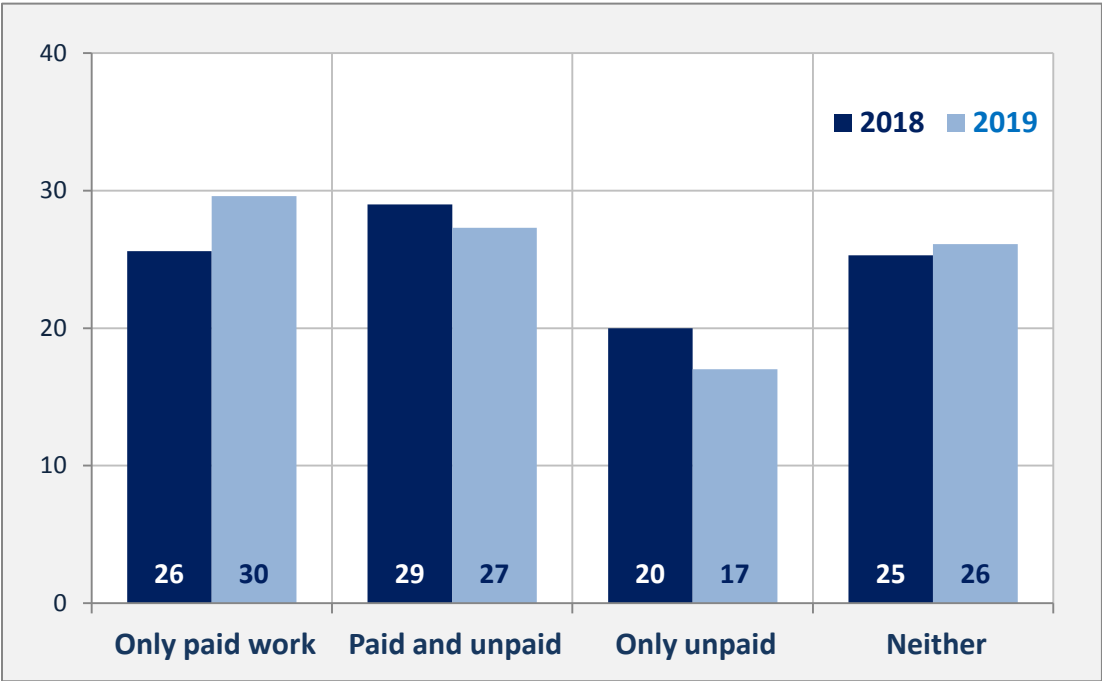
Source: HWS Survey 2019.

As **Figure 2** shows, in 2019, there were statistically significant differences regarding male and female student engagement in volunteer hours (Chi-Squared = 37.155***). The results reiterate that female students are more frequently involved in unpaid work, but for a smaller number of hours. The same pattern of involvement is also identified in the 2018 HWS survey.

Figure 3 below shows the proportions of students who engaged in different combinations of paid and unpaid work in 2018 and 2019. Both HWS surveys show that approximately three-quarters of students are involved in paid work, unpaid work or a combination of both types of work.

Similarly, our **interviews** with students who were engaged in paid work found that 25 of 37 (68%) also participated in unpaid work. Most of these participants were engaged in voluntary work for less than five hours per week although four students did unpaid work for more than 10 hours per week (in addition to their paid work of 10 or more hours per week). Interestingly, 15 participants (out of the sample of 37), who were spending 5 or less hours per week on unpaid work, indicated that they would like to spend more time on this activity.

Figure 3: Combined participation in paid and unpaid work (HWS 2018 and HWS 2019)



Source: HWS Survey 2018 and 2019.

Motivations for volunteer work participation

Our survey participants most frequently stated that the main reason they volunteer is to gain career-related experience (40%) and to make a social contribution (39%). A smaller proportion (15%) indicated that they volunteer to increase their competitiveness for graduate or professional school. These findings resonated with the findings in our literature review, where writers refer to volunteering for employability (Handy et al., 2010); to explore career paths (Gage & Thapa, 2012); and to meet higher education admission requirements (Ghose & Kassam, 2014). Only a small fraction of our participants (2%) reported that volunteer work is part of their university program. Also, a small number (4%) indicated that they are involved in volunteer work for different reasons.

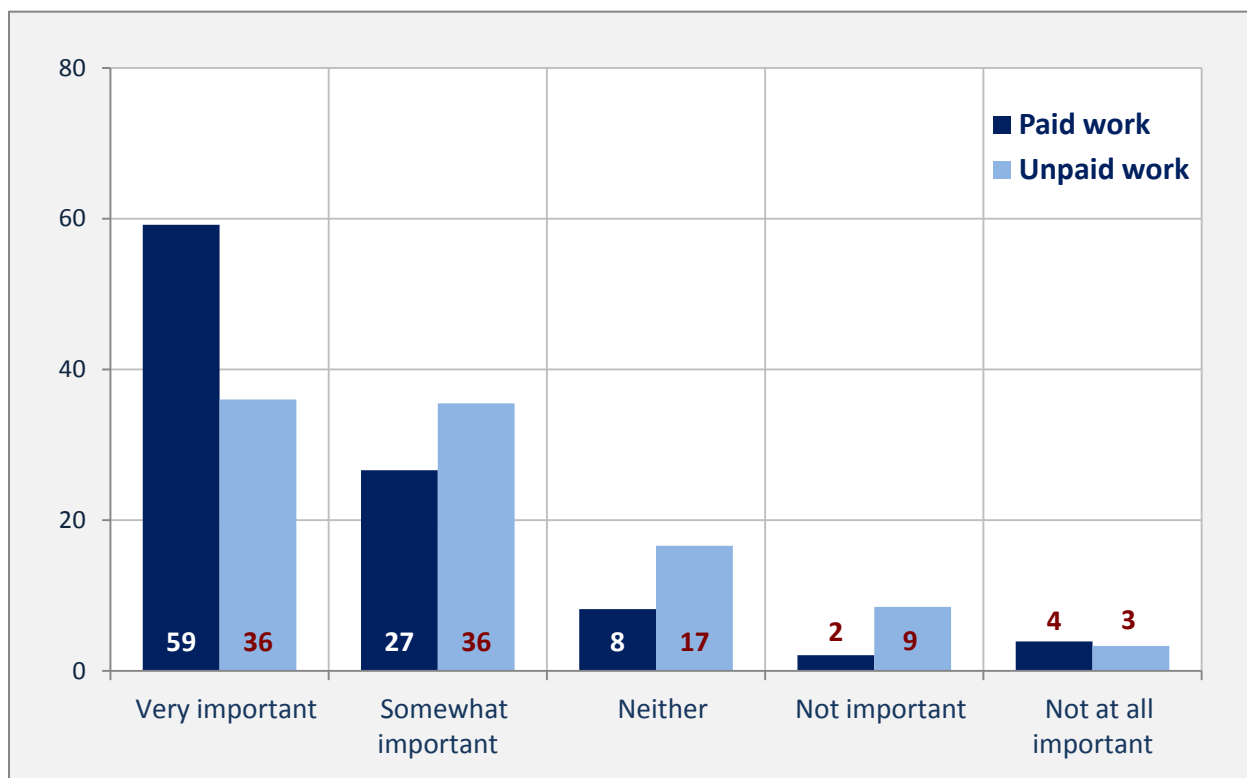
Our focus group interviews reinforced survey findings about the importance of unpaid work for career and social reasons, but interview data also provided more nuanced insights. For example, one student shared that she had undertaken three different kinds of unpaid work since high school for different reasons. For example, she volunteered in high school at an immigrant-servicing agency because she and her family were immigrants to Canada and she felt good helping other newcomers. In her previous year of university, she had volunteered in a leadership role in a club to meet other students. Finally, at the time of our interview, she was volunteering at a hospital because she wanted to apply for a professional program in healthcare.

Further, although many students seek volunteer experiences that they see as related to their career choices, students may also develop passion for a career through volunteer work. As one student recalled, “the first day I went [to my volunteer placement], I was like ‘oh my God, like this is what I want to do all my time.’” Also, while some of our interviewees were trying to accumulate voluntary experience to enhance their chances of being admitted to professional programs like physiotherapy or counselling, as in our survey, it was also common to hear that students were doing volunteer work because they were unable to find paid work in career-related areas.

Another common reason that students reported for volunteering in clubs and associations was to socialize with other students and have fun. Some students also met personal needs through volunteer work. For example, one student volunteered with a health program so he could learn more about a disease that had affected his family. Another student said she felt “stuck” when she was only associating with students and therefore decided to volunteer off-campus to get out of her “school bubble” and broaden her perspective.

International students may have particular reasons for engaging in voluntary work. Research suggests that over half of the international students in Canada are interested in becoming permanent residents (El-Assal, 2020). Our 2019 survey asked international students about the importance of gaining Canadian work experience through paid and unpaid work. **Figure 4** below shows that 86% of international students indicated that their *paid work* was slightly or very important to gain Canadian work experience while almost three-quarters (72%) indicated that *voluntary work* was important for this purpose. Only a small proportion of international students did not consider paid (6%) and unpaid (12%) work as important to gain Canadian work experience. These results are statistically significant and confirm that while paid work is preferred, unpaid work is also seen as *very important* for over one-third of international students.

Figure 4. International students’ perceptions of work to gain Canadian work experience



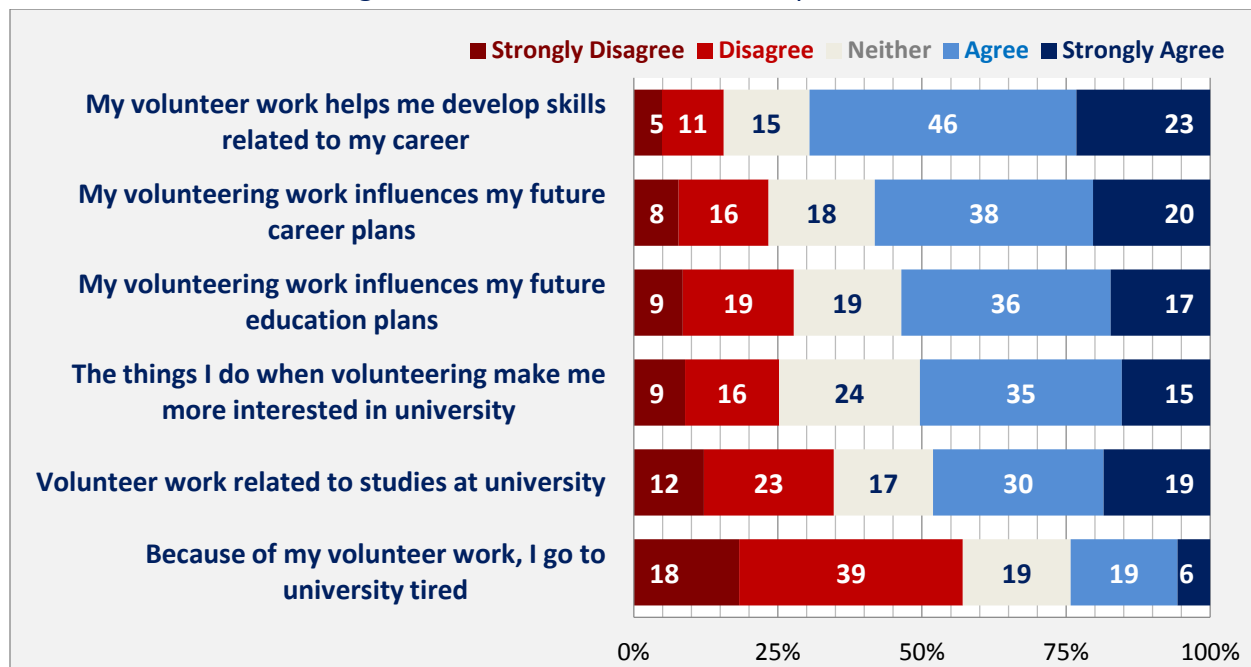
Source: HWS 2019; Chi-Square = 30.5196***.

Outcomes of Unpaid Work

The results of our 2019 survey demonstrate that over half of the undergraduate students perceived the impact of volunteer work on their studies and career plans to be positive or very positive (**Figure 5**). Over two-thirds (69%) of students who volunteered agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them **build career-related skills**. Volunteer work was also perceived to influence their **further education plans** (53 % agreed or strongly agreed) and **career plans** (58%

agreed or strongly agreed). Instructors might be interested to know that 50% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their voluntary work made them **more interested in university**, which is not surprising since almost the same proportion felt that their unpaid work was related to their university studies. Again, this is consistent with the literature cited above.

Figure 5. Perceived outcomes of unpaid work



Source: HWS 2019.

Our focus group interviews with students suggested that volunteer work can also have positive benefits in their transition to university. In particular, international and out-of-province students may find that on-campus voluntary experience helps them feel comfortable, as this student suggests:

[W]hen you leave your home or your own province, your own city, whatever it is, you feel some kind of detachment. And you need to find that back when you're here if you want some kind of stability, I think. And volunteer work has really helped me with that because it's helped me find good friends, helped me build good relationships, and find a job that I actually like to do.

Our focus group data further suggest that students commonly perceive volunteer work as the only way to gain certain kinds of experience, particularly in health-related professions. For example, a student shared these thoughts:

I'm definitely interested in volunteering and stuff at hospitals [in future], because I need to get a lot more of that under my belt before applying to med school. I feel like at my age, it's kind of unrealistic to have a job that relates to the medical field. ... like there is no way you are getting a paid position to do something that you want to do.

A business student also admitted that “it’s hard to find a [paid] job where I’m going to get leadership opportunities,” which is why she attempted to get that experience through volunteering. Finally, students in fields like media studies stated that they expected to do a lot of unpaid voluntary work and internships when starting out. These responses suggest that students tend to normalize unpaid work as part of their transition to paid work.

Despite the perceived benefits of volunteering, however, it wasn’t always possible for students to participate in unpaid opportunities even if they would enhance their CVs. This is particularly true for expensive international opportunities, as this student shared: “the part-time job I have right now is not going to be able to cover all of that. It is kind of like, it’s a struggle.” In addition, our survey found that just over a third (35%) did not perceive their unpaid work to be related to their studies at university.

Further, despite the positive outcomes that are evident in our surveys and interviews, a significant number of students surveyed also reported more problematic outcomes. In our 2019 survey, for example, one quarter (25%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that because of their volunteer work, they went to university tired.

A small number of students in our focus groups also pointed to the negative impacts of volunteer work. For example, one suggested that her significant investment in a student club may have looked good on her resume but it “didn’t look good on my transcript!” Another student agreed that when voluntary work becomes too big of a commitment, it can lead to stress and frustration.

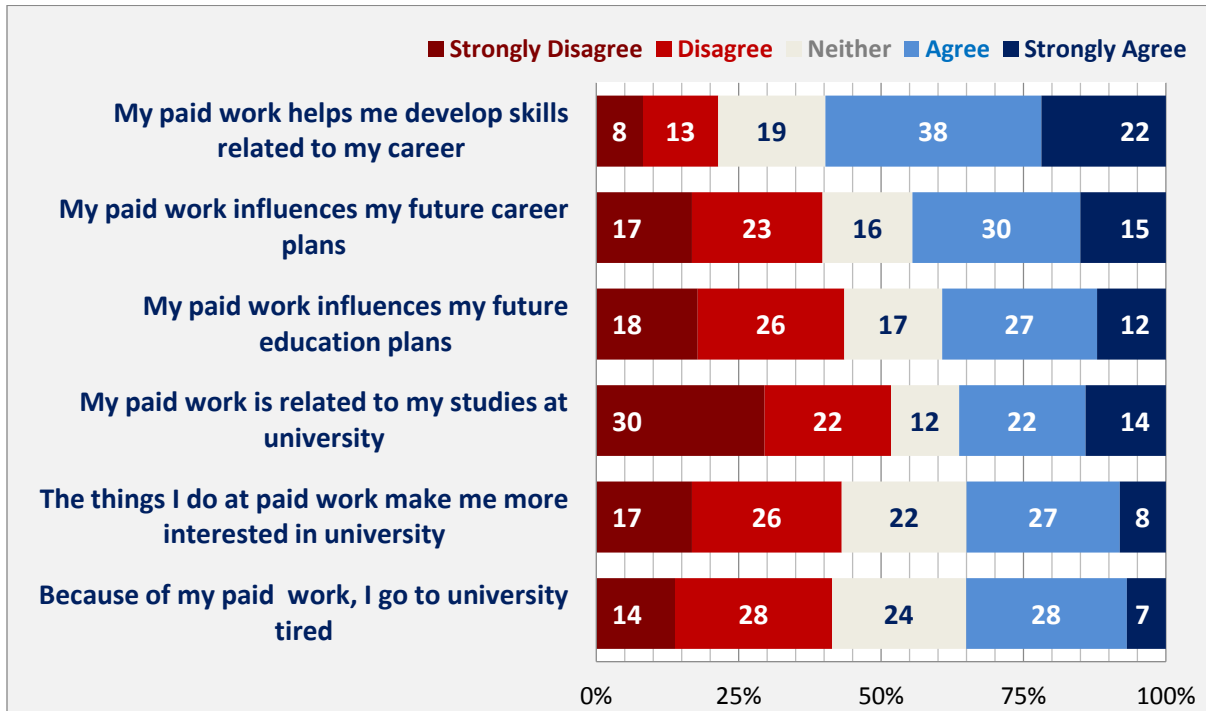
Comparison of Students’ Perceptions of Paid and Unpaid Work

A topic that we did not see addressed in the literature concerns how students perceive their paid work in comparison with their unpaid work. **Figure 6** below shows students’ perceptions of their paid work experience based on the 2019 survey. In contrast to unpaid work, a much smaller proportion of undergraduate students (**35% to 60%**) felt that their paid work had a positive impact on their university studies and career.

In particular, 60% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their paid work helped them develop career-related skills compared to 69% for unpaid work. Further, while 45% felt that paid work influenced their career plans, this perception was more common for unpaid work (58%).

Regarding future education plans, unpaid work appeared to be more influential (53% agreed or strongly agreed) than paid work (39%). Paid work was also seen as related to university studies (36%) less than unpaid work (49%), and perhaps for that reason, had less influence on their academic interests. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that voluntary work is usually more flexible, more students agreed or strongly agreed that paid work makes them go to university tired (35% vs. 25% for unpaid work) (Chi-square = 74.220***).

Figure 6. Perceived outcomes of paid work

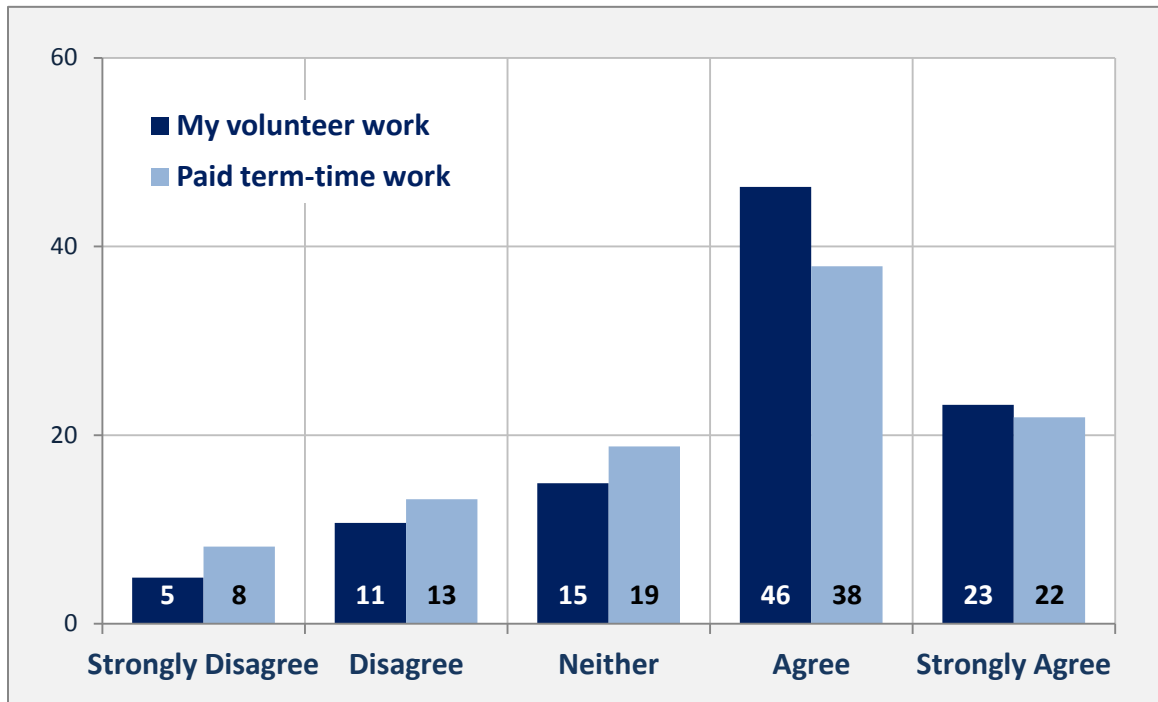


Source: HWS 2019.

In sum, the direct comparisons of the perceived outcomes of paid and unpaid work show that **volunteer work is perceived by students as more beneficial on all measured outcomes.** Further, the differences in perceived outcomes of paid and unpaid work for education and future careers are statistically highly significant.

Figure 7 below shows that participation in unpaid work is more likely than paid work to be perceived as useful for developing skills related to students' future careers (Chi-square = 33.977***). This is consistent with literature cited above, which indicates that volunteer work is perceived as beneficial for developing professional networks, honing time management skills, and applying academic knowledge (Gage & Thapa, 2012; Ghose & Kassam, 2014).

Figure 7: Comparing paid and unpaid work on the development of career-related skills



Source: HWS 2019.

Some students in our focus groups also indicated that they gained more from unpaid than paid work. For example, a business student commented:

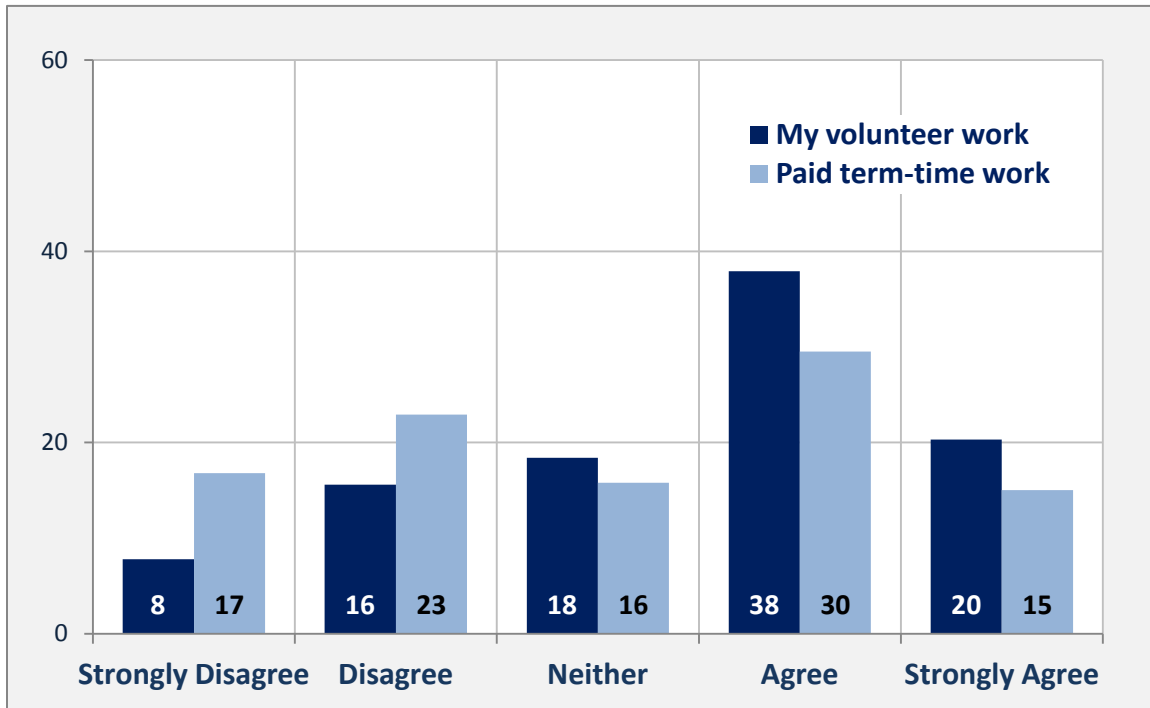
I gain a lot more experience [in my leadership role in a club], because I'm in control, versus like working [in paid work, where] like I'm under someone, so I don't get to control what I do, I just do mindless work.

Similarly, another student suggested that while paid work can be more motivating ...

... volunteering is a lot more fun because, you know, there's no rules and restrictions and stuff. Whereas when you are working [for pay] there's like a hierarchy.

Our survey findings also show (**Figure 8**) that students who participated in both types of work more positively evaluate the influence of unpaid work than paid work on their **future career plans** (Chi-square = 94.2377***).

Figure 8: The perceived influence of volunteer and paid work on students' future career plans



Source: HWS 2019.

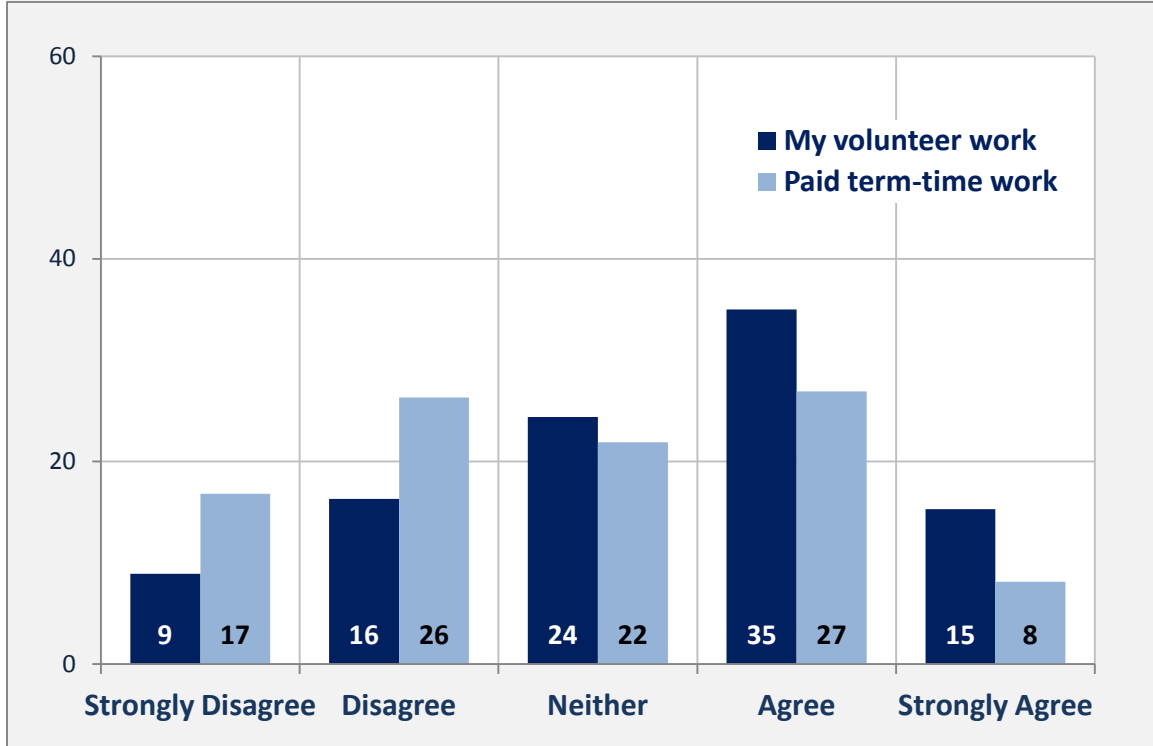
More students also believe that their volunteer work has a greater influence than paid work on their **future education plans** (53% vs. 39% agree and strongly agree; Chi-square = 91.668***).

Volunteer work is more frequently **related to participants' university studies** (49%) than their paid work (36%) (Chi-sq. = 135.465***). Our interviews suggest this may be true, in particular, for students who *need to* engage in paid work and therefore prioritize pay above other features of work.

The fact that the majority of students perceive volunteer work as important and related to their university studies may also explain why students report that volunteer work increases their interest in university studies more often than paid work (50% vs 35%), (Chi-sq. = 115.891***; see **Figure 9** below).

Finally, the proportion of students reporting **fatigue** associated with paid work (35%) is greater than for unpaid work (25%; Chi-square = 74.220***). While we assume that this is probably related to the greater number of hours that students spend on paid work, it is also possible that the lack of choice and flexibility in much paid work (as indicated by the focus group comments cited above) contributes to this result.

Figure 9: Perceived impact of volunteer and paid work on students' interest in university



Source: HWS 2019.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is clear from our surveys and focus group interviews that voluntary work is an important part of many students' lives. Whether it involves leadership in student clubs or working with a non-profit organization in the community, most students see this work as meaningful and beneficial for themselves and others. For example, unpaid work has practical benefits related to planning graduate education and careers. Further analysis of our qualitative data is needed to explore issues such as:

- whether or not voluntary work plays different roles for international students compared to domestic students;
- whether gender differences are evident in the way students talk about their paid and unpaid work as well as other activities;
- any differences in expectations across disciplines regarding voluntary work; and
- whether access to unpaid work is a problem for certain groups of students (in particular, those who are financing their own studies).

While our Hard Working Student research project focuses primarily on students' paid term-time work, the data reported here provide an important reminder that work needs to be thought about in more expansive ways to capture the complexity of students' experiences. We recommend that future Undergraduate Experience Surveys at UBC ask more questions about the range of students' voluntary work and their experiences doing it. It would also be interesting to learn more about students' domestic work responsibilities (including caring responsibilities) since this invisible work no doubt also impacts students' ability to participate in other voluntary, paid, and academic work.

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