The 'hard working student': Results from a survey of undergraduates

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a 2018 survey module on undergraduates' term-time work at a Canadian university. We discuss which students are working, how much they work, why they work, and the self-reported impacts of that work on studies. Our analysis of survey data shows that over half of respondents worked. More women than men worked, more domestic than international students worked, and more students from lower socioeconomic status families worked. Hours of work were most strongly correlated with students' financial needs. The more students worked, the less time they spent studying and on other academic activities or attending classes, tutorial or labs. Further analysis will focus more on what difference the kind of work makes to effects on studies.

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 a paid job (Eurostudent, 2018). In the US too, almost half of college students were involved in the labour 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 PSE 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 GPAs (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 are also seen as preventing students from campus engagement beyond the classroom.

Previous research suggests there are socio-demographic 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 non-standard 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 preliminary quantitative findings from a mixed methods study of undergraduates at a large Canadian university. Our survey module was attached to an online institutional survey. . Those who completed this institutional survey (7,080) were

invited to participate in our survey module on their work and study experiences and 1,733 (24%) respondents completed it.

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.

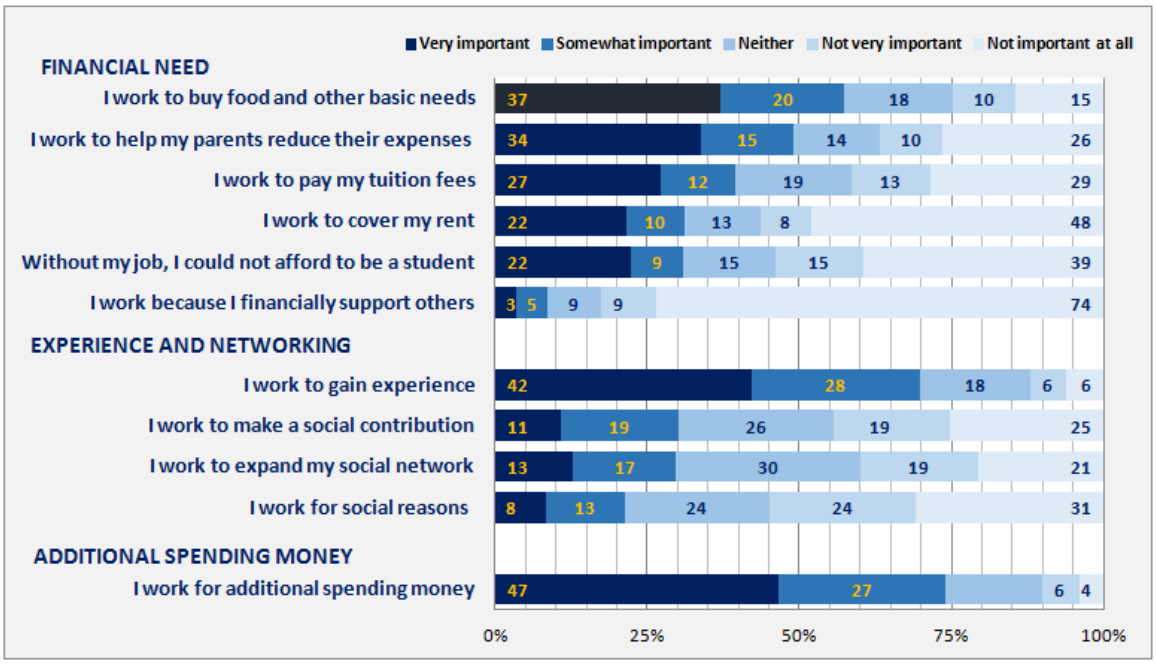
Third- and fourth-year students are more frequently employed, spend more hours at work, and are less likely to experience difficulties finding work ($\chi^2 = 165.545$, $p < .001$). As well, **full-time students** are employed less frequently than part-time students (53% vs. 72%, $\chi^2 = 23.557$, $p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

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, and to buy food and for other basic needs. The strongest (statistically significant) correlation is 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). 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*.

Figure 1: Student motivation for term-time paid work



In the institutional survey overall, respondents report that while parents contribute most to their total funding for 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%), 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 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 Table 1 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.

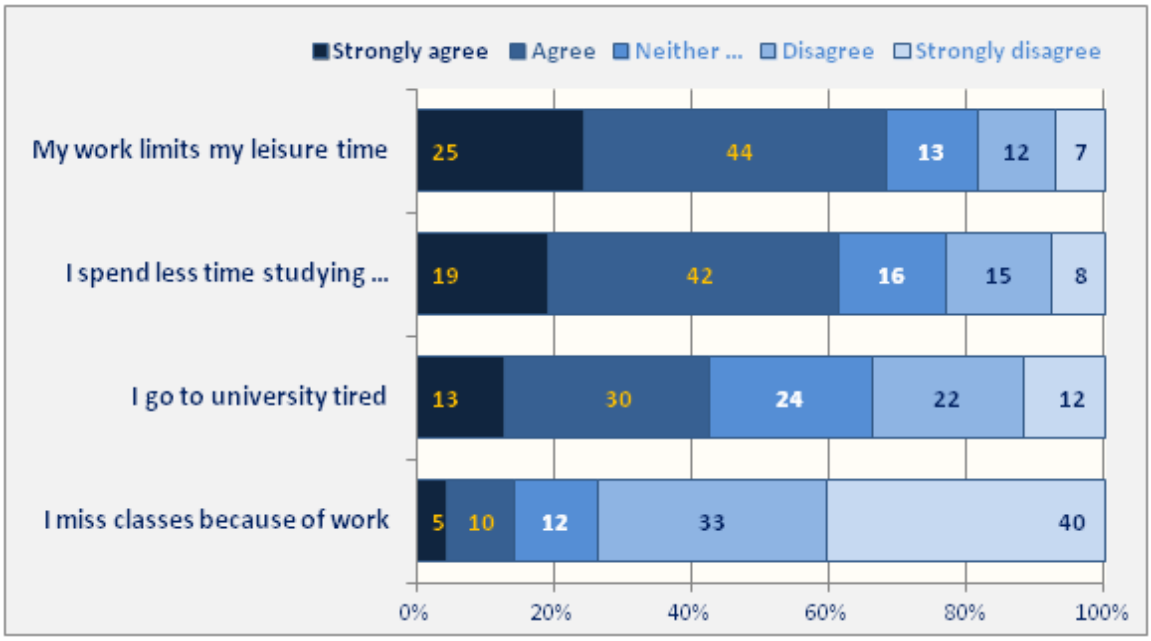
Almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents to the survey overall indicated that they have experienced stress related to tuition and living expenses.

Table 1: Average hours of student involvement in paid work, studies and other activities

	Term-time paid work	Studying & other academic activities	Attending classes, tutorials, or labs	Unpaid or volunteer work	Social and leisure activities	TOTAL number of hours
Not working	-	19	19	3	10	**49.9**
1 - 5 hours	**3**	16	17	3	7	**46.1**
6 - 10 hours	**9**	15	16	3	8	**51.7**
11 - 15 hours	**13**	15	15	2	9	**54.4**
16 - 20 hours	**18**	15	15	3	9	**60.5**
21 or more hours	**36**	11	11	3	12	**73.5**

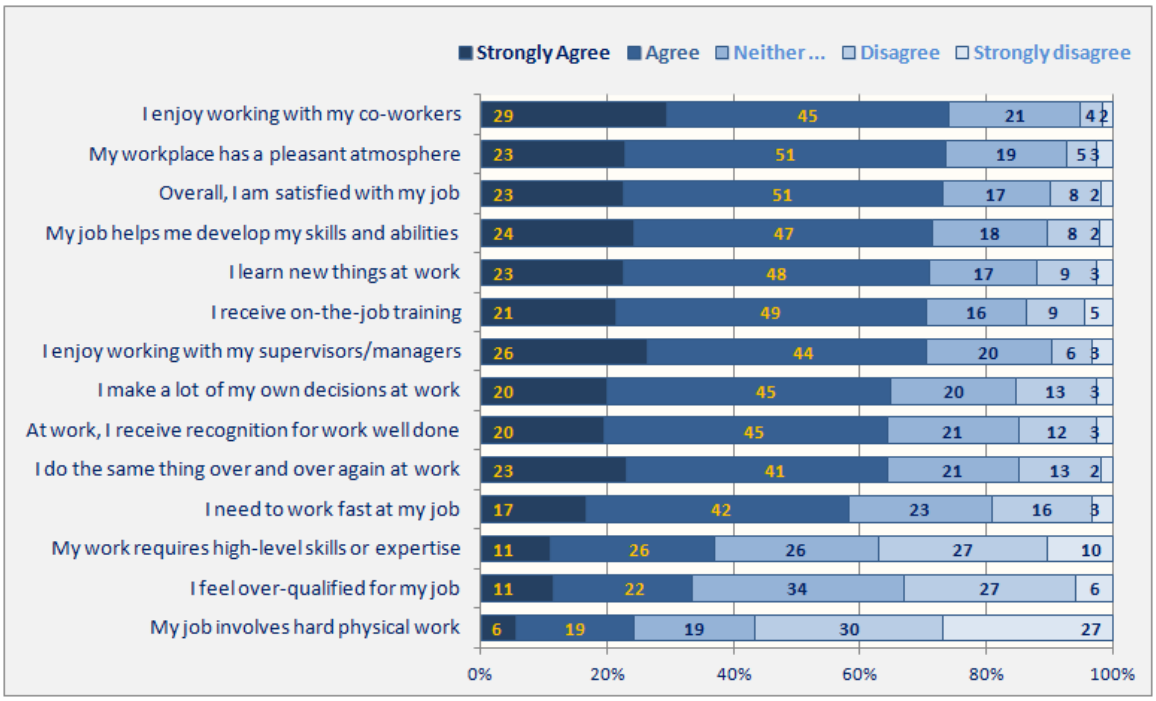
As Figure 2 shows, students involved in paid work most often report that work limits their leisure time, (69%) the time for studies (61%) and that because of work they go to university tired (43%).

Figure 2: The impact of students' involvement in paid work



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 3).

Figure 3: Student experiences of work



Students engaged in high-intensity 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 **immigra**nt 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%, $\chi^2 = 14.029$, $p < .001$).

Discussion and conclusions

This paper provides a snapshot of working students at a Canadian university. Some socio-demographic 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 of work often have negative consequences for academic studies, and 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.

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