

Work Without Wages: Comparing Quality of Working Life in Paid and Unpaid Student Placements



Emily Milton, University of Portsmouth

Dr Julie Udell, julie.udell@port.ac.uk University of Portsmouth

Placements and internships provide students with valuable opportunities to develop professional skills, apply academic knowledge and improve their employability. However, not all placement experiences are the same. Whilst many students undertake paid placements, others complete unpaid roles, particularly in disciplines where work-based learning forms part of professional accreditation. Although these experiences prepare students for professional practice, unpaid placements and

extensive placement hours can create additional financial and personal pressures.

A recent Sutton Trust report found that whilst over half of graduates complete an internship during their studies, around one in five receive no financial compensation ([Holt-White & Cullinane, 2025](#)). We therefore explored whether students undertaking paid and unpaid placements differed in their Placement-Related Quality of Working Life (PRQoWL), moving beyond financial reward to consider the wider placement experience.

Looking beyond pay

Research suggests that whether a placement is paid or unpaid is influenced more by discipline and employment sector than by factors such as family income or gender ([Jang-Tucci et al., 2025](#)). Financial pressures associated with unpaid placements are well documented, with some students reporting significant hardship during their placement year ([Grant-Smith et al., 2017](#)). However, financial reward alone may not fully explain students' experiences. To explore this, we drew on the concept of Quality of Working Life (QoWL), which considers the relationship between work, wellbeing and wider life ([Van Laar et al., 2007](#); [Netto, 2019](#)). Existing Quality of Working Life frameworks did not fully capture students' dual identities as learners and emerging professionals. We therefore developed a Placement-Related Quality of Working Life (PRQoWL) scale to provide a more relevant framework for evaluating students' placement experiences. The questionnaire explored wellbeing and stress, workplace support, autonomy, learning opportunities and relationships, enabling us to compare the experiences of students completing paid and unpaid placements. Each participant's responses were totalled to create an overall PRQoWL score. Higher scores would indicate the student had a more positive view of their quality of working life experience whilst on placement.

What did we find?

Ninety-nine students, the majority from the University of Portsmouth, completed the survey of which 16 had completed an unpaid placement. We explored whether PRQoWL differed according to placement type (paid or unpaid), gender, placement industry, frequency of university contact and living arrangements. Interestingly, paid placements did not automatically result in higher PRQoWL scores. Of the factors examined, only gender showed a significant relationship with PRQoWL, with female participants reporting lower scores than male participants. This suggested female students were more likely to experience lower PRQoWL on placements than male students irrespective if their placements were paid or unpaid. Whilst pay itself did not predict students' quality of working life, the factor analysis highlighted seven areas that appeared to shape the placement experience:





workplace satisfaction and support, stress and wellbeing, learning and meaningful contribution, alignment with career goals, practical and interpersonal support, organisational support, and support from the Higher Education Provider. Together, these findings suggest that students' experiences are influenced by a combination of workplace, personal and institutional factors rather than financial reward alone.

Placement-Related Quality of Working Life (PRQoWL)



Implications for practice

Our findings suggest that evaluating placement quality requires consideration of more than whether opportunities are paid. Whilst financial reward is important, students' experiences are also shaped by workplace support, opportunities for meaningful contribution, organisational culture and communication between Higher Education Providers and placement providers. The findings also reinforce the importance of incorporating the student voice when evaluating placement provision. Using the PRQoWL framework may help Higher Education Providers identify areas for improvement and better support students as they develop their professional identities through work-based learning. Further research with larger and more diverse samples would strengthen understanding of the factors that contribute to positive placement experiences and support the further development and validation of the PRQoWL framework.

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