



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY  
Mr James Milligan MLA (Chair), Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Deputy Chair),  
Ms Laura Nuttall MLA

# **Submission Cover sheet**

## **Inquiry into Unpaid Work**

Submission number: 18

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Submission to the

**ACT Legislative Assembly**

Standing Committee on Economic and Gender and  
Economic Equality

## **Inquiry into Unpaid Work**

**May 2024**

## 1. Background

The University of Canberra's Student Representative Council (UCSRC) was informed by the ACT Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality that an inquiry about the impact of unpaid work was open for submissions. The UCSRC welcomes the committee's efforts in understanding how unpaid work of its various forms affects our community in Canberra.

Our submission represents students' experiences across unpaid work in terms of placements, internships and volunteer opportunities. While we acknowledge the importance of placements as a mandatory training component for professions facing skill shortages and recognise the valuable role of volunteering in the community, our submission offers a different angle of view. Specifically, we reflect on the impact that unpaid work imposes on students' quality of life. Furthermore, we propose recommendations for government action to reduce the negative impacts associated with unpaid work.

## 2. Methodology

The UCSRC collected feedback from its members, other student representatives of clubs and societies, and conducted interviews with individual students from different faculties from 13th May to 26th May 2024. The UCSRC believes, to the best of its ability, it has gathered a sufficient number of feedback that reflects fair and genuine experiences and comments. Several UCSRC members were involved in the collection and analysis of information to ensure it was a fair assessment of the current landscape. There are limitations to this methodology, such as time constraints and the qualitative nature of feedback collection, and the UCSRC therefore recommends further investigation into these matters.

## 3. Challenges to Maintain Sustainable Family Life and Social Connections

There are considerable impacts of unpaid work on students' ability to maintain family connections and a sustainable family life, leading to increased stress, strained relationships, and feelings of isolation.

**Increased Family Distance:** Many students felt distant from their family members due to the demands of unpaid work. The long hours and intense schedules of placements left little time for family interactions, leading to feelings of isolation from loved ones.

**Strained Family Relationships:** The stress and financial burden of unpaid work often resulted in heightened tensions within the household. The increased stress impacted family dynamics, causing strain and conflicts in relationships. As one student mentioned:

“Since we rely on family to care for our son during the week, we don’t feel we can ask for extra childcare, so my partner and I don’t go out together, and we don’t get a break from childcare responsibilities outside of times that we’re at work.”

**Impact on Social and Recreational Activities:** Students reported on having to cut back on socialising, gym memberships, and other recreational activities to save money. This had a negative impact on their social life and their physical and mental wellbeing.

#### 4. Overall impact on students

Students are making considerable financial sacrifices to accommodate unpaid work, affecting their food security, housing stability, transportation, health, and overall wellbeing. These include:

**Reducing Expenditure on Food:** Many students reported cutting back on food, with some skipping meals or reducing their food intake to save money. This was a prevalent theme, indicating a significant impact on nutrition and daily sustenance.

**Housing and Rent Issues:** Students faced challenges with housing, including the need to pay double rent during placements, with some having to move back in with their parents to save on rent, or relying on partners and family for housing support. Some expressed concerns about potential homelessness. A student shared that

“This year I am allocated to 25 weeks of full-time unpaid placements with 15 of these outside of Canberra, where I need to paid double rent due in that period. I have had to cut back significantly on food and living costs.”

**Transportation Costs:** High transportation costs were a common issue, with students resorting to public transportation, walking, or cutting back on fuel usage to save money. The increased travel time and costs were significant burdens.

**Medical and Health Expenses:** Some students reported having to forego medical appointments and essential health-related expenses due to financial constraints caused by unpaid work.

**Negative Emotional Impact:** The emotional toll of unpaid work is evident in the feelings of frustration, worry, and hopelessness expressed by students. The uncertainty and financial instability have made some students question the value of their degree and future endeavours. Also, many students reported increased stress and anxiety levels during unpaid work.

#### 5. Impact on Study Time and Academic Goals

Usually, some students take internships with other classes while others complete placements in time blocks outside the main studying semesters. When unpaid work is combined with other study load or paid commitments it led to compromised academic

performance, extended degree completion times, and increased stress and mental load. On the other hand, students completing unpaid work in isolation reported little to no impact on their academic performance.

**Compromised Study Time:** Many students reported having to reduce their study time due to unpaid work. The need to balance unpaid internships with paid work and other responsibilities left them with less time and energy for their academic studies.

**Reduced Academic Performance:** Some students mentioned that the quality of their academic work suffered. They had to put less effort into assignments and study less diligently, leading to lower academic performance and a focus on merely passing rather than excelling.

**Extended Degree Completion Time:** A few students had to delay completing their degrees due to the demands of unpaid work. They either had to extend their study period to accommodate placements or consider taking breaks from their studies altogether.

**Potential Career Doubts:** The strain of unpaid work led some students to doubt their academic and career choices. The financial and time pressures made them question the value of continuing their degrees under such demanding conditions.

**Lack of Breaks:** Some students mentioned that their unpaid placements during breaks (winter and summer) left them without any downtime, adding to their overall stress and reducing their ability to focus on their studies during regular semesters.

## 6. Volunteering within the community

A few students shared their experiences with volunteering which were generally positive, and they faced minimal issues as outlined below.

**Lack of recognition:** Students mentioned lack of acknowledgement to the contributions and efforts of university students who volunteer in the community.

**Transportation:** The main challenge students identified when volunteering is cost of transportation.

## 7. Suggestions from Students to ACT Government

There were calls for systemic changes to address the issues with unpaid work. Students advocated for better financial support, paid placements, and policies that protect their rights and wellbeing during their education.

Students also suggest that the government collaborates with educational institutions to evaluate whether unpaid students are adequately covered by workplace safety policies and regulations to prevent any potential exploitation and ensure that students receive meaningful and relevant experiences within safe workplaces.

Many of the impacts experienced by students come down to the financial implications of undertaking unpaid work. Therefore, the Government should consider further financial

supports being made available to students. The most agreed form of financial support is a stipend available to all students who are required to undertake unpaid placements and internships.

This stipend should sufficiently cover the additional expenses incurred by students during the period of their unpaid work and extend to all disciplines (not just those covered by existing ACT Government and Federal Government programs). Additionally, expanding access to emergency financial support and bursaries can assist students facing immediate financial crises.

The ACT and Federal government's commitments to provide scholarships and the current support has not sufficiently addressed the challenges students face. As one student explains:

“Almost everyone in my course is relying on some paid work or Centrelink payments to get by. We have conversations nearly weekly about the impact the fact that our placements are unpaid is having on our lives. If I received some income for the placements that I have to do, I may not need to do my paid work and we may be able to afford some childcare. This would have immeasurable benefits for my family’s wellbeing and my mental health.”

## **8. Recommendations to the ACT Legislative Assembly from the University of Canberra’s Student Representative Council (UCSRC)**

Based on the feedback and insights gathered from students regarding the impact of unpaid placements, internships, and volunteering, the UCSRC submits the following recommendations to the Legislative Assembly to address the significant financial, mental health, and academic challenges faced by students during unpaid work:

1. Acknowledge the impact of unpaid work on students
2. Investigate the issues of unpaid placements further
3. Request the ACT government to consider the feasibility and implementation of student suggestions to supplement and enhance existing support.

University of Canberra’s Student Representative Council (UCSRC)

| Contact [ucsrc@canberra.edu.au](mailto:ucsrc@canberra.edu.au)

| Address 11 Kirinari Street, Bruce, ACT 2617