



# A Comparative Analysis of Paid and Unpaid Veterinary Nursing Clinical Placements: Investigating The Experiences of Veterinary Nursing Students



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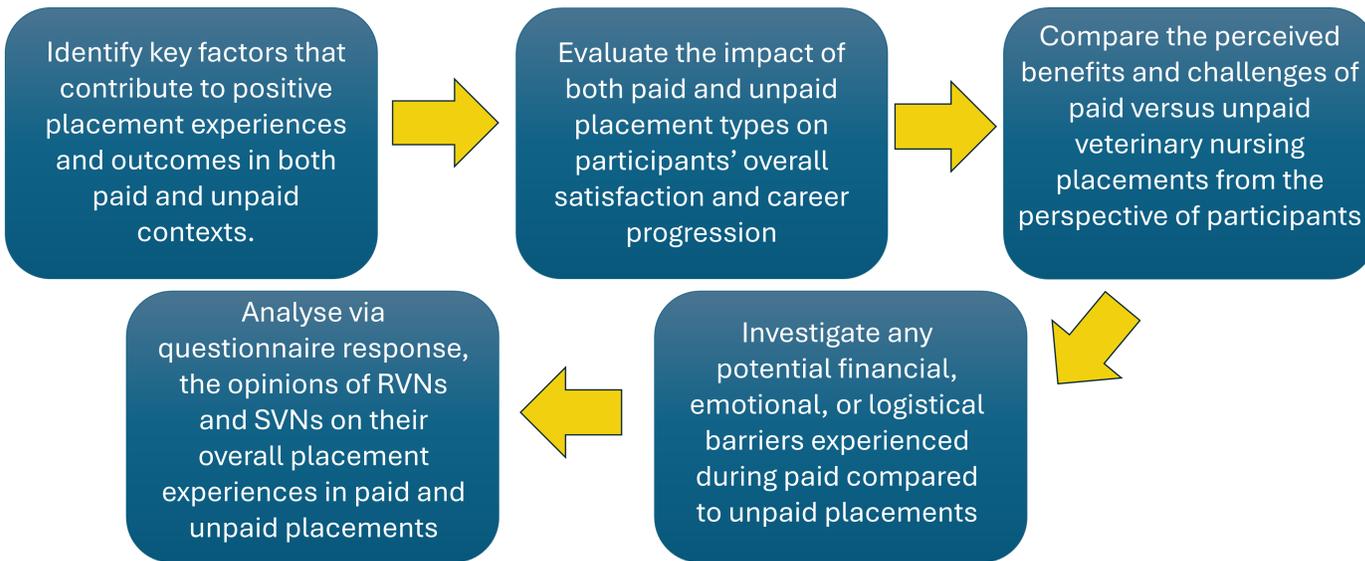
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## Introduction

Student veterinary nurses (SVNs) in the UK are required by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to complete a minimum of 1,800 hours in an approved training practice (TP) with the intent of becoming a registered veterinary nurse (RVN) (Rowlinson, 2016). UK legislation states that students undertaking a placement lasting less than one year as a part of a further or higher education course are not entitled to national minimum wage (GOV.UK, 2013).

There are two groups of TPs identified: students who are paid minimum wage or above for their time in the clinical placement, and students who are not paid. While general stressors in veterinary nursing are known, differences between paid (PPL) and unpaid (UPL) placements remain underexplored.

### Objectives:



## Methods

With ethical approval from Harper Adams University and a sample size of 377 required, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to current and former SVNs across the UK to collect primary data.

Questions included themes of placement experiences, payment status, stressors, and professional aspirations. Following a pilot study, participants confirmed eligibility and gave informed consent before completing the survey.

Distribution methods included social media platforms and randomised direct email to veterinary practices, using voluntary response and snowball sampling.

Quantitative data was analysed via cross tabulation, percentages, chi-squared and permutation tests where appropriate, to identify any significant associations. P values of <0.05 were indicative of statistical significance. Qualitative responses were thematically analysed.

It was hypothesised that financial disparities between PPL and UPL SVNs would lead to differing experiences and responses.

## Results

232 (61.5%) of the 377 respondents had a PPL and 145 (38.5%) had a UPL. Both groups reported similar benefits and common stressors, including high workload and emotional strain. PPL students reported long working hours and UPL students reported financial pressures, but overall impact on experience did not differ significantly ( $p=0.114$ ). As hypothesised, UPL students endured a greater financial impact on their overall experience ( $p=0.001$ ), and exposure to financial hardship ( $P<0.001$ ), compared to PPL students.

Both groups considered leaving their placement due to experiences of financial hardship; PPL students cited low pay as the main reason. More UPL students reported having to seek external financial support ( $P<0.001$ ) and experienced increased stress and anxiety due to financial pressures ( $p<0.001$ ).

PPL students more often worked unsociable hours ( $p<0.001$ ). The choice of TP was financially influenced for both groups, but more commonly for UPL ( $p<0.001$ ). Significantly more PPL respondents were satisfied with their overall experience ( $p<0.001$ ), while less UPLs expressed the desire to continue in the profession long-term ( $p<0.002$ ).

Despite the differences in responses, there was no remarkable difference regarding the ability to complete the necessary practical skills ( $p=0.373$ ).

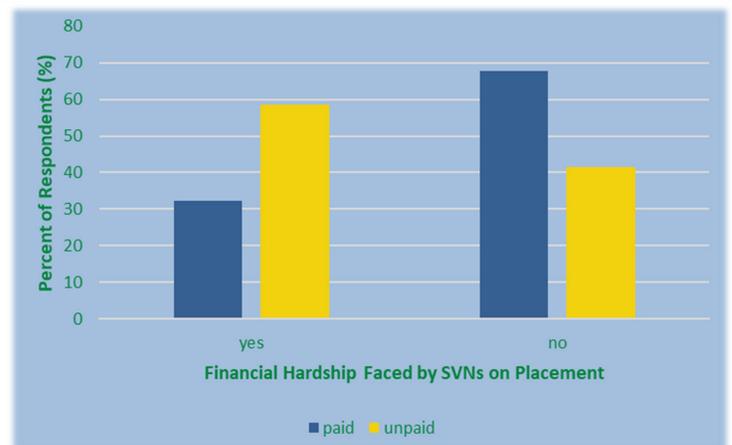


Figure 1: Paid and unpaid participants' experience of financial hardship

*"I think the right practice with the right people is more important than whether you get paid provided you can obtain financial support in other ways"* – UPL participant

*"Having done an unpaid placement and a paid placement, having a paid placement helps reduce the financial stress a little bit"* – interestingly, some respondents had experience in both, noting the tangible impact of being paid

*"I enjoyed my time during my placement and learned ways to adapt to the difficulties as these are part of the profession"* – PPL participant

## Conclusion and Future Research

High workload and emotional strain remain primary stressors for SVNs, supporting Black et al., (2015). PPL students worked over twice the unsociable hours of UPLs, reflecting higher expectations with pay (Zegwaard and Adams-Hutcheson, 2024), while UPL students faced greater financial strain. Financial hardship led both groups to consider leaving, with more UPL students feeling it reduced their desire to stay in the profession, supporting Harniman (2024). UPL students reported greater impact on study, but both groups completed practical skills equally, showing RCVS-approved TPs ensure core competencies (Cooper and Smith, 2015).

Limitations include the lack of current national baseline data, inclusion of RVNs, and potential response bias. Future studies should focus on current SVNs and explore attrition rates to better reflect present conditions. Payment status strongly affects financial stress, satisfaction and career plans, though environment and personal factors also influence outcomes. Addressing financial and structural challenges may improve placement satisfaction and long-term commitment across the profession.

## References:

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