

98 Learning from Labour: challenging student worker's precarity in UK post-92 HE

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper addresses student workers' educational and employment challenges in a UK post-92 University during the Covid-19 pandemic. Students' labour market and work-study-life balance difficulties are well known. Our research focuses on the less explored workplace dimension of precarity. The study is based on findings from a pilot project carried out at Middlesex University in 2022-2023. Using multiple methods, the research explored students' work experience and their knowledge of employment rights. Early findings show that students fill extremely challenging low-paying jobs where labour rights violations are widespread. The pandemic conjuncture has negatively impacted students with fewer jobs, higher workloads and more unpredictable schedules. Coping strategies include silent endurance but also small-scale resistance. Respondents' accounts portray highly exploitative workplace regimes which rely on student-worker's precarious condition for reproduction. We conclude that post-92 universities should not be unfairly blamed for failing students' employability. The project's ongoing impact strategy is documented.

Full paper

This paper addresses the educational and employment challenges faced by student workers in a UK post-92 University. Financial and labour market difficulties affecting students' work—study-life balance are well known. However, the benefits of labour market flexibility and resilience remain highly contested. Our research focuses on the less explored workplace dimension of precarity. The study is based on findings from a pilot project carried out at Middlesex University in 2022-2023. We analyse the labour process of students' precarious work and their resistance tactics. The early phase of the project's ongoing impact strategy is documented.

The Project aimed at adapting and adopting Critical Pedagogy to the post-92 HE context to raise the quality of learning experienced by working students and to enhance understanding of the challenges they face at work, and their coping strategies in the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. The research used multiple methods, including a survey, interviews, in-class discussions and reflective essays, to establish the extent of their work experience, the nature of any problems encountered and their knowledge of employment rights. Academics across the University employed student-centred, research-engaged strategies to stimulate critical reflection on students' work experiences and socio-political backgrounds.

The research identified students' major workplace challenges and their coping strategies while reflexive exercises provided detailed descriptions and experiential narratives of labour processes across a wide range of jobs. Early findings show that this HE institution, in line with sectoral trends, welcomes potentially disadvantaged 'first-in-family' students accustomed to, and in need to work. Most working students fill low-paying, low-skilled jobs in hospitality, retail, care and education. The survey reveals labour rights violations reinforced by students' limited knowledge of employment rights. Variations in sample responses suggest international students display higher vulnerabilities. Visa constraints draw them towards labour market grey areas. Overall, most research participants find work extremely challenging. There are indications that the Covid-19 pandemic conjuncture has negatively impacted working students. The availability of suitable jobs has declined affecting their labour market participation rate. Available jobs display higher workloads and more unpredictable schedules. Coping strategies include silent endurance, embracement of employer-driven flexibility, but also small-scale resistance. High turnover remains the dominant form of resistance.

Labour process analysis identifies the structural constraints that make such workplaces toxic and exploitative environments. Participants' accounts report management exploitative practices, including the lengthening of the working time, deskilling and effort intensification combined with functional flexibility. The picture emerging is one of an often disorganised but highly exploitative workplace regime which relies on student-workers' precarious conditions for

its reproduction. Due to their short-term commitments, lack of experience and employment rights knowledge as well as their desire for flexible hours, students become dependable workers. However, student workers are no mere victims of unscrupulous employers and exploitative work designs. Resistance to unfair conditions also materializes; this manifests itself as labour mobility power exercised by withdrawing labour (turnover) or as workplace small-scale resistance by individuals and groups (foot-dragging, work-to-rule, solidarity, grievances).

The paper presents a picture in line with national and local data about trends in student labour market engagement and employment as adjusted by the pandemic watershed. Its findings, however, suggest that the social suffering of student workers is underestimated and consequently there is a stronger connection between 'bad' jobs and poor educational outcomes than previously thought. In conclusion we argue that it is not poor education that allegedly prevents students from succeeding in the labour market, but rather it is the latter, due to the social suffering it causes, that prevents students from making the most of their learning opportunities. We conclude that post-92 universities should not be unfairly blamed for failing students' employability. However, recognition of the significant challenges students face should lead universities as well as students and educators to turn these struggles into an opportunity for collective, social and pedagogic, change.

The research team impact strategy consists of an evolving and cumulative roadmap of actions developed with key stakeholders. So far, local stakeholders (university leaders, students, lecturers, civil society actors and unions) have been engaged to develop social and pedagogic actions to overcome the significant challenges bad jobs pose to students. These include embedding critical pedagogy strategies in learning and teaching, generalising education about employment rights and providing an advisory service to support victims of their violations. A Citizens UK 'Listening Campaign' addresses student mobilising to generate activism and recommendations from below.

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