

337 Working While Studying: an exploration of the drivers leading university students to seek employment over the course of their degree

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

We consider the increasing trend in the number of university students seeking part-time employment whilst studying in the UK. Building on a case-study situated at a mid-sized British university, we survey the undergraduate population to investigate the relative importance of three drivers for working while studying: (i) necessities, (ii) wants, and (iii) for future employment. Questionnaire responses are linked to university records, providing demographic information, as well as attainment and engagement indicators, to inform the characterisation of typologies. A third dataset address affective dimensions, such as physical/mental wellbeing, to be correlated with university outcomes. We also conduct follow-up interviews to enrich quantitative findings. Grounding on such detailed instruments, our results enable us to advance recommendations for intervention at institutional level, as well as pathways for further exploration at education policy level.

Full paper

In recent times, higher education providers in the United Kingdom have registered an increasing trend in the number of students seeking part-time employment whilst studying (Creed et al., 2015; Darolia, 2014; Grozev & Easterbook, 2020; Eurostat, 2016). Different factors seem to contribute to this phenomenon. Increasing participation in higher education (HE) implies that a greater proportion of students from less privileged background access university without family support (Lessky & Unger, 2021; Mishra, 2020); resorting to part-time work to pay for living costs. At the same time, wider access to HE increases the competition for graduate-level jobs, leading students to seek opportunities to signal work-readiness through employment experience on top of their degree qualifications (Little, 2002). Furthermore, the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are now compounded by a cost of living crisis fuelled by economic and political instability, which generate additional pressure on student finance, mental wellbeing, and attainment (Grozev & Easterbook, 2020; Students' Union UCL, 2023; Wang et al., 2020).

Whilst there is broad acknowledgement of the challenges faced by university students, very little research has been conducted in exploring the motivations that lead students to work while studying, with the great majority of contributions focusing on US data (e.g., Darolia, 2014; Stern & Nakata, 1991; Wang et al., 2020), and limited scope to assess external validity and implications for British HE, due to the difference across education systems. This paper addresses gaps in the literature in two ways. First, it considers the experience of the United Kingdom to compare and contrast findings with US based studies. Second, it shifts the focus to the lived experience of students through extensive surveying of the student population. Our research builds on a case-study situated at a mid-sized British university with the aim of (i) generating valuable information for universities to understand and respond to students' needs and (ii) developing a methodology that can be easily scaled up to other HE institutions, in the United Kingdom and beyond, informing the HE policy debate.

The first objective of our investigation is to assess the relative importance of three drivers for working while studying: (i) necessities, (ii) wants, and (iii) future employment. The first two drivers encompass issues with the increasing cost of living, and with the willingness to increase purchasing power to afford a better lifestyle during studies. The third driver explores motivations linked to employability, such as the acquisition of practical skills, experience, and/or an internship record.

Our research framework grounds on a mixed methods approach. A questionnaire designed and deployed via Qualtrics is administered to students, targeting the undergraduate population and recording the views of students currently in employment, as well as not in employment. Linking student responses to university records, data exploring the three drivers for working while studying are combined with demographic information, as well as

attainment and engagement indicators to inform the characterisation of typologies. A third dataset addresses affective dimensions, such as physical/mental wellbeing, as well as student's self-assessment of their financial situation, to establish correlation with university outcomes.

Questionnaire respondents are also invited to attend follow-up interviews to elaborate on their experience. Qualitative data is being explored both deductively (to gather further information about the three drivers) as well as inductively (to assess whether further drivers and nuances emerge from student narratives). The accuracy of our questionnaire items (i.e. gathering information on shift patterns, distance from workplace, as well as affective dimensions of the student experience), will enable us to advance recommendations for practical intervention at institutional level, as well as pathways for further exploration at wider education policy level. The research protocol has cleared ethical approval.

In this first account, we will detail the results of a pilot survey, comprising survey responses from 150 students and a subset of transcripts with those respondents who agreed to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview. The insights derived from the pilot will enable us to review the structure of the questionnaire, refine the interview script for qualitative interviews, and progress to further data collection from the beginning of the Academic Year 2023-24. We shall welcome collaboration and partnership with other HE institutions interested in researching the experience of student workers.

Initial findings suggest that the main motivation for additional employment is 'wants', with a substantial share of respondents (over a third) working to cover basic needs. This suggests that there are some cases where, firstly, student finance may be inadequate and, secondly, students do not recognise the employability benefits of part-time work.

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