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Tuition and timesheets: analysing undergraduates' hidden strategies for negotiating study and employment needs during the 'cost of learning crisis'

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper uses a longitudinal study of 27 undergraduates at a UK university to trace students' employment narrative in tandem with their studies. While students have long supplemented their loan income through part-time work, the present 'cost of learning crisis' (Hill et al, 2024) has generated urgent questions regarding student support and engagement across the HE sector.

Our research foregrounds complexities of students' lived experience, with interviews helping unpack the subjective rationality of students' decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). Findings indicate that students' strategies represent a form of 'independent learning', albeit in a context where university study often competes with employment and employability pressures. Yet while many students' strategies facilitated academic achievement and graduate-level employment, others were constrained by financial and social capital inequities. Moreover, these students were often acutely aware that employment commitments were directly affecting their academic performance yet felt constrained in their capacity to address this imbalance.

Full paper

This paper draws on longitudinal qualitative data from 27 undergraduates to explore how students negotiate their study and employment needs while at university. While it has long been common for students to supplement their loan income through part-time work (Hodgson and Spours 2010; Metcalfe, 2001; Broadbridge and Swanson, 2005), the escalating 'cost of learning crisis' (Hill et al, 2024) has generated urgent questions regarding student support and engagement across the UK university sector. With the real value of student loans having decreased by a third since 2012, undergraduates are having to work longer hours to pay for accommodation and subsistence costs. Recent data from HEPI (2022) indicates that the percentage of students in paid employment has grown to 55 per cent, with nearly a quarter working more than 20 hours per week.

Research on student employment remains scarce, though a number of quantitative studies have helped foreground certain key trends. Callendar (2008), for example, found that increasing the number of part-time hours worked during term-time was likely to negatively impact academic attainment. Conversely though, Evans et al's study indicates that part-time work can be beneficial for students as a means of improving their self-organisation and accruing career-enhancing skills. Aside from working excessive

hours, these studies raise fundamental questions about under which specific conditions student employment might be considered detrimental or beneficial. Moreover, the literature requires updating to account for emerging factors, notably the rise of the 'gig economy' and increased pressures graduates face to accrue employability capital though unpaid internships (Ingram et al, 2024). Simply put, there is a need to rethink definitions of student employment that are not too broad in their measurement (i.e. conflating term-time with vacation work; not accounting for variables such as unsociable hours or remote working) or too narrow (i.e. ignoring forms of career-enhancing employment).

This paper seeks to help address these questions by drawing on a three-year longitudinal study of 27 undergraduates at a UK university. Conducted between 2019 and 2023, the study traces students' employment narrative in tandem with their studies. Our research design importantly foregrounds the complexities of students' lived experience, with termly interviews helping unpack the evolving subjective rationality of students' decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). Findings indicate that students' strategies represent a form of 'independent learning', albeit within a context where university study often competes with pressures to generate income and enhance graduate employability.

Yet while many students' strategies enabled them to achieve good degrees and graduate-level employment, for others their decision-making was constrained by fundamental inequities in financial and social capital access. At one end of the spectrum, wealthier students could afford to restrict their employment to holiday periods or avoid working altogether. This freed up students to pursue internships and other forms of career-enhancing work experience, as well as committing to extracurricular activities on campus and managing their mental health.

At the other end of the spectrum, students from poorer backgrounds had little choice but to supplement their loan payments through 30-40 hour weekly shiftwork. These jobs – typically involving retail, warehouse, hospitality, and delivery work – were characterised by precarious, inflexible, and often unsocial working hours, and offered comparatively few opportunities to accrue skills and experience valuable for graduate careers. For many of these students, their independent learning strategies were more akin to 'self-reliance' (Hensby and Adewumi, 2024), as they made use of universities' increasingly flexible learning provision following the Covid-19 pandemic, while also seeking to avoid disclosing the full extent of their struggles to family or university staff. Interviews revealed how students were often acutely aware that their employment commitments were directly affecting their academic performance yet felt fundamentally constrained in their capacity to redress the balance.

In sum, our paper makes a key contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the motivations, experiences, and impact of student employment in contemporary UK higher education. By taking a broader definition of student employment, our paper captures the continuum of extracurricular work that students undertake, ranging from 'career-enhancing' employment opportunities to jobs that both reflect and exacerbate their struggles to commit full-time to their academic study. Moreover, these findings provide a timely contribution to a topic requiring crucial attention, as the ongoing 'cost of learning crisis' means these inequities are likely to deepen further without urgent interventions from the HE sector.

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