

Paid work during term time: classified experiences of full-time undergraduate students

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Context

- Lots of research on student term-time employment in UK, US and Ireland (Callender 2003; Bozick 2007; Darmody and Smyth 2008; Hall 2010; Watts and Pickering 2000)
- Emphasis of research on 1) positive and negative aspects of work and 2) balancing term-time work with academic studies
- Main findings: w/c students more likely to work longer hours (Callender 2003), more likely to suffer academically because of employment (Humphrey 2006) and more likely to be working to pay for essentials rather than luxuries (Moreau and Leathwood 2006)
- Other aspects of 'university experience' not explored
- Very few studies analysed class and paid work (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Humphrey 2006)

Methods

- 90 student participants
- Students studying range of subjects including the sciences and engineering, humanities, social sciences and law
- Longitudinal research: data drawn from interviews in 1st and 2nd year (biographical and semi-structured)
- Emphasis on term-time paid work rather than gap years/internships/summer jobs/unpaid caring

General trends

- About 75% of students had a term-time job or were looking for one
- All students working for financial reasons
- For many, working is a financial necessity rather than for providing luxuries
- Poorer students under more pressure to sustain jobs that were unsatisfactory
- Working between 8-16 hours a week (flexible hours)
- Most working in low paid work (bars/restaurants/supermarkets) with casual contracts
- A few (usually) middle-class students had more well-paying jobs: guitar teacher; dance teacher; actor; proof reader; gym instructor

Positive aspects of term-time work

- Money
- Can 'switch off' or escape 'university bubble'
- Learning about businesses and chain stores

‘the customers appreciate you, and even just...it was nice just to have that sort of focus in your life even though [the work] is mundane’. (Jade, UofB, w/c, interview 2)

‘you get a different view. Like you’re with people who don’t go to university, you’re with older people, you’re with people who are still at school. It’s just nice to have a different variety of people, and then you can talk to business people who are coming in for, you know, whatever. So that’s nice, instead of just being in your own little environment’ (Jessica, UWE, w/c, interview 1)

Negative aspects of term-time work

- Difficulties of balancing studies with work
- Casual nature of job
- Difficult to maintain job alongside vacations
- Few opportunities to volunteer/socialise/do extra-curricular activities

‘Probably working prevents me from doing things, focusing at the weekend, that sort of thing [...]. I think that’s probably the main obstacle that’s like holding me back, because I don’t get to do anything at the weekends, I just work.’ (Keren, UWE, w/c, interview 2)

I: ...are there any obstacles that prevent you from doing as we as you would like to?

Maybe my working commitments [...] I was working all day, and then I was really tired and I've just had a ... and I'm really tired right now because I've just not been able to sleep properly since then. My mind's just been on the go, so, yeah, work probably does get in the way a little bit. (Isabel, m/c, UWE, interview 2)

‘I’ve seen what can happen, there used to be...a couple of my friends that used to work there, they went to UWE and both of them dropped out after their first year, basically just because they were working too much overtime. [...] the short term financial gain of a bit of extra money every month isn’t worth it in my mind’. (Garry, w/c, interview 1)

Paid work and the 'university experience'

- Graduate employers often consider extra-curricular activities to be an indication that candidates have developed leadership, management and teamworking skills.
- Extra-curricular activities are form of cultural capital, influencing graduate employment prospects
- Paid work influences time available for extra-curricular activities, social networking, attending 'milk rounds' and applying for summer internships
- In current economic climate and at a time of 'grade inflation', valuable social networks are perhaps *as* important as academic qualifications in the competition for graduate employment

‘...there’s a lot of stuff going on outside work as well, like careers stuff. So I’ve got interviews for banks so....want to do a summer internship with a bank. So I’ve got back and forwards to London pretty much every week. [...] I’ve had four interviews with [company] in the one day, a couple at [company] and I’ve got more this week and then more next week. [...] So the problem is whenever it wipes out a day of legal work and then you’re behind when you come back’. (Nathan, UofB, m/c, interview 3)

'...my boyfriend's just read so much and spent so many like...just time just doing what he needs to do and like bettering himself, and I couldn't help thinking like every weekend I worked both days [...] and all that time that you're serving pizza to horrible, ungrateful people who are like yelling at you for God knows what, it's so stressful, you're just thinking "oh I could be practising my violin" or "I could be reading" or "I could be doing my work". And it just feels like a complete waste of time because you're not doing anything, you're not going anywhere, you're doing something that's completely just awful for you' (Megan, UofB, w/c, interview 1, English)

Some middle-class participants were in the privileged position of being able to actively choose to prioritise sports or extra curricular activities over a job:

‘I don’t think I could [get a part-time job] here just because you never know when you’re going to be in plays and you never know when you’re going to audition for something and get into something and then have to spend all your time doing that’. (Rose, m/c, UofB, interview 2, drama)

‘I’ve tried to find work, but because I’ve got rowing and I’ve got studying there’s not really very much time. [...] it would have to be very flexible and no-one is really willing to offer that’ (Edward, m/c, UofB, interview 1)

Strategies of sustaining a job during university:

'I think what puts people off is the fact that I don't actually live here, so they know that I'm going to go home for Christmas for about a month, and then the same for Easter, and then summer....it's like 3 months long. So it might be that that's putting them off, but I'm not sure.' (Carly, m/c, UofB, interview 3)

- local students in good position to sustain a job throughout the year, but commuting limited opportunities at university
- many students worked in chains which organised transfers to branches at home
- many students were prepared to lose their job in the university vacations and then look for another job when they return to university after the summer holidays

Differences between UWE and UoB?

- No difference in institutional/staff support for working students
- Both HEIs had student union 'Job Shops'
- Practical differences in relation to location of UWE and UofB (e.g. public transport and travelling to-from job):
'living on campus it's kind of out of the way of everywhere [...] it's difficult to get to like bars in town, getting home at night and stuff' (Amber, UWE, m/c, interview 2)

Conclusions

- Our findings emphasise the negative aspects of term-time work rather than the positive aspects
- Term-time work limits opportunities for extra-curricular activities/networking/volunteering as well as limiting time for academic work
- No institutional differences between UWE and UofB in relation to student experiences of balancing work and studies
- Class inequalities influencing students' experiences of university and graduate employment opportunities