

For Universities On Working Students

As the cost of living crisis continues, growing numbers of students are seeking employment or an increase in their existing working hours to reduce their financial insecurity. For these students, student loans, bursaries, and other available grants do not cover the basic living costs of rent, food and bills, and securing a supplementary income is a necessity. ONS data shows that between October and December 2021 over 260,000 full-time students were employed on zero-hour contracts; this represents 25% of all zero-hour contracts in the UK. The hospitality sector, with its need for flexible workers to accommodate seasonal and other trade fluctuations, might seem ideal for students looking to fit work around study. However, rather than benefiting from the flexibility promised by the zero-hour contract, [students can experience job and income insecurity, feel undervalued and poorly treated as workers, and have the sense they will be replaced if they do not comply with employer demands.](#)

Students working late shifts and long hours can exhibit tiredness and lack the motivation to study. They may struggle to achieve the results they are capable of and can find universities unsympathetic. These students are in a bind. Pressure from employers and limited understanding from universities can prove detrimental to academic

achievement and to their prospects of long-term social mobility. Student-workers comprise a distinct worker group that is vulnerable in distinct ways and could be better supported by universities.

Greater understanding of how students experience zero-hour contracts and better liaison with key local student employers could pave the way for multiple benefits, including the potential for a better outcome for the student, an increase in student retention and in employer engagement for the university, and an improvement for the employer.

This brief reports on research conducted among students working in the hospitality sector, and provides a set of recommendations for universities on how to support working students, and how to engage with employers to improve working practices as relate to student-workers.

Experiences Of Students Who Work

Students Work Out Of Financial Necessity

Many students need to work throughout their time at university. Loans often do not fully cover student needs and their families cannot always afford to help financially. Students work in order to pay for basic needs such as food, rent and utilities and require flexible hours to accommodate study timetables. Many work in the hospitality sector as waiters, waitresses, bar staff, baristas, reception, and event staff, on zero-hour contracts.

Flexibility Is Employer-Driven And Students Struggle To Combine Work With Study

Jobs in hospitality are seen as plentiful and easy to come by. These jobs ought to work well for students by providing them with the flexibility of hours to not detrimentally impact their study and the income needed to stay in education. However, this flexibility does not always materialise. Flexibility is often experienced primarily by the employer and not by both sides of the working partnership. Being called in to work unexpectedly, receiving repeated requests to work more hours than planned, or being told they were not needed at the last minute were cited as regular occurrences by working students – with consequences on their ability to study well and plan spending.

“[M]y grades would be better [if I didn't work]. I would have more time for studying. But financially this is not an option.”

“I needed the money as my student loan didn't cover my accommodation, let alone living costs. ... if I didn't need the money, I wouldn't choose to work, especially in this restaurant.”

'I got back, and my boss had been like 'can you work the next two nights?' - and I was like, 'I can't, I've got a hand-in' - and she was like, 'there's no other staff to cover you.' In the end, I managed to get one of the night's covered, and massively rushed the essay. It showed because I got a lower mark for it.'

'I'm often put on because it's expected to be a very busy shift and it turns out it's not. I'll often be told very last minute "oh you don't need to come in". So if I've made plans around that or had to schedule my uni work ... that kind of thing can be a bit annoying.'

'It wasn't so much a choice, it's more you're shifted to do the shifts so you go to work, but then next day you've got university.'

Students Experience Job Insecurity

Students relations with employers can be a cause of job insecurity. Failure to agree to workplace imposed changes can lead to fear of having hours reduced or being removed from the rota. The stress from this has consequences on study time and academic performance.

'If I can't commit to certain things because of university, always in the back of my mind there is always that "oh well he could give the shifts I have now to somebody else".'

'[if you declined shifts] They'd just start dropping your hours and they'd drop them so low that you literally can't afford to stay in that job anymore so they wouldn't like fire you so you have to leave but they would kind of, make it difficult for you to stay.'

'If they were just part-time they were easily replaced, if they missed like, or were sick for two of their shifts, then they'd be replaced ... because you can always be replaced, if it's better off for the employer ... Because someone who's just more flexible than you, can always join.'

This can lead to students concealing information about their needs to keep shifts coming their way, further increasing stress and feelings of insecurity.

Working Students Feel Underappreciated By Employers

While some students do feel respected by their employers, many report not being treated equally to other worker groups, including not being invited to social events, or afforded the same development opportunities, which impacts on confidence.

Student-workers can feel that their private and university commitments are not respected and that they are generally disadvantaged by the transactional nature of their relationship with employers, due to their transient contractual status.

'[T]he boss just didn't care, she was like, 'these are your shifts, if you can't do it you don't have the job.'

'I felt like [as a young woman and a student] I didn't have the respect that I need in that job to fulfil it appropriately. ... I think we need to be given more trust and more support in what we do.'

'I have worked there for two years and went to uni to better my life. I worked there at every single wedding that they had during the summer, and I wasn't invited to the Christmas do ... if we had had the invitation to know we are appreciated, then it would have been nice.'

Key Policy Recommendations

There are several ways in which universities could proactively support working students better and raise the profile of student-worker concerns within public policy debates. Processes are needed that provide space for better understanding of student realities of income insecurity and create engagement opportunities between universities, employers, and relevant unions.

1. Recognise the challenges working students face and understand this duty of care within university pastoral support.
2. Establish processes for students to share their employment-related problems – especially around zero-hour contracts – with relevant university personnel, where they can elicit advice and support for a course of action to address those issues.
3. Provide tailored training, counselling and support around stress and anxiety relating to workplace challenges.
4. Reach out to local businesses and develop university-employer-student fora where issues can be aired, employers can advertise jobs, and students can voice their needs.
5. Work collaboratively with local businesses and unions, and promote good student employment practice

For more detailed information on these recommendations, refer to the **Guidelines for Universities document**.



The Research

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