



Students and Work:

What impact is part-time and full-time work having on the student experience?

3:30pm-5pm, Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023  
The Grimond Room, Portcullis House



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The APPG for Students held a meeting to discuss students and paid work, the effects this might have on students and the university experience, and whether higher education was a different offering than it was before.

The meeting came on the back of evidence that students were increasingly taking on paid work and working longer hours than ever.

Most recently, an NUS survey of 1,367 full-time students in higher education, found:

- **69% work part time on top of their studies.**
- Of those who work, **65% reported working more this year than last.**
- Of those who work, almost **1 in 5 worked more than 20 hours per week** alongside their studies.
- **34%** of those who work say it has a somewhat negative impact on their studies. **4% say it has a very negative impact.**
- Of those reporting a negative impact, **tiredness, juggling commitments, and less time for studying** are all reported.

While a survey of 10'000 full-time undergraduates conducted by HEPI and published in June, found:

- **55% are doing paid work compared to 45% 12 months before**
- Students in paid employment were working an average of 13.5 hours per week.
- 76% of all respondents reported a negative impact from the cost-of-living crisis.

Considering the above, the APPG met to discuss:

- 1) How the cost-of-living crisis has changed student experiences of paid employment both quantitatively & qualitatively.
- 2) The impact of increased working hours on student's ability to study.
- 3) The impact of increased paid employment on the wider student experience, such as the decline of extracurricular activities and volunteering.
- 4) The impact of increased paid employment on social aspects of university.
- 5) Whether increased paid employment is further contributing to the social stratification of university students– with richer students having a different university experience to poorer students.
- 6) How universities are accommodating increased work – for example through increased remote learning or 3-day weeks.
- 7) Whether increasing paid student employment reflects changes in student demographics and the typical university experience ? E.g., there are different cohorts going to university who never went before



and don't expect/want the stereotype of the 'university experience' of before.

- 8) Rather than a negative, does paid work offer students opportunities?
- 9) International students and the limits on their working rights.
- 10) Healthcare students and their experiences.

The meeting was chaired by **Paul Blomfield MP** and heard from a panel which consisted of:

- **Anuj Baral**, President of Greenwich Students Union, International undergraduate student.
- **Tolu Solola**, who is a final-year midwifery student at Kingston University.
- **Nehaal Bajwa**, PHD student at Sussex and NUS VP for Liberation and Equality).
- **Amira Campbell**, Birmingham Guild President.
- **Professor Katie Normington**, Vice Chancellor, De Montfort University.

## **Introductory remarks**

**Paul Blomfield MP** opened the meeting and laid out the context; when the APPG held its inquiry into the cost-of-living crisis, members were struck by the impact of increased working hours on the student experience and extracurricular activities. More recent research has just gone on to reinforce this impression.

## **Nehaal Bajwa**

- Spoke about the impact on masters, postgraduate taught (PGT) and postgraduate research (PGR) students; she stressed the issue also affected FE students, and although the impact is less pronounced on those who live at home, not all FE students do so.
- PGT programmes are 12 months and very intense. Students on these courses can't really fit in paid work and often find it better to go part time. But this disadvantages them, because they might not get the discounts and student benefits they otherwise would.
- All this, therefore, impacts on who gets to do PGT courses, because who has the funds to? This has a knock-on impact on the skills of the UK, because people who might gain from further study, and develop skills which would be beneficial to an employer and thus the wider economy, don't get a chance to do so.
- Similar issues affect those who do a PGR course, too.
- The knock-on effect of all this is that lots of people are self-funding, but then they are at risk of running into problems with debt, etc.
- This all leads to various downward spirals: people can't access education; PhD students are working in universities teaching undergraduates, often for poor pay and under poor conditions, so



they are burning the candle at both ends and burning out, and this then impacts the quality of teaching undergraduates get.

## **Tolu Solola**

- Final year midwifery student at Kingston.
- Said would talk about the impact of paid work on healthcare students and the special challenges they face.

## **Amira Campbell**

- Said would speak as an undergraduate, home student, and as a student representative.
- Has her own experiences of paid work: worked part time from aged 11/12, and then throughout her undergraduate career, and in a variety of different types of jobs.
- Juggling full-time studies with part-time work is challenging.
- Has experienced exploitation from various employers.
- Hospitality and tutoring are rife with exploitation. When we talk about exploitation and challenges, we must remember that students are often having their first experiences of work, and this is for many their foundational experience of the workplace.

## **Anuj Baral**

- Lots of international students study at Greenwich, and while as President of Greenwich SU he represents all students, he would be speaking at the meeting to the international student experience.
- It's hard for international students to find jobs; it's hard to find a part-time job.
- Classes and academic submissions often clash with work, and with a working hour cap of 20 hours, it's difficult to get enough work in the week.
- International students want to be independent and get something great out of their contribution to the country.
- We need students to be paid the living wage; students only get £9/£10, at most they make £750 per month, and so they must rely on parental income.
- We must ask: how can work help us to bring equality to the university experience?

## **Professor Katie Normington**

- DMU's student cohort is 50% commuters, 50% first in family (FiF) to go to university, 25% mature. So DMU offers lots of vocational and apprenticeship-based programmes.
- Has changed most of its timetable to block learning; instead of students doing 2/3/4 modules at a time, they just do one at a time. Also, they get assessed at the end of the module and find out their mark very quickly. This ensures they always know how they are doing.



- DMU originally moved to this system to help students study. The DMU cohort is different than many institutions and this system suits them better.
- But students have told us that it's improved the way that they can balance their work and lives and enabled them to balance paid work with study. While this wasn't the original objective of the change, it's a good result.
- Have seen an 8% increase in students liking the organization and management of their course.
- But this doesn't change the fact that we need maintenance grant reform.
- The student experience has moved on from a pure focus on extra-curricular; student exp now is more about careers and qualifications. Was it all better in the past? It's a different world and we can't compare.

### **Students working longer hours?**

**Paul Blomfield MP** asked whether the panel agreed with the opening assertion that students were working longer hours? And what was the panels' experience of this?

#### **Amira Campbell**

- It's fair to say that students are working more than previously; Some of it is cost-of-living. Some of it is the demographic changing. There are more people who want to study part-time and participate in different types of study.
- We need to consider what we want to offer to and for every type of student. Students come from everywhere and all kinds of backgrounds, so how do we support everyone in the way that they need to be supported?
- Career prospects: people would like to work in jobs that can help them improve their prospects; there's an expectation in the workplace that you need to have work experience. Graduate jobs don't want just a degree anymore.
- Ideally, people would like to work in a field related to the one they want to go into; everything in our environment is encouraging people to work more.

#### **Nehaal Bajwa**

- But while students are working more, all too often the quality of work they're doing hasn't improved.
- Apprentices, for example, aren't paid well. With travel and tool costs they can pay up to £2'000 more than if they were paying the equivalent tuition fees.



- Young people are paid less for the same work; they are unsure of their rights, such as the right to payslips, or a contract. This is especially true for FE students. People don't know what they're entitled to.

## **Professor Katie Normington**

- There are undoubtedly pressures from the cost-of-living and some students can't sustain everything, which can lead to academic failure.
- DMU SU successfully petitioned for free breakfasts, which we provided.
- A problem is the student loan system does not make expected contribution clear, so not everyone (Parents) understands that there's an amount that they're expected to make up.
- DMU has increased its hardship fund, while throughout the country there are reports of students using food banks, and even universities needing to set them up; there are different initiatives across different institutions.
- DMU's modular system, where students study for one module at a time has helped our students to balance study and the paid work that they might need to help them during this crisis.

## **International students and work**

**Paul Blomfield MP** asked about the cap on international students working hours and the challenges this placed on them.

### **Nehaal Bajwa**

- With international students, there's an unfairness built into the working cap which creates the potential for exploitation. For example, recently someone at Stirling was in immigration detention because they were accused of working for more hours than the cap allowed.
- Some have called for a lifting of the cap for international students' working hours. But UKCISA argued against raising the limit because they said doing so would damage international education.

### **Amira Campbell**

- There is a proportion of students who can't work more, such as international students because of the cap, and this skews the data because some of them will work the hours they need to, but they can't announce it, because to do so would put them at risk. There's almost certainly more students working longer hours than the data shows.

### **Anuj Baral**

- Some international students work for cash in hand.
- Effectively that means there is no limit on their working hours, which opens them up to exploitation.



- Because they are breaking the rules, they find it difficult to access help and assistance when things go wrong, and this will continue to happen if the cap is not raised or there aren't any laws.
- The main thing to ask is how do we equip students with their rights under such circumstances?

## **Healthcare students and work**

**Paul Blomfield MP** asked how easy it was for students to take on paid work, and what impact does that have on study? As a midwifery student, must be difficult and more intense. How does someone like Tolu manage it?

### **Tolu Solola**

- Midwifery involves placements – 600 hours in the 1<sup>st</sup> year, 800 hours in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 900 hours in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year – which involves working long hours, 12 ½ hour shifts.
- The cohort is quite mixed – young and old, and there are a lot of people who need to work on top of their placement, to support their families, etc.
- This can result in a lot of mental health issues as people don't have enough time to recuperate and recover, and so get burnt out.
- It's important that we're able to study and focus; cover expenses and things like that, it's vital for our health.

## **Students and work – impact on extracurricular activities**

**Paul Blomfield MP** asked the panel for their thoughts on the changing shape of the university experience. Was it to be regretted that many students might not be able to participate in traditional extracurricular activities?

### **Amira Campbell**

- One of the things unique to the UK – a lot of the things are additional costs to a degree. In Canada, a sports team is part of a degree.
- To be in a sports team at Birmingham University costs £100 a year. And that doesn't necessarily include all the kit, etc.
- So, it's not true to say extra-curricular activities were ever "free". A lot of the extra-curricular activities in the UK are an additional cost and so benefit the wealthy.
- Even if you do extra-curricular activities that benefit the field you plan to go into, it costs.
- So, people work part-time to do stuff. Amira worked part-time to afford an unpaid placement.
- It's one and the same: to improve your prospects you must work part time, while to do extra-curricular activities you must work part time;





Amira worked part-time in the hospitality industry to fund an unpaid internship in the field she wanted to go in.

## **Tolu Solola**

- It's tough as a midwifery student to find time to study and midwifery students can't find the time to do much extra-curricular activities.
- In the long run it does start to take a toll on students' mental health as they don't have a way of unwinding.
- Working in the NHS, it really is important to do extra-curricular activities if possible, because it would be beneficial to the midwife and the NHS (their employer) and their patients for midwives to qualify as well-rounded professionals; when you talk to other students, it is possible to see those who are worst affected by this.

## **Professor Katie Normington**

- Extra-curricular activities used to be something that people put on their CV to improve their pitch to employers.
- Russell Group universities are a different cohort to DMU. Perhaps their students still want to do extra-curricular. The DMU cohort wants to improve their employability, through work and things linked to their field of study.
- Traditionally, in a red brick university, with more 'typical' students; particularly university sports – people would work part-time to pay to do their extra curriculums.
- What our students talk about is that they come to DMU for a qualification and a job, and they want experiences around their courses which will improve their prospects.
- Katie says she didn't work when she was a student, because when she was a student there were bursaries and no fees. But she says she suspects she'd have left university a better person if she had worked.
- While it's tempting to rue the passing of the old system, the students she sees come through DMU are more world-wise.
- And it's important to remember that there are lots of people attending under the new systems offered by places such as DMU, than would have had the opportunity to go to university before.

## **The danger of a two-tier system?**

**Paul Blomfield MP** asked the panel for their thoughts on whether it was tougher to be a student now than when he was a student. An underlying worry of the APPG was that successive governments had pushed an agenda of expansion, and the idea of equality of not just entry, but outcomes. But are we in danger of creating a two-tier system and split outcomes?

## **Nehaal Bajwa**

- Agreed with this but argued it has always been the case and is seen in student unions as well. While there is a range of people coming up as officers, it's mainly the voices of people who are in those spaces



and can afford to take part. But there are swathes of people we don't hear from.

- There's no one right way to be a student; but everyone should have the choice of what they want to do. Mature, neurodivergent, students with families – they might not want to do sports, but they're hidden groups of people now, who nobody hears from: we don't hear from students on placement, and those teaching. But if we're serious about skills and learning and education, we must make it possible for people to access them.
- People need their chance to develop different strengths.
- But there's a competitive labour market and that's playing out in universities, too.
- There are so many people currently on benefits who are also in work; but work isn't paying.
- We're not getting the best from people.

### **Professor Katie Normington**

- This is the gap that we must concern ourselves with (the ability to obtain graduate level jobs) and I would argue its more important than the changing shape of the university experiences – when people have got their qualifications and move into work, the social capital some have, the parental networks, the firms which recruit from certain universities and so on replicate privilege.

### **Opening out the discussion**

**Paul Blomfield MP** opened out the discussion by asking Matt Western, Shadow Minister for Shadow Minister for Higher Education, for his thoughts:

### **Matt Western MP**

- I was really struck by some data a year ago which showed the explosion in student employment; it's interesting to get the data on that.
- And another thing which I've noted is the increase in the number of commuter students. This means that they're travelling X number of hours a day; I spoke to a student in Birmingham who was commuting from Liverpool as they couldn't afford the accommodation in Birmingham. It was cheaper for them to live at home and travel. This dynamic is going on, and they are missing out.

**Paul Blomfield MP** invited the audience to give their opinions/thoughts on the issues discussed:

### **Cerys, Lancaster University SU President**

- In our own survey – 65% were working, and of those who weren't, 77% wanted to be.



- Those working reported a negative impact on their learning.
- 14% were working more than 20 hours per week.
- It's a really shocking survey which found that students were struggling with the cost-of-living.
- Save the Student says there's a 17% increase in living costs and foodbank usage amongst students has doubled.
- There's a registered foodbank at our SU; I've had students crying in my office, failing their degrees/even their parents can't afford to eat.
- Students are struggling and universities can't afford to support them because of the funding model.
- I'm happy to share our data.

### **Fraser, University of Manchester**

- We've got to differentiate between relevant work and the gig economy, such as in the hospitality industry. We must pay attention to those in casualized and exploitative contracts.
- People work 36 – 50 hours per week – not just one job but could be two or three.
- A friend of mine worked in hospitality; they needed a second job and applied for a vacancy in Tesco – 165 students applied for the same shifts.
- None of them are doing it for the experience, but so they can put food on the table.

### **Rimsha Leeds University Union Postgraduate officer**

- We did a cost-of-living survey last month.
- The average home student had £15 per week to spend after rent and bills; there's been a 14.5% increase in accommodation costs.
- As an international postgraduate student – I've worked in a warehouse, two shifts, managing studies, skipping class to go later in the week.
- 500 students were recruited in the winter, then removed or fired in February because they had to lay off people as they were not needed; not just their studies – it's their mental health as they can't afford to look after themselves.
- Not everyone has support from family, many have to work and pay for rent.

### **Nathan, University of East Anglia Welfare Officer**

- Another thing we need to remember is that it's not just the number of hours, but when they are.
- A friend has quit her campus job and got a job at Asda. It starts at 3am so she can fit it in.
- I worked at a trampoline park, started at 5am – It's good that students want experience, But I would have been better off volunteering.



## **International student from audience**

- Considering the economic contribution of international students to the UK, can student work not be used for a UK residency permit when they have the skills?
- Would there be consideration of the 20-hour working limit on international students to focus on more inclusive environments.
- Cap means people must work every week.

## **Ibby Williams, Community Officer**

- I would like to talk about disabled students and work. I worked throughout my degree, but I'm not able to work all the time; disabled students work then burn out.

## **Natasha, University College Birmingham**

- Two things that impact students and work, and they're different for home and international students:
- Home students: The maintenance loan is not enough and all-too-often the calculation of family income forces them to need to work instead.
- International students: the cap is a problem, which deprives them of a way to work; they don't have an opportunity to get jobs – some jobs don't want to be flexible – and then applications get rejected.

## **Ishika – former international student**

- Often pay double the fees of home students but can work only half the time that home students can, because they can only work up to 20 hours.
- If international students earn minimum wage, which most of them do, they have a deficit of £250 each month – arguably they need to change to self-employment.

## **Postgraduate Student**

- There's a disparity among individual courses.
- When looking at third sector and such career paths, they offer unpaid placements as extra-curricular activity.
- But other industries pay more. This means students are tempted to turn away from their passions for more lucrative career paths they don't want to do.
- It further enforces and entrenches a multi-tiered system.

## **St Mary's University, Twickenham**

- I worked 5 jobs over my studies, pub work to subsidise work which was relevant.
- But there are severe cases I know of, students with partners and children in student accommodation; living in cars on campus because it's more feasible for them to pay the parking ticket than to live in halls.



**Paul Blomfield MP asked students to email in their data.**

**Tolu Solola**

- I want to touch on healthcare students turning away from their passion.
- It's an important point, because healthcare students are doing unpaid employment to qualify.
- I would like to see a student debt write off to compensate us for this.
- Midwifery and nursing used to not pay tuition – right now having to pay the loan and work on top of that; working as a Healthcare Assistant I was doing 3 days on placement and 3 days as HCA; but then I had to stop working and couldn't pay for my cost-of-living.

**Nehaal Bajwa**

- So many things that have been said really resonate with me.
- Last year I saw some data that showed disabled students must pay £560 extra just to live in the world.
- So many students are having to commute to their studies.
- How do we equip people and change the model of education?
- We're not learning the skills we need to solve the problems of our age; do we want to learn those skills or go into places that are well paid?
- PhD students – those funded by companies - are not necessarily able to solve those problems and are not able to do that with the full time focus they need. Those not funded are often spending the lion share of their time teaching the next generation, and so again can't devote the time they need to solving these problems.

**Anuj Baral**

- It's great to hear so many people interested in working hours; I hope we can work together to persuade the government to drop the working hours cap. Thank you and I look forward to working together.

**Amira Campbell**

- Thank you all for contributing and for identifying the challenges that make people have to work.
- We've heard some quite harrowing things; it's disturbing and concerning.
- I spoke to my own experiences; I worked to pay for things I wanted and needed to do.
- But if we believe that education is an investment in ourselves and the country, then we as a nation has to invest in it.

**Professor Katie Normington**



- I'm not sure that I should have the last word; so, reflecting on the impact and the words of students, I was concerned that we will come out of the cost-of-living crisis and it will not end for students.
- Institutions can follow DMU's lead and do more to restructure their timetables, but really what we are hearing is so widespread that there needs to be wider reform.
- Colleagues on panel have said the cost-of-living and the crisis many students face puts into jeopardy the skills the country will need going forward and this is true.