

Academic plate spinning: The difficulties of balancing full time degree study with a part-time job

Mark Richardson (University of Worcester), Carl Evans (University of Worcester),
Gbolahan Gbadamosi (Bournemouth University)

m.richardson@worc.ac.uk, c.evans@worc.ac.uk, ggbadamosi@bournemouth.ac.uk

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Abstract

The study examined full-time students engaged in part-time work during term time. A qualitative approach was used to examine how students cope with simultaneously managing the two activities, and how part-time working affects their academic study. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from a sample of 30 undergraduate business students. The findings confirm that students merely satisfice many aspects of their lives, with reading time and assignment preparation being key areas that suffer in order to allow students to engage with part-time work. Possible options available to HEIs to adapt to, and remedy, the situation are explored.

Introduction

More than 50% of University students now work part-time, at the same time as undertaking a full-time undergraduate degree (Endsleigh, 2012; NUS/HSBC, 2011). Several studies have examined this issue and concluded that students are primarily motivated by financial needs, either to reduce hardship whilst studying at University, or to maintain the standard of living to which they had become accustomed prior to becoming a full-time student (Richardson et al., 2009; UCAS, 2011).

In addition, structural changes in the economy, particularly expansion of the service sector, where deregulation and a move to 24-hour service availability has increased the need for a more flexible workforce (IDS, 2008). This new employment landscape

has proven to be attractive to students who can integrate part-time working whilst undertaking, and paying for, a full-time University education.

The effect of students' part-time working, whilst studying full-time, has been the subject of several academic works (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Neill et al., 2004; Watts & Pickering, 2000). The positives for full-time students undertaking part-time work have been noted and include the development of transferable skills, such as team working and time management (Holloway, 2001; Watts and Pickering, 2000; Wignall, 2007). In addition, part-time work can also contribute to testing, developing or reflecting upon a particular career path and provide a more direct route into desired employment (Billett and Ovens, 2007).

Nonetheless, Lillydahl (1990) and Salamonson and Andrew (2006) find that working part-time can adversely affect academic performance. Significantly, Carney et al. (2005) found that students who feel that part-time working has affected their academic performance, generally worked more hours. Here, Neill et al. (2004) argue that working 15 hours per week is an optimum, beyond which part-time work may become detrimental to students' academic studies. How individuals balance their respective work activities with full-time study appears to be crucial to their academic performance (Ford et al., 1995; Hodgson and Spours, 2001). Additionally, Hall (2010) and Harrison and Chudry (2011) found that students are struggling to cope with the academic demands of their studies due to part-time work commitments and resultant limits on time available for study. How students perceive the effect of part-time working on study time, and how this is seen by students to impinge on their studies, will form the focus of this study.

Objectives of this study

Most authors researching the area of students' part-time working have used quantitative methods, such as surveys (see, for example, Carney et al., 2005; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Lucas and Lamont, 1998; Neill et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2009). In this study, a qualitative approach has been used in order to allow deeper exploration of complex issues and, in doing so, build upon other qualitative work examining the impact of part-time working on academic performance (see for

example, Hall, 2010; Watts, 2002; Watts and Pickering, 2000). In particular, this study will examine how students manage to balance full-time study and part-time work and how they perceive that working affects their academic performance whilst at University.

Method

The research participants for this study were undergraduate BA (Hons) Business Management students at a post-92 University, who were engaged in full-time study during 2010/11. A request for participants to be interviewed was issued via e-mail early in the academic year 2010/11. No incentive to participate in the study was offered. Thirty positive responses were received from full-time students engaged in part-time paid employment, comprising nine first year, ten second year, and eleven third year students.

Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the students in a location within the University. Questions relating to the individual's perceived relationship between part-time work and the full-time educational experience were explored, including consideration of how part-time working was thought to affect overall academic performance.

Findings

Balancing the demands on time

Students expressed difficulty in balancing the mix of part-time work, meeting University assessment deadlines and achieving good grades, whilst at the same time embracing a full social life. A reduction in self-study time is one of the consequences of part-time working, with a year one student commenting that 'background reading time is reduced'. This was repeated by a year two student, who because of working late shifts stated, 'I don't think I've read anything this year'. This is accounted for by her work patterns as she feels unable to read effectively when she 'gets home at 3 am'. Similarly, another year one student felt that work 'massively reduces reading time', stating that he always manages to fall asleep when trying to read. More significantly, another interviewee (a year three student) stated that because of work

commitments it has not been possible to do any extra reading on the degree at all and has 'not picked up a book in three years'.

For those in a retail environment, this lack of personal study opportunity tends to be exacerbated around assignment times, which typically correspond to busy sales periods, such as the pre-Christmas period and the January sales, when increased working hours are expected by employers. Here, a third year student was aware that 'I could be doing an essay now if I wasn't at work'.

Yet, despite the difficulties of finding time to study, there were students who believed that they managed to balance the two activities effectively, either as a result of the job itself, through their own personal circumstances or by adopting a range of coping strategies. One year two student felt that his job did not conflict with his studies because he worked night shifts and as a consequence, work did not interfere with his class schedule. He felt fortunate that because of his job as a security officer, he was able to do extra reading while sitting in the gatehouse. However, a year one student felt that his hectic lifestyle was only facilitated because he still lived at home and had a parent to cook and clean for him otherwise he felt he would not be able to cope. Another (year two) student saw work and degree level studies as completely different aspects of his life, which he managed to keep separate, or 'box-off'. For him, it was this delineation of different aspects of his life that allowed him to manage a reasonable balance of work and study. Similarly, another year one student felt that because of part-time working, he felt that he has a better attitude to study – a more disciplined approach, stating 'If I didn't work, I would probably take a more relaxed approach to study' and 'I'm able to plan my week a bit more'. For example, because he works Monday and Tuesday evenings, he schedules his study periods during the daytime.

Nonetheless, there was a feeling amongst many of the students that they have to sacrifice something in their life in order to fit in time to study. One second year student stated that she is 'committed to the degree' and as a consequence she reduces her personal time to fit in study. 'My study is now part of my personal time at weekends'. Similarly, another student commented that when it is busy at work, it does affect the amount of study time available. However, he recognises the

importance of good time management and is now, 'unable to relax after work, instead get down to study'. Another (year two) student stated that 'family life takes a back seat' because of the need to study.

However, it is not just social life that gets sacrificed, with one first year student stating that due to her study commitments she is unable to undertake more hours at work, which she would ideally like to. Here, she feels that life is made more difficult if you are a student not living close to University, and thinks it would be more beneficial to have modules scheduled on one day in order to give people the maximum opportunity to 'block-in work time', and consequently, she feels the University needs to be more aware of students' working needs.

This was not however a universal view, with one year three student stating that if there was a clash, she would always choose work over a class unless it was a mandatory session. Similarly, a year one student stated, 'They get in the way of each other' and went on to say 'Work pays, Uni doesn't, so it takes priority'. Although, a second student was unsure whether she would prioritise study or work if a conflict arose, noting that she felt some areas on the degree are merely a repeat of 'stuff done before'. She went on to say 'I sometimes think it is a waste of time – and I would rather be at work'. Nonetheless, another second year student stated that if his employer was desperate, he would choose work over a class and look to catch up later. However, he states, 'I'm here to study – I wouldn't have the job if not at Uni'.

The problems of conflicting demands on time tend to be more apparent for those working in the leisure or hospitality industry (typical working domains of students), where long hours and late shifts are accepted working patterns. For three of the interviewees this meant they were too tired to study at the end of a shift. For other interviewees, work dominates their lives to the detriment of their studies, with one year 3 student commenting that 'it feels like you don't stop seven days a week'.

The perceived effects of part-time work on academic studies

The pressures of part-time working have an adverse effect on students' studies, not only restricting reading time, but also time for assessments, with 'I leave

assignments to the last possible moment', a comment made by a year three student, being a typical response of interviewees. For one first year student, there is an intention to complete assignments to the best of her ability, but there are sometimes clashes between her work commitments and her studies, and feels that at busy times she does not complete assignments as well as she could, stating that 'When I have a quiet period, I think about study, but then everything builds up'. Similarly, a third year student leaves assignments to the last possible moment and already feels she is behind in her research project. One second year student who felt able to manage the work-study balance acknowledged that his grades were not as good as they could be due to 'persistent tiredness'.

For one third year student, she found that work reduces reading time since when she finishes work she is tired and is unable to fit the study easily into gaps and so she is certain that her grades have been reduced as a consequence. This was seemingly common, with four of the third year students interviewed feeling that they would have achieved a better degree classification if they had not worked during term time as this reduced the time that they could devote to their studies. Similarly, a second year student noticed her academic performance was significantly better before she started working; commenting that 'I've never had an 'A' before'. Yet, once she started a part-time job, she became aware of her grades deteriorating. Similarly, a student working in retail found that the 24 hours per week working did conflict with his studies and the split shifts meant some tiredness which reduced his reading time and meant some assignments were rushed. Another third year student had taken on extra shifts in her final year (working a third evening and an additional shift on Sunday) which she thought was resulting in her neglecting her studies, especially her research project.

Yet, while the negative aspects of working whilst studying dominated the interviewees' responses, the positive that was evident from all of the interviewees, was that a connection between the theoretical aspects of their business degree and their practical work environment had been formed. One interviewee, a third year, felt that work gave a more realistic perspective to her studies, and this was confirmed by another third year who stated 'text books are not always like it is in real life'. Moreover, one first year student noted that he is now seeing aspects of his

marketing studies manifesting themselves in issues addressed at work, commenting 'I could understand the terminology they were using and didn't need to ask questions like some'. Another recognized that his studies reflected his experience in the workplace and can now see crucial managerial aspects, such as the motivation of staff, as important, noting that 'I find myself thinking about what we've covered at University'.

Conclusion

Students face a constant challenge to balance the competing demands of full-time study, part-time work and a generally busy lifestyle. For many students who work part-time, the amount of time that can be devoted to University studies such as wider academic reading and assessment preparation, inevitably suffers. This clearly has potential to impact upon academic development and performance in assessments. Moreover, because of the nature of the part-time work undertaken by students – mainly in retail, leisure or hospitality – these time constraints are exacerbated at crucial points in the academic year, such as at assessment times. Whilst students adopt a range of coping strategies, their attempts to balance work, study and personal interests often result in all aspects of their life being merely satisfied rather than optimised (Simon, 1956).

This has significant implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they seek to maximise the academic development and performance of their students, since any initiatives that may be instigated by Universities to maximise levels of student achievement will be undermined by students' who are forced to compromise in all facets of their life, rather than looking to prioritise study. Here, the lack of wider reading in particular will be detrimental to deep learning and academic achievement.

With a new approach to funding Higher Education now established, and the trend towards full-time students working part-time firmly embedded (Richardson et al., 2009), it seems unlikely that HEIs will be able, or wish, to force a reduction in part-time working by increasing the mandatory requirements of academic work. Equally, it seems unrealistic for course teams to simply ignore changes in student part-time work patterns which have emerged over recent years.

A range of learning and teaching strategies must now emerge which seek to engage students more fully in their own academic development, but within a context of increased part-time working and the growing significance of other non-University activities. HEIs may seek to collaborate with students as true partners in learning, perhaps through an academic tutoring process which helps to determine a work and study schedule which ensures reading and study time is given adequate coverage, perhaps during allocated periods. Additionally, some students are able to manage their time more effectively than others. This yields opportunities for HEIs to provide support sessions for students, perhaps asking current students and recent graduates to provide useful insights in how to manage time and self-study effectively and efficiently.

Clearly, given the increasingly competitive higher education environment, anything that risks deterring prospective students from enrolling at an individual HEI carries risk. Nonetheless, parents, key influencers in the students' decision about where to study might find this more collaborative approach to learning, especially during the vital transition from a highly managed School or College environment to the more independent learning environment of a University, genuinely attractive.

Given that students relate their work activity to their degree studies, one possible development opportunity is to more fully integrate students' current work experience and encapsulate it within the academic study. Since, those students interviewed in this study were studying Business, the opportunity to base study activities and assessments on the students' work experiences is obvious. A range of work-based learning modules and work-related learning projects can be used to support this integration of academic study and work experience. Here, Collins (2011) and Harris (2011) note that there is already some move in Universities towards accrediting work experience within the degree programme (see for example Ogilvie and Shaw, 2011). However, both Collins (2011) and Harris (2011) cited reservations about this process, with a feeling that employability activities need to sit outside the main academic award.

A range of modules could however, be used to integrate students own experience in the approach to learning, teaching and assessment, as has been the case for many years in MBA studies. The demands of employers are well known, and include application of relevant knowledge, research and problem solving, critical analysis, communication, numeracy, self-management, interpersonal skills, team working, self-awareness, use of IT and enterprise and creativity. Many of these skills can, and should, be incorporated within the curriculum across a range of subject disciplines. Nonetheless, in contrast with Business and Management Studies, it will not be as easy for other subjects, such as History, to incorporate into their courses learning based on students' part-time work, but that does not mean they should not try, since work-related themes can be found in most subjects, and that through work students can gain insights into people, organisations, the human condition, and the way they communicate, which can be relevant to other subjects, such as Sociology

In addition, there is the possibility for HEIs to provide, or at least facilitate, appropriate paid earn as you learn employment opportunities for students, which incorporate work-based learning. This would respond directly to the Leitch Report (2006) recommendation that Universities encourage more active employer engagement within the curriculum. This focus on, and integration of, work-related and work-based learning activities, alongside the traditional one-year placements also goes some way to providing the necessary financial support for students to engage with higher education and has potential to dramatically enhance the skills base, and employability, of graduates.

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Biographies:

Mark Richardson is Head of the University of Worcester Business School and has a wide range of teaching and research interests. He has published extensively on a

variety of topics ranging from student perceptions and careers to management issues. Mark is also a member of the Institute of Directors Branch Committee for Hereford and Worcester.

Carl Evans joined the University of Worcester Business School in 2006, and managed the MBA programme as well as being a University of Worcester Teaching Fellow. Prior to this appointment, Carl spent several years with a range of commercial organisations before entering Further and Higher Education in 1993. He has published in numerous Management, Business and Education journals.

Gbolahan Gbadamosi is the Business and Management Framework Leader with The Business School, Bournemouth University. He teaches Contemporary Employment Studies and Research Methods. His current research is in the areas of: unethical work behaviour, workplace wellness and well-being and students' adjustment in higher education. His recent publications related to HE have appeared in Innovations in Education and Teaching International, Higher Education, Journal of Education and Work, and South African Journal of Higher Education.

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