Degrees on the side: student employment and the neoliberal university

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Neither the government nor the HE establishment has much understanding of the working lives of contemporary students

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the financial precarity of UK students who rely on income from part-time jobs to survive financially, but the response from the government and universities has shown its usual lack of understanding of such students' lived realities and employment pressures: it has been piecemeal, and there has been no consistent guidance on how to effectively support students. In their anxiety that students may defer, drop out or commute from home for financial reasons, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been actively encouraging students to engage in the 'full campus experience', and are apparently concerned about 'stay-at-home' students (disproportionality working-class, black and minority ethnic) who are missing out on the 'real' student experience.[1]

What it means to be a student and the concept of an 'ideal student' have seldom changed: students are still traditionally imagined as middle-class, white and male. But the major shift that has taken place in HE - from an elite to a highly stratified and expanded system, combined with an increased 'diversification' of the student

population - means that any generalisations made about contemporary students or the student experience are highly problematic. Despite the growing acknowledgement that many individuals are no longer *just* students, HEIs continue to explicitly state or implicitly imply that university is, or should be, a student's main priority. Those who 'fail' to prioritise their studies over paid employment or other commitments are deemed 'at risk', and this diverts attention away from the government's refusal to provide proper financial support and equal access to resources for all students.

The majority of research on students and part-time work remains quantitative and tends to portray students simplistically as either working or non-working. My research, however, based on 52 in-depth interviews with 39 students working in the sex and hospitality industries, draws attention to the multiple, dynamic and potentially 'new' ways students are engaging with university, in response to the increased neoliberalisation of HE and the labour markets.[2] In this article I discuss a spectrum of student experiences: many students have side jobs, but increasing numbers are in effect doing what I term 'degrees on the side', either as a strategic choice, a form of income generation, and/or as a result of structural inequalities.

Homogenous students: workshy or overworking?

Students are usually represented in academic and policy literature in two main ways: some analysts divide them into two distinct categories (traditional/non-traditional), while others see them as a homogenous group, with the white, middle-class ideal used as a proxy for all students. Scholars subscribing to the latter view have described students as privileged, entitled and workshy.[3] For instance, Laura Gardiner's report for the Resolution Foundation on people who have never had a paid job, although rightly refuting hostile stereotypes of 'lazy working-class families' living comfortably on overly generous welfare payments, falters when a similar argument is made against students: she argues that rising tuition maintenance loans have improved student incomes such that 'they do not feel the need to work'.[4] This statement is particularly dangerous as it disregards the decline in financial support for students that mirrors benefit cuts experienced by the other groups she discusses, and ignores the very large economic disparity within the category 'student'. While there is some acknowledgement in the report of rising tuition fees, it is argued that this cost may have driven an increased focus on getting the best educational outcomes 'at the expense' of seeking paid employment. The report implicitly inscribes the idea that all students *should* work, yet,

as will be discussed, for many students 'earning while learning' is neither a choice nor luxury, but rather a necessity for survival.

Gardiner's report is based on Labour Force Survey data which appears to support the claim that young students constitute a large proportion of those who have never worked (it finds that 60 per cent of 16- to 64-year olds who have never worked are young students). However, the variable which captures whether people have ever had a paid job excludes precisely the kinds of holiday, casual and zero-hour work that students are most likely to engage in. The data, therefore, omits the 974,000 people on zero-hours contracts from October to December 2019, of whom one-third were aged between 16 and 24. Specifically, it is young women in full-time education who are most likely to have zero-hour contracts when compared with other people in employment.[5] Furthermore, from March to May 2019 there were 47 per cent more female students working and studying than male students, highlighting the gendered nature of student employment pressures.[6] While female students may opt for zero-hours work for purposes of 'flexibility' (i.e. fitting around university timetables and other commitments, typically care work), we also know that this kind of work is associated with and characterises the effects of neoliberal policy - that is, the transference of economic risk onto workers, the erosion of workers' rights, the flexibilisation and casualisation of work contracts, self-responsibility, financial insecurity and emotional stress.[7]

In contrast to the assumptions made by Gardiner, participants in my own research were working on average 30 hours a week - over three times the government's recommended 10 hours per week for students and more than double the 15 hours recommended by most course providers, once again demonstrating just how wide of the mark government and universities are in their understanding of the lived realities of many working students.[8] My argument that students are working in much greater numbers and for much longer than the government and universities - or Gardiner - realise is supported further by a recent Freedom of Information request sent by Mike Larkin to every UK university to uncover how student employment is currently monitored.[9] Of the 80 responses, only eight universities were aware of student working hours, and just two institutions had information linking hours worked to academic attainment.

While studying is rarely - if ever - conceptualised as 'work', if time spent on studying is added to that spent working in other capacities, the total number

of hours worked by some of the participants in my research surpassed the legal weekly limit of 48 hours, with some women (over)working 60 hours per week. As mentioned, the pressure to work is not shared equally by all students, yet for some participants overworking was taken-for-granted and expected.

At the other end of the spectrum, rather than blaming students for not engaging enough in paid work, equally class-blind arguments have been made by scholars making the opposite point - for example Carl Evans et al, who claim that students are 'failing' to prioritise their education over paid employment.[10] When Evans et al carried out 30 semi-structured interviews with university students at one institution, they chose to treat the interviewees as a homogenous group, ignoring demographic factors (arguing that this could lead to 'spurious assumptions') and implying that it was simply individual choice and will that determined whether or not a student took on paid work:

> … some students are clearly more susceptible to persuasion from managers asking them to work overtime than others … there is an apparent compromise being made which sacrifices the longer-term benefits of study against the more immediate financial gain offered through work. Some individuals do ignore excessive demands of their employers and project into the future, anticipating a financially rewarding full-time job.

Failing to take into account structural inequalities leads to 'some' students being blamed for their lack of commitment. Rather than urging HEIs to support students or to acknowledge their own role in continuing to uphold the barriers to student 'success', the authors warn universities that any initiatives they may be undertaking to 'maximise outputs' are likely to be undermined by said students. The students are therefore implicitly blamed for any output failure, rather than structural inequalities. In my own data, it was evident that students' choices and priorities are complex, fluid and constantly renegotiated. The assumption that all workers share the same capacity to 'ignore excessive demands of employers' - or to choose delayed financial gratification - ignores the fact that refusing to work does not have equal repercussions for everyone. For example, participants in my research who had unstable or non-existent employment contracts stated that refusing to cover shifts or work additional hours would be reflected in future opportunities for work: in the following rota, management would favour those who had 'helped out' and 'punish' those who had refused to work

by allocating fewer or unfavourable shifts. Agency workers, like those in other forms of platform and gig-work, are negotiating in an era of feedback and evaluations; as Kristy Milland describes, they have to 'walk on eggshells' to ensure positive feedback and thus, continued work.[11] As Emily, an agency waitress, describes it:

> The agency views your profile and there's comments from managers on your profile saying like, 'This person is good' or 'This person is bad'. I've called in sick a few times but you can't get away with that too much - you get black marks on your profile - if you call in sick, that's one black mark against your name and if you get three of them then you get suspended for six months.

From side jobs to degrees on the side

Rather than simply dividing students into 'working' or 'non-working', my research categorises students' relationships with work and university into seven groups. The categories range from students with side jobs to those with degrees on the side, although they are obviously neither exclusive nor exhaustive. The rest of this section discusses these categories, focusing in particular on factors influencing students who work for long hours in paid employment.

Full-time student with part-time job - chooses if/when they work

The government and HEIs assume that most students fit into this category. However, students in this group were primarily middle-class and referred to financial support from family which meant that they were able to choose when they worked: they did so to maintain a certain lifestyle.

Full-time student with part-time job - unable to choose if/when they work

These students maintained a 'balance' between work and university to ensure that university remained their main priority. Waitressing and stripping were considered to be part-time, temporary jobs, but nonetheless their roles as students and workers were interdependent.

Full-time student with multiple hustles

One of my interviewees, a full-time student with multiple hustles (degree,

internship, stripping, artist), did not want university to become 'the be-all and end-all' in her life as she wanted to be 'more than just a student'. Due to the deregulation and flexibilisation of labour markets, having multiple jobs has become the new normal for many people. Moreover, now that 50.2 per cent of young people attend university, the student status and having a degree has also become, to some extent, devalued.[12] It can therefore now also be argued that students may feel an increased pressure to diversify their CV (and mitigate risk) by finding more creative ways to stand out to potential employers amidst the growing pool of graduates.

Full-time student and full-time worker - with boundaries maintained between the two

Students in this category wanted university to remain their main priority, but their degree was pushed to the side as they were forced to engage in full-time work in response to their more immediate need to earn money. It is important to stress the difference between part-time students working full-time and those who both work and study full-time. The pressures and expectations differ substantially, making the latter much more difficult to manage. Far from lacking commitment or motivation, or an ability to prioritise educational outcomes over paid employment, the students I interviewed, unsurprisingly, struggled with the demands of both a full-time degree and full-time job, and this produced intense feelings of worry and guilt:

> It's always playing in the back of your mind that I shouldn't be at work. I should be doing uni work rather than [waitressing]. It's kind of a waste of my time. Obviously, I know I need to work, and I need to earn money. If I go in and it is dead, and there's three of us just standing around, it's like, 'Ah! I could be writing my dissertation right now' or 'I could be revising' - that I found tough (Lauren, waitress).

Participants in this category tended to be working-class and struggled to cover the extortionate costs of student life, especially those living in London. One woman stated that she envied her peers who were privileged enough to 'just *be* a student'. To manage competing demands, scholars have consistently found that students create spatio-temporal boundaries between different aspects of their lives. For example, students in Hazel Christie et al's research considered themselves to be 'day students' and treated university like a nine to five job.[13] This was also the case for Rachel, who found that

maintaining clear boundaries between university, work and 'life' was essential both practically and psychologically, as she juggled three emotionally laborious forms of work - motherhood, a counselling course and working as a stripper - although she also stated that it was difficult to switch from one identity/role to the other.

Full-time student and full-time worker - with boundaries blurred between the two

In this category, students struggled to establish a 'balance' or to create boundaries due to a lack of fixity in their different schedules. For example, the number of contact hours required by the university, and the amount of time needed for independent study, placements and internships (often the equivalent to full-time working hours), varied throughout the year. The days/hours worked waitressing or stripping were also subject to change, given that participants had zero-hour contracts, worked shifts or worked on an ad-hoc basis as agency staff. This made any attempt at finding a 'balance' futile: participants did not always know when it was that they would be required to engage in work as students, waitresses/strippers or in other capacities, i.e. as mothers and/or caregivers. The time changes in work and university also meant that their income varied weekly and/or monthly, making financial planning difficult. In an attempt to regain a sense of stability and control over their busy schedules, several women stated that they tried to account for every minute of their day and to remain constantly 'productive':

> *Every minute* of my day has to be used productively. I've learnt how to be much more efficient which, in the end, is a good thing. It's just good for your life in general (Holly, dancer).
>
> Dancing, waitressing and university, that was a really, really fun period in my life called the insomnia period (laughs). Basically, you get up at 5am, you go and do your waitressing until midday, then go to university until last lecture ends at about 5/6pm-ish, and then you come home, have a nap, shower and head off to the club at 7/8pm-ish, and come home 3am-ish (Gemma, dancer/waitress).

A key theme within the responses was the normalisation and even *valorisation* of overworking, as well as the physical repercussions of this approach to work, i.e. burnout. Neoliberalism demands high productivity in compressed time frames that

command self-disciplining individuals to dedicate their lives to constant, methodical work as if it were a 'calling' or a moral duty - in a way that echoes Weber's Protestant Work Ethic.[14] This sense of Puritanism has continued to haunt our understandings of work and our consciousness as employees.[15] Feeling pressured to remain constantly busy has arguably intensified over the past forty years, becoming an accepted indicator of getting it [life] *right*.[16] In contrast to the students who found ways to maintain boundaries, the students in this category sought instead to maximise their level of efficiency by actively blurring the different facets of their lives, for example by bringing university work to the restaurant or strip club. Participants also blurred work and leisure, as they specifically chose to work in the 'carnivalesque atmosphere' of the night-time economy, and in jobs which doubled-up as spaces to socialise and drink alcohol while still earning money.

Full-time workers with a full-time degree on the side

Some women in this category were pursuing careers that did not require a degree. For example, Cassie's goal was to become a professional dancer, which she acknowledged to be a competitive, short-term, and thus risky, career path. As all labour market outcomes become individualised, young people such as Cassie are encouraged to protect themselves from future uncertainty by investing in credentials. Women in this category considered their degree to be a backup/Plan B if their preferred careers failed. Ashley, on the other hand, considered her job as a stripper to be her main priority; and due to familial pressure to go to university, her degree became something she did 'on the side'.

> Very quickly I went from this responsible student who had to work a couple of days a week just to support myself to a full-time stripper who also went to university when she *had* to (Ashley, dancer).

Full-time worker with university as a side-hustle

Emma was at the other end of the spectrum to a full-time student, part-time worker: she considered university, or more specifically Student Finance, to be a source of financial support helping her to pursue her 'main thing', which was her work as a performer. I have conceptualised university as a side-hustle in this context, as it becomes a capital accumulation strategy in preparation for other livelihood opportunities. Indeed, rather than working in order to study, Emma was studying to

fund her work in a precarious industry:

> I just applied [to university] at the time because I really wanted to stay in London and pursue performing and events producing. I applied because I was, like, 'Oh, I'm gonna have a loan and it's going to help support me. I will have to study but it's kind of better than working an eight-hour job somewhere every day for the minimum wage and then also trying to pursue dance'. It's kind of worked out better for me this way. It is harder, I'm kind of failing but just about scraping a pass. I'm just *so* passionate about that [performing] side of things but it is good to show that you can commit to something. In November, I was working a lot and I just thought I was going to drop out again (laughs) 'cos I just didn't go to uni for like a term. Then a month ago, I was, like, 'No! I need to go back'. So, I went, and I'm not as present as I should be, but I think my tutors know that, and so do the rest of my peers. I have a whole other career so I'm not going to feel bad about it because I have something that they don't. But it's *very* difficult to work and study (Emma, dancer).

There are multiple ways of understanding Emma's experience. On the one hand, Emma could be seen as the ideal self-governing, enterprising neoliberal subject who has made a rational cost-benefit analysis whereby accruing high-levels of student debt - a debt which has become normalised and expected among young people - is the better option than working in several low-paid jobs. She appears to have found a 'solution' to her (individual) 'problem' by investing in her future and risk-taking. However, by becoming financially dependent on the continuation of her student loan, dropping out or failing her course were no longer seen as 'options', something which she experienced as severely stressful. Understanding people's lives through such individualising discourses can also mean portraying young people as rational actors, devoid of emotion. Yet, similarly to other creative workers, Emma was pursuing not only a career but also her passion. The social construction of creative work not as work but as a 'labour of love' leads to what Rachel Cohen refers to as self-exploitation, as individuals are required, but also willing, to work long hours, and to endure unpaid internships and repeated insecure contracts, in order to be able to continue 'doing what they love'.[17] However, if students are entering university and signing up to potentially thirty years of loan repayments,

not for educational or even occupational purposes, but rather as the 'best option' to fund careers/work within highly exploitative and precarious industries, this puts under serious question both the purpose and value of HE and the ability of the very precarious to survive at all economically.

The future of higher education?

Narratives of students as 'workshy' fuel harmful stereotypes of snowflake millennials ill-equipped for the labour market, while largely misrepresenting the HE experiences of many students. At the same time, blaming students for 'failing' to prioritise their education over paid employment ignores structural inequalities and the role played by governments and universities in helping to maintain the barriers to students' 'success'. It is important to avoid seeing students as a homogeneous group, or as divisible into simple categories based on a binary opposition between those who prioritise their education and those who don't. This approach privileges the 'ideal'/ middle-class student experience and disregards the multiplicity and complexity of the lived realities of many students today. It is clear that the government and HEIs are wide of the mark in their understanding of student employment pressures, and that we must rethink HE and how it is delivered, given the overwhelming evidence that our current system is both unequal and outmoded.

The participants in my research revealed some of the potentially 'new' ways in which students are negotiating the increased neoliberalisation of HE and the labour markets. These included having multiple hustles; undertaking a degree as a Plan B to mitigate 'risky' career-paths; and strategically utilising university - and thirty years of debt - as a side-hustle and form of income generation. This latter example not only brings Student Finance under serious question, but also illuminates how impenetrable certain industries and careers are for young working-class women (or those who do not have access to the 'Bank of Mum and Dad') - that is, industries where exploitative working practices (e.g. unpaid labour, internships and repeated casualised contracts) are considered commonplace. In the example given here, Emma's expectation of undertaking a full-time job and full-time degree did not match the lived reality of becoming dependent on the continuation of mounting student loans and the pressure of passing each term, which brought with it high levels of stress, overworking and burnout. It is clear from my data that going to university is not always the 'best' or preferred option for everyone; however, given

that funding and support for alternative career paths also continue to diminish, for many young people university currently feels like the only choice they have *if* they want to compete in the labour market. Indeed, HE has become intimately linked to labour market outcomes, and yet the assumption that individuals will complete their education by the age of 21 and that they will then be prepared for the world of work is highly unrealistic. Given the ever-changing nature of work, accelerated by the digital revolution, people must be able to dip into education and other forms of training throughout their lives as labour markets evolve. To avoid further social and economic polarisation, this must be properly funded by the democratic state and employers rather than the individual citizen.

As we have seen, in the case of some students, their degree was quite literally pushed to the side: not out of choice but rather necessity, as they struggled to cover the costs of living, particularly in London. It was assumed by most of the women in my study that overworking and the physical ramifications of doing so were part of a short-term struggle while at university. However, data from interviews with the same women as graduates revealed that overworking, low income and precarity had become a regular feature of their lives after university. Despite obtaining qualifications and gaining work experience as students, several women struggled to find what they described as a 'proper job'. Women who were able to enter their preferred careers were those who opted for traditionally feminised and arguably devalued industries (i.e. fashion, social care, dance, teaching), and they often continued waitressing or stripping to help counter low wages and insecure contracts.

As I have argued throughout, employment pressures are not shared equally by everyone, and for young people in particular there is a need to tackle the stresses of economic insecurity. These could be partly reduced through a few simple but effective changes: ensuring parity of pay for under 25s, guaranteeing decent living wages in all industries and banning exploitative unpaid labour and internships. Furthermore, rather than extending such financial precarity by expecting individuals to pay back the full cost of their education *with interest*, a less burdensome and more sustainable alternative could be for graduates to contribute to the cost of their education in proportion to their post-graduation income (e.g. at a rate of 1 per cent), which would serve as a form of recognition of the benefits of being a graduate.[18]

Diane Reay argues that to begin to create a fair education system, we must first acknowledge that HE is a sexist, classist, racist place;[19] and we must take seriously

the different ways that such inequalities are able to reproduce themselves - for example through governments failing to provide proper financial support and thus preventing large numbers of students from participating as equals within the system; and through universities holding on to archaic understandings of 'ideal' students and imposing the same rigid expectations on all students regardless of circumstance (i.e. that they can/should 'prioritise' their education). A wider recognition of these inequalities and the way they are reproduced is a necessary prerequisite for addressing them.

However, recommendations to redistribute resources, recognise difference and increase representation of difference within HEIs are by no means 'new'; creating cultural and structural change to address deeply imbedded inequalities is clearly a long-term strategy and not a quick fix. What my research has attempted to add to the mix is a better understanding of why it is that the typical piecemeal approach adopted by governments and universities to support students, such as what we have witnessed throughout the Covid-19 pandemic - or even the introduction of ad hoc/tick-box 'equality and diversity' policies and procedures - is simply not enough to transform the system, or to begin to counter the effects of neoliberalism.

Jessica Simpson recently completed her PhD in the Department of Sociology at City, University of London and she is now working at the London School of Economics. Her thesis explored what happens after university for female students working in the sex industry and 'mainstream' employment.

Notes

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2. The research compared student experience of sex work and 'mainstream' work as well as their transition through HE and into the graduate labour market. All 39 participants identified as cis-gender women, were from different class backgrounds and were living across the UK. Despite attempting a wide variety of recruitment strategies, the majority of respondents were white British (31). This is likely to reflect the whiteness of the categories 'student' and 'erotic dancer'; however, the lack of racial diversity among waitresses was more surprising considering the high percentage of black and ethnic minority workers in hospitality. Given that most participants were recruited via referrals this may reflect participants' networks.

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Soundings

Degrees on the side: student employment and the neoliberal university

Jessica Simpson

This article draws on interviews with 39 female students who work, in order to refute contradictory, and class-blind, narratives that see students as either workshy, or as 'failing' to prioritise their education over paid employment. The data reveals that dominant ideas of the undergraduate experience are outmoded and fail to represent the multiplicity and complexity of students' lives. The experiences of the interviewees make it clear just how wide of the mark universities and governments are in their understanding of the employment pressures faced by many students. Rather than being un/employed, young people are now engaging with university and work in 'new' ways, in response to the increased neoliberalisation of higher education and the labour markets. Participants ranged from students with side-jobs to students who were doing their degrees 'on the side'; either as a strategic form of income generation and/or as a result of structural inequalities. The findings from the study add to scholarship demonstrating the need to rethink higher education and how it is delivered in the UK.