

# **Experiencing term-time employment as a non-traditional aged university student: a welsh study**

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## **Notes on contributors**

Jenny Mercer, James Clay and Leanne Etheridge are based within the Department of Applied Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University. They all have a keen interest in understanding student experiences and are members of departmental research group focusing on this. Jenny Mercer has previously published work on mature students' transitions across further and higher education.

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## **Abstract**

Engaging in term-time employment appears to be becoming a common feature of student life in the UK today. This study examined the ways in which a cohort of full-time non-traditional aged students negotiated paid employment whilst pursuing a full-time higher education course in Wales. Taking a qualitative approach to explore this further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 non-traditional age students, and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that participants felt compromises had to be made in both academic and social spheres in order to accommodate conflicting time demands; there was a desire to maintain the quality of life experienced before entering university; and the impact of working and studying presented challenges for both their academic engagement and personal relationships. These findings will be discussed in relation to the extant literature, and debate around how higher educational institutions may seek to address and acknowledge these issues are considered.

**Keywords:** term-time employment; student experience; non-traditional age students; student relationships; academic performance.

## **Introduction**

There have been substantial changes to the ways in which higher education (HE) has been funded during the past two decades, which have led to costs being shifted from the state and more onto students themselves (Metcalf 2005). Since 2012, UK universities have been able to charge English students up to a maximum of £9000 a year for their courses, (previously it had been £3,465, GOV2013, UCAS 2013) which represented a near tripling of tuition fees. Whilst for Welsh domiciled students the fees are capped at £3,810, they still have had to pay a substantial amount more than previously. An unsurprising outcome of this is that more students are engaging in paid employment whilst studying than ever before (Callender 2008). One of the main reasons for this cited by UK students in Robotham's (2013) study were financial. Although estimates differ relating to the specific hours of paid work taking place, there seems to be some consensus in the literature reviewed that between 50% and 60% of full-time students will be engaged in part-time employment during academic term-time (Curtis and Williams 2002; Lashly 2005; NUS/HSBC 2008; Richardson, Evans and Gbadamosi, 2014). More recently an online survey of 4,624 students conducted by the Endlsleigh insurance company in 2015 revealed that 77% of them worked whilst studying. This indicated an increase from the previous year's survey when it was 59%. It seems reasonable to say that term-time employment is becoming a social norm for many students in the contemporary landscape of higher education.

Research seeking to document the impact of this has focused both on students' academic performance and engagement with study. For example Humphrey (2006) noted a substantial diminution in end-of-year grade averages for employed term-time students over non-employed. Nearly 40% of the students who worked during term-time reported feelings of regret and believed that they could have achieved higher grades and degree classifications if they had not been employed (Humphrey 2006). Curtis and Shani (2002) also reported adverse effects on attendance and performance with employed students reporting missing more lectures and attaining lower grades as a direct consequence of work commitments. The inability to attend all time-tabled classes was also noted by Robotham (2011), and Curtis and Williams (2002) found that up to 83% of students expressed views that working had detracted them from their studies. Also of concern, Gilardi and Gugliemetti (2011) found that being employed significantly increased chances of attrition at the end of the first year of higher education study.

Manthei and Gilmore (2005) propose that students who work part-time simply have less time than is ideally desired for studying; however this can also impinge on other areas of academic and student life which those not in employment may be enjoying. For example term-time employment has been found to severely confine students' chances to participate in extra-curricular activities (Moreau and Leathwood 2006) or to partake in overseas study (Pitcher and Purcell 1998). The juggling of roles may also mean that there is insufficient time to rest and recuperate properly (Ford, Bosworth, and Wilson 1995) or to develop coping buffers (Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diehoff 2013). Carney, McNeish, and McColl (2005) suggest that a combination of term-time employment, full-time study and increasing student debt can have serious negative outcomes, not only upon academic endeavours but also upon students' psychological and physiological health. Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diehoff (2013) report greater levels of stress and anxiety exhibited amongst employed students when compared to those not working. This highlights cause for concern regarding student welfare.

However, not all authors subscribe fully to this view point. Manthei and Gilmore (2005) note that part-time work may not be detrimental to students' academic endeavours if the hours worked and job type are manageable in respect to course demands. Gellner (2012) provides a similar argument, suggesting that the negative consequences of working are likely mediated by employment characteristics and hours worked alongside the nature of the academic course and assessments. It has also been pointed out that students' ability to effectively manage time may be the significant factor that determines outcomes, rather than the total number of hours spent in paid employment (Carney, McNeish, and McColl, 2005). According to Greenbank, Hepworth, and Mercer (2009) there may have been an over emphasis on the negative aspects of student employment, a point supported when one considers the existing literature on positive outcomes such as: improved job prospects (Watts 2002), greater financial security (Gellner 2012), development of life skills (Watts 2002), increased social links (Ford, Bosworth and Wilson 1995) and broadened independence (Watts 2002).

Laura (2010) asserts that many students perceive term-time employment to be of great benefit. Students use working opportunities to explore future career options while gaining accurate insights into the real working world. These experiences in turn help develop students' identity, ultimately enhancing self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth (Laura, 2010). This view concords with past research by Astin (1999) and Kuh (1995) who offer similar notions on student development as a positive feature, derived from career related paid term-time work

both on and off-campus. These authors argue that students who choose to work regardless of job relevancy still gain a diverse range of abilities and social experiences that enhance life perspective; experiences which Astin (1999) and Kuh (1995) consider vital to goal achievement and successful life progression. Cheng and Alcantara (2007) state that in addition to providing monetary security, paid work during term-time often ensures a more meaningful HE experience, leading to a greater sense of well-being and satisfaction.

Taken at face value, the above findings appear contradictory; either painting a positive picture where term-time employment facilitates the development of important skills and experiences or an opposing story of its potentially damaging and detrimental impact. It could be that positive and negative aspects are not mutually exclusive and gains in one area need to be balanced against losses in another. However, it is likely that the situation is far more complex with factors such as age, type of course studied, nature of the employment and number of hours worked all contributing to the impact term-time working has on each individual. It seems fair to say that further research is required in order to explore and unpack some of the factors listed. The present study specifically considers age and term-time employment.

It has been well documented that studies of students in HE predominantly consider those in the 18-21 age bracket. However, for non-traditional aged or 'mature' students HE can represent a different learning and social environment. Although the terms mature and non-traditional aged are often used interchangeably, in the UK the former is anyone aged twenty-one years or older on 30<sup>th</sup> September in the first year of starting HE (HESA 2013; UCAS 2013), whilst the latter, although not so tightly defined, could refer to anyone who did not enter at the 'traditional' post-school age. In much of the adult learning literature though it is often used to refer to those of over 25 years of age (e.g. Markle 2015; Shillingford, Shani and Karlin 2013). For the purpose of consistency the term non-traditional aged will be used in this review, to encompass both terms and definitions. In comparison to traditional aged students, older students are more likely to have had diverse and disjointed learning careers before entering HE (Gallacher, Crossan, and Merrill, 2002); have family commitments which meant they were not able to study until a little later in life (McCune, Cree and Tett, 2010); and feel more anxiety initially about their academic ability having had this break from education (Mercer, 2010). Studies also indicate that they adopt deeper learning styles and tend to be more intrinsically motivated than traditional aged students (Bye, Pushkar, and Conway, 2007; Mercer, 2001; Wang and Chen 2013). These factors suggest that non-traditional aged students may have some different

challenges from their traditional aged counterparts (Mercer, 2001; Mercer 2010) which could be further exasperated by engaging in term-time employment. Presently little is known about the ways in which non-traditional aged students in particular negotiate employment and academic study as previous pedagogic research primarily concentrated on traditional age student populations (Rochford, Connolly, and Drennan, 2009; Salamonson et al. 2011).

In terms of methodology, Robotham (2013) notes that there has been an emphasis on quantitative measures, typically focusing on relationships between specific variables. Whilst such research is important, it cannot capture the nuanced ways in which participants might make sense of the multiple roles they may be juggling. It can be argued that in order to understand the student experience there is also a need for a body of research that takes into consideration their domestic, social and academic roles, all of which impact on and contribute to the academic life of older students. For this reason, the present study adopts a qualitative approach, seeking to capture subjective experiences and personal accounts of how such students manage and feel about term-time employment whilst studying full-time

## **Method**

The authors referred to Markle's (2015 p 267) account of non-traditional aged student "as defined by the single criterion of age being 25 years and older" for this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who fitted the inclusion criteria of being aged twenty-five years or older at the start of a full time higher education course, and having experience of undertaking paid-employment during academic term-time. The study was advertised via local mature student societies and posters were also displayed at three universities within the locality of the researchers. Some participants were contacts of the second author. All participants were required to have been working and studying for at least one year to ensure that they had sufficient experiences to reflect upon in the interviews. Typically participants had been studying for at least two years when they took part in the study; some had recently graduated. The final sample comprised of 14 (10 undergraduate and 4 post-graduate) students from an old university and two post-92 institutions. Further demographics are provided in Table 1.

**Insert Table 1 around here**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and focused on the experiences of term-time employment and the perceived effects it had upon academic, social and domestic lives. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and the data was subsequently analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Ethical approval was provided by Cardiff Metropolitan University and the research conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's 2010 guidelines.

As qualitative research is a subjective endeavour, a systematic and transparent process was adhered to throughout the different stages of the research. For example, the second author conducted the initial coding, which was discussed at length with the first author to establish the validity of the themes. Once a set of emergent codes were agreed upon the third author was also shown the themes and involved in discussions about the final version; this provided a further credibility check. Potential researcher bias must also be acknowledged; the interviews were conducted by the second author, who was a non-traditional aged student who engaged in term time employment. Depending on the timing of the interviews he was either still studying or recently graduated when collecting the data. This provided an 'insider' perspective and was considered more appropriate for establishing rapport, than interviews being undertaken by lecturers (which the other authors are). However, it is noted that such insider knowledge can lead to a focus on extracts which resonate more with the experiences of the researcher, hence the importance of other researchers also taking part in the analysis. To enhance the transparency of the interpretative process the stance of the other authors are highlighted: The first author has previous experience of research involving non-traditional aged students, thus also had a level of insider knowledge, especially in relation to the extant literature. Finally, the third author was not involved in the research or analysis process until the end and does not have a background in this topic area – she provided an independent perspective on the findings. Taken together the respective roles of the research team enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the study.

## **Findings**

Following completion of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) five salient themes were identified from the accounts: 'Maintaining financial security and quality of life', 'The positive outcomes of employment', 'Academic limitations', 'Pushing oneself to succeed' and 'Social lives and relationships challenged'. These are outlined below, and supported by verbatim quotations.

### ***Maintaining financial security and quality of life***

The notion of working to earn money in order to minimise debt was common. For the majority of participants monetary concerns were the main reason for engaging in paid employment during term-time:

*Money is a real concern. I have two children and I have a small bursary, so I'm trying to pump up my income a bit... If I don't do it I have to borrow money. I have done that in the past and it was really difficult to pay back. (Participant 5)*

*I decided I just didn't want to put myself in more debt, it just really freaked me out, the thought of being in that much debt. (Participant 10)*

Others could not rely on jobs during the university vacations alone:

*I don't get funding in the summer time, so for example basically spending the whole year working trying to save up rent for the whole summer. (Participant 1)*

For some having the option to continue the same employment post-graduation was regarded critical for safeguarding future financial security:

*I don't know if I'm guaranteed something to do after the masters...So it's mainly as a sort of insurance in case I don't get anything after. (Participant 13)*

*It kinda gives you that security blanket when you graduate and you know it's a very saturated market we're in these days...you aren't that pressurised to find a job. So you don't have that pressure to get a graduate job, but at the same time you have a job that is quite ok, it's not perfect but it's alright. (Participant 7)*

While participants worked to avoid accruing further debt during their studies, they were also keen to maintain a quality of life akin to the one they had established before returning to education:

*Yeah, I wouldn't want to go back to my first undergrad degree where I was trying to live on about £10 a week, it just wasn't happening... Yeah, I think if I really tried*

*I could probably live on a lot less but...Yeah, I just... I wouldn't want to go back to living like that. I like having nice things and if that means I have to work a bit then ...that's what's going to happen. (Participant 9)*

*I wouldn't be able to live and maintain my lifestyle without having a job. (Participant 8)*

This desire to hold on to the past lifestyle may also be related to maintaining a sense of self associated with employment:

*I cannot imagine not to work; it's just something so natural to me. (Participant 11)*

And for this participant a link to a specific boss:

*It's definitely a safety net but also the link I have to my boss. I absolutely adore my boss...I think it's hard to find a job that you feel really comfortable in... to have left and gone straight into maybe a full-time masters without stability of knowing what I could go back to [pause] that would have been quite hard. (Participant 8)*

It is apparent from the accounts above that participants were keen to establish, or in some cases maintain, employment links at the same time as studying. This afforded them security on a number of levels: financially; as a way of holding on to an established standard of living; and as a strategy to avoid the risk of unemployment in the competitive post-graduate job market.

### ***The positive outcomes of employment***

The perception that there were positive aspects to term-time employment was apparent throughout the interviews. Working created structure and routine in daily life; it facilitated sound time-management and organisation skills:

*I feel like in a routine with work. I think work and uni keeps me in quite a structured routine and I find myself being a lot more productive. (Participant 1)*

*Time management definitely...And then it's that sense of, you know like your self-esteem raises because you're thinking hmm I can do both and then when you go*



*for a job interview you can say well I was studying and I had to work, so those are quite good things. (Participant 11)*

Although time-management was the most commonly reported positive outcome, some participants also experienced unexpected benefits such as opportunities to form and maintain new friendships:

*Money is always nice but it's also the social side, so you kind of get to hang out with different people while at university and you meet completely different people in the work place. It's also a completely different experience, so it makes it more interesting. (Participant 7)*

Some were also able to make parallels between their employment and their specific course content:

*...It was a very conscious choice that I went for jobs that were in mental health because I knew that that's where I wanted to go and so not least of all because I was able to do some of my work, my reading work, if it was quite a quiet shift I took that into work and didn't feel guilty about it because it was all to do with mental health. (Participant 12)*

Working in relevant fields provided opportunities to experience potential future careers:

*The nature of the job I have does help with the course and things...so that is an area I could end up potentially working in when I qualify. (Participant 2)*

As with the previous theme, it became apparent that term-time employment was not just about fiscal security. It offered transferrable and practical skills, but perhaps more importantly the employment opportunities discussed by some of the participants were framed as the first steps on the post-graduate employment ladder. As well as holding onto the past, they were looking to the future.

### ***Academic Limitations***

However, participants did note that juggling paid employment around university also had negative aspects. Time constraints led to them not being able to devote as much time to studying as they would like:

*I get less time to focus on my assignments and to do my reading and prepare for my lectures. (Participant 8)*

Having to juggle the two roles was hard at times:

*Really stressed because it's really hard to switch from one mind set to the other... feel like you juggling so many things and it's really hard to switch off from one to the other. (Participant 8)*

The above participant describes feeling stressed, others talked about feeling under constant pressure to complete university assignments in their limited free time. As the following extract reveals, this can have a negative impact on performance:

*...if I'm already thinking about what I'm doing later, it will throw me off in terms of how much I can do and I'll start just, you know... start just typing nonsense, just for the sake of you know filling the time. (Participant 13)*

The perception that academic outcomes were suffering was common:

*I remember my first year I ended up you know falling asleep on the lectures and then I was thinking I'm just not going to go for lectures so that had a like huge impact on my grades, on my engagement with uni. (Participant 11)*

In order to tackle the conflicting time demands, there were occasions where participants sacrificed social and/or work opportunities in order to meet assignment deadlines or prepare for exam periods:

*There were times when I wanted to not work so I could concentrate on my study. I could take annual leave you know and stuff like that, but it's not nice taking your holiday to do exams and assignments. (Participant 3)*

*Yeah I find that I'm finishing essays the day before or the day it's due which I never used to do and that's just the timing thing and I called in sick at work once because I couldn't bare... I had this huge report to write and it just wasn't finished and I was like I can't go in and work ten hours and then stay up all night writing this report and so I called in sick because I couldn't get on top of it. (Participant 10).*

So despite the inevitable challenges of finding time to complete the academic work whilst in term-time employment, strategies were adopted to complete assessments. Whether their grades would have been higher given more time is not possible to discern. However, as the next theme reveals, these students also put pressure on themselves to succeed.

### ***Pushing oneself to succeed***

When discussing motivations around working and studying it transpired that many participants experienced a pressure to succeed. Often this was self-imposed, and linked to their stage in the life course:

*For me it's like this is my last chance now. (Participant 2)*

*I guess it's the maturity that allows you to recognise what you've been given on a plate and actually make the best of it. (Participant 12)*

In light of increased pressures to succeed in order to achieve (their own) idealistic standards, further dilemmas emerged as a result of meeting work commitments and assignment deadlines. Again, participants described how employment impeded opportunities to complete HE work to the highest standards:

*Yeah, and I'm not hitting my ideal standards and it is a time thing because I you know, I spend all my days off doing uni work and I don't want to spend them all doing uni work (Participant 10)*

This led to a sense of inequality, especially when comparing themselves with non-working students:

*I think that's going back to a sense of injustice I feel about work. It's like I know work affects my grades...I know that the work correlated to the exams and it just brought my average down and I could have gotten a first last year, but instead I had a high 2:1 which is fine, but I could have had a first. (Participant 1)*

Participants also described pushing themselves physically in order to manage:

*I don't sleep very much, I have one day a week where I sleep in and then that... then the rest of the time I just don't sleep to fit it all in, and it works okay, I drink a lot of coffee. (Participant 10)*

It was acknowledged that the pressure fluctuated throughout the academic year in line with varying academic and employment demands:

*Sometimes it was just exhausting, especially like the first term when we had to hand in the essays and it coincides with Christmas. So Christmas at work it's very physically draining and emotionally draining at times, and at the same time you still have to do your essays, so it's a massive task. (Participant 7)*

However, the type of coping strategies described did mean that other areas of their lives, and at times other people, were affected.

### ***Social lives and relationships challenged***

Participants stated that they were not always able to dedicate the time they would like to socialising:

*You just miss out on all the sort of spontaneous stuff...obviously working you just don't have that freedom and time flexibility that your friends do. (Participant 1)*

*I don't see my friends, quite a few of them got a bit upset with me, but I spoke with them and I said 'look I can't I'm not doing it on purpose, I just haven't got any time. I don't have any time'. So it affects my friendships. (Participant 5)*

Household chores and food preparation were also areas which this participant felt she had to compromise on:

*Domestic wise your diet suffers because you have no time to cook...so diet suffers. The state of your room suffers. Like the whole household stuff gets move to the back of the list to do so you don't do it. (Participant 7)*

Partnered participants faced additional challenges around maintaining their relationships alongside paid work and academic life:

*Most of the time we spend together is when we're asleep, and we don't really get to go out and do stuff that much because he works full time and I'm not there at the weekends and in the evenings. (Participant 9)*

*I'm fairly good at making sure I hit deadlines with my work but I'm perhaps not good at managing spending time with my boyfriend and he definitely resents my degree. (Participant 10)*

In some cases it resulted in relationship dissolution:

*He hadn't been through uni, so he didn't know the amount of time required on top of going to classes and just attending lectures...I see it as a good thing to tell you the truth. I'm glad I figured it out early rather than later...It was like 'where have you been, why have you been out this late?' It was just his insecurities he had. We tried to get over it together but we never did. (Participant 4)*

The situation was not straight forward for those who started their studies as single either. As this extract illustrates, sacrifices relating to relationships have to be made:

*I was dating a lot before I started the course. There is no way I can do that now because I just don't have the time, which is really hard because at 27 years of age a lot of friends are kinda finishing their masters and settling down and they've got kids. (Participant 8)*

Linking back to the idea of limited time, participants also expressed that there was little point considering new romantic relationships due to their limited available free time:

*I'm single and it's because I don't get to meet people. If I did meet somebody I have no idea where I would fit them in. When people say 'are you seeing anyone' I'm like where would I put them! (Participant 2)*

The challenges faced in the domestic and romantic sphere are clear as the participants describe struggling to devote adequate time to work, study, friendships, chores and their relationships. Often it is the relationships that take the brunt of the burden with some participants actively choosing to remain single during their period as a student.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to contribute to the existing body of literature pertaining to the growth of term-time employment amongst full-time students in HE. By adopting a qualitative methodology the findings address previous research recommendations for additional qualitative research in the field of HE student employment (Manthei and Gilmore, 2005). Additionally, an under-represented student demographic has been considered (Bowl 2001; Deggs 2011; Mercer 2003), as previous research has predominantly focused on traditional age student populations (Robotham 2011, 2013; Rochford, Connolly, and Drennan, 2009) potentially neglecting non-traditional aged students' accounts of juggling paid employment alongside full-time HE study (Manthei and Gilmore 2005).

In summary, the research revealed that a complex relationship exists between the perceived benefits of term-time employment and the constraints it places on non-traditional aged students' academic performance and engagement. This supports previous literature illustrating that a range of both positive and negative outcomes exist from term-time employment (e.g. Gellner 2012; Watts 2002). For participants in this study juggling multiple roles also impacted on their domestic and social lives, suggesting that university life and home lives are not separate entities. Thus for researchers and educators alike, understanding student experiences of HE cannot be achieved by solely focussing on what goes on in the classroom or academic achievement. The academic and social appear to be inextricably linked.

Similarly, Robotham (2013) has previously highlighted that studies considering term-time employment have been deficient in considering the impact that this may have on students' overall quality of life. This study provides an insight into some aspects of this via the themes 'Maintaining financial security and quality of life', 'Social lives and relationships challenged' and 'Pushing oneself to succeed'. The theme 'Academic limitations' also illuminated the perceived impact that working had on academic study; yet concurrently participants were able to identify the advantages of pursuing term-time employment in 'The positive outcomes of employment'. These aspects are now discussed further before considering the implications for those working in HE institutions.

To begin by picking up on Robotham's (2013) point about the impact term-time employment may have on overall quality of life it is interesting to note that the theme 'Maintaining financial security and quality of life' suggests a desire to ensure that university will not impact on this, at least financially. Some talked of continuing with their established lifestyle, they were not seeking a traditional 'student life'. The stage of life-course participants were at mean that they are likely to have a higher number of external demands and responsibilities than traditional-aged students, for example mortgages, spouses, children. For those in the present study such responsibilities could mean that they had no choice but to maintain their financial security; for others it was about holding on to a comfortable and established lifestyle. However, this could come at a price when it came to relationships; 'Social lives and relationships challenged' revealed that some participants elected to refrain from actively seeking an intimate relationship because they were so busy, something which does not appear to have been documented in previous literature. For others their lifestyle put the relationship under strain, at times leading to dissolution. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) found concerns about the level of support partners would provide was displayed amongst mature students about to return to education. In a review of 14 international papers Andrew et al (2015) identified that partner support can be a key influence in supporting or constraining academic progressions and social involvement in university life. Whilst Norton et al (1998) found that the most significant buffer for mature students coping with the transition into HE during the first year of their course was the support from partners. Clearly a good relationship can offer protective features, but if the numbers of hours working both on academic work and in employment leave individuals with insufficient time to engage in relationships (either socially or of an intimate kind), then one could raise concerns in relation to the wellbeing of some students in this situation. It is noteworthy that half of the sample here were single at the time of their interviews.

In a similar vein the theme ‘Pushing oneself to succeed’ highlighted some worrying trends. The self imposed pressure to succeed showed some participants pushed themselves physically and mentally, leaving little time for other activities. This could also be linked to the reported lack of time to maintain relationships with others. Whilst they attributed this to being older and seeing education as a last chance, there is also compelling evidence that older students tend to have a very different approach to learning than their younger counterparts. For example Mercer (2001) points out older students are more likely to adopt a deeper approach to their work. Similarly Richardson (1997) found that non-traditional aged students were less likely to memorise information for a specific task than their younger counterparts. Whilst such learning styles are to be actively encouraged, maintaining a deep approach to learning will take more time to achieve than adopting a surface approach. Time, it seems, which many non-traditional aged students may not have. Perhaps paradoxically the very approaches to study which as educators we desire may be compromised amongst students suffering from time poverty. The consequences of this for non-traditional aged students can also be feeling unable to achieve one’s full academic potential.

This was developed further as in the theme ‘Academic Limitations’ where it was reported that juggling university work and paid employment left individuals feeling pressured, stressed and unable to engage with their courses as fully as they wished. As noted in the introduction Mounsey, Vandehey and Diehoff (2013) report greater levels of stress and anxiety exhibited amongst employed students when compared to those not working. The perceived consequences of this discussed in the present study were academic under achievement and engagement, a common concern amongst such populations (Curtis and Shani, 2002; Curtis and Williams, 2002; Humphrey, 2006; Robothom, 2011). Whilst it cannot be ascertained from a qualitative analysis if their grades would have been higher had they not been working, trends from quantitative studies do seem to support this idea. For example Humphrey (2006) found a substantial diminution in end-of-year grade averages for employed term-time students over non-employed.

The discussion to date may appear somewhat negative, however the theme ‘The positive outcomes of employment’ provides a counter balance to this. The positive aspects participants highlighted mirrored much of the literature reviewed in the introduction such as learning useful skills (Watts 2002), increasing social links (Watts and Pickering 2000), and enhanced time-



management skills (Robotham 2011). Additionally, Mercer (2001) when discussing the differences and similarities between traditional and non-traditional aged students noted that older students, based on their life experience, and multiple responsibilities, often come into university with superior time management skills. They may, therefore, be well equipped to deal with challenges of juggling multiple roles. Despite reporting condensed time for social engagements, participants formed new friendships within work as well as building professional networking ties; in times of austerity and uncertainty about graduate careers enhancing social capital can only be seen as a good thing. Overall this theme concurred with the work of authors such as Laura (2010) that employment can be beneficial and enhance HE experiences.

Acknowledging the benefits, whilst important, does not mediate the challenges inherent in negotiating term-time employment and study. It is noteworthy that Robotham (2013) reports that in the UK, the government recommends that full-time students should spend no more than 10 hours in paid employment per week. As the participants' working hours in table one reveal, this was not reality for individuals interviewed for this study. It is unlikely that term-time employment and academic study are going to go away, and the present study has highlighted some points for concern about the impact of this. What might HE institutions do to better accommodate such activities?

Evans, Gbolahan, and Richardson, (2014) suggest configuring curricula around students' part-time working, potentially by embedding part-time employment activities within programmes of study. Likewise, Robotham (2011) suggests that universities ought to consider evaluating existing models of delivery to enhance flexibility to allow non-traditional aged students to combine term-time work and full-time study more effectively. One way of doing this may be by offering more blended learning approaches encompassing shorter blocks of face to face teaching supported by online resources and activities which can be completed at times conducive to employment patterns. Hall (2010) having interviewed students about this topic found they desired more flexible submission requirements and timetables and the provision of online facilities for assignment submission. All of these require a different way of thinking about the traditional campus based delivery of programmes and a possible shake up of university culture. However, this may be inevitable as studies such as ours do lead one to a question what does the term 'full-time' study actually mean? In the present landscape where working and studying are becoming an increasingly embedded part of HE for students this is indeed a debatable point.

### **Study limitations and future research**

One must be cautious about making generalisations from a study of this size. However, it may be that some of the findings resonate with other educators and researchers in the field and further research with such cohorts can be encouraged to corroborate (or dispel) some of the points made. The literature review also revealed that the present findings supported some past research about term-time employment and HE study. It is noteworthy that some aspects of the findings could be relevant not just to non-traditional aged students (e. g. the positive outcomes of employment), whilst others such as ‘Maintaining financial security and quality of life’ and ‘Pushing oneself to succeed’ do seem more pertinent for students who are of a non-traditional age.

It is important to acknowledge also that the definition of non-traditional aged student is somewhat wide. It would be perilous to assume that everyone over the age of 25 would have similar experiences, or represent a homogenous group. In the present study eight of the 14 were still in their 20s, and the age range only went up to the early 40s. It is likely that older students would have additional responsibilities, for example Elmi-Glennan’s (2013) work with students between 34 and 60 years of age found that responsibility for older parents became a more salient feature of the non-traditional aged student’s wider responsibilities. It would be useful for future research to focus on different age ranges within this wider category.

Although finances were not discussed in great depth at time of writing the UK government in their latest spending review statement announced the introduction of a loan scheme for masters’ students of up to £10,000. This may ease the burden for post-graduate students, such as those in the present study, in the future. Evans, Gbolahan, and Richardson, (2014) note location will most likely effect experiences, especially for those studying in expensive areas of the UK such as London. This study was based in Wales, where currently an annual cap on fees of £3810 exists for Welsh domiciled undergraduates. Although participants were not asked if they were Welsh domiciled (and not all were undergraduates) it is likely that some of the undergraduates who took part in the study were and therefore paying significantly lower fees than English domiciled students. As it appears that the shift to students paying fees is a large factor in the rise in students undertaking term time employment, future research may wish to consider regional differences, which can then be used to explore comparisons between areas of higher fees and those, such as Scotland, where at present students are not the fee payers. Such a UK

wide perspective would provide further insight about the role of finances and fees and expanding the literature base and knowledge in this field.

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**Table 1: Participant Details**

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Level of Study</b>	<b>Hours Worked Per Week</b>
1	30	Male	Single	Undergraduate	12-30

2	30	Female	Single	Undergraduate	25-35
3	29	Female	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Undergraduate	17.5
4	29	Male	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Undergraduate	16-24
5	41	Female	Single	Undergraduate	0-34
6	43	Male	Single	Undergraduate	21
7	27	Female	Single	Undergraduate	50
8	27	Female	Single	Postgraduate	21
9	28	Female	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Undergraduate	25
10	25	Female	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Postgraduate	25-30
11	27	Female	Single	Undergraduate	10-30
12	41	Female	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Postgraduate	8-16
13	25	Male	Single	Postgraduate	10-18
14	33	Male	Partnered/Co-Habiting	Undergraduate	16-20