



# CAREERS SERVICE BRIEFING

## Balancing work and university life Research findings

Inspiring futures

### What question were we trying to answer?

It is well documented<sup>1</sup> that extra-curricular activities, such as work experience, involvement in student societies and volunteering make a significant contribution to employability, career planning and graduate success. The Careers Service plays an important role in encouraging students to take part in such experiences, particularly work experience. It also plays a role in advising students how to balance their extra-curricular activities with their academic commitments. We have been recommending for a number of years that full-time undergraduate students should work no more than 15 hours per week during semester. Given the steady increase in the number of students working while studying, we decided it was timely to investigate whether this advice was still current and useful to students and whether there was any 'critical threshold' for working hours beyond which academic performance and other areas of student life suffer.

### How did we approach this?

We commissioned a research project, undertaken by an intern during the summer of 2017 through the Employ.ed on Campus scheme and funded by ASET<sup>2</sup> to collect and analyse data from full-time undergraduate UoE students about their motivations for working during semester, the number and pattern of hours they work and the perceived impacts of this on their academic performance, both positive and negative. We had responses from more than 650 students.

### What did we find out?

Some expected findings from the research were that work is seen as a necessary part of student life due to financial necessity, particularly for students from a widening participation background, those with caring responsibilities and those on courses with high material costs. Some areas of student life which are adversely impacted by work are extra-curricular and social activities. UG Students who exceed the recommended maximum of 15 hours work per week are significantly more likely to report missing deadlines and to believe that work has a negative impact on their grades.

Other, more surprising findings, were that the students who reported the most negative impact on their academic lives fell into the 11-20 working hours bracket. Students at either extreme of the spectrum (i.e. those working less than 10 or more than 30 hours per week) reported the least impact on their academic lives.

The research also found that there was a positive impact of balancing work and study, primarily in developing time management and prioritisation skills.

<sup>1</sup>[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/604170/Graduates\\_career\\_planning\\_and\\_its\\_effect\\_on\\_their\\_outcomes.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/604170/Graduates_career_planning_and_its_effect_on_their_outcomes.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Careers Service is a member of ASET, a UK Work-based and Placement Learning Association  
<http://www.asetonline.org/>

## Why does this matter?

This research helps us better understand our students and appreciate the importance to them of successfully balancing work and study. It informs how we can support them by:

- Recognising that Edinburgh is an expensive place to live and that debt is an enduring concern for many students.
- Highlighting the benefits of working, beyond financial gain, and helping students to identify and value these.
- Continuing to advise caution to UG students about working more than 15 hours per week during semester (and only advertising jobs up to this threshold) but accepting that some students work beyond this recommendation out of necessity and should be supported in balancing this with their university commitments.
- Continuing to offer a wide variety of flexible, part-time job opportunities to students, ensuring these are paid at least the living wage.
- Increasing the number of quality jobs available on campus and streamlining the processes to make it easier for staff to recruit students flexibly.
- Considering offering financial support for students from a WP background and those with caring responsibilities who may be losing out on the chance for personal development through other extra-curricular activities due to needing to work longer hours than others.

## A few headline stats

- 81% of students work less than 20 hours per week. Students from the College of Science and Engineering work the highest number of hours across all the Colleges.
- 57% of students have, or have had, more than 1 job, 5% have, or have had, more than 5 jobs. Almost 1/3 of students have zero hours contracts.
- The primary motivation for working is financial: over 30% of UG students working 16-20 hours strongly agreed that they would not be able to remain at university if they did not work during semester. Significantly more students from a WP background reported working to pay for rent and essential items and to avoid debt. Other motivations included gaining experience and developing skills and attributes.
- The most popular sectors for student work are Retail & Sales, Hospitality & Events and Finance.
- Just over 25% of UG students working 11-15 hours per week during semester report having missed a class due to work.

## Interested in finding out more?

Email [employ.ed@ed.ac.uk](mailto:employ.ed@ed.ac.uk) to ask for a full copy of the report and find out who would be the best person to discuss your area of particular interest.