



CAREERS SERVICE BRIEFING

Balancing student employment and university life Research findings

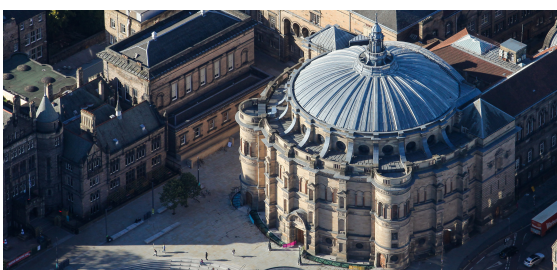
Inspiring futures

What question were we trying to answer?

The Careers Service encourages students to take part in extracurricular activities, such as part-time work. However, the cost-of-living crisis has created a 'catch-22' for many students.

Students taking on more hours of paid work alongside their studies may struggle academically by missing classes, having less time to study, and/or feeling burnt out. On the other hand, students who choose not to take on employment may also struggle academically due to persistent financial stress impacting their physical and mental health. The choice to work/not work and how much to work during the university semester is not a simple one.

This study examined the motivations, benefits, and disadvantages of part-time work for undergraduate students at the University of Edinburgh (UofE). It aimed to establish whether the current guidance of critical threshold hours for student employment at no more than 15 hours per week during Semester should be revised.



How did we approach this?

This research project was carried out by a Careers Service Employ.ed intern in 2023. It built on 2017 research which analysed UofE students and their motivations for working during semester.

Research included benchmarking of Russell Group and Scottish Universities' guidance, in addition to a survey with responses from close to 600 UofE undergraduate students and qualitative research with input from current undergraduate students, employers and UofE staff.

What did we learn?

Key findings included:

- Respondents to the survey worked an average of 18 hours per week, with the majority (24%) working between 16 and 20 hours
- 59% of survey participants agreed that student employment contributes positively to their professional/personal growth
- 66% of students working part-time for financial reasons believe their independent study time would increase if they were not working
- Students report that academic commitments begin to be impacted at >11 hours of part-time work, compared to social commitments that were impacted at >22.5 hours
- 65% of commuter students felt work obstructed their sense of community, with 77% experiencing this more than once, as opposed to 41% of non-commuter students
- Our findings were that we should continue to promote a threshold of no more than 15 hours part-time work per week during semester

Benchmarking

- Among the Russell Group universities, the most common recommendation for student work hours is no more than 15 per week, endorsed by 12 institutions (Seven suggest a maximum of 20 hours while four discourage any employment during studies). This 15- hour recommendation is also prevalent among Scottish universities, with six out of fifteen and three out of four Edinburgh-based institutions endorsing this, while one suggests a range of 15-20 hours as the absolute maximum.
- Students who responded to the survey worked an average of 18 hours per week, with the majority (24%) working between 16 and 20 hours, the next most common range was 11-15 hours (18%). There were no significant gender differences in average hours worked per week and UK students work slightly more than international students which is likely to reflect visa restrictions. There was minor difference in the average weekly hours worked when comparing by year group.



This research can be understood through four key lenses:

Students' motivations for working part time, the benefits of working part time, the disadvantages, and the support students would find valuable with balancing work and study.

Motivations

The primary driving force for students to seek employment is financial, indicated by 83% of students surveyed.

Individual circumstances affect the way in which money motivated students, but the most common motivation was 'affording essentials' – for some respondents there was a necessity to work to cover even their basic living costs. 26% of survey participants indicated they received extra financial support such as bursaries, grants, or loans. Interestingly, those with this additional support reported working slightly more hours weekly than those without, averaging 19.3 hours compared to 17.5. Despite receiving financial aid, students worked more than the recommended limit of 15 hours per week.

67% of students agreed that employment offers more than just financial stability, with 24% strongly endorsing this view. In focus groups, some students commented that while their student loan and parental support was sufficient to survive on, they wanted to work as the cost of living reduced the leisure spending, which in turn impacted their quality of life. Earnings from student employment can provide disposable income for hobbies and holidays, which can in-turn support wellbeing and improvements in students' quality of life. However, this benefit of financial security is only derived from stable employment, which not all students attain.

Of the 580 respondents many students actively chose to work extra hours, however some respondents felt pressured by their employers to do so, indicating that factors beyond financial necessity may affect the hours worked.

“(my sports membership) is so vital to (my) mental health that it makes the stress of trying to balance all three (employment, academics, sport) necessary”
(UG student)

Benefits

- 59% of survey participants agreed that student employment contributes positively to their professional/personal growth.
- The focus group of students/staff discussed the pros and cons of employment on academic performance. They noted that jobs can enhance skills such as time management and provide a fresh perspective to studying, thereby improving academic outcomes and work-life balance.
- Students reflected that their jobs gave them a break from university work, and provided an opportunity to interact with people they felt they connected to better. One student touched on how they used to be quite introverted before they came to university, but taking on employment made them feel more social and confident in talking to strangers.
- Staff respondents discussed how employment helped students feel more connected to their local community, especially beneficial for students moving to Edinburgh post-pandemic. Paid work offered students a way to get to know the local area, as well as meeting people and other students.

Disadvantages

“It is not possible to join sports societies, the socials are described as something that you cannot skip regularly, this makes all the hours impossible for working students.”

(UG student)

- The survey found that 66% of students working part-time for financial reasons believe their independent study time would increase if they were not working. 58% admitted to missing at least one university class due to work commitments, with 59% stating their academic performance would improve without work. The most reported impacts include falling behind on course readings, missing beneficial unpaid experiences, and decreased study time.
- Students report that academic commitments begin to be impacted at >11 hours compared to social commitments at >22.5 hours, implying more work hours are sustained before social life is impacted.

- Throughout the research, many students discuss the lack of time they have available to do things besides working and studying, impacting their quality of life. The first thing to be sacrificed by working students is time to rest, socialize, or do their hobbies. The findings highlight the interplay between mental health and academic performance.
- The survey revealed that 57% of students claimed work never affected their sense of belonging to the student community, while 32% said it did more than once. The negative impact was most significant for those working over 25 hours per week.
- Commuter students reported less time for extracurricular activities, averaging 3.88 hours per week, compared to 6.45 hours for students living in postcodes EH1-EH17. Moreover, 65% of commuter students felt work obstructed their sense of community, with 77% experiencing this more than once, as opposed to 41% of non-commuter students.

“ I have consistently worked two jobs throughout my 3rd year (working 30+ hours during term time) just so I can afford rent and food and heating during the winter.”

(UG student)

Support

- Many students were unaware of any support offered by the institution; the concept of a threshold hours recommendation was well-received, as it provided a tangible guideline for balancing work and studies. However, there was a call for more personalized advice, with more relevant and specific advice and suggestions for respective year groups and their varying contact hours.
- The focus group discussed the challenges of balancing work and study due to university timetabling. They felt unsupported as employed students because lecture schedules e.g. 9am lecture and 4pm lecture on the same day, prevented them taking on shifts. Also, wider availability of recorded/on-demand course content and advance notice of upcoming semester schedules would help students to balance working more effectively with study.

Key recommendations: what should we do now?

Continue to promote a threshold of no more than 15 hours per week during semester; only advertising jobs up to this threshold from credible living-wage (min) employers and actively promoting students' employment rights. Recognising that some students may work beyond the threshold out of financial necessity and/or relative to their course commitments/year of study.

Continue to increase the amount of quality paid work available on-campus and streamline the processes to make it easier for staff to recruit students flexibly.

Interested in finding out more?

For a full copy of the report, please email employ.ed@ed.ac.uk. We can also put you in contact with the best person to discuss your area of particular interest.

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