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Flexibility, compromise and opportunity: Students' perceptions of balancing part-time work with a full-time business degree



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ABSTRACT

Amidst the growing importance of employability in higher education, this study explores and identifies the motivations behind full-time university students engaging in part-time employment during term time, how students cope with simultaneously managing the two activities and how part-time working influences their career aspirations. Semi-structured interviews are used to obtain data from a sample of 30 business degree students at a UK university.

The findings confirm previous studies, that financial necessity is a primary driver of part-time work, but also reveal a complex set of supplementary reasons, that either satisfies a long-term vision, or a more immediate need for development or self-gratification. Furthermore, most students compromise the longer-term benefit of study against the more immediate financial gains offered by work, resulting in an accepted lowering of academic performance as a consequence. The majority of the students did not see a connecting opportunity between their part-time work and future career, and were uncertain regarding future career direction.

This study extends the use of qualitative methods in this area, which is dominated by survey research, while also extending extant findings to the career aspirations of students, which is hitherto largely unexplored.

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1. Introduction

The bulk of academic work describing part-time working patterns whilst studying full-time in higher education (HE) have been generated from samples of UK university students. Working part-time whilst studying for a full-time degree is, however, not a UK phenomenon. In particular, [Morrison \(2009\)](#) identifies similarities in patterns and reasons for working among Chinese HE students, to students from other countries. Another longitudinal study conducted by [Hall \(2010\)](#) on Australian HE students concluded with findings that were consistent with previous UK studies. Even though studies in the US have tended

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to focus on the part-time working activities of High School students (see for example [Holloway, 2001](#)), the work of [O'Connor and Cordova \(2010\)](#) provides a useful analysis of graduate school students who concurrently work. Notwithstanding a recognition that patterns of students' working may differ internationally, this paper builds on the existing volume of work regarding students' part-time working in the UK (see for example, [Carney, McNeish, & McColl, 2005](#); [Curtis & Shani, 2002](#); [Richardson, Evans, & Gbadamosi, 2009](#); [Watts, 2002](#)).

Since the [Leitch Report \(2006\)](#) recommended that universities encourage more active employer engagement within the curriculum, the contemporary HE environment has seen an increase in work-related activities being offered to students, such as short-term or one-year business placements and various forms of work-based project and work-related learning ([Knight & Yorke, 2002, 2003](#)). Yet, at the same time as universities are embedding employability frameworks and activities within their curriculum ([Smith, Clegg, Lawrence, & Todd, 2007](#)), the numbers of students working part-time whilst undertaking a full-time degree has also increased ([NUS/HSBC Students Research Report, 2008](#)). While it might be argued that this activity embraces the sectoral strategic shift, other factors, in particular structural changes in industry, where deregulation, expansion, and a move to 24-h service availability, has increased the need for flexibility of labour, especially part-time and casual staffing ([IDS, 2008](#)), providing opportunities for students to earn whilst studying. Perhaps more significantly, the financial hardship of HE students has been highlighted in recent reports ([Endsleigh, 2012](#); [NUS, 2009, 2010a, 2010b](#)), giving rise to the conclusion that part-time work is now a necessity in order to survive financially while at university.

There has been a corresponding increase in academic work in this area. Yet, given the multi-faceted research that surrounds part-time working, no single conceptual model exists that embraces the broad spectrum of students working whilst studying at university, despite calls for a theoretical framework ([Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005](#)). Here, studies have predominantly focused on students' part-time work activities, particularly their motives ([Richardson et al., 2009](#)), or its impact upon academic performance ([Curtis & Shani, 2002](#)).

1.1. The impetus to work part-time whilst studying full-time

Several studies highlighting the growing number of full-time undergraduate students engaged in some form of paid part-time employment are widely discussed (see for example [Neill, Mulholland, Ross, & Leckey, 2004](#); [Richardson et al., 2009](#)). The main theme to emerge from these works has centred on the growing need amongst higher education students to work part-time to reduce financial hardship ([NUS, 2008](#)), with [Targetjobs.co.uk \(2008\)](#) highlighting the substantial gap between income and the combined costs of tuition fees and living expenses.

Evidence therefore suggests that full-time students in higher education who work part-time, are often motivated by financial necessity rather than a desire to enhance future employability prospects ([Davies, 2000](#); [Neill et al., 2004](#); [Richardson et al., 2009](#)).

Consequently, the apparent motivation for part-time working is an effort to provide additional income and avoid excessive debt, while maintaining a certain standard of living ([Moreau & Leathwood, 2006](#); [Richardson et al., 2009](#)). [Harrison and Chudry \(2011\)](#) noted that student indebtedness has coincided with the growth of part-time working, while [Carney et al. \(2005\)](#) found that being in debt and working part-time have a very slight, albeit significant, detrimental effect on both mental and physical health of students. More significant is their finding that students, who felt that part-time working had affected their academic performance, generally worked more hours.

1.2. The effect of part-time work on academic studies

While part-time work does offer positive non-financial benefits such as the development of personal skills; it limits the amount of time available for academic study ([Harrison & Chudry, 2011](#)). On the positive side, employers indicate that a good profile of part-time employment can help supplement a relatively weak academic profile; as well as provide evidence of enhanced communication and teamwork skills that can be drawn out at interview. The positive and negative implications of engaging in part-time work whilst studying full-time have been well documented ([Neill et al., 2004](#); [Watts & Pickering, 2000](#)). A significant amount of work has focused on the potentially detrimental effects that part-time working has on academic performance, with some studies confirming a converse relationship ([Lillydahl, 1990](#); [Salamonson & Andrew, 2006](#)). [Neill et al. \(2004\)](#) argue that working 15 h per week is the optimum beyond which part-time work may become disadvantageous. Nonetheless, the literature remains inconclusive, and [Green and Jacques \(1987\)](#) found no relationship between part-time work and students' academic performance. In the UK, [Ford, Bosworth, and Wilson \(1995\)](#) and [Hodgson and Spours \(2001\)](#) both accept that individuals will manage the balance of work and study differently, with some managing their time effectively while others struggle to cope with the demands of both.

1.3. Non-financial benefits of part-time working for students

It is also suggested that many students now recognise that part-time work enhances transferable skills such as time management ([Holloway, 2001](#)), although the extent to which students recognise the value of the skills they obtain from part-time work to prospective employers is arguable. Nonetheless, [Watts and Pickering \(2000\)](#) for example, reported that students gained increased confidence and important skills such as effective time management which can be useful in application to the academic arena. In addition, [Green \(2011\)](#) confirms that work placement can have a positive impact on degree performance,

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