



Paid part-time employment and academic performance of undergraduate nursing students

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SUMMARY

Nursing students are increasingly undertaking paid term-time employment to finance their living expenses and studies. However the type and duration of this part-time work is unknown; furthermore there is a limited evidence on the extent to which this part-time employment is impacting on academic performance and the student's experience of higher education. To address this shortfall this study undertook a cross-sectional survey of undergraduate nursing students to explore the incidence of student involvement in term-time employment and to develop an understanding of the relationship of employment on student's academic and clinical achievement, and on their experience of higher education. The results found that the vast majority of the sample were working in part-time employment during term-time. The average number of hours worked per week was sixteen. The number of hours worked per week was found to be a predictor of course performance, the student's experience of college and grades achieved. Students who worked greater hours reported negative outcomes in each of these three domains. The findings also support the contention that it is not working per se that has a detrimental effect on student outcomes but the numbers of hours' students are actually working while attending college. Therefore policy makers, educationalists and health service providers need to be aware of the burden that nursing students may have to contend with in combining work with their academic studies.

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Introduction

The last decade has seen major restructuring of nurse education in Ireland following its move from hospital-based schools of nursing to full integration into the higher education system. Nursing students are now full-time university-based undergraduates subject to the impact of changes in government educational policies and student financial support schemes. Previously, in the traditional model of nurse education, students were paid employees of the training hospital to which they were attached and the majority of students did not undertake part-time employment during their studies. Now nursing students attending higher education programmes are undertaking part-time employment to financially support their studies. However, there is a paucity of evidence on the extent to which this part-time employment is impacting on academic performance and the student's experience of higher education. The objective of this study was to explore nursing undergraduates' term-time employment commitments and the effect that this employment may have had on course outcomes. In-

creased awareness of nursing students' wider experience of university life will help academic and clinical staff understand the impact that term-time working has on student outcomes.

Literature review

There are a number of factors that can impact negatively on a student's experience of their nurse education programmes including the stresses of clinical placement and financial strain leading to, in some cases, economic hardship (Rhead, 1995; Lauder and Cuthbertson, 1998; Cuthbertson et al., 2004; Nicholl and Timmins, 2005). Financial strain may, in particular, impact on mature nursing students due to family and housing commitments; however there is emerging evidence that this monetary strain is now impacting on a broad range of nursing students. This financial strain is resulting in an increasing number of full-time nursing students undertaking significant amounts of term-time employment. Although there is evidence of student involvement in term-time employment there is limited research on the relationship between term-time employment and course outcomes for nursing students (Ferguson and Cerinus, 1996; Lee et al., 1999; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006).

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Students' reasons for undertaking part-time employment

The rationale for a student contemplating and undertaking term-time employment are complex and multi-factorial and include poverty, financial hardship, inadequate income and debt (Ford et al., 1995; Curtis and Shani, 2002). For example, Ford et al. (1995) in a study of over a thousand undergraduate students in four United Kingdom (UK) universities identified factors such as inadequate parental contribution, low personal income and debt as largely influential in a student's decision to work whilst studying. The extent of parental financial contribution to students was identified as a particularly important factor in influencing a student's decision to work during their studies. A third of students who did not receive a monetary contribution from their parents worked while only a fifth who did receive a contribution were identified as working during their studies. Many students were also found to have reached their borrowing limits with banks, while a significant majority was experiencing pressure to repay loans (Ford et al., 1995).

The majority of studies on student term-time working conclude that students that sought work did so to supplement inadequate incomes as opposed to career development. For example Happell (2002) found that nursing students who undertook part-time employment in nursing homes were least likely to express a desire to work with older people following graduation. This finding suggests that students undertook term-time employment in care of the elderly facilities not so much for practical experience but more out of financial necessity. This theme of working for financial necessity rather than practical experience has also been identified by Hunt et al. (2004) who examined growth in term-time employment and its impact on academic attainment among full-time undergraduates at a university in the United Kingdom. The study, utilising data from three large-scale surveys undertaken between 1999 and 2001, identified that the growth in term-time employment coincided with changes in funding arrangements for students in higher education in the UK. The main reason cited by students for undertaking employment was financial, principally to maintain personal borrowings at a minimum. This longitudinal survey further established that many of those in term-time employment were disproportionately drawn from less well-off backgrounds. This theme of students working for purely financial reasons has also been found in studies in Wales (Tangney, 2002), Scotland (Carney, 2000) and Ireland (Clancy and Wall, 2000; Clancy, 2001). In addition Carney identified that a majority of students were worried about their financial situation during their time in higher education. The financial necessity of working during term-time was highlighted by the finding that relevance of the term-time job for their future career was given as the least important incentive to work (Carney, 2000).

Type and extent of part-time employment

The number of students engaged in term-time employment is variable however the trend is upward. A study by the National Union of Students (1995) in the UK highlighted that 70% of students are in some form of employment. Similar studies by the Union of Students in Ireland (2000, 2002) found that students in higher education work on average 17 h per week. The number of hours worked in Ireland is slightly higher than that in the UK where it was reported that students spent approximately 14 h per week working during term, with 12% of students reporting that they worked greater than 20 h per week. The majority of higher education students undertaking term-time employment work in the retail and catering sectors, however nursing students, tend to work in health related areas such as nursing homes or care homes (Happell, 2002). Although the number of students undertaking

term-time employment is increasing, Ruscoe et al. (1996) suggest that working seems less important than the numbers of hours' students are actually working. This view suggests that the detrimental effects of employment on the student's experience of higher education are associated with the intensity of work involvement (Taylor and Smith, 1997).

Impact of term-time employment on student's experience of college

There has been a debate about the effect of term-time employment on the academic experience of students especially with students working in bars, clubs, catering industry and healthcare sector which can require long and unsocial hours. There is emerging evidence that term-time employment can negatively impact on a number of aspects of student life including attendance (Carney, 2000; Warren et al., 2001; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Tangney, 2002; Oakey et al., 2003), attrition (Callender, 1999), academic achievement (Hunt et al., 2004; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006), and stress (Howard, 2001; Lo, 2002).

Stress has been identified as an outcome due to the financial pressure experienced by nursing students during their studies. For example Howard (2001) in a survey of students completing pre-registration nurse education in a UK university identified financial pressure associated with an inadequate bursary as a major source of stress for nursing students. Many of the students surveyed experienced severe financial difficulties and 50% had taken additional employment. Though this succeeded in alleviating some financial pressure, it also increased the demands placed on student time for study, a factor with which many reported that they already struggled. Similar finding were reported in Australia where Lo (2002) identified that, after academic factors, financial worries were reported as a major source of stress while at college. Lo (2002) further found that many students reported that they lived on or around the poverty line. These financial worries can lead to increased levels of stress for students throughout their academic career (Timmins and Kaliszer, 2002).

Attendance in particular has been identified as being effected by term-time employment with approximately 25% of students reporting that it was the principal reason for being absent from college (Tangney, 2002; Curtis and Shani, 2002). Poor attendance at lectures related to term-time working can eventually result in student attrition. Studies identify that many students consider 'dropping out' of college courses due to financial hardship (Palmer, 2001). For example in the UK a survey by the National Union of Students (1995) found that a quarter of undergraduates had considered leaving higher education as a result of financial pressures. Callender (1999) in a survey of one thousand UK university students also identified that the need to work during term resulted in a large minority of respondents deciding not to continue their participation in higher education. Similar findings were found by Morgan et al. (2001) whose study of students in Irish Institutes of Technology highlighted that over 40% of those surveyed did not finish their course with many citing financial difficulties as the main reason for non-completion.

Term-time employment has also been associated with low levels of academic achievement as a consequence of missed lectures or late submission of assignments leading students to perceive that their academic grades were lower than they would have been had they not been working (Marsh, 1991; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Pearce, 2004; Hunt et al., 2004). One reason postulated for negative academic outcomes is tiredness as a consequence of term-time work which impacts on the student's ability to attend lectures and the effect that this has on their overall attention to academic work (Oakey et al., 2003). The number of hours worked by the student in part-time jobs has been identified as a predictor of academic outcomes with students working greater than 16 h per

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