

How can I make it count? The impact of part-time work on the student experience at LSE

Marta Santivanez-Fernandez

See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/829hBUD5bIU>
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Background

While there is ample literature correlating part-time work with worse academic results and general experience at university (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Metcalf, 2003; Rokicka, 2014), LSE has no data on students who work part-time nor the impact it has on their experience. This project attempts to map this reality and reflect the needs of this segment of the student body. The project aimed to explore two hypotheses:

H1: Working part-time negatively impacts students' academic performance

H2: Working part-time negatively impacts student-life experience

Methodology

We developed a questionnaire that addressed student perceptions of the impact of part-time work on their experience at LSE, both in terms of their academic and university life experience. The focus on "perceptions" reflects the challenges of establishing causation between responsibilities as a "student" and as a "paid worker".

The questionnaire also collected demographic data, structured in the same format as the official statistics provided by LSE, along with self-assessments on class and mental health wellbeing. Only those students that have a part-time job could complete the rest of the questionnaire, which included questions on the reasons students work, based upon existing questionnaires (Carney et al., 2005), and a series of matrix-produced questions, comprised of six statements each, where students could self-assess the impact of part-time work on different elements of their academic and social experiences. The self-assessment offered an option to "neither agree nor disagree" with the statements. The questionnaire was shared among all undergraduate departments as well as the LSE Change Makers portal.

Data analysis

The survey received a total of 241 responses, of which 67.91% identified as women, 28.84% men and 1.86% as non-binary. 86.05% of them were 18-21 years old. The ethnic breakdown falls along similar lines with the School's. Because we did not employ probability sampling, the findings are not representative and therefore will not be interpreted for statistical significance. We use descriptive statistics to point out interesting trends in the data and shed light on the issues at the forefront of part-time work at LSE and its impact on the student experience. We developed our analysis by comparing the conditional distributions of attitudes between those who stand at the lower end of the income bracket, based on their declared earnings per hour (under £8 an hour), those in the middle bracket (£9-£12) and the higher income bracket, including those respondents who are making more than £13 per hour in their part-time jobs. The following breakdown is done based on the number of students reporting earnings in these brackets.

In terms of impact of part-time work on academic performance, the responses indicate a greater negative perception of its impact among those students who are in the lower earning bracket. 50% agreed with the statement “my grades would improve if I didn’t work”, 70% reported that they would prepare better for class if they didn’t work, and 60% agreed with the statement “I find it difficult to juggle my academic and work related responsibilities”. In contrast, the higher earning bracket reported agreeing with these same statements in 32.7%, 45.4% and 46.2% of the cases, respectively. 50% of those earning less than £8 an hour strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I have trouble concentrating in my coursework”, compared to 46.4% of those in the middle-income bracket and 44.2% in the highest.

Regarding the impact of part-time work in student’s university experience, differences are again noted across income brackets. Combining answers that reflect “agree” and “strongly agree”, 75% of working students in the lower income bracket think that they would like to be involved in more societies at LSE, compared to 66.5% of those in the middle income brackets and 48.1% of those in the higher income bracket. 50% of the lower earners agreed they “can never make it to LSE socials”, compared to 25% of the higher earners. Importantly for the LSE “experience”, 50% of those students in the lower income earning bracket think they “won’t have a strong LSE network after graduation”, compared to 43.5% of the middle income earners and 19.2% of the higher income earners.

Other elements that may be influencing respondents is the number of hours they are working. Comparing the distributions of hours worked by income bracket, we note that 30% of those earning less than £8 an hour work 15 or more hours a week; compared to 23.2% of those earning £9-£12 and 15.4% of those earning over £13 an hour.

Findings and recommendations

The implications of these statistics suggest that undertaking part-time work has a negative impact on both academic performance and student experience. We noticed a correlation between the perception of negative impact and pay offered in the position. Those who reported making less money or working more hours encounter greater difficulty in their academic work at LSE and, equally important for the value of the university, do not get to live a full student experience beyond the classroom. This expands on existing literature that determines the negative impact of part-time work in the student experience and brings light to the specifics of the LSE context. Undergraduate students are taking on paid work to the detriment of their studies and the university is not putting measures in place to reduce inequalities across the playing field. Considering these results, we recommend the following:

1. That LSE Careers continues to provide support for students looking for part-time work. These include resources to facilitate access to part-time work paying the London Living Wage. Given the differences in negative perceptions of their LSE experience among lower earners, this should improve their circumstances.
2. That LSE Careers and LSESU develop resources to ensure students are aware of their rights in the workplace, including reliable information collated online and workshops that instruct students on how to navigate a professional environment.
3. That LSESU sets measures in place to facilitate access to society events by diversifying their schedules, including activities taking place in the morning and early afternoon as well as evening events.
4. That LSE encourages its lecturers to consider the time constraints on working students and facilitate scheduling seminars and office hours that can accommodate these limitations.
5. That LSESU advocates for stronger financial aid packages that better take into account the high cost of student living in London.

Bibliography

- Broadbridge, A., & Swanson, V. (2005). Earning and learning: How term-time employment impacts on students' adjustment to university life. *Journal of Education and Work, 18*(2), 235–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080500086008>
- Carney, C., McNeish, S., & McColl, J. (2005). The impact of part time employment on students' health and academic performance: A Scottish perspective. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 29*(4), 307–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770500353300>
- Curtis, S., & Shani, N. (2002). The Effect of Taking Paid Employment During Term-time on Students' Academic Studies. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 26*(2), 129–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770220129406>
- Metcalfe, H. (2003). Increasing Inequality in Higher Education: The role of term-time working. *Oxford Review of Education, 29*(3), 315–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980307447>
- Rokicka, M. (2014). The impact of students' part-time work on educational outcomes. *ISER Working Paper Series, 2014–42*. <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2014-42.pdf>