

# Socioeconomic Background, Part-Time Work and Career Prospects: Experiences of Postgraduate Students in LSE Department of Sociology

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## Background

This research project looks at the experiences of postgraduate students in the Department of Sociology with regards to socioeconomic background, part-time work and career prospects. It seeks to understand whether financially-driven part-time work might contribute to perpetuating inequalities linked to students' socioeconomic backgrounds, and in turn how LSE is helping or could help to ensure that students have equal opportunities during their studies to build up their future career profile. This is in line with LSE's 2030's Strategy, notably its commitment to "Ensuring LSE works for everyone," including a need to "address systematic inequalities." The project explores the following research questions:

1. How does socioeconomic background relate to students' undertaking of part-time work alongside their studies?
2. How do students perceive the support and opportunities offered by the LSE to advance their future career prospects?

## Methodology

This project adopts a mixed-methods approach. I first conducted online research into the availability of career-building initiatives offered by LSE to postgraduate students in the Department of Sociology. Secondly, I met with an LSE Careers advisor to understand the careers service's approach to the matter. Thirdly, I created a survey which was distributed amongst the department's postgraduate cohort via departmental emails. The survey received 54 responses including 45 completed answers, comprising 21.6% and 18.0% of the cohort respectively<sup>1</sup>. Finally, I conducted 6 semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were recruited through the survey and included both international and domestic students, as well as students who worked part-time and others who did not.

## Literature review

The academic literature related to this topic largely focuses on undergraduate experiences and argues that students from lower financial backgrounds are more likely to work part-time and less likely to shape their part-time work to their career ambitions (see Hordósy, Clark & Vickers, 2018). Studies have also found that students do not effectively highlight their part-time work when making job applications (see Evans & Yusof, 2011). There is a gap in linking these dimensions to understand how students' experiences of working part-time out of financial necessity relates to their perceptions of their career prospects. This project

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a figure provided by the Department of Sociology of approximately 250 postgraduate students

therefore explores such linkages in the postgraduate context to contribute to discussions around the reproduction and perpetuation of socioeconomic inequalities and relate them to matters of student satisfaction at the LSE specifically.

## Data Analysis

### 1. Student Profiles

Survey respondents were categorised into two groups based on their self-identification of class and their responses to certain socioeconomic indicators. These groups are (1) Lower Socioeconomic Background, and (2) Higher Socioeconomic Background. *Figure 1* shows that Lower Socioeconomic Background students were more likely to have a scholarship (50%) or a loan (60%) than Higher Socioeconomic Background students, and were less financially supported by family, friends and partners (55%). We can observe a different distribution between groups with regards to part-time work, as we see that Lower Socioeconomic Background students were significantly more likely to work part-time during their studies than those of Higher Socioeconomic Background.

	Lower Socioeconomic Background	Higher Socioeconomic Background
Scholarship	<b>50.0%</b>	24.2%
Loan	<b>60.0%</b>	45.5%
No to slight financial reliance on others	<b>55.0%</b>	27.3%
Moderate to entire financial reliance on others	45.0%	<b>72.7%</b>
Current part-time work	<b>65.0%</b>	21.2%
No part-time work	20.0%	<b>63.6%</b>

*Figure 1: Students Characteristics*

### 2. Part-Time Work

#### 2.a. Socioeconomic background affects the nature of the part-time work students undertake

Interviewees indicated that the financial necessity to work pushes them to seek jobs that are readily available at the expense of searching longer for a more professionally-beneficial position. Indeed, survey data showed that Lower Socioeconomic Background students place more weight on financial need as a reason for working part-time (57.1%) compared to students of Higher Socioeconomic Background (33.3%), and the vast majority of Lower Socioeconomic Background students (92.9%) said that their part-time work is not related to their area of postgraduate study.

#### 2.b. Part-time work prevents students from engaging in other activities which they perceive to be beneficial to their career prospects

Students working part-time out of financial necessity equally felt that this limits them from pursuing other professionally-beneficial activities. All interviewees working part-time and 68% of survey respondents agreed with this. Most participants who had volunteered or interned considered this experience valuable to their future careers (75.0% and 87.5%

respectively), and those who had both interned and worked part-time believed their internship to be more valuable than their part-time work (71.4%). Interviewees working part-time said they lacked the time to engage in these activities as well as other aspects of career-planning, such as engaging with LSE Careers and doing careers research.

*"If I didn't have to work, I could focus much more on a strategic approach to my full-time career ... because of this economic necessity, long-term I think I'm disadvantaged." (Postgraduate Sociology student)*

### **3. Perceptions of LSE Careers and Careers Support from the Department of Sociology**

Participants expressed a general appreciation for LSE Careers' one-on-one appointments, but interviewees felt that the support offered was not sufficiently tailored to them. This included a lack of guidance for students needing part-time work out of financial necessity, but also a perception that the events, opportunities and information shared with them were insufficient and often not relevant enough to their fields of study and career interests. Participants expressed the feeling that LSE Careers prioritised "*corporate*" fields such as law, finance and consulting, reflected in the opportunities advertised on Career Hub and the number of events held related to these fields. Furthermore, interviewees felt that the Department of Sociology lacked a pragmatic focus on helping students prepare for careers beyond academia.

*"The [careers consultant] said I should just sit down and think about my ideal job and what I can do to make this happen ... It would be good advice in an ideal world, but it's not something that you can actually do when you just need the job. ... I think it's not attentive to the needs of students with harder socioeconomic positions." (Postgraduate Sociology student)*

*"It's more about the LSE without the Political Science." (Postgraduate Sociology student)*

*"I feel like they [the Department of Sociology] are lacking this pragmatic side when they give something extracurricular to their students. I think they are not actually preparing them in translating academics to practice." (Postgraduate Sociology student)*

## **Findings and Recommendations**

The data analysis shows that students feel disadvantaged by having to work part-time out of financial necessity in roles which they do not consider beneficial to their career prospects, and they feel limited in their ability to engage in other professionally-beneficial activities. Students equally feel there is a lack of tailored careers advice and initiatives for them through the Department of Sociology and the LSE more generally, the negative effects of which may be compounded for Lower Socioeconomic Background students who already feel less able to prepare and plan for their careers in their own time. The project's recommendations based on these findings are the following:

### LSE Careers

1. Offer more tailored support to students searching for part-time work out of financial need
2. Organise workshops and promote resources to help students highlight the value of their part-time work experience, such as by emphasising their transferable soft skills

3. Hold more varied events related to fields in the Department of Sociology, particularly promoting engagement with third-sector employers

#### LSE and the Department of Sociology

1. Offer postgraduate students more paid positions within LSE related to their fields. The Department of Sociology's research internship opportunities, currently limited to undergraduate students, should be extended to the postgraduate cohort.
2. Offer funding for students undertaking unpaid internships, as the Department of International Relations and Social Policy do through their Internship Fund Scheme.

### **Further Research**

There are other factors worth exploring which were beyond the scope of this project but that would strengthen understandings of this topic. The interviews highlighted additional difficulties for international students, whose work hours are restricted by their visas, as well as for students with prior work experience who felt that LSE Careers events were solely geared towards students with no professional background. It is also worth considering to what extent LSE Careers' shortcomings as perceived by students are a reflection of labour markets and to what extent they are LSE's responsibility.

### **References**

- Hordósy, R., Clark, T., & Vickers, D. (2018). Lower income students and the 'double deficit' of part-time work: undergraduate experiences of finance, studying and employability. *Journal of Education and Work*, 31(4), 353-365. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2018.1498068
- Evans, C., & Yusof, Z. N. (2021). The importance of part-time work to UK university students. *Industry and Higher Education*, 35(6), 725-735. doi: 10.1177/0950422220980920