

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at  
[www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister)



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at  
[www.emeraldinsight.com/0040-0912.htm](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0040-0912.htm)

ET  
47,7

# Support for working undergraduates: the view of academic staff

496

Susan Curtis

*Manchester Metropolitan University, Crewe, UK*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – To investigate the attitudes of academic staff towards providing practical support for full-time students working on a part-time basis during term-time.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study of a rural faculty of a large metropolitan university in the UK. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 22 members of staff, drawn from every department in the case study faculty.

**Findings** – Support for working students is arbitrary and accidental. The majority of staff are unaware of the extent of student employment and of the possibilities of providing support.

**Research limitations/implications** – Only a small proportion of the total university staff were interviewed, coupled with the fact that the faculty is rural and therefore the sample may not be representative of the majority of universities which have city centre campuses.

**Practical implications** – Improved awareness of students' total university experience on the part of academics may encourage practical measures to assist the undergraduates to cope more effectively with their dual roles of student and worker. However, some forms of support, such as greater flexibility in the timetable, may be very difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate.

**Originality/value** – No other research appears to have been carried out in the UK on this topic.

**Keywords** Undergraduates, Students, Employment, Part time workers, Academic staff, United Kingdom

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

Undergraduates are now taking term-time jobs due to financial necessity. The debate in the literature has acknowledged this phenomenon and has focused mainly on academic effects (Barke *et al.*, 2000; Watts, 2002; Curtis and Shani, 2002), but also on a variety of other issues such as debt (Christie *et al.*, 2001; Curtis and Klapper, 2005), gender (Lucas, 1997), resistance and control (Lammont and Lucas, 1999), perceived organizational support (Gakovic and Tetrick, 2003) and the psychological contract (Curtis and Atkinson, 2004). No studies have, as yet, examined the perception of UK academics on this increasing trend.

Regularly employed American high-school students have been assessed by their teachers as exhibiting negative classroom behaviours, including fatigue and absences, less attentiveness, reduced participation and effort in class, fewer homework assignments completed and lower academic goals (Bills *et al.*, 1995). However, the teachers had unclear notions about which students worked and which did not, even when claiming that working students do less well academically. Helms *et al.* (1994) found that teachers did not know the proportion of working students in their school, and only 6 per cent of teachers were willing to accommodate the needs of working students. The accuracy and extent of respondents' knowledge about the problems of



Education + Training  
Vol. 47 No. 7, 2005  
pp. 496-505  
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
0040-0912  
DOI 10.1108/00400910510626349



working students, as well as about existing statutory provisions governing student work, were limited. If academics are ignorant of the extent of part-time working among their students, they are unlikely to attempt to support students who are juggling work and study. Smith and Taylor (1999) say that lecturers do frequently rearrange tutorial times in order to accommodate students' employment timetables. But they also say that these responses are *ad hoc* and partial and fall short of considered and formalised policies which universities should implement (p. 161).

The aim of this case study is to explore the extent to which academics perceive that they or their university can, or should, offer support to undergraduates who take paid employment during term-time.

### Academics responding to change

It may be that academics do not always embrace change enthusiastically and the growing phenomenon of the employed student is not necessarily being accommodated and supported to any real extent. Trowler (1998) identifies four broad categories of academics' responses to change (in this case the credit framework), in his book *Academics Responding to Change*. He uses the terms "sinking", "swimming", "coping" and "reconstructing" to describe academics' responses to changes at a university. The categories represent behavioural response rather than types of academic, and are not mutually exclusive:

- *Swimming* – these academics are the contents who accept the *status quo*. They thrive in their environment, and many benefit from changes. Academics swimming with the change in undergraduate status to half-time student/half-time employee will feel distinct benefits from the students' employment. These may manifest themselves in such experiences as more confident and more skilled students, or academics being able to use the work experience in lessons to illustrate concepts.
- *Policy reconstruction* – these academics are also contents, but work around or change policy. They reinterpret and reconstruct policy on the ground, using strategies to effectively change the policy, sometimes resisting change, sometimes altering its direction. These policy changes may include being proactive in initiating curriculum and syllabus innovation to incorporate students' work experience, or manipulating policies in the form of increasing timetable flexibility, increased use of the intranet or internet to support working students, and designing assignments to better suit working students.
- *Sinking* – these are the discontents who accept the *status quo*. They are suffering from intensification in workload, decline of resources, de-skilling in some cases, increase in student numbers and general degradation of the labour process. These staff may feel that they are unable even to maintain the level of support they used to give students in pre-part-time employment days.
- *Using coping strategies* – these academics are also discontents, but work around or change policy. Trowler (1998) reported that these academics retreated from innovation in order to be able to cope with the administrative and other pressing demands they had, some had started unofficially "working to rule", whilst others had deliberately made themselves unapproachable and their teaching and

assignments very difficult in order to reduce the intolerably great demands made upon them by the greatly increased number of students (p. 122). These academics actively resist accommodating working students, believing that higher education should be a full-time activity.

### Research method

In the light of calls from students for support from their universities, this investigation set out to look at:

- the perception of academic staff of undergraduates taking paid employment during term-time;
- whether academics consider it possible to offer support to working students;
- the forms of support already provided; and
- whether the staff considered it feasible to increase the forms of support for working students in future.

The case study was investigated by 22 semi-structured interviews carried out between November 2000 and March 2001. Academic staff included the Dean of the Faculty and three Heads of Department (hereafter referred to as "Manager"). Teaching staff included six staff responsible for timetabling in their departments, five skills co-ordinators, course leaders and other lecturers with a variety of responsibilities. Two non-academic staff were interviewed: the Careers Officer for the faculty and the Business Manager of the Student Job Shop in Manchester. These staff were included in the survey in order to clarify their roles in student term-time job seeking. The interviews were taped and typed up afterwards, and a copy was sent to interviewees for them to check as valid transcriptions. Overall the sample of academic staff covered a range of disciplines, types and levels of responsibility and represented every department in the faculty. The research method gave staff freedom to express their attitudes and perceptions and explore their feelings on the subject of student term-time employment, on what was for many, the first time they had given any thought to the phenomenon of the working student. The method proved to be a rich data source and revealed academics' discontent with their working lives and the growing distance between themselves and their students. The analysis of the data has been influenced by grounded theory (Glazer and Strauss, 1967), where the emphasis is on emergent themes and on agency "allowing the data to speak", which are then made sense of via the theoretical insights discussed earlier. The categories of swimming, policy reconstruction, sinking and using coping strategies (Trowler, 1998) were determined according to academics' responses to questions on undergraduates' term-time working and practical support from academics.

### The case study

The Cheshire faculty is the most southerly faculty of Manchester Metropolitan University and has a reasonably sized student population of around 3,500 full-time students, 1,000 postgraduate students and 1,500 part-time students. The Faculty is typical of many larger institutions and has six departments, one of which gained a five-star rating in the most recent Research Assessment Exercise. The Department of

Education comes within Didsbury Faculty and has been renamed the Institute of Education. Other departments at Cheshire Faculty include Humanities and Applied Social Science, Contemporary Arts, Exercise and Sports Science, Business and Management Studies and Environmental and Leisure Studies. Cheshire Faculty consists of two separate campuses, six miles apart. Students often study at both sites and a free inter-site bus is available for students. The faculty has a range of professional support for students, including two full-time student counsellors and a careers officer. There is a wide range of subject-focused and integrated courses and also a joint honours degree which permits students to select two subjects from over 20 available from the six departments. Joint honours students are therefore often studying combinations of subjects which range across different departments. This impacts on the Faculty timetable in that those subjects offered to joint honours students have to be timetabled across all departments (known as the joint honours interlock), restricting the flexibility of the timetable to be changed once in place.

### Findings

The paper now turns to the ways in which the respondents perceived the students' part-time employment and their ability to offer support for it. There is compatibility between what is said and findings in the literature, despite the fact that some of the literature concerns North American schoolchildren. In the next section, the responses of academics to changes in the characteristics of the student body are examined using Trowler's (1998) categories of Academics responding to change, i.e. swimming, policy reconstruction, using coping strategies and sinking. Trowler's categories of academics responding to change provide a useful framework with which to examine academic staff's perceptions of changes in the student experience of university life and its effects on staff. The typologies assist in clarifying the complexities of the situation, which go beyond mere "for" or "against" responses. Some academics may be "swimming" with the changes and gain benefits. Others may also be at ease with the idea of students working during term-time, and attempt to change current arrangements in terms of offering support, these are "policy reconstructionists". A third category, the "sinking" academics, are discontent with students working but feel unable to take any action to assist or resist the situation. The final type, those who "use coping strategies" are against students working and actively work against any accommodation of student needs or provision of assistance.

### Support for working undergraduates

#### *Swimming*

These academic staff who are swimming with the changes are content with the *status quo*, and in this context feel that student employment is an advantage to them. Knowledge of student employment is used by some staff as a learning resource. Those lecturers who do use students' part-time work experience during lectures found it to be invaluable:

We did an organisation chart, and rather than do a family tree, I got one person who works at McDonald's to say what the reporting structure is there, informal and formal. The informal brought out the point that some organisation charts do not reflect what actually happens. It was very good because another student said, "yes, we have the same at Tesco", so I was

actually getting the students involved. And anything that gets the students involved, I'm for, its very beneficial (Respondent 6, Lecturer).

Very few staff were swimming in that they experienced any benefits from student employment. Only those lecturers in the Department of Business and Management Studies who teach the "softer" subjects utilised students' knowledge of the world of work. Business Studies lecturers in numerical subjects feel unable to use the work experience in their teaching. In other disciplines, sport in particular, students are very good at finding jobs which are subject-related and in which they can use their skills (Curtis and Lucas, 2001), although academic staff were largely unaware of this. One Contemporary Arts lecturer was surprised that one of his students did have a subject-related job and that the skills learnt were useful to her course:

I'm making a theatre production piece at the moment which involves a dance piece in the middle of it and the student who was assigned the task of choreographing a particular section, dances in a hotel in Derby at the weekends. I described the sort of dance it needed to be and she said, "oh that's exactly the sort of dance I do at the weekends, I can import that material". In a sense there was a crossover there, but that was really just serendipity more than anything else, it would be impossible to do more of that I suspect (Respondent 9, Course Leader).

#### *Policy reconstruction*

These academics are also content with the increase in student employment, and attempt to change policy in order to be supportive to students. In one department where a course was stand-alone, the course leader had organised the timetable so that everything was taught in two days. This had resulted in three different reactions from the students. Firstly, some students took the opportunity to work for the remainder of the week and left themselves no study time. Secondly, some students disliked the intense nature of the course and declared themselves "brain dead" after the two days of continuous lectures. Thirdly, students not on this course expressed envy of this timetable and dissatisfaction with their own timetable. The intent to support students' term-time working through the timetable can therefore be problematic. This course gives students freedom to take paid employment, but this affords no flexibility or choice for the students in terms of timetabling – it is imposed upon them.

Many lecturers put notes onto the intranet, although not specifically with the intention of assisting working students. The availability of notes, articles, copies of OHTs on the intranet or web as a supplement to normal lectures was considered preferable to courses which were totally online. The IT skills of the staff were seen as a problem in making lecture notes available online, although some staff have taken courses on online learning. One respondent said that the rationale in her department for putting so many lecture notes online was really in order to pass photocopying costs onto the students.

Due to the joint-honours interlock, the majority of the timetable across the Faculty faces considerable constraints, but many staff do not understand the reasons for the lack of flexibility in the timetable and wish for greater flexibility in order to accommodate working students' needs. One lecturer expressed surprise that when she tried to rearrange a single lecture, it was impossible to do so, as the students in the class were not all available at any other time in the week. These staff are supportive of



student employment and wish to see policy change in order to accommodate students' needs more fully, but have not actually enquired as to the feasibility of increasing timetable flexibility.

There was scant evidence of any policy reconstruction, in the form of concrete support for working students, having been implemented. This response to change on the part of academics, was largely at the stage of individuals considering certain adaptations, but no wider discussion had taken place.

### *Sinking*

These academics are discontents who accept the change in student status, and feel powerless to support students. Staff generally felt that their availability for students was reducing over time and that they had less contact with the students and less time to discuss student issues with colleagues:

A couple of years ago we had a system where all tutors in our department met every week and talked about the students for an hour, so we could identify problems and get some sort of general sense of patterns. That's not possible now because the timetable doesn't allow it and the pressure of work (Respondent 9, Course Leader).

I can't support them as I used to do, simply because of the demands on my time. Very often I don't even get to learn their names (Respondent 3, Lecturer).

This lack of time for pastoral and academic support was considered to be unacknowledged officially. One member of staff felt that there was a lack of recognition for those who did provide academic support:

You can support students and you can give them a lot of help. It might be quite low key, informal quiet work with students, but the system doesn't reward that kind of activity. People like me who spend time with students don't get rewarded for that. You get rewards for getting away from students as quickly as possible and becoming a researcher or an administrator. The only way forward is to get out of teaching into something else – you can be a teacher here and you rot as a teacher. If the institution wants more engagement, then obviously it has to pay for it in some way (Respondent 13, Skills Co-ordinator).

Advice on employment issues was felt to be outside of the remit of academic staff:

I know one instance of a student in the past who was employed as a care assistant, and I thought the circumstances under which they were employed were actually an abuse of their employee's rights, and I did refer them on to the Citizens Advice Bureau. But I just didn't feel equipped to give that kind of advice at all (Respondent 17, Timetabler).

The advice for students being called for in the literature is mostly not available. Academic staff generally do not have the expertise or consider that it is part of their job to advise on matters such as budgeting, employment rights and trade union membership. On the whole, they consider that this advice should be available, but that it is best provided by a body such as the Students' Union. More pastoral types of advice are still given, but lecturers feel increasingly hard pressed due to increased staff/student ratios and other responsibilities.

*Using coping strategies*

These academics are discontent with the increase in student employment and attempt to work around the change. Some staff wanted a return to the past and considered that their course was full-time and that the students should be present on a full-time basis. Arts students in particular are required to put in long hours, attending and reviewing professional productions as well as staging their own performances and assisting students in other years with their productions. Some of the assessments in the Contemporary Arts Department also run over whole weekends. A member of staff in the Department of Exercise and Sports Science also resisted making any allowances for student employment:

If people want us to tailor the course around their work commitments they shouldn't be higher education. Our courses are full-time, we mean what we say about full-time courses, there's very little room for anything else. In our Department we want the students to spend their evenings training and using the clubs for sports (Respondent 15, Timetabler).

This coping strategy was to take a hard line to student employment in order to protect academic standards. Other resistance to supporting student employment was for pragmatic reasons. Academic staff responsible for timetabling in their departments resisted accommodating students' demands for flexibility in the timetable as it poses an additional constraint in an already very problematic timetable. The size and range of the joint honours programme is the biggest stumbling block to giving any flexibility to students in their choice of timetable. Although not every student is taking the joint honours degree, most subjects are involved.

The main area of flexibility was considered to be in the choice of tutorial sessions from lead lectures as these often have several runs on different days and times. Timetable co-ordinators said that this choice is not publicised, however, and students are only advised of the possibility to switch between different tutorial sessions if they seek advice due to their timetables being unworkable. In the Department of Exercise and Sports Science, tutorial sessions take the form of laboratory work, which has a limit on numbers for health and safety reasons. Otherwise, the advertising of the facility to choose tutorial sessions was considered by timetable co-ordinators to be hazardous to a workable timetable, as it may encourage the avoidance of certain days and times.

The building of a new lecture theatre on the Crewe site was considered by timetable co-ordinators to have the potential to reduce flexibility even further. Prior to the completion of the lecture theatre, smaller rooms were utilised and therefore several runs of lead lectures had to take place. Once the lecture theatre is complete, there will be fewer runs of lead lectures and therefore the flexibility to swap lead lecture slots will be reduced for students. The timetable at Cheshire faculty is a masterpiece in terms of juggling all the possible combinations of joint honours subjects across all six departments. The numbers of subjects available to joint honours students is growing each year which increases the complexity of the timetable. Staff not involved in the process are unaware of the extremely high standard of co-ordination which goes into this document. The corollary of this co-ordination is rigidity for students and staff. Flexibility is available in the form of repeat runs of core subjects or options. This varies

between subjects and departments, with the smallest department not offering any repeat runs of any subject. Although students do switch timetable slots they are not officially told that it is possible to do so, unless they seek advice about clashes. Some members of academic staff therefore use resistance as a coping strategy, either in the form of resisting demands for greater transparency in the availability of the opportunity to change timetable slots or in resisting giving students any free time in which to take paid employment.

### Conclusion

Strategies for supporting students may encompass more flexible timetables and skills advice (Watts and Pickering, 2000), and different "opening hours" (Winn and Stevenson, 1997), increased access to personal tutors, advertising jobs available locally, rearranging timetabled lectures and allowances for the late submission of coursework (Watts, 2001). The Cubie Report on financing in Scottish Higher Education suggested that universities should establish part-time employment schemes and advise students on how to balance studies with earning money (The Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance, 2000). There is a need for better information and promotion of awareness of the current system of finance available to students (Garner, 2001). Part-time students who receive support have been found to be more successful in the process of combining work and study (Kember, 1999), and have the lowest levels of work-school conflict (Hammer *et al.*, 1998). Hammer suggested that there is a need to help students better balance the demands of work and school by providing programmes which would help them deal more effectively with their multiple demands.

Support for working students within the case study faculty is very limited and consists of flexibility in the timetable for some courses and subjects, notes on the intranet, and pastoral care and academic advice on an individual basis. The idea of consciously supporting students who are working to survive financially whilst at university had not occurred to the vast majority of respondents. The aforementioned forms of support were therefore spread very unevenly across the student body. In practice, the working student experience within Cheshire Faculty varies enormously, with some students already benefiting from most forms of support, and others can be fitted on a continuum to the opposite extreme of no support. Support for working students is therefore arbitrary and accidental. Staff were largely unaware of the difficulties students face in juggling their dual roles. There is no consistent position amongst academics within the faculty of offering support to working students.

A small minority of staff came under Trowler's (1998) category of "swimming", in that they feel a benefit from student employment. These staff can use the work experience and development of skills within lessons. The "policy reconstructionists", who are content and work around or change policy, did so mostly for other purposes, such as keeping up to date with technological advancements, and were not aware that these changes may benefit working students. Some staff have ideas on reconstructing policy, many of which are not feasible or problematic. Those using "coping strategies" also work around or change policy but are discontents. They may reluctantly provide flexibility in the timetable or attempt to "crowd out" part-time employment from students' university experience by making the course quite literally full-time. These



academics perceive a conflict between paid employment and study and are unaware of the realities of students' financial status. The majority of the staff come under the "sinking" category and appeared to feel helpless and were struggling with their workloads, increasing responsibilities and staff/student ratios and did not feel inclined to take on the support of working students as an extra duty. The staff do not feel qualified to give advice or get involved in any activity which involves adding to their own workloads. Some feel that there are sanctions inadvertently imposed upon them by the university for spending time with students instead of devoting themselves to research or administration. Academics are facing a variety of difficulties besides intensification of work: "hard" managerialism, a loss of collegiality, and ageing, malaise and marginality (Knight and Trowler, 2000, pp. 71-2). Academics are unaware of the need for, and extent of student term-time employment, and they are becoming increasingly distant from students due to growing numbers and increasing workloads.

### References

- Barke, M., Braidford, P., Houston, M., Hunt, A., Lincoln, I., Morphet, C., Stone, I. and Walker, A. (2000), "Students in the labour market", *DfEE Research Report*, No. 215, DfEE, Norwich.
- Bills, D.B., Helms, L.B. and Ozcan, M. (1995), "The impact of student employment on teachers' attitudes and behaviours toward working students", *Youth and Society*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 169-93.
- Christie, H., Munro, M. and Rettig, H. (2001), "Making ends meet: student incomes and debt", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 363-83.
- Curtis, S. and Atkinson, C. (2004), "Not just a transaction: students' part-time work and the psychological contract", *The International Journal of Applied Human Resource Management*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 116-43.
- Curtis, S. and Klapper, R. (2005), "Financial support systems: the student experience in England and France", *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 32 Nos 1/2, pp. 121-32.
- Curtis, S. and Lucas, R. (2001), "A coincidence of needs? Employees and full-time students", *Employee Relations Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 38-54.
- Curtis, S. and Shani, N. (2002), "The effect of taking paid employment during term-time on students' academic studies", *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 129-38.
- Garner, M. (2001), "Money worries top list of student concerns", *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, January 19.
- Gakovic, A. and Tetrick, L.E. (2003), "Perceived organisational support and work status: a comparison of the employment relationships of part-time and full-time employees attending university classes", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 24, pp. 649-66.
- Glazer, B. and Strauss, A. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Hammer, L.B., Grigsby, T.D. and Woods, S. (1998), "The conflicting demands of work, family, and school among students at an urban university", *The Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 220-7.
- Helms, L.B., Bills, D. and Ozcan, M. (1994), "Educators' perspectives on student employment", *Educational Policy*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 272-88.
- (The) Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance (2000), *Executive Summary Report*, available at: [www.studentfinance.org.uk](http://www.studentfinance.org.uk)

- Kember, D. (1999), "Integrating part-time study with family, work and social obligations", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 109-24.
- Knight, P.T. and Trowler, P. (2000), "Department-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 69-83.
- Lammont, N. and Lucas, R. (1999), "'Getting by' and 'getting on' in service work: lessons for the future of accounting?", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 10, pp. 809-30.
- Lucas, R. (1997), "Youth, gender and part-time work – students in the labour process", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 595-614.
- Smith, N. and Taylor, P. (1999), "'Not for lipstick and lager': students and part-time work", *Scottish Affairs*, No. 28, Summer, pp. 147-63.
- Trowler, P. (1998), *Academics Responding to Change*, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Watts, C. (2001), "Pay as you learn: the effects of part-time paid employment on academic performance", paper presented at the 2nd Higher Education Close-Up Conference, Lancaster, July 16-18.
- Watts, C. (2002), "The effects of term-time employment on academic performance", *Education + Training*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 67-75.
- Watts, C. and Pickering, A. (2000), "Pay as you learn: student employment and academic progress", *Education + Training*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 129-34.
- Winn, S. and Stevenson, R. (1997), "Student loans: are the policy objectives being achieved?", *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 144-63.