



# Earning while Learning: student employment

This **research briefing for the education sector** reports key findings from the study '*L-learning: rethinking young women's working lives*'. The briefing reports data drawn from: a) analyses of national datasets of student employment; and b) focus group interviews with 83 young women about their experiences of engaging in paid work whilst studying ('Earning while Learning'). Participants were aged between 14-23 years old and attending schools, Further Education (FE) colleges, sixth forms, and universities across England. We refer to young people engaged in Earning while Learning as 'students' and 'student workers'. This briefing offers recommendations for educational institutions, student unions, policymakers and sector representatives for improving the experiences for student workers.

## Key findings:

### The vast majority of young people in education engage in paid work before completing full-time study.

- Over two-thirds of students have undertaken work at some point alongside their (full-time) studies.<sup>2</sup>
- For many students who work, work is a long-term commitment. For example, over 40% of student workers aged 16-22 are in jobs that have lasted at least a year.<sup>1</sup>

### Young women are about 50% more likely to engage in paid work while studying than young men.

- This finding is robust across data sources and student age groups.<sup>1,2,3</sup> One example is that at the time they responded to the APS survey, 23.8% of young men in full-time study and 31.4% of young women in full-time study were currently working.<sup>1</sup>
- Since young women are much more likely to be balancing work and study, supporting student workers may be an equality duty for educational institutions.

### Pay for student workers is low, often below national minimum wage levels for their age and yet, students' earnings can be a vital contribution to household income.

- A large minority of students earn below national minimum wage rates for their age bracket and the large majority earn below the full adult minimum wage level.<sup>1</sup>
- Students report poor, and potentially illegal, treatment by some employers with regards to pay, with participants reporting not being paid, being paid late, as well as below-legal pay.
- It is not unusual for students to undertake more than one day of 'trial shifts' for which they receive no pay (contravening UK Government guidelines).
- Pay is low for both young men and women with no significant gender pay gap.<sup>1</sup>

**Data sources:** <sup>1</sup> Annual Population Survey (APS); <sup>2</sup> Next-Steps; <sup>3</sup> Covid and Social Mobility study (Cosmo). All other: focus group participants.

#### ARIANA:

*'Tell me why my hourly wage was less than one of their croissants. I'm sorry; that is actually insane.'*



## Student workers are concentrated in some of the lowest paid sectors.

- Student workers tend to work in entry-level and low paid occupations, including sales assistants, retail cashiers, and elementary service occupations (e.g. bar staff, coffee shop workers, and waiting staff. These account for 54% of student workers overall and over two-thirds (70%) of 16-17 year olds amongst them.<sup>1</sup>
- Commonly reported job roles included front-of-house hospitality and retail work, as well as informal caring (e.g. babysitting, dog walking) and personal tutoring.

## Work patterns vary between students, with some working long or inconvenient hours.

- The large majority of student workers work fewer than 16 hours a week, but for about half of working students this work is spread out across three or more days a week.<sup>1</sup>
- Student workers repeatedly report little control or choice over their shift patterns and many felt unable to refuse or change shifts.
- Some university students reported working long hours (30 hours/week), sometimes in very compressed hours (e.g. 25hrs+ over two days).

### ESME:

*'I started waitressing at 13 and worked long weekends.... I didn't get breaks. They didn't feed me. I was on like, below... like £4 an hour....I was spending all my time there, sometimes over 12 hours... [it's] been kind of bad.'*

### SARAH:

*'Especially in hospitality there is always this entitlement to your time. Last summer I got a position at a café... through an agency. So I was an agency worker [and] there was some weeks when they would even cancel our shifts and the moment we wanted a day off it was almost like a sin sort of thing.'*



## Money and financial autonomy are key drivers for working, but students also report other benefits of paid work.

- Earning while learning is an important step in reducing dependence on family and/or alleviating the family's financial burden.
- School-age students cited financial freedom as a key motivation for working, allowing them to fund social activities, save or spend on personal items.
- College and university students stated that earning money was essential to sustaining studying and living, especially in areas with the largest gap between maintenance loans and high costs of living and renting.
- Students often distinguished earning while learning for financial needs from other (often unpaid) work experience for CV-building purposes.
- Students cited other benefits of paid work, including opportunities to socialise, build self-confidence and develop other interpersonal skills but these were not as widely identified as pay.

## Combining work and studying can result in negative outcomes, especially related to working hours.

- Students reported that it was often difficult to balance work and study.
- University students who worked very long hours reported significant mental health issues, including burnout and anxiety.
- College and university students in London and the South-East, who faced the most extreme financial constraint, reported that working long hours left them with little or no time to do anything enjoyable.
- Students on zero-hour contracts reported being unable to predict or plan their time or financial situation, receiving rotas at the last minute, going long periods without shifts, or having shifts cancelled.

### ANA:

*'I just like having a job, like having work, doing something else, because obviously I think you learn a lot of life skills from having a job and responsibility ... and obviously the reward of getting paid and learning how to try and be good with money.'*

### MILLIE:

*'It depends what's happened that week though, 'cause you can be proper tired from stuff. Like I had my exams and everything, my mocks, and then I'll go into work and just be like [sighs].'*



## Student workers often feel powerless in the workplace and sometimes unsafe.

- Young women felt they did not have value or choice on the labour market and had to take whatever job was available.
- This lack of choice was compounded by mandatory, institution-led (unpaid) work experience placements. Where these were not clearly aligned with their future aspirations and interest, young women rarely saw value in undertaking these.
- Sexual harassment at work is widespread for young women and comes from both co-workers and customers. These experiences were rarely reported to or addressed appropriately by managers.
- Late shifts were very common in hospitality roles and many young women felt unsafe when travelling home from work late at night, on foot or via public transport.
- Many students reported stress and exhaustion resulting from paid work.

## Students lack knowledge of rights or legal pay rates or feel unable to assert their rights.

- There was a widespread lack of knowledge among students about holiday and sick leave entitlements or National Minimum Wage levels.
- School-age students had few benchmarks and were often surprised to learn (in focus groups) about others' rates of pay and how these were negotiated.
- The use of informal personal networks to secure employment meant that many young women felt unable to negotiate better pay, contest poor working conditions or turn down shifts when these were not convenient.
- Many student workers felt disposable and feared that they could be easily replaced. This undermined their willingness to raise concerns.
- Some students felt that having explicit conversations with employers, particularly around pay, was 'impolite' and 'awkward'. Gendered norms and expectations appeared to make it harder for young women to raise issues around pay.

### MARINA:

*'I'd say the main issue is harassment... I've worked in a lot of bars and clubs and I find that the harassment is really, really, bad, like people will touch you... They're very persistent... I have the authority to get someone to call and get them banned, it's not difficult, but you also kind of can't do it to every single person, because they're your money, they're your clients. Sometimes you just have to suck it up.'*

### IMENE:

*'I used to babysit but it was for a family friend and I didn't really get paid. It was kind of rude to be like "Pay me", I don't know, it would be long but it was more of a favour and sometimes she would give me about £3 or something.'*



# Recommendations for educational institutions, student unions, policymakers and sector representatives:

## Understanding and supporting students in work:

- The sector must recognise that most students engage in paid work during their studies, and that this may impact their engagement in learning and their wellbeing.
- Students have varied reasons for working and these are typically beyond the control of institutions. Therefore, policies restricting work are unlikely to be effective, may alienate students and so should be avoided. Instead, the sector should focus on providing appropriate support and guidance to students regarding their rights at work, legal protections, and how to navigate challenges in the workplace.
- Institutions must recognise students' commitments to paid employment through reviewing assessment deadlines, timetabling, and wider expectations around students' presence on campus/in school or college outside of scheduled teaching.
- Institutions should identify spaces in the curriculum (e.g. Citizenship Education or PSHE) within which to engage students in conversations about their current experiences of work, including discussions about students' rights at work and how to assert these.
- Careers information, advice, and guidance (IAG) and Employability agendas must include all forms of workplace experience – not simply those directly or explicitly related to students' future career aspirations. Students should be supported to identify and critically reflect on the transferable skills they develop in these roles.
- Institutions should communicate to students that careers practitioners can support them in navigating problems in the workplace and make clear that there is no judgment if their work situation is imperfect.
- Institutions should collaborate with trade unions associated with the sectors in which students most often work (e.g. USDAW – retail; Unite – hospitality) to educate students about their rights at work.

- The government should increase Maintenance loans to enable university students to have greater choice about how much paid work they undertake and when. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for younger students should be reintroduced, reducing the financial pressures to work part-time. Institutions should review and enhance financial assistance schemes, particularly for students facing acute financial hardship.

## Understanding student work as integral to wellbeing:

- Supporting student workers should be considered an equality issue because earning while learning is substantially more common among young women.
- Given that women students report relatively frequent experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, institutions could create spaces that enable students to identify and report this as part of wider initiatives and agendas to address sexual violence in education.

## Improving the conditions of student work:

- Institutions and student unions should work collaboratively to advocate for better pay and conditions for working students.
- Institutions and sector bodies should collaborate with employers who offer the Living Wage and/or those recognised through 'Good Work' or 'Good Employment' charters or the 'Good Youth Employment Benchmark' (Youth Employment UK). Opportunities with these employers should be actively promoted by institutions and student unions.



## ABOUT THE STUDY

**‘L-earning: rethinking young women’s working lives’** is a 3-year national study of young women’s earliest experiences of work, including paid work while studying, and how these experiences may contribute to gendered inequalities in later life. The study is funded by the **Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)** as part of the ‘Transforming Working Lives’ initiative. The research team is based at the **University of Leeds, University of Manchester** and **City St George’s, University of London**. We are extremely grateful to the partner institutions and young women who took part in the research.



You can read more about the research here:

<https://ywworking.co.uk>



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With thanks to our sponsor the Economic and Social Research Council and our partner the Young Women’s Trust.

### For further reading:

Zhong, M.R., Cohen, R.L., Allen, K., Finn, K., Hardy, K. and Kill, C. (2025), Equally Bad, Unevenly Distributed: Gender and the ‘Black Box’ of Student Employment. *British Journal of Sociology*. Available here. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.13210>

### How to cite this briefing

Allen, K., Brouwers, L., Cohen, R.L., Finn, K., Hardy, K., Kill, C., and Zhong, M.R. (2025). Earning while Learning: student employment (Research Briefing for the Education Sector). University of Leeds, University of Manchester and City St George’s, University of London.

<https://doi.org/10.48785/100/326>



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