



Earning while Learning: student employment

This **research briefing for employers** reports key findings from the study '*L-earning: 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. The briefing offers recommendations for employers, businesses and industry representatives to improve the experience of student workers.

Key findings:

Student workers are concentrated in some key sectors and are vital to many businesses and the economy.

- 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).
- Student workers make up over 20% of sales assistant/elementary service roles.
- Of student workers, about 54% are in sales assistant/elementary service. Among school-age (as opposed to college/university) student workers it was over two-thirds (70%) of student workers in these jobs.¹

Students undertake paid work for a range of reasons, especially covering essential living costs.

- For students, earning while learning was an important way to reduce 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 their education, personal items or activities, or to save.
- College and university students stated that earning money was often essential for everyday life and to sustain studying.
- 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.

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.'

NORAH:

'I had an issue where my boss didn't tell me that minimum wage had gone up... I got underpaid massively.... I think it was like £70 odd quid that I was not paid'.

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



Legal pay requirements are not consistently met, with student workers often paid below national minimum wage levels for their age.

- A large minority of student workers earn below national minimum wage rates for their age bracket and the large majority earn below adult living wage level.¹
- 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).

Students often feel they have little control over hours, schedule and shift patterns.

- 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.
- Many felt unable to refuse or change shifts, suggesting that the flexibility of zero-hour contracts works largely in favour of employers rather than students.
- The large majority of student workers work fewer than 16 hours a week, but about half of working students work across three or more days a week.¹
- Some students reported working long hours (30 hours/week), sometimes in very compressed hours (e.g. 25hrs+ over two days), long days of work extending after school/college, or compressing weekly hours into a single long weekend shift.
- University students who worked very long hours reported significant mental health issues, including burnout and anxiety, stress and exhaustion.

ARIA:

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

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.'



Student workers often feel unsafe at work.

- 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.
- In addition, many young women felt unsafe when traveling home from work late at night, on foot or via public transport.

Student workers may have relatively long tenure but poor enforcement of rights and lack of voice encourage turnover.

- For many students, 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, meaning that students can be a stable part of the workforce.
- Students described repeated instances of poor employer compliance with labour legislation, especially surrounding holiday and sick leave entitlements or National Minimum Wage levels.
- Young women saw few avenues for voicing serious concerns in the workplace, leading to them quitting jobs and increasing turnover rather than improving the workplace in cooperation with employers.

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.'

LAURA:

'It's really difficult because a lot of jobs you're getting quite exploited, it's kind of difficult to try and get change or ... like say anything about it really, because employers don't really care.'



Recommendations for employers and industry:

- Employers should pay the Real Living Wage to workers, regardless of age bracket.
- Employers should act within labour law legislation to ensure that student workers do not encounter poorer treatment than older or non-student workers.
- Employers should end the use of ‘trial shifts’ for which workers receive no pay.
- High turnover is not inherent to employing students. Students want stable jobs. This can be undermined by lack of voice, control over work hours and schedule, pay levels, safety at work, and ability to combine work and study. Improving working conditions can therefore reduce turnover.
- Lack of control over working hours – and conflict with educational timetables – is perhaps the biggest reason for student turnover. Therefore giving student workers greater control over hours can reduce turnover.
- Avenues for expressing worker voice should be strengthened within workplaces employing significant numbers of students. This should include recognition that student workers may be less confident in raising issues and need support to do so.
- Employers must develop robust strategies for ensuring that sexism and sexual harassment are reduced and effectively addressed when they do occur, drawing on EHRC technical guidance and support from trade unions.
- Employers should work closely with trade unions to ensure that student workers are able to access the same rights as workers who are not in education.
- Employers should work with educational institutions to identify spaces in the curriculum (e.g. Citizenship Education or PSHE) within which to engage students in conversations about their current experiences of work.
- Employers should engage with local and regional ‘Good Work’ or ‘Good Employment’ charters and the ‘Good Youth Employment Benchmark’ (Youth Employment UK). They should actively work with local educational institutions to promote job opportunities to students, and become first choice employers.



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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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>

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