The interplay of student part-time working with geographical differences

Erica Smith, Dean of Graduate Studies and Professor of Education, University of Ballarat.  
Email: e.smith@ballarat.edu.au

Much of this submission is based on current Australian Research Council research I am undertaking with Professor Wendy Patton of QUT, and on previous research projects. The current project has involved me in research with young on-campus first year students at Charles Sturt University (Wagga), at the University of Sydney, and with young university (and school) students working at branches of McDonalds and the Reject Shop in NSW and Victoria. The submission does not extend to mature students and it is fully recognised that at many universities young students do not form the majority. It is also recognised that many students study by distance.

Context

It is now basically a necessity for all full-time university students to work part-time. This is because nearly every student needs to support him or herself financially at least to some extent, and also because the employability skills developed through part-time working are needed to gain ‘career jobs’. Employers expect young graduates to have an established employment record. It is also very clear that young people enjoy their jobs and learn a lot from them that they otherwise would not have done.

There are some common features of university student working that are emerging from our current and previous research:

- student part-time working is generally continuous, often in permanent jobs, and is rarely confined to vacation periods;
- many students on entering university continue with the part-time jobs they had while at school;
- continuity of work from school to university is important in earning ‘brownie points’ which enable students to negotiate time off for exams, pracs and family visits; and
- Students who do not work part-time experience financial difficulty, self-esteem problems and a danger of being unemployed on graduation rather than being able to continue with part-time work while looking for a career position. They also lose the chance of working in different industry areas that might lead to unanticipated career positions.

Special considerations for young students from regional and rural backgrounds

Such students are more likely to leave their parents’ home to study at university than students from metropolitan areas. They seem from our research to suffer some disadvantage in their access to part-time work and the effects of their part-time work on themselves and their families. In the Charles Sturt University phase of the research
a number of issues were identified and are listed below. There is no reason to suppose that Victorian universities would show a different pattern.

- rural and regional students are more likely to have moved away from home to go to uni, and therefore have no continuity from their school-day part-time jobs;
- They are more likely than metropolitan students to have been without part-time work while at school because they lived in rural areas outside towns, and/or they went to boarding school. It is hard to get work as an 18-year old without previous work experience;
- if living away from home they are faced with the problem of either having to negotiate part-time jobs which will give them time off in vacations, or, if living in residences, of having to pay for accommodation during university vacations to maintain their part-time jobs which may not yield much of a weekly income. The latter situation also leads to emotional distress associated with not being able to visit their families – and distress also for their families. Casual work rosters compound the difficulty;
- extended periods of prac (eg for veterinary science and teacher-training students) compound all the above difficulties; and
- courses with heavy attendance requirements make jobs harder to find. Some companies routinely use uni students for Monday to Friday daytime working and prefer to use school students for after hours and weekends. While similar courses have similar attendance requirements at all universities, the disadvantages that rural and regional students already suffer, as listed above, mean that this problem impacts disproportionately on them.

Possible strategies to deal with disadvantages according to rural/regional students attempting to enter higher education

If part-time working is essential for the reasons outlined above, then we need to ensure that rural/regional students can be reasonably confident of gaining and maintain part-time jobs if they move away from their parents’ home. Some employers are aware of this need, and larger employers often arrange ‘transfers’ for their school-student workers, yet the students themselves are not always aware of this facility. Universities could be more aware of the difficulties faced by students who, because of their geographical location, may not have had previous employment experience, and could assist them to find employment. A close relationship between universities and employers of student labour, particularly in universities that are themselves in regional areas, could be forged. Such dialogue could be used, for example, to educate employers about prac requirements, as well as to assist novice workers find jobs. Employers could be encouraged to adopt a more flexible arrangement to rostering arrangements and leave provisions so that students can visit their families.

It is suggested that strategies will not succeed until the whole of the higher education sector ceases to regard student-working as a problem and accepts it as a long-term reality with many positive aspects.

---

1 It is also possible that some do not know that the option of staying in residences is available.