



Earning while Learning: student employment

This **research briefing for trade unions** 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 trade unions for engaging and supporting workers who are simultaneously in education.

Key findings:

Paid work is a reality for the vast majority of young people in education and is a particular issue for young women who are about 50% more likely than men to engage in paid work while studying.

- About two-thirds of students undertake work at some point alongside their (full-time) studies before completing education.²
- Women are more likely than men to work while studying across all student age groups.^{1,3} For example, among respondents 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.¹
- For many students who work, work is a long-term commitment and many have long tenure in their roles. Over 40% of student workers aged 16-22 are in jobs that have lasted at least a year.¹

Pay for student workers is low, often below national minimum wage levels for their age.

- For many college and university students the money they earn is essential for everyday life and to sustain studying. Pay was the overwhelmingly most important reason for engaging in work. Paid work was seen as an important way to reduce young people's dependence on family and/or alleviate the family's financial burden.
- A large minority of students earn below national minimum wage rates for their age bracket and the large majority earn below full adult minimum wage level.¹
- Students report poor, and potentially illegal, treatment by employers of young workers with regards to pay, with some 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.¹

ARIA:

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

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



Student workers are concentrated in a couple of key low-paid sectors: retail and hospitality.

- 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 lack knowledge of rights or legal pay rates.

- There was a widespread lack of knowledge among student workers 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.

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.'

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.'



Students feel unable to assert rights.

- Even where they were aware of their rights, student workers felt disposable and feared that they could be easily replaced. This undermined their willingness to raise concerns.
- 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.
- Young women felt they had little choice about which job(s) they undertook. Many felt that they did not have value in the labour market and had to take whatever job was available.
- Gendered norms and expectations appeared to make it harder for young women to raise issues around pay.

Student workers often feel unsafe at work and report negative impacts of work on their wellbeing.

- Sexual harassment at work is widespread for young women and comes from both co-workers and customers. These experiences were rarely reported 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.
- Many students reported stress and exhaustion resulting from paid work, and students who worked very long hours reported significant mental health issues, including burnout and anxiety.

LAURA:

'With hospitality... there definitely should be health and safety involved, but there's not really anybody to talk to, just one manager on shift who was always like stressed dealing with people.'

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'



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

- Student workers feel they have little control or choice over their shift patterns.
- 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.
- 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.
- A large majority of student workers work fewer than 16 hours a week, but about half of working students undertake paid work across three or more days a week.¹
- Some university student workers reported working long hours (30 hours/week), sometimes in very compressed hours (e.g. 25hrs+ over two days).
- Some younger student workers described long days of work extending after school/college, or compressing hours into a single long (12hrs+) weekend shift.

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.’

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].’



Recommendations for trade unions:

- Trade unions should recognise that workers still in education are an important and organisable section of the workforce.
- Attracting student workers to membership and participation in trade unions while still in education may have positive implications for membership across the working life course. Trade unions should consider a ‘student worker’ category with free or lower fees for membership.
- Trade unions can play a key role in providing information about worker rights, laws and protections (e.g. on pay, hours, bullying and discrimination) to students, and in developing students’ ability to assert their rights at work.
- Supporting student workers should be considered an equality issue for trade unions because earning while learning is substantially more common among young women.
- Trade unions associated with the sectors in which students most often work (e.g. USDAW – retail; Unite – hospitality) and the TUC should work directly with schools, FE colleges and HEI institutions to educate and support student workers.
- Trade unions should develop and promote material that fits within the curriculum (e.g. Citizenship Education or PSHE) and engage students in conversations about their current experiences of work. This should include discussions about students’ rights at work and how to assert these.
- Unions should collaborate with the National Union of Students (NUS) to advocate for better pay and conditions for working students.
- Trade Union campaigns around sexism and sexual harassment within the workplace have specific relevance to student workers. Trade unions should create spaces aimed at student workers that enable them to identify and report these issues.



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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