

Evaluating the role of part-time work for full-time undergraduate business students, and its implications for teaching, learning and curriculum development

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The Leitch report recommends that the UK commits to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020, with over 40% of adults skilled to graduate level and above, a substantial increase against a figure of 29% in 2005. It also recommends increased employer investment in higher level qualifications, involving significantly more training in the workplace. Leitch concludes that: "Skills were once a key lever for prosperity and fairness. Skills are now increasingly the key lever."

At the same time, the University of Worcester Strategic Plan states clear and ambitious aims to "produce highly employable, innovative, professional and entrepreneurial alumni" and "play an outstanding part in the economic development of the region and to the growth of the knowledge economy, in partnership with employers and strategic partners". Within this, Worcester Business School's mission is to develop highly informed, innovative and entrepreneurial Business and Computing graduates and play an increasingly valuable role in the development of the regional economy".

The UK is now exhibiting a clear trend towards increased 'casualisation' of the workforce. 25% of the workforce (7 million people) now work part-time. The equivalent figure for 16-19 year old students is c. 75% and for HE students is c. 50%.

The key motivations for full-time students participating in part-time work appear to be financial. The average Student debt is now £5,760, partly as a result of the pressures of the Consumer Society – the desire to own cars, mobile telephones and designer clothes. It is perhaps not surprising that 47% of students now claim lack of money to be the worst aspect of University life.

The potential link between employment and skills development is less clearly explored in the literature. However, there is a growing consensus that more than 20 hours of part-time work per week is detrimental to full-time student performance.

This study has demonstrated that the majority of full-time BA (Hons) Business Management students at the University of Worcester work part-time (57.7%). The vast majority (81.3%) work in the retail or leisure sector. 82.4% work fewer than 20 hours per week.

For University of Worcester Business Management students, the principal motivation is financial – 81.4% working to fund a social life. A small majority (52.1%) claim to work to gain experience to support their studies. A significant finding is that 55.5% claim working does not have a beneficial impact upon their studies.

Implicit in these findings is that as the frequency and intensity of part-time working amongst full-time UG students grows its relationship to curriculum design, to learning, teaching and assessment and to student achievement will become ever more significant.

It may therefore be important that higher educational institutions and practitioners assess the extent to which courses can be adapted to maximize the potential for students to create credible connections between their studies and their work experience, and minimize tension between the two.

Four potential states have been identified by Hodgson and Spours (2001). These are:

- **Accommodation** – A convenient relationship is developed between academic study and part-time work, essentially allowing space in the academic timetable to allow students to work part-time.
- **Tension** – Conflict is created between the demands of the curriculum and the demands of part-time work.
- **Balance** – Compartmentalising full-time study and a limited amount of part-time work to allow reasonable co-existence.
- **Connection** – Active balance is created that includes a closer relationship between the curriculum and part-time work. Vocational HE courses provide an opportunity to contextualise academic work within students' understanding of the workplace.

The paper concluded by exploring ways to develop connection between the curriculum and part-time work.