



# Newham Working Student Pilot project Summary Report

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## Executive summary

- Short-term research funding from Research England enabled a pilot research project among Newham-resident Middlesex students, to establish the kinds of work undertaken during their studies, the nature of any problems encountered, and the extent of their knowledge of employment rights.
- This took the form of an online questionnaire, analysis of Labour Force Survey data and a series of interviews. 126 responses were received from 500 students in the Newham cohort.
- Over 60% worked during the term, suggesting that Middlesex students are far more likely to work than UK students as a whole.
- 45% said they used earnings to pay for necessities, with a further 14% saying it was to pay off debts.
- The sudden cessation of work as a consequence of the coronavirus epidemic is likely to have serious consequences for them – and for the rest of their households. Interviewees reported making contributions to their family budgets, which in some cases are now under strain because one or both of their parents have lost income,
- Retail is the most common sector followed by health and social care, these accounting for over half (56%) of our sample.
- Most worked part time, with the average working week being 23 hours, but a substantial minority (14%) reported working full time.
- Hourly pay tended to be above the Minimum Wage, with a median of £9.00
- However, unpaid time was reported by up to 18% of responses, while 24% said they never received holiday pay, and 60% reported no access to sick pay.
- While over half (55%) considered they knew the basics of employment rights, almost none could correctly state the Minimum Wage or their basic holiday entitlement.
- Interviewees expressed interest in learning more about their rights at university, but also considered that it would have been of value earlier in their education
- Recommendations include:
  - Establishing an employment rights advice service at the University
  - Developing a locally delivered advice service in Newham perhaps involving FE colleges
  - Expanding the enquiry to include Middlesex students in another London Borough
  - Seeking partners for a larger project including FE and HE students from one or more other geographical areas thought to have different labour markets, possibly funded through the Nuffield Foundation's Research, Development & Analysis stream

## 1. Introduction

Young people are more likely than older people to be working in precarious working condition, and this is particularly so among students (TUC 2018). Middlesex University's recent Unpaid Britain project found student workers to be a group who are both concentrated in sectors showing a high tendency to abuse of employment rights<sup>1</sup> and are demonstrably ignorant of those rights<sup>2</sup> (Clark & Herman 2017). Consequently, this group was identified as one worthy of further study in order to better understand the dynamics of employment rights abuse, particularly amongst young workers.

The coincidence of Newham Borough Council's initiative to support residents in enforcing their employment rights (Fiaz 2019) with the sudden availability of some short-term research funding from Research England led us to launch a pilot research project among Newham-resident students. Its aim was to establish the kinds of work undertaken by our students during their studies, the nature of problems encountered, and the extent of their knowledge of employment rights. This would help determine what support might be offered by the University or other agencies to students working during their studies.

However, given the tight timescale for the funding (expenditure had to occur before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020), it was decided to restrict the project to a pilot study amongst a defined cohort of Middlesex University students. According to registry records, there were 520 full time students with a term-time address in the London Borough of Newham, and given the potential interest of the Council in any results, it was decided to focus on this group. This paper summarises our preliminary results, and concludes with some recommendations for further research and actions to support students who are also workers.

The **project team** consists of Principal Investigator Nick Clark, Research Fellow in the Middlesex University Business School, who led the Unpaid Britain Project, and Co-investigators Dr Bianca Stumbitz from the Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research (CEEDR), Dr Janroj Keles of the Middlesex School of Law and Dr Jamie Woodcock of the Open University Faculty of Business and Law. They have been supported by Research Assistant and Middlesex University student, Marwa Hariai.

## 2. Method

As with the Unpaid Britain project, a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining a quantitative survey, secondary data analysis and qualitative interviews.

A survey of student experience of working during their studies was conducted online, using Qualtrics software. Main cohort (that is, full time) students recorded as having term-time addresses in Newham were invited to participate by e-mail, using the student e-mail address assigned to them by the University. Several reminders were sent out in order to achieve an acceptable response rate (determined by the project team as being 20%).

The questionnaire asked whether students worked, what they did, who they worked for, conditions of work including pay and hours, their experiences at work, and their knowledge of employment rights. The last question asked if respondents were prepared to take part in an interview or focus

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<sup>1</sup> Such as hospitality, recreation & leisure, and retail

<sup>2</sup> 33% of working full time students do not know their holiday entitlement, compared with 13% of the non-student workforce, while a further 27% report they have no entitlement to holidays (equivalent for non-students is 4%) (data from 2019 Labour Force Survey).

group, for which a small payment in vouchers was available, and asked for an e-mail contact. Only those filling in this field were approached directly to take part in an interview.

The survey and interview procedure were designed before restrictions on movements resulting from the Covid 19 epidemic were imposed. The coronavirus pandemic and the university’s decision to move from face to face to online interaction to prevent spread of the virus impeded our research but some interviews were successfully conducted by phone, Skype or Zoom.

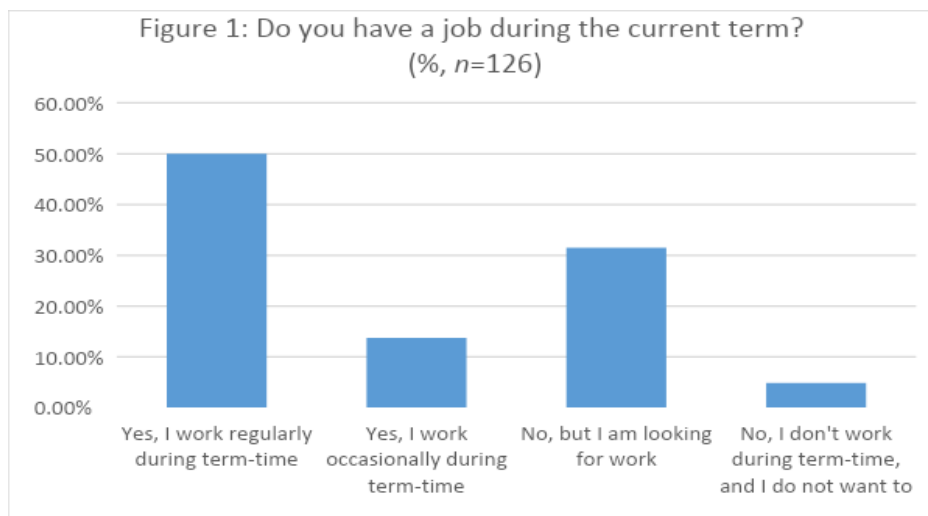
The survey ran from 14 February 2020 to 6 April 2020. Interviews were conducted between mid-March and the end of April 2020. These were semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. In addition, some of those who had agreed to participate in focus group discussions (which had originally been scheduled to take place on campus at Hendon) took part in longer group interviews via Zoom.<sup>3</sup>

For comparative purposes, we have also used national data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which allows us to identify full time students who are also working or seeking work.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Labour market engagement

Our first questions sought to establish the extent of working during studies.



Half reported working regularly, with a further 14% working occasionally during the term. Those who said “no”, we also asked ‘Did you have a job during the holidays in the last 12 months?’

Table 1: Holiday job during the last 12 months?		%
1	Yes	26%
2	No, because I could not find work	48%
3	No, because I did not want work	26%

<sup>3</sup> In one case this discussion was not recorded, and two of the three participants submitted e-mail summaries of their contributions.

We can make a broad comparison between this distribution and that derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), to give us an idea of how this particular group of students compares with full time students across the country, as well as with non-students – see Table 2 below.

<b>Table 2: Economic activity</b>	<b>LFS<sup>4</sup> FT student (%)</b>	<b>LFS not FT student<sup>5</sup> (%)</b>	<b>Middlesex Newham students (%)</b>
In employment	33.6	64.5	63.7 <sup>6</sup>
ILO unemployed (LFS measure)	5.2	2.2	31.5 <sup>7</sup>
Inactive	61.2	25.8	4.8
			<i>N=124</i>

Our data suggests that Middlesex students are far more likely than UK students as a whole, as shown by the LFS data, to be working, or seeking work. This may be distorted by the inclusion in the LFS data of Further Education (FE) students, and by a degree of self-selection by the Middlesex respondents (those not working or seeking work being perhaps less likely to respond). However, the difference is so marked as to suggest that for Middlesex at least, the working student is the rule rather than the exception. Although we found a difference between male and female respondents in that men are more likely to be working at some point during the term than women, owing to the small sample size this cannot be considered to be significant.

We might also have to consider that there is a difference between Newham-resident students, and those Middlesex students living in other London Boroughs in term-time. For example, those living in halls of residence or other private rented accommodation are more likely to be living in Barnet or perhaps in nearby Brent. At this stage, we are assuming that the Newham cohort is representative, but only a wider study could confirm or contradict this.

The majority of our sample (two thirds) said they were living with parents. Problems with travelling to Hendon (some interviewees said that it could take up more than 90 minutes each way) may be more of an issue for this group than for others, and this may influence the likelihood of them working. On the one hand it may be more problematic to accommodate working, lectures and travel (thus making working less likely). On the other, several interviewees explained that one of their key areas of expenditure was running a car in order to reduce the time spent travelling to and from University (thus making working more likely).

While student working can sometimes be dismissed as a means of paying for leisure pursuits, or ‘looking to earn extra money for tickets to a concert’ as the Taylor Review (2017) put it, for our sample at least it is clearly not the case. We asked respondents what they used their earnings for, and 45% said to pay for necessities, with a further 14% saying it was to pay off debts. Only 22% said it was for leisure expenditure and luxuries or although even then this was accompanied in some cases by paying for necessities (some respondents making more than one response).

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<sup>4</sup> Oct-Dec 2019

<sup>5</sup> Excluding under 16s

<sup>6</sup> Working regularly (50.0%) , plus working occasionally during term (13.7%)

<sup>7</sup> ‘I am looking for work’ – may not quite match the ILO test, which is interpreted in the LFS as specific job search activity in the preceding four weeks, and is distinct from the claimant count

Table 3: Main reasons for working?		%	Count
1	To pay off debts	14%	10
2	Pay for leisure/luxuries	22%	16
3	To pay for necessities	45%	33
4	For general work experience	8%	6
5	For career related experience	9%	7
6	It is relevant to my studies	2.70%	2
Total		100%	74

The number reporting that they did not work because they did not want to was small, but most said this was because they had insufficient time to work and study. Only two said that they did not work because they had sufficient money without doing so.

For our students, working is an economic necessity. This means that the sudden cessation of work as a consequence of the coronavirus epidemic is likely to have serious consequences for them – and for the rest of their households (see also Section 3.5). As the examples from the qualitative interviews below demonstrate, those interviewed who were living with their parents reported making contributions to their family budgets, which in some cases are now under strain because one or both of their parents have lost income, also as a result of the epidemic. Those in rented accommodation (usually shared) also face the possibility of losing their housing as a result of being unable to pay the rent. We are not able to establish at this stage, the extent to which this risk has been realised.

*“I’m staying with my parents, because obviously we live in a council estate house, so we do need to look out for each other. My dad works as a cab driver, so doesn’t really make that much [...]. I give [money] to my mum so she can buy like groceries and things if she doesn’t have any, because obviously my dad is the main breadwinner for our house. So my dad, he’s not working at the moment. I mean, he’s self-employed and he’s been at home because obviously you know how serious this disease is and how many people have been killed in Italy, so he’s just at home at the moment.”* (Participant 1, F)

*“I do live with my parents [...] but I have to travel to Uni and that’s why I need my job, for my travelling, my eating. But my dad works with the agency company and he has like a zero hour contract, but even if he doesn’t get a job for like the next one month or something, for the virus, the company won’t be paying him anything, so the job was really important for me.”* (Focus Group 2, F)

Poor living conditions can also have severe implications on students’ ability to study and earning an income can be a means to improve conditions for studying, particularly if living far from campus:

*“I do live with my parents, but I don’t have a room in our house, so I need to move out next year, so I’m trying to like earn money to save up, in order to move out next year. Yeah, I have to share a room with my brother and as we don’t have enough space in the house, so I was*

*trying to move out. It's difficult to study and just in general, because I need my own space."*  
(Focus Group 2, F)

### 3.2 Employment

Some confusion on the part of students regarding their industrial **sector** is evident in their replies – some describe themselves as working in retail, but give occupation as waitress or bar supervisor. We also suspect that offering a large range of options suppressed the response rate – most will have completed the survey on a smartphone. That said, comparison with LFS data suggests that retail is more common amongst our sample than amongst students in Britain as a whole.

<b>Table 4: Which of the following industries most closely matches the one in which you are employed?</b>			
Sector	Survey results		LFS data, Oct-Dec 2019
	Number	Percent	Percent
Post/delivery	1	1.6	1
Construction	1	1.6	2
Bars, restaurants, cafes	4	6.5	24
Education	3	4.8	9
Health and social care	12	19.4	9
Retail trade	23	37.1	26
Arts, entertainment or recreation	4	6.5	7
Transportation or warehousing	1	1.6	1
Other business services (e.g. facilities management)	1	1.6	1
Cleaning	1	1.6	1
Security	3	4.8	1
Temporary Agency	2	3.2	1
Call centre	1	1.6	1
Personal services (e.g. hairdressing, beauty, personal trainer)	2	3.2	1
Public administration	1	1.6	2
Other	2	3.2	14
Total	62	100.0	100%
No response	64		
Total	126		

Retail is followed by health and social care, these two sectors accounting for over half of our sample. On the face of it, this does not seem to relate to the proportion of students studying in health areas: HESA data for 2017/18 shows that 12.3% of all undergraduate were studying in the 'Subjects allied to medicine' area, which when added to the 6.2% studying in Education, comes very close to the 22% of our sample studying 'Health and Education'. Hospitality does not feature as frequently as we

might expect, and this may be related to the demographics of Newham residents (BAME workers are less likely to be found in hospitality than in retail) – but at this stage this is speculation.

Part-time	51%	46
Full-time	14%	13
Permanent/open ended	5%	5
Temporary (for a fixed term)	1%	1
Temporary (for an indeterminate period)	1%	1
Zero hours contract	14%	13
Freelance/self-employed	1%	1
Agency work	9%	8
Informal/undeclared	0%	0
Other (please specify)	3%	3
Total	100%	91

Over half describe themselves as having part time contracts, with 15% reporting zero hours contracts, but these categories may overlap (see Table 5). 14% report that they are working full time, and this is to some extent supported by the data on hours.

64 respondents told us about their **working hours**. Four did not know what their normal working hours were, and 13 (20%) said there was no such thing as a normal working week. Among the remaining 47, hours varied between 5 and 50 per week, with an average of 23.2 hours. Some gave a range of hours, of which we took the mid-point as the value for calculating the average. However, this may be misleading since the choice might be between two or three shifts per week, with no values between the two. It was also apparent from interviews, for some students at least, that this did not take into account ‘shreds’ of unpaid work at the beginning or end of shifts, which they tended to discount.

**Wages** ranged between £6 and £34 per hour, with an average (of 52) of £9.69<sup>8</sup>, and a median of £9.00. This is above the NMW even for adults aged over 24. For this group of young workers at least, the market rate appears somewhat detached from the regulatory floor. This fails to take into account, however, the unpaid hours reported by a substantial minority (over 10%) of the responses.

For the most part, respondents have been working in the same job for considerable periods. Responses range from 5 weeks to over 6 years, but the average is just under 17 months (median 10-12 months), so frequent job-hopping is clearly not common. Some interviewees reported continuing with jobs begun before they commenced at university.

### 3.3 Conditions at work

Only about half our responses get as far as the questions regarding their employment conditions, so the data is still a little thin, but nevertheless potentially revealing:

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<sup>8</sup> This excludes one who gave us an annual salary of £25,000 and another who claimed an hourly rate of zero.



<b>Question</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Total (n)</b>
I am paid for all hours I work	11%	7	8%	5	79%	50	2%	1	63
I am paid at the rate agreed with my employer	6%	4	3%	2	88%	56	3%	2	64
Some of my wage is paid in cash to avoid tax/National Insurance	89%	55	3%	2	6%	4	2%	1	62
I receive payslips	13%	8	6%	4	81%	51	0%	0	63
I get paid holidays	24%	15	10%	6	59%	37	8%	5	63
If I am ill, I get paid sick leave	60%	38	10%	6	17%	11	13%	8	63
If pregnant, I am entitled to paid maternity leave <sup>9</sup>	23%	10	0%	0	30%	13	47%	20	43

As we can see, over 10% report that they are never paid for all the hours they work, with 10% also reporting that sometimes or always, some of their wage is paid in cash to avoid tax and National Insurance. This can render their contracts unlawful, and therefore unenforceable in law. However, the major issue would seem to be the absence, or perceived absence at least, of sick pay, followed by the 24% who said they never got paid holidays. The level of ignorance regarding maternity entitlements is also of concern – almost half of the women responding said they did not know if they would be entitled to maternity leave.

*RES: Does sick pay get mentioned in your contract do you know?*

*PART: It actually doesn't. Well you have, in my contract it just says, well when I started I had a base shop and it says my hours and that's it, it doesn't mention sick pay. No it doesn't mention sick pay.*

...

*RES: Does it mention anything about maternity leave and pay?*

*PART: No.*

*RES: You don't recall.*

*PART: Yeah I don't recall.*

*RES: So if you were to fall pregnant you don't know what your entitlements would be?*

*PART: I really don't, no. " (Participant 13, F)*

*"Because I'm zero hour contract, if I'm sick, I just don't work. [...] If you don't work, you don't get paid, for whatever reason." (Participant 32, M)*

<sup>9</sup> Only women were asked this question

We also asked about students' experience of particular actions in the workplace.

Table 7: Have you experienced any of the following?							
	Frequently		Once or twice		Never		Total (n)
Bullying	6%	4	20%	13	73%	47	64
Discrimination	5%	3	27%	17	69%	44	64
Threats of dismissal	11%	7	13%	8	77%	49	64
Being required to work for longer than contracted	31%	20	22%	14	47%	30	64
Injury or accident at work	3%	2	10%	6	87%	55	63
Sexual harassment	0%	0	10%	6	90%	56	62
Racial harassment	2%	1	16%	10	82%	50	61
Disciplinary action	5%	3	11%	7	84%	54	64

Again we see the obligation to work more than contracted hours as the most frequent experience, although given that some may have had very short contractual hours (one interviewee reported only having a guarantee of 8 hours per week), this may not always have been unwelcome.

Bullying, discrimination and threats of dismissal had been experienced by a substantial minority of respondents, and although these could cover a range of actions or varying severity, they suggest that the workplace is not always a comfortable or safe place to be.

*“RES: And do you feel safe there?”*

*PART: I would like to say yeah, but then I always, especially at the end, because [bookmaker employer] they close at 10 O'clock at night and sometimes that means you leave the shop at 10.30 at night and obviously when you've had drunk customers, you've had your angry customers that aren't even right, so leaving, that initial leaving to go home is a bit worrying, because you don't know, especially if we've had like an argument with a customer, or someone has been rude to you, you don't know like where they are, as of now. So I wouldn't say I feel 100% safe” (Participant 32, F)*

One participant was made redundant from her job without prior notice before the Covid pandemic hit. She had been heavily financially dependent on the income. After enquiring about her rights online and through friends, she had just decided to sue her employer when she found out that the employer had no more business due to the Corona crisis:

*“They told me we have to let you go [...]. Normally when you sack someone you get two weeks' notice period, but I didn't get that. So I just left the same day. After the shift was over – I wanted to do my shift because I wanted to get paid – when it was over, I just went home. I didn't say anything to anyone, I just went home, because I thought that was just ridiculous what happened. So and also I'm a part time student so I need the money to pay off my expenses, food, travelling as well as maintaining my cost and they just sacked me without even letting me know anything in advance and that happened, so yeah. So I got taken back a little bit and I wanted to do something about it, I wanted to sue the company but I already had got redundant so I couldn't really do anything.” (Participant 1, F)*

### 3.4 Knowledge of Employment rights

A key aim of the pilot project was to establish the extent of knowledge working students have of their rights at work. We approached this by asking a direct question in the survey (see Table 8 below), and by asking some specific questions regarding the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and holiday entitlement.

<b>Table 8: How would you describe your knowledge of employment rights?</b>	%	Count
I know very little	19%	12
I know the basics	55%	35
I know nothing	13%	8
I am well informed	14%	9
Total	100%	64

Over half of those responding consider that they know the basics, with those saying they know nothing (13%) roughly matching those who claim to be well informed (14%). However, answers to specific questions regarding minimum wage and holiday entitlements suggest that even then, students are not as well informed as they thought they were.

<b>Table 9: Do you know how many paid holidays you are entitled to per year?</b>		
Answer	%	Count
Yes	36%	23
No, I don't know	45%	29
I am not entitled to any paid holidays	19%	12
Total	100%	64

45% said they did not know their holiday entitlement, with a further 19% saying (almost certainly wrongly<sup>10</sup>) that they had none<sup>11</sup>. If accurate, this level of ignorance appears to match that identifiable from the LFS, where 33% of full-time students who work said they did not know their entitlement, and 27% reported they had none (Labour Force Survey Oct-Dec 2019).

Only 16% thought they knew the NMW for 21-24 year olds, and of those, only 3 out of 10 responses were correct (£7.70 per hour). Interestingly, all the others gave an hourly rate for the NMW which OVER estimated it. This suggests some confusion with the real Living Wage set by the Living Wage Foundation (see Appendix 1 for details of rates in force). It might also suggest that they expect their own wage to be at or even below the NMW, not recognising that there is a market, as well as a legislative, rate for their own labour power.

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<sup>10</sup> All workers are entitled to 5.6 weeks paid holiday per year. Only self-employed and 'family' workers do not qualify

<sup>11</sup> It may be possible to establish whether respondents who provided a number of days for their entitlement are receiving at least the legal minimum, but this will require some further analysis of responses.

Even if there was a tendency by some students to overestimate their own knowledge of employment rights, at least a third knew they were ill-informed. It is arguable that they would only need such knowledge when a problem arose, in which case knowing where to look for the relevant information becomes important. Most (52%) said they would ask their own employer, which is likely to be unfruitful where breaches arise from the sort of business models identified in the Unpaid Britain project.

<b>Table 10: If you needed to find out information about your employment rights, where would you find this?</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
Employer/HR department	52%	32
Citizens Advice	5%	3
Solicitor	0%	0
Trade Union/student union/other professional body	8%	5
ACAS	2%	1
Family or friends	2%	1
Government department/government websites	7%	4
General internet search	10%	6
Don't know	15%	9

15% of respondents did not know where to go, while 8% might approach a union (including student union), with the same proportion favouring a general internet search. When interviewees were asked about the value of the university including employment rights as part of the taught curriculum, there was general approval, although some commented that this should take place earlier in young people's education, perhaps in year 11.

In the following example, the student could not recall whether she had received a written contract at all and did not seem to consider asking her employer for one. She was also not ignorant of any entitlements:

*RES: "Are you familiar with your rights as an employee at all?"*

*PART: "No. I got told nothing at all."*

*RES: "And have you ever checked online whether there is any information available?"*

*PART: "I haven't myself, no, just because of time wise, but I probably should really check."*

(Participant 15, F)

### 3.5 Note ref Covid 19 lockdown and the aftermath

Just as the online survey was coming to an end, and the first contacts for interviews were being established, the effective closure of the Hendon campus, and the subsequent government 'lockdown' took place. The interviews were consequently overshadowed by the impact of workplace closures and limits on mobility which followed.

The topic was covered insofar as discussion of how students' work had been affected, but we also gained some insight into the lives of students faced with limited living (and private) space, access to internet and IT equipment. While these are issues to which we may wish to return, the following observations relate to the economic consequences to which our working students may be exposed.

The default position in the LFS (and therefore government policy making) is that students are economically inactive if they are not actually working. However, our analysis suggests that they may be seeking work, or working intermittently even if not regularly, and that only a small minority of our students are in fact economically inactive.

If our students are more likely than average to have been working, mostly to pay for necessities, how might they now be impacted? If not furloughed by their employers, they will not be entitled to any state benefits by virtue of their student status, but household budgets will also be strained by the impact of Covid on other household members (see also Section 3.5 above).

Mostly living at the family home, and (as it seems from interviews) contributing to largely working class household budgets, the likelihood is that these students will all be struggling in the current circumstances. A focus group participant who was living with her mother and younger sibling was particularly concerned about the implications of Covid on the household income:

*“Honestly I don’t think I will be okay because I don’t get student finance like the rest of my classmates, so this income meant a lot to me [...]. I help my mum so this is completely destroying our household income and we kind of worry about paying rent right now. [...] So for me the scenario is because my mum pays the rent, if she doesn’t earn enough money, we may have the council knock on the door and ask us what is going on. We might be evicted, although people say the council is quite lenient, it’s not that strict. So for us also it’s the food, because we have a child [sibling], so we have to make sure that the child has enough food on the plate and you know.” (FG 2, F)*

RES: *“Ok, how important to you are the earnings you get from working?”*

PART: *“It is really important to me because you know I have other things to pay for like, I actually help out at home as well, with the food and stuff, especially with what’s going on now. I’m trying to save up as much as I can, only because like we never know what’s going to happen next.” [participant 6, F, age 21]*

At same time, continuing their studies from home may mean more use of home broadband and smart phones, as well as heat, light, etc. So even where they can access the 80% furlough payment (and time will tell whether early promises are met), budgets will be stretched.

As the following example illustrates, for some the sudden Covid crisis also meant that they did not receive their most recent wages, leaving them in a very precarious financial situation:

*“Yeah, so they’ve said to all of my colleagues, they’ve all said to us that obviously you can’t work here until obviously it’s all sorted out, and they said to us - so we were meant to get paid two weeks ago but they’ve kept the money because they needed the money to keep the place running, which is not fair on us [...]. So yeah, that’s what they said to us, so we won’t be back there - they said they were going to close it for three months, because that’s what the government have said, so yeah.” (Participant 15, F)*

Then we have to consider their likelihood of being re-employed as lockdown is relaxed. Retail work in ‘non-essential’ (i.e. non-food) areas is currently scheduled to recommence from 15 June, but it is far from clear how easy it will be for either customers or workers to travel to the outlets safely. The

situation for arts & recreation, and hospitality will be even more problematic, with no clear timetable for resumption for most activities.

*“I got the job and then I got in touch with one of my colleagues who used to work there, because we were really good friends. She sent me a text saying they are closing down the shop, because of coronavirus and they are making everyone redundant and they said to look for another job.”*

*“I was literally working about a month ago. Then because of the virus that’s going on, they kind of laid me off. I’m still on the books and everything and I think I still will be when I go back, whenever that is, but yeah, no I currently don’t work anymore.” (Participant 32, M)*

By contrast, in health and social care (which is likely to have continued operating) workers may be at a higher risk of infection, as identified by the ONS (2020), rather than a high risk of unemployment<sup>12</sup>.

## 4. Discussion & Recommendations

The following section has been produced in the light of the survey results, preliminary analysis of LFS data, and a read through of the interview transcripts. A detailed consideration will be prepared once the interviews have been subject to a more rigorous examination, using NVivo, and taking into account the work recently published by the National Union of Students and the Resolution Foundation on students’ and young workers’ experiences during the Covid lockdown (NUS 2020, Gustafsson & McCurdy 2020).

### 4.1 The significance of student working

For our students, working during their studies seems to be a matter of survival. It enables them to reduce their borrowings, and pay for travel, phone contracts and food, as well as contributing to family budgets. Not only are our students ‘work-ready’, they have substantial work experience and important transferable skills, having in some cases begun work years before commencing their studies. However, this experience may well be undervalued, both by the students themselves and by prospective employers.

Our students are certainly more likely to be working than those at Russell Group universities, some of which actively discourage working during term-time,<sup>13</sup> yet these latter universities are judged by the *THE* (and other) rankings to score highly on employability as measured by earnings – which tend to discriminate against the ‘key workers’ on whom we have so heavily relied, as well as against BAME workers more generally.

Our understanding of the impact of working on students’ economic lives is very limited, and this pilot study has only scratched at the surface. A wider survey of all Middlesex students, or at least of

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<sup>12</sup> During the research we heard tragic news of the death from Covid of Ade Raymond, a first year mental health nursing student at Middlesex who was working as a health care assistant.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cambridge: “The University takes the view that our students shouldn’t undertake paid employment during term-time”, <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/fees-and-finance/financial-support>; and Oxford: “Term-time employment is not permitted except under exceptional circumstances” <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/life/experience?wssl=1> Cambridge & Oxford University websites, accessed 30 April 2020

another significant London Borough, could reveal much which would be of value both to those students themselves, and for developing new services aimed at our students.

At a sectoral level, student employment can be of great significance for employers. In some sectors, students make up a substantial part of the workforce – food and drink services, accommodation, recreation and leisure, retail and domestic personnel all have more than 5% of the workforce made up of full time students (LFS Q4 2019). In the case of food and drink services, almost one worker in five (18.4%) is a full time student. The welfare of post '92 students is therefore likely to be closely related to the health of these economic sectors, and *vice versa*. It is of considerable concern that these are the very economic sectors most damaged by the Covid-19 epidemic and consequent lockdown (see below).

#### 4.2 Rights at work and pricing of labour power

From this admittedly small survey, we see that there is evidence of extensive abuse of student workers' basic employment rights – unpaid hours of work, failure to provide paid holidays, absence of payslips and reports of discrimination and bullying, for example.

This is accompanied by students' woeful ignorance of basic employment rights (such as entitlement to paid holidays or to maternity pay and leave). In some cases the students may not even be aware that their rights (unpaid hours, holiday pay) and/or contracts are being breached, let alone how they might seek redress. As the examples taken from the qualitative interviews below demonstrate, in a few cases, students do not even have a written contract that informs them of their entitlements.

PART: *"I think people like me who are just [job role], we're just on zero-hour contracts."*

RES: *"Uh huh. But do you at least have a contract, or is it just a verbal agreement? You do have a written contract, right?"*

PART: *"I think, I don't actually remember, but I think it's more a verbal agreement because I don't remember signing anything saying, you know ... Yeah, so it's not exactly very reliable. I'm not exactly sure. My job is not very organised at all, which is really bad."* (Participant 15, F)

*"No I didn't have any written contract, anything like that. When I started out [the employer] just told me to basically put my details on a form and then she told me we are going to send you a contract by December or January and then she never did that. So when I got sacked I asked her for the contract and she was like oh we'll give it to you. So I waited one week and she didn't give it to me, so I asked her again and then it got a bit like, I don't know it didn't really go down really well, so I think she got a bit like taken aback and then I asked a couple of times and she didn't really want to give it and it just feels a bit dodgy why she can't give me my contract. Then I asked a couple of people, normally you are meant to have a contract when you start working in a place, in the workplace, you need to have a copy of a contract, but I never really got one."* (Participant 1, F)

In our view, simply providing links to official web sites setting out employment rights will not be enough to substantially improve our students' capacity to successfully assert their rights (although this would have value in itself). Interviewees were clear that they saw a role for the university in better enabling them to ensure fair and equitable treatment in the workplace. This could lead not only to a reduction in economic precariousness for working students, but to an enhanced confidence in pricing themselves into the post-graduation labour market.

### 4.3 Potential for successful interventions

There is clearly a role for the development of teaching materials and processes aimed at introducing students to the basics of employment rights and contracts, as well as the means of enforcing them. However, mere knowledge is insufficient to ensure that these rights are met in full.

Young workers may lack the confidence or experience to take steps to enforcing their rights. Pedagogy therefore needs to be supplemented with a system of advice, peer support and advocacy, perhaps delivered in association with the Student Union, in order to be effective. At the same time, interviews made clear that the time taken to travel between Newham and Hendon was a major factor in reducing the amount of time students could spend on campus, particularly when they had to fit in both study and paid work. The possibility of providing services in Newham itself, as well as through digital platforms, social media and telephone helplines should also therefore be considered. To this end, we might usefully consider expanding our scope of enquiry to include both University of East London and Newham College as partners for further work.

The significance of paid work for students from working class backgrounds has been largely ignored, beyond its potential impact on learning outcomes. The sudden shock applied to service sector employers by the Covid lockdown may have particular consequences for poorer families with working students in the household. We are well placed to examine these further in order to effectively lobby government on behalf of students whose economic resources were already stretched before the epidemic.

Extending our work to cover students from FE, and from outside London, would therefore give us a particular insight into the importance of paid work for students from less prosperous backgrounds, and the impact of the withdrawal of that work due to Covid, on their physical and mental well-being. This could fit well into the criteria set out by UKRI for COVID 19 priority research (via the ESRC).

### 4.4 Proposed actions arising from the pilot

1. Our students often rely on their work to sustain themselves and their families, and will feel any loss of income associated with the fallout from the Covid pandemic. We propose that a service be developed to provide students with advice and assistance with employment-related problems, including at present those associated with the furlough scheme, sick pay and job loss. This can start at a modest level, providing advice online and by e-mail supplemented by telephone/Skype/Zoom consultations, provided initially by team members but potentially staff and students from the Law School and MDXSU.
2. Some interviewees were unaware of the Employability support services available on campus. There is a need to raise students' awareness of the valuable transferable skills gained even in jobs that are unrelated to their area of study, and to assist them in strengthen their CVs accordingly. This may help to boost their confidence and help them to compete on the graduate job market.
3. A further study be initiated amongst Middlesex students residing in another, outer, London borough, comprising a similar survey (improved in the light of experience gained through the pilot in Newham), and a limited number of interviews. This could be conducted with very limited additional expenditure. The most promising borough would be Enfield (764 main cohort students in 2019/20).



4. Newham borough council to be approached with preliminary results to consider how an employment rights service might be provided to working HE/FE students in the borough, engaging FE and HE Institutions located in the Borough, local trade unions, advice organisations and community groups.
5. Partners to be sought for a larger project extending the area of study to include FE and HE students from one or more other areas thought to have different labour markets, with a view to preparing a bid for a larger research project, possibly funded through the Nuffield Foundation's Research, Development & Analysis stream, whose key themes are presently Education, Welfare and Justice.

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## Appendix 1: National Minimum Wage rates

<b>25 and over</b> (or 'National Living Wage')	£8.72	£8.21	£9.30 (£10.75 in London)
<b>21 to 24</b>	£8.20	£7.70	as above
<b>18 to 20</b>	£6.45	£6.15	as above
<b>Under 18</b>	£4.55	£4.35	
<b>Apprentice</b>	£4.15	£3.90	

## Appendix 2: Online Survey

### Questionnaire responses

Middlesex students living in Newham	520
Non-working email addresses:	21
Surveys started	148
Surveys 'finished' (as at 8 April 2020)	135

Of these, 1 was a preview response, and 8 were records with no data<sup>15</sup>. Thus total usable responses were 126 out of a reachable population of 499, representing a 25.3% response rate. The project team had determined 25% as the lower target threshold for a representative sample.

### Demographics compared with Newham cohort

#### *a. Gender*

Survey response: F 63.5%, M 36.5%

Newham cohort: F 55%, M 45%

#### *b. School*

Survey response:

Arts and Creative Industries	7.9
Business School	21.9
Health and Education	22.8
Law & International	14.9
Science and Technology	31.6
Other (unclear)	0.9

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>, 2019-2020 rates

<sup>15</sup> This suggests that they had scrolled through most of the survey without actually recording any responses. Those abandoning the survey early on without scrolling through seem to be recorded as having started, but not finished.

Newham cohort:

Arts and Creative Industries	9.0
Business School	25.8
Health and Education	22.2
Law & International	11.7
Science and Technology	31.3

- *Men are under-represented, but by School/faculty, age and year of commencing studies our response is broadly comparable with the cohort as a whole.*