**Learning from Labour: Critical pedagogy for working students**

Project Preliminary report

March 2023

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***Executive summary***

● A short-term research funding from Enhancing Education Awards (EEAs) enabled a small-scale research project among Middlesex students, to explore the kinds of work undertaken during their studies, the nature of any difficulties they may have faced, and the extent of their knowledge of employment rights.

● The research employed a mixed method approach including a survey, semi-structured interviews as well as in-class reflective exercises and analyses of reflective essays on task performance and workplace experiences.

● The survey sample consists of 247 respondents of which 61.6 were female.

● The majority of students participating in the survey, classed by passport nationality, are respectively international/overseas students (44%), British (32%) and EU-settled residents (18%).

● 34% of students are living with their parents. Many others live in rented accommodation: alone, with other students, with children or with their partner (13.5% admit to dependent children).

● The university displays a culturally and socially diverse population. The majority of them are students who are the first members of their families to attend university.

● In the sample, 90% of them reported “not having enough money to live on without working”, 85% were actively seeking employment, and about 56% worked before enrolment and continued to work after.

● The reasons for working while studying are clearly split between those seeking experience and career advancement and those having to pay for necessities (the largest group at 29.5%), pay off debt (roughly 10%) or for leisure (14%). Only 8% stated that their work was in their field of study.

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● The impact of the pandemic may explain lower labour market participation and a correspondingly higher inactivity rate. Responses suggest that both the quantity and quality of jobs suitable for students may have decreased.

● After furlough, dismissals or quitting, students face a less favourable environment. Many students who are employed must, out of necessity, accept undesirable employment conditions and jobs.

● Almost 50% work part-time and a significant proportion full-time, almost 17%. A third of students work precarious jobs, zero hours, freelance and in the informal sector (14%).

● The majority of students work in retail, catering and hospitality. Almost 18% work in the public sector, covering healthcare, education and some administrative occupations. Notably, at 16%, there stands the grey area of self-employment, private employers and family businesses.

● The majority of students work in the low-wage and low-skilled sectors and earn less than minimum wage.

● 68% state that their work schedule is changed at short notice, 28.5% do not always or ever see a payslip, 22.5% of respondents complain about unpaid extra work; 17.34% claim some of their wages are paid cash in hand to avoid taxation. Equally worrying is the fact that 50% believe they are not entitled to paid maternity leave.

● Almost 30% claim experiencing discrimination at work (almost 10% do so frequently), 24% bullying, 22% are subjected to threats of dismissal and 12% to disciplinary action. The gravest violations of labour rights and sexual and racial harassment affected 10% of the sample. Last, 20% reported accidents and injuries at work.

● The survey data shows that the majority of working students do not know much about labour rights. A lack of knowledge of employment rights is one of the main reasons for abusive employment relationships and the precariousness of students in the workplace.

● The extent to which student workers can seize opportunities in the labour market depends heavily on their social and cultural capital.

● The data reveals well-known workplace issues such as long shifts, heavy workloads and unpredictable hours, as well as discrimination and health and safety violations.

● This study however sought to go beyond the survey-based labour market and employment analysis to investigate the often-overlooked inner abode of production. This report focuses on labour process analysis to identify the social structures and processes sustaining student workers' 'bad' jobs. So far, we established that:

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● Student jobs exist in an apparently disorganised but highly exploitative workplace regime, which relies on student-workers' precarious conditions for its reproduction.

● Its work organisation achieves labour exploitation by combining traditional lengthening of the working time, deskilling and effort intensification with more contemporary functional flexibility.

● Due to their short-term commitments, lack of experience and employment rights knowledge as well as their desire for flexible hours, students become dependable workers.

● As predicated by Labour Process Theory, resistance to unfair conditions also materializes; this manifests itself as labour mobility power exercised by withdrawing labour (turnover) or as workplace small-scale resistance by individuals and groups (foot-dragging, work-to-rule, solidarity, grievances).

● This report presents a picture in line with national and local data about trends in student labour market engagement and employment as adjusted by the pandemic watershed.

● Its findings, however, suggest that the social suffering of student workers is underestimated and consequently there is a stronger connection between ‘bad’ jobs and poor educational outcomes than previously thought.

● In conclusion we argue that is not poor education that allegedly prevents students from succeeding in the labour market, but rather it is the latter, due to the social suffering it causes, that prevents students from making the most of their learning opportunities.

● Therefore, post-92 universities that rely so heavily on such students should not be unfairly blamed for failing students’ employability outcomes. However, recognition of the significant challenges students face should lead universities as well as students and educators to turn these struggles into an opportunity for collective, social and pedagogic, innovation. Initial recommendations are provided to this end.

Recommendations include:

● Establishing an employment rights advice service at the University.

● Introducing education about workplace challenges and employment rights early in the curriculum.

● Extending this research to a broad scale in order to capture the effect of work on the academic performance of working students