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Working on a dream: educational returns from off-campus paid work

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Helping students develop the employability skills and professional capabilities they will need to transition into graduate roles is one of the most important mandates for university study. With this context in mind, this paper analyses the nature and implications of Australian university students’ participation in paid work during study. The paper looks at the incidence with which students participate in paid work, and follows this with an analysis of the influence such participation has on academic engagement and outcomes. There are disjuncts, the data shows, between student activity and the support received from institutions. It is suggested that institutions need to embrace students’ off-campus paid work. The findings shed light on practices that institutions can use to support students’ participation and outcomes.

Keywords: student engagement; paid work; work skills

Taking a stance towards work during study

Finding sustainable opportunities to improve the outcomes of higher education for graduates, institutions and the economy as a whole is an ongoing challenge for practitioners, policy-makers and higher education researchers alike. Improving the productivity and standards of higher education is becoming more important than ever, given the growing economic and social relevance of higher education to many countries, coupled with a decrease in public investment (KPMG 2009). Doing more higher learning, doing it wiser and faster, and doing it for less, is a pressing preoccupation for higher education.

Within this frame, helping students develop the employability skills and professional capabilities they will need to transition into graduate roles is one of the most important mandates for university study. While institutions...
and courses vary in the weight, they place on ‘real-world work readiness’, even the most broadly liberal areas of study have underpinning vocational components. Employers and graduate schools alike are increasingly explicit in their calls for people completing university with a bachelor degree to be work-ready (see, for instance: Bradley et al. 2008; University of Western Australia [UWA] 2008; University of Melbourne [UoM] 2010; Poole-Warren and Strugnell 2010; University of Melbourne 2013).

The following analysis investigates Australian university students’ participation in off-campus paid work. During the 1990s, this phenomenon became an increasingly interesting and significant narrative in Australian higher education (McInnis and Hartley 2002), with implications for institutions, industries, individuals and the economy as a whole.

In recent decades, combining paid off-campus work and study has tended to be received as a troubling situation driven by economic hardship and lack of government support that resulted in students being distracted from their studies (see: Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; James et al. 2007; Beffy, Fougère, and Maurel 2009). As with any complex sociological notion, the story is more complex on closer inspection (McInnis and Hartley 2002; Radloff and Coates 2010; Polidano and Zakirova 2011; Salisbury, Pascarella, and Padgett 2011). As the following analysis shows, off-campus paid work would appear to have become an intrinsic and often rewarding facet of undergraduate life.

The present analysis approaches/respects the phenomenon empirically, treating it as an inexorable trend. It ventures beyond moralism, although leaves open the prospects that participating in paid work during study may well be a good thing. Either way, this is a significant facet of Australia’s higher education life that is slipping between the cracks, as with opportunities to venture beyond didactic vocational training and educate the whole person. Somewhat a matter yet to be resolved, and with complex links to educational practice and the quality and productivity of higher education, analysing students’ participation in paid work provides an excellent test case for exploring institutional support for students’ engagement.

The focus on ‘off-campus’ as opposed to ‘on-campus’ employment is deliberate and non-trivial, and a note of clarification is helpful. Broadly, while off-campus employment has been seen to have uncertain or even harmful effects on study, this is not the case for on-campus employment, which research has shown to be positively related to academic outcomes (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). Hence, there is less immediate need to explore the impact of on-campus employment. In Australia, on-campus paid work is also far less prevalent than off-campus employment, involving only around 5% of first-year and 10% of later-(third)-year students. As seen below, it thus involves far fewer people – a point considered by way of conclusion.
Adopting an engaged perspective

This paper draws on data from the 2010 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE; Coates and Radloff 2011). The overall sample size for this analysis is very large – 25,950 students (around 14,300 first years and 11,650 later (mostly third) years), and is weighted to ensure representativeness of the target population – onshore undergraduate students. The weighting scheme is detailed in Radloff and Coates (2010) and, as far as possible given available information, involves weighting within institutions for student year level, attendance type and sex. The level of institutional participation and the within-institution sampling methods imply that the results can be interpreted as being broadly generalisable on a national level. Note that given the large sample of responses, formal tests of ‘statistical significance’ are uninformative technically and substantively. Instead, advice is provided throughout the paper to inform the interpretation of results, using descriptive techniques appropriate to large-scale analysis of the kind pursued in this paper.

The AUSSE (Coates 2009) provides data both on learners’ engagement in effective learning practices and on whether institutions have provided the support mechanisms to facilitate such engagement. The AUSSE (Coates and Radloff 2011) was conducted with 25 Australasian universities in 2007, 29 in 2008, 35 in 2009 and 55 higher education providers in 2010. At its time the 2010 was the largest cross-institutional collection of data from currently enrolled students and as such shed new light on several important phenomenon. It offers institutions in Australia and New Zealand information on students’ involvement with the activities and conditions that empirical research has linked with high-quality learning and development. As with any student survey and many studies on work, data is based on self reports. A range of research have been conducted to affirm the validity of such information (Coates and Ainley 2006; Coates and Radloff 2011; Coates and Richardson 2013; Radloff et al. 2012). The concept and collection provide a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities that higher education institutions face. AUSSE results provide key insights into what students are actually doing, a structure for framing conversations about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about good practice.

As defined by Coates (2009), student engagement is an idea specifically focused on learners and their interactions with higher education institutions. Once considered behaviourally in terms of ‘time on task’, contemporary perspectives now touch on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners’ lives beyond university and institutional support. It is based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage
involvement. Learners are central to the idea of student engagement, which focuses squarely on enhancing individual learning and development. This perspective draws together decades of research into higher education student learning and development (Pace 1979; Astin 1985; Ewell and Jones 1996; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Coates 2006; Kuh 2008; Coates 2010). In addition to confirming the importance of ensuring appropriate levels of active learning and academic challenge, this research has emphasised the importance of examining students’ integration into institutional life and involvement in educationally relevant, ‘beyond classroom’ experiences. Clearly, this is potentially a vast range of activities and conditions. As argued above, and as this paper shows, particularly given the increasingly distributed nature of curriculum and provision, off-campus paid work would now appear to be an inherent facet of contemporary students’ engagement of key relevance to their education and development.

The analysis begins by looking at the incidence with which students participate in paid work, and follows this with an analysis of the influence such participation has on academic engagement and outcomes. There are critical disjuncts, the data shows, between student activity and the support received from institutions. It is suggested that institutions need to further embrace students’ off-campus paid work. The findings shed light on practices that institutions can use to support students’ participation and outcomes.

In addition to drawing on data from one of the largest cross-institutional student surveys yet conducted in Australia, this paper builds on extensive consultation with academic and employer stakeholders. Between 2007 and 2011, the arguments and evidence presented in this paper have been tested in seminars, workshops and consultations with hundreds of student support professionals (such as academic advisors, careers advisors and learning skills advisors), with academics (including teachers, and institutional leaders and managers), and with graduate employers (peak bodies, large individual organisations and professional accreditation agencies). These consultations have played a formative role in shaping the paper’s argument, evidence and conclusions.

Who is working and what is not

If learning how to think is the primary purpose of university, then getting a job at the end likely comes a close second. This partly explains why a very large number of students participate in paid work activities during their study. Clearly, there are a variety of reasons – needing money, socialising, soaking up free time, developing employability skills, reinforcing academic skills, career formation, having fun, meeting family expectations and responding – implicitly or otherwise – to cultural factors.

But the bottom line is that students work. Results from four administrations of the AUSSE show that around two-thirds of Australian university
students participated in paid work (see Figure 1). Between 2007 and 2010, the figure for first-year students has varied from 65% in 2007 to 69% in 2008, and for later years from 71% in 2007 to 76% in later years. The 2008 figures appear marginally higher than those for the other three timepoints. The confidence bands around these figures are insubstantial given sample sizes. As these figures do not include the approximately 10% of students who were working on campus, it seems reasonable to assume that around four-fifths of first-year students and nine out of 10 later years were working for pay. This estimate was affirmed by a census of 2002 bachelor degree students conducted in 2008 that found 83% of students worked during their final year of study (Coates and Edwards 2009). These figures also accord with extrapolations from Long and Hayden’s 2001 national survey of student finances.

Figure 1. Participation in paid work, 2007–2010.

Figure 2. Hours per week participating in paid work by year level.
Turning to 2010, Figure 2 shows the time students spend working in the average week. The horizontal groups have been joined to facilitate trendwise analysis of what is clearly a non-linear relationship (hence basic summary statistics are not applicable). The results indicate that a quarter of all first years who work did so between 6 and 10 h, which is the most common level of participation. Around half (48%) of first-year students participate for between 6 and 15 h. Later-year students tend to work longer. The most common length of time for later-year students is 11 to 15 h per week, with 40% undertaking between 11 and 20 h of paid work each week. The ‘blip’ at the end of the distribution for each year level is interesting, reflecting those students who report working over 30 h per week – levels close to a full-time workload. Eight per cent of Australian first-year students fall into this category, and around double this percentage (14%) of later-year learners. Interestingly, these results along with those in Figure 1 mirrored 2009 figures in Germany (Hochschul-Informations-System [HIS] 2009), and also 2001 Australian figures collected by McInnis and Hartley (2002). Again, these figures are very accurate statistically given the AUSSE’s sampling regime and the size of the 2010 sample.

A number of students are working long hours, and a wide range of students are working. As Figure 1 shows, first-year students work less than later years. More females tend to work than males. People who receive financial support from government or their university work less than those who did not. International students report working less than their domestic counterparts, though visa restrictions constrain easy comparison (see Marginson et al. 2010). Students from high or middle socio-economic backgrounds work more than others, flagging that Australian university students may not have been participating in paid work for income alone. Similarly, students from metropolitan areas work more than those from provincial or remote areas, although the regional availability of work may have played a role. Strikingly, students living with their parents are more likely to work than those living with partners or by themselves, or in on- or off-campus student accommodation – again, highlighting that students may be working for lifestyle rather than subsistence alone. These findings are triangulated by insights procured through the 2008 Graduate Pathways Survey (Coates and Edwards 2009) which confirms – for instance, that females work more than males as did Australian citizens and first-in-family students, people from metropolitan areas, and people who completed primary school in a low socio-economic area.

As might be expected, engagement in various work experiences varies by field of education. Science-oriented professional studies which also tended to be highly competitive to enter had rates about 20-to-30 points lower than other often non-science related fields. The fields with higher rates of participation did, however, appear more heterogeneous than those with
lower rates of participation, possibly flagging the increased influence of other mediating institutional or individual factors.

Participation in paid off-campus work has a striking relationship with academic performance. Essentially, as Figure 3 shows, students with lower or higher grades tend to participate in less work compared with those with average grades. There is a positive relationship between grades and paid-work participation for students who work for one to 10 h per week – except for those with the highest grade. People working for 11 to 20 h per week tend to have average grades. Learners working over 20 h tend to receive grades across the performance spectrum, with a slight dip towards the upper extreme. These trends are confirmed by chi-square tests ($X^2(70, n = 19,776)$)

Figure 3. Participation in off-campus paid work by grade.

Figure 4. Participation in work experiences by field of education.
Precise figures are not labelled here as the intention is to bring out general trends which are very robust given the size of the sample on which the results are based.

The situation is slightly different when looking at participation in broader forms of work-related activity. As Figure 4 shows, people in ‘professional’ fields appear more likely than those in others to enjoy various kind of vocational experience during their study. Curriculum differences, for instance, mean that students in health, medical studies, nursing or education seem much more likely to participate in a practicum or industry placement than those studying sciences, IT, accounting or humanities.

Considerable variation across institutions exists, too. While one institution has only 48% of its first-year students participating in off-campus paid work, another has 82%. A similar range is evident for later-year students – ranging from 45 to 81%. The gap between first- and later-year participation tends to be less pronounced for institutions that have higher rates for both year levels, likely due to the very high number of students participating in paid work. In terms of institutional groupings, students in research intensive and regional institutions tend to work less than others, followed by students in ‘innovative research’ institutions. People studying in metropolitan institutions tend to work the most. No other apparent institution-level characteristics are associated with variations in students’ paid work.

Clearly, these descriptive statistics only scratch the surface of this very widespread and significant phenomenon. Yet, even these univariate and bivariate descriptive results show that participation varied across a number of student sub-groups, and in complex and conditional ways. These insights provide a springboard and foundation for future work that should seek to build a typological framework that institutions can use to understand and hence manage this phenomenon.

The academic impact of paid work

Insights into the incidence of participation in off-campus paid work are intrinsically important, but they also affirm the need to explore how vocational activity interacts with students’ academic engagements. In principle, educationally well-phrased off-campus paid work carries an enormous potential to contribution to the formation of graduate capacity and outcomes.

Off-campus paid work appears to yield positive returns for learners, although the effects appear conditional on individual and academic characteristics. Figure 5 reports results for each of the six aggregate student participation and institutional support scales measured in the AUSSE. Scale scores are reported on a metric ranging from 0 to 100, with differences of five scale points or more reflecting an educationally meaningful effect size (again, confidence bands are uninformative given sample size). Clearly, paid-work participation does not have a negative impact on students’ engagement
or perceptions of support. Conversely, people in paid work report higher levels of active learning, interactions with academic staff, engagement in enriching educational experiences, and – perhaps unsurprisingly – work-integrated learning. At an aggregate (national) level, therefore, paid work does not seem to be associated with lower engagement in academic work.

Off-campus paid work is often linked with the time that students spent on campus. The AUSSE provides two measures of this facet of engagement – time on-campus including and excluding class. Time outside class is important, as this captured students’ engagement in the broader life of the academy. The evidence shows that having off-campus vocational commitments leads students to spend less time on campus. These results are reported for students who are classified by institutions as having ‘full-time’ and ‘campus-based’ enrolments, and who are participating in paid work. Around half (49%) of all off-campus workers only spend between one and five hours per week on campus outside class, compared with only 37% for those who did not work. Conversely, nearly no working students spend more than 30 h on campus per week, compared with a figure of 10% for people who did not work off campus. Interestingly, the lines cross between 11 and 15 h, which is the same amount of time most undergraduates spend working, providing high-level evidence of a substitution effect. Similar trends are evident for the time spent on campus including class-time. Obviously, this latter set of results is particularly influenced by discipline, curriculum, year level, the time required to travel to campus, and the availability of online learning materials and more general resources.

Figure 5. Students’ engagement by participation in paid work.
Vocational effort yielded similar apparent returns for student outcomes. At the national level, there appears to be little impact on students’ development of higher-order thinking or general skills, on average grade or dropout intentions, or on overall satisfaction. The national results highlight a positive impact on general learning outcomes (outcomes such as reading, writing and speaking), and particularly on career development. The correlation between paid work and average grades is captured in Figure 3, which shows that working between 1 and 20 h per week can yield positive returns. Further analysis of the Career Readiness and Departure Intention scales, the latter being the percentage of students who have ‘seriously considered’ dropping out before course completion, is undertaken below. As noted above, these observations are based on self-reports, boosting the relevance of the validation of such data.

Figure 6 shows only a slight difference in dropout intentions and work participation, but digging beneath this aggregate result yields an interesting story. For first years, there appear to be three groups of students. Taking part in paid off-campus work does not appear to increase early departure unless it is over 10 h per week. Departure intentions seem to increase by between 5 and 10% for those working between 11 and 30 h (but with little variation within this), and then fall back to lower levels for students working over 30 h. Results for later-year students show a different pattern. Here, the first group consists of students working up to five hours per week (around 30%), the second group between 6 and 20 h per week (dropout intentions of around 35%), and the third group of more than 20 h (around 40% considering early departure). The relationship here appears roughly linear and so trendlines have been fitted, with equations shown on the chart. While not a tight fit, these loose statistical approximations affirm a reasonable effect, and

![Figure 6. Early departure by participation in paid work.](image-url)
that that paid off-campus work may yield educational benefits if practised in moderation.

The benefits of paid work are particularly strong in relation to career readiness. Closer analysis of effect-size statistics for specific items reveals that participation in off-campus paid work is correlated with increase in the extent to which students report:

- developing communication skills relevant to the discipline;
- exploring how to apply learning in the workforce;
- knowing how to present to potential employers;
- improving knowledge and skills that will contribute to employability;
- keeping the resume up-to-date;
- networking for job opportunities;
- setting career development goals and plans; and
- knowing where to look for jobs.

Skill development in these areas is important because these are clearly the kinds of skills that helped people secure employment after graduation. Results from Australia’s first census of bachelor degree students five years after graduation (Coates and Edwards 2009) indicated that people who participated in paid work were much more likely to move seamlessly into paid work after graduation, and to receive higher salaries (Figure 7). In the first year, while 49% of those who did not work for pay as an undergraduate were in full-time graduate employment, this increased to 67% for those who worked 21–30 h and 78% for those who worked 31 h or more. Participation in part-time work increased from 13 then decreased to 26–15% for the same groups. These patterns were repeated at the five-year point, although the rates of full-time work were higher and part-time work lower. After five years, graduates who worked between 1 and 10 h per week as undergraduates were more likely to have professional or managerial occupations than those who did not work (71 compared with 62%). They were also likely to have higher salaries (Figure 7), and the relationship between paid-work hours per week and salary grows over time. Again, these figures are very accurate statistically given the size of the sample.

Involvement in paid off-campus work would seem unlikely to be diminishing, affirming a need to understand how institutions can support students and link work efforts with academic practice. Improving support would help capture the benefits that accrue from working off-campus while at the same time dampen or better manage unhelpful or unintended consequences, such as early departure.

To tap into this important link between student work activity and institutional support, stemming from national consultation with student careers advisors, students responding to the 2010 AUSSE were asked to report that relationship between paid work and study. Results are shown in Figure 8.
Particularly given the large and nationally representative sample, these are clearly concerning, exposing a disconnect that is unproductive, and quite likely even harmful. Given the incidence of paid work, this straightforward descriptive result has major implications for higher education policy and practice.

This apparent misalignment is evidenced by looking at the lack students’ participation in career-related academic activities. In 2010, only around 7% of first years and 15% of final years consulted a careers service for advice. Strikingly, 41% of first years and 27% of later years said that in the current academic year, they ‘never’ blended academic learning with workplace experience, participated in a community-based project (‘never’: 76% first years and 66% later years), talked about career plans with academics (‘never’: 59% first years and 45% later years), or worked with academics on

Figure 7. Graduates’ employability outcomes by participation in paid work.
activities outside of coursework (‘never’: 76% first years and 70% later years). The percentage of undergraduate students who did not engage in various work preparation experiences (Figure 9 presents descriptive results, again noting that the large sample size means that an effect-size interpretation is the most appropriate) is somewhat concerning.

Such seeming misalignment has a clear potential to cause problems and to create bumps and inefficiencies, in students’ education. A significant amount of learners’ activity is disconnected from what would, according to institution records and student reports, appear to be their main activity – full-time study. This doubtless creates conflicts for learners work and study and, at the same time, fails to capitalise on the synergies that would likely derive from testing and using academic skills in the workplace and,
conversely, embracing the significant work-derived learning that can greatly enhance academic study.

**Work that needs to be done**

This paper has asserted that Australia’s higher education institutions should be aiming to produce better learning outcomes for Australian students in both academic knowledge and skills, and also in relation to what have been described as ‘employability’, ‘graduate’ or ‘smart’ skills. Such skills underpin effective professional work by enabling individuals to work effectively with other and produce better results. They can be conceptualised as including communication, team work, adaptability, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking and decision-making.

These skills exist in all education programmes, but the extent to which they are actively taught and assessed varies greatly. At one extreme, fields such as engineering have mapped the learning and teaching of smart skills to specific facets of a subject or qualification. As a result, students have an opportunity to develop and test these skills and the profession works actively to enhance practice and outcomes (Engineers Australia 2009). Many other courses, however, do not explicitly teach such smart skills.

A more effective approach is needed across the higher education system. Broader employability skills can be taught and learned, and this paper has explored the important contribution that may be made by off-campus paid work. Of course, students will not have fully mastered these professional skills at the time of leaving university. Further development will very likely be required in the workplace. But, in view of the importance of such skills to a successful career, it is important that, at the very least, students gain an opportunity to understand their importance and to learn to use them practical or simulated workplace environments. To this end, a series of policy-level suggestions are offered by a way of conclusion which draw together threads running through the above large-scale results. As noted above, these concluding suggestions build from the argument and descriptive evidence reviewed above and have been shaped by hundreds of stakeholder consultations and expert perspectives.

First, and most basically, it is patently no longer possible for higher education stakeholders – students, teachers, institutions and employers – to ignore students’ participation in off-campus paid work. This is a widespread phenomenon that merits detailed research at all universities. Only by replicating the kinds of analyses presented in this paper – and going beyond to look at links with campus characteristics, commuting practices, local missions and feedback from consultations – is it possible to build insights into how to manage this phenomenon. In planning and provision, academic leaders and practitioners at all institutions should account of students’ participation in paid off-campus work.
Second, it is evident in the above system-level results that moderate amounts of paid work carry benefits for educational engagement and outcomes. Universities should thereby play their role in creating further opportunities for students to participate in paid work, particularly on campus. Working for pay helps people develop the work-ready skills employers want. As flagged in various curriculum reforms (see, for instance: UWA 2008; UoM 2010), it can broaden students’ development beyond discipline-specific study.

Third, and taking one step further, institutions and teachers might well consider developing programmes that recognise or even embed students’ paid-work effort in the curriculum. Recognition of work activity exists in vocationally oriented curricular and at a growing number of institutions, but more needs to be done. Assessing links between scholarly and community work is complex at all levels of practice, but considerable dividends would derive from attempting further progress in this area. Institutions could be supported to develop practices that provide students with the opportunity to gain credit towards their degree for learning through work. Changes to the curriculum must be complemented by reforms to the training undertaken by academics who teach. This will require training that incorporates the teaching of skills that will prepare individuals for their future places of work, in addition to learning how to teach the underpinning knowledge of a particular discipline. This is a complex, evolving and controversial area (Chung 2012). Consideration would need to be given to setting boundaries around acceptable work activities, looking into equal employment opportunity considerations, and managing the assessment.

Fourth, there would appear to be a related need to dramatically improve students’ participation in career-oriented educational activities. With evidence about the apparent benefits of paid work, the low level of engagement in many work-relevant activities, and persistent calls from graduate employers for graduates to be more ‘work ready’, there is a clear case for bolstering engagement in work-integrated forms of learning. This could be progressed in several ways – potentially through increased internships, by rewarding participation in paid work, through service learning activities, or by promoting participation what could loosely be referred to as ‘enriching educational activities’.

Fifth, to enhance outcomes and reduce attrition, it would appear imperative that institutions develop strategies to better support students’ off-campus work. There are clear problems with current support practices – they are either failing to deliver, or have yet to be designed or re-tuned around students’ everyday activities. Doubtless good practices do exist, and with the stimulus offered by the findings in this paper these should be studied and generalised to develop new or improved approaches that capture the positive facets of paid work and reduce attrition.
Notes on contributor
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