January 1996

Working all the while

Donna Berthelsen
Queensland University of Technology

Mary R. Power
Bond University, Mary_Power@bond.edu.au

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Recommended Citation
Donna Berthelsen and Mary R. Power. (1996) "Working all the while", .

Many higher education students work part-time in order to support their studies. One hundred Education students, predominantly female, in their third and fourth years of study completed a survey focused on the extent of their work commitments and the nature of other financial support. Students were working, on average, 17 hours per week in up to three jobs. Parents or partners were the next most important source of income. At a time when the Commonwealth Government is introducing fees for higher education courses and requiring an increase in student contributions to the HECS, this study provides support for the conclusion that increased financial demands on students would result in lower participation in higher education, increased stress and less involvement in study.

Many university students in the 1990s have to work to support themselves. Balancing the demands of student life with their outside work commitments is often difficult for them. The issue of how students survive financially warrants close attention when student fees, higher contributions and earlier repayments to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) are being introduced. And yet there is little information about how students are coping financially under present arrangements. Against a background of other research into students' lives this paper gives a picture of the way one hundred students are currently meeting the challenges of student life.

'Student work' - What do these words bring to mind? - Students writing assignments, researching in the library, preparing for exams or listening to lectures? Or do they bring visions of the student standing at Woolworths supermarket checkout, waiting on tables until the early hours of the morning or working in child-care? How do students working at supermarkets, restaurants or child-care centres affect the quality of their intellectual
work in their courses? How does coping with all this affect the quality of their lives and their university experience?

Many academics are concerned about the time students spend working outside the university, feeling that it has a detrimental effect on student work within the university. McInnis and James' (1995) study of students in their first year of university, based on 4028 student responses and interviews with staff found that academics frequently raised the issue of students' paid work. These authors believe that the topic warrants closer attention because although their study shows that 53% of their student sample did not have regular paid work and a further 25% worked only 1-10 hours per week, leaving 22% who worked more than 11 hours per week, it seems that academics see part-time work as infringing on University time. "Staff feel that some students are not working for survival, rather they are seeking opulent lives" (McInnis & James, 1995, p. 88). Academics see students who are "registered as full-time, but they only want to do it part-time". "They have jobs during the day and come and do full-time at night and you've got to fit in".

"Part-time work has changed. It's no longer weekend or night-time waitering work. Their part-time work is in the supermarkets during the day and their employers want them to work in the day" (McInnis & James, 1995, p. 88).

Such comments have even reached the ears of vice chancellors, so that Don Aitken of the University of Canberra commented that the "legions of truly full-time students are gone" (Aitken, 1996, p. 78) now that so many students carry a full-time study load, while working part-time. Such students no longer have the time to enjoy the traditional intellectual and social benefits of university life. Aitken suggested that undergraduates do not have the time to 'read widely' and timetables must be adjusted to suit full-time students who attend university part-time and work the rest of the time (Aitken, 1996, p. 81). It appears that universities have become merely a 'national system for post-secondary credentialing' for 'full-time' students who work long hours in service industry jobs.

Being a student is not a part-time occupation, if it is done well. High achieving students work at being students, but those who have to support themselves with one or more jobs are often too tired to do well and may become dispirited due to the pressure of the demands upon them. Such students would find courses in the sciences or engineering —
courses that require upwards of 20 hours on campus — difficult to combine with a part-time job sufficient to provide for the cost of living.

What academics told McInnis and James (1995) was similar to sentiments expressed among lecturing staff at Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) School of Early Childhood, where the first author of this study found perceptions that work commitments of many students were impacting on the amount of time which they devoted to participation in classes and/or had available for study. It seemed to lecturers that many students had more extensive work responsibilities than they had had five years previously, and that because of this, many students seemed less committed to their study.

Interviews with campus counsellors at QUT supported the impression that motivation to study was reduced because of the possibility that unemployment would be the outcome after graduation. As well, students appeared to be under greater financial stress, as evidenced by a greater demand for the Student Loan Scheme. It seemed too, that many more students were living with partners at a younger age which might increase financial pressures on the couple, particularly if the partner were also studying or unemployed.

To academics it appeared that increased need to work, in order to complete tertiary studies, must detract from the amount of time and energy devoted to study and lead to less satisfaction with students' course experiences. As well, lecturers believe that there needs to be time for social and intellectual growth during a university course. Students need time to talk and reflect on intellectual issues, if they are to be more than technically qualified. If students had extensive work commitments (whether or not their commitment to their course of study was high), they would be less able to devote time to study and consequently would experience more life stress in trying to balance the work, study and personal/interpersonal areas of their lives.

Students learn by becoming involved (Astin, 1985). The concept of involvement encompasses both time-on-task and the investment of psychological energy (Terenzini, et al. 1994). Learning and development require an investment of time and effort by the student. It seemed to lecturers at QUT, just as it had to lecturers who talked to McInnis and James, that students were overly involved in the hard scrabble of supporting themselves to the detriment of their performance in their academic work.
Data on the extent of student work commitments needs to be gathered, together with an understanding of the impact of those commitments on students' experiences and involvement in their tertiary study. Using such data, university administration and lecturing staff could examine if, and how, they can respond to students' perceived needs and changing lifestyles in the organisation of courses and the processes of teaching. In order to gather such data, the first author conducted a survey of third-year and fourth-year, Bachelor of Education and third-year Bachelor of Teaching students in the School of Early Childhood of QUT during November, 1994.

Overview of the Study

A questionnaire was designed to examine the nature and the extent of students' work commitments. Students were asked how they supported themselves financially through the course, whether they had part-time employment, the number of jobs currently worked each week, the number of hours worked in each job and the nature of the work in each of those jobs. Respondents were also asked to rate the degree of stress they were currently experiencing in various life areas (financial, study, interpersonal relationships, health, and balancing work and study) on a five-point scale (1 - little stress, 2 - some stress, 3 - reasonable levels of stress, 4 - high stress, 5 - severe stress).

In order to gauge students' initial motivation for their course of study, they were asked why they chose the course and also whether it was their first choice.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaires were completed by all students present at five tutorial sessions for third and fourth year students in Early Childhood units. The 100 respondents included 23 third-year Bachelor of Teaching students, 41 third-year Bachelor of Education students and 36 fourth-year Bachelor of Education students.

The mean age was 23.6 years (SD = 5.4) and ranged from 19 to 46 years. The median and modal age was 21 years. There were 98 female respondents and 2 male respondents. Most students were single. Those who were married, partnered or divorced or widowed had children so the perception that many students were marrying or partnering at young
ages was not borne out. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were single, 19% were married or living with a partner and 4% were widowed or divorced and 14% of the students had from one to four children.

Thirty-five percent had experience in another tertiary education course, including eight respondents who had completed a TAFE Associate Diploma in various areas, mainly Child Care. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents had had experience in full-time employment, primarily in secretarial/clerical work or in child-care/nannying positions. Eighty-eight percent of the students indicated that this course was their first choice for tertiary education studies and 80% identified their primary reason for selecting this course was to work with/teach young children, so they appeared to be highly motivated.

For the QUT sample, families were important. In answer to the question *How do you support yourself financially?* the main sources of income indicated were parents or partner 11%, parents and part-time work 21%, Austudy and part-time work 20% and part-time work 33%. For the QUT sample part-time work was a component of 74% of the 'financial packages' that students had assembled for themselves and was thus very important. Fifty-two percent had one job, 34% had two jobs and 13% had three jobs. The mean number of hours worked overall was 17 (SD = 8, ranging from 3 to 37 hours). For the first nominated job, the mean number of hours worked was 13 (SD = 6) and 33% of the positions held were sales assistants, 31% were categorised as child care/after school care positions and 14% as waitering/bar work. For the second nominated job, the mean number of hours worked was 9 (SD = 6) and 20% of these were categorised as child care/after school care positions, 20% as nannying/babysitting and 15% as sales positions. For the third nominated job, the mean number of hours worked was 5 (SD = 1) and 30% of these were categorised as nannying/babysitting, 20% child care and 20% as cleaning.

Comparing the findings from the QUT study of 100 Brisbane students with those available from other studies of students' lives broadens the picture. McInnis and James' (1995) study of students across Australia in their first year of university found that the family was the principal source of income for students and that other kinds of family support were important in helping students complete their first year. Principal sources of income were "family 40.9%, Austudy 34.9, part-time work 25.7, full-time work 5.4, savings 5.3 and loans 2.2" (p. 81). McInnis and James highlighted aid, other than financial, that students
get from their families such as "having washing and ironing done. Having access to a family car, getting help with medical expenses, having someone help with the preparation of class papers, being able to discuss issues with family members and general emotional support - having someone to talk through particular problems, having someone believe you will pass, having someone to encourage you when you hit a bad spot" (McInnis & James, 1996, p. 91).

Results of the QUT survey differ from those obtained from McInnis and James' national sample in that the QUT students work more and receive less support from Austudy and from parents. The surveys were conducted under different situations with different groups. The Brisbane sample included everyone present at class, unlike the national sample which relied upon students to return the survey by mail. The QUT sample was 98% female and was at a later stage of the course when students, although past the first flush of excitement about university life, also had more investment in their courses because they were closer to finishing them. The Brisbane survey appears to confirm academics' views that students are handicapped in their studies by financial situations which make part-time work a necessity. In fact substantial numbers are 'working all the time' either in part-time jobs or on their university studies.

However, most students report that they are engaged in the academic process. McInnis and James said that 77% of first year students were on campus four to five days per week and 60% said that they studied on weekends. Thirty per cent of students have from 21 to 30 contact hours per week, 24% have from 16 to 20 and 30% have 11 to 15 contact hours a week. Students in the School of Early Childhood have from 12 to 14 contact hours per week at university. The majority are spending more time at their part-time jobs, than they are at university. Students reported feeling stressed when their weekend work prevented them from using weekends to complete assignments.

A study of Education students by Yarrow, et al. (1996) found that "most students held down one or two jobs, although a small number reported employment in three or four different positions" (p. 56). Although some students worked up to 40 hours, Yarrow et al. found that the average student "spends around 15 hours each week in outside, paid work" which they, too, commented "usually exceeds the hours of scheduled, class contact time in the university" (p. 58).
Several studies in Australia's public universities have examined the difficulties of students who do not receive parental support. Beswick, Schofield and Boreham (1983) examined students' reasons for dropping out of university in 1983 and found that overall, female students were significantly more at risk than male students, and that "boys were being pushed faster than they can see the point in and girls were not adequately supported" (p. 15). A significantly higher proportion of females than males said they "couldn't afford" to continue their studies. Beswick et al. found that more than twice the number of female students, compared with males, were concerned by lack of financial support from parents and that girls found it more difficult to get part-time jobs. In March 1996, information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that there were still more females than males looking for part-time work (McLennan, 1996, p. 20).

The differences between the family support figures for the QUT and the McInnis and James samples may be due to the fact that the QUT sample was 98% female. There appears to be some reluctance by families to fund higher education for girls. This fact is noted by Power (1996) who examined reasons for the low representation of women (only 35% of all student enrolments) at Bond University, where all students pay full fees.

As Beswick et al. say, "We have found the assumption that parents who are able will be willing to support their children false, particularly in the case of girls" (1983, p. 17). They, too, found that many spouses were not willing for family income to be spent on tertiary studies for their wives.

Some Case Studies

Students in the QUT study expressed particular concerns about the practical requirements in courses. Julie who is 21 said:

> teaching practice for five weeks is an impossible demand when you consider the real life of students; that is, working three jobs to support yourself and paying rent because you are unable to get any government help.
A third year Bachelor of Education student, Julie works as a shop assistant for 25 hours per week, is a nanny for 8 hours and has a regular cleaning job for 3 hours per week. As Julie points out, all this careful cobbling together of a livelihood is threatened when students are required to attend schools and pre-schools full-time in order to fulfil teaching practice requirements.

Ellen’s capacity to support herself was also affected during teaching practice periods. She is 22 years old and is in fourth year of the Bachelor of Education. In response to the question on how she supported her studies, she replied:

Initially Austudy, but since that finished I have been working 6 days a week. Teaching practice does not take into account that some students have to support themselves and I find it impossible to do so during this period.

Ellen works in two jobs each week. She works 15 hours in an After School Program and 10 hours in a video shop. Her apparent idealism in choosing this course because she wants to be involved in the development of children must be sorely tested as she tries to combine work and study.

These difficulties seem particularly poignant when considered alongside economist Hogbin's comment:

The validity of the proposition that people from poorer families cannot meet at least some of the cost of higher education is, at best questionable . . . it is feasible for students to earn additional income by working part-time during the academic year and in vacations. It is also feasible for a potential student of higher education to take a job for a year or two after leaving high school in order to save money to meet future educational expenses (Hogbin, 1988, p. 57).

Cases such as those of 'Julie' and 'Ellen' illustrate the difficulties that students face, without parental support, in meeting basic living costs, let alone fees. Hogbin assumes that the eventual benefits from higher education outweigh the fatigue and drudgery of working in two jobs.
Power, Robertson and Beswick (1985) followed up the 31% of 15 to 19 year olds in South Australia who qualified for a university place but did not apply and found that financial reasons predominated. The following reasons were typical: "Could not afford to keep myself and pay for books and other requirements. Also wanted some money of my own, rather than use my parents' money. Would come if I were paid to study". "Purely because of a lack of funds, parents could not afford the cost of boarding in the city to attend a college. Household income, however, was too high to enable me to go on an allowance TEAS" (p. 82). Just over half the deferring students named "wanted money of my own" as being important in arriving at the decision not to go; 45% wanted a year off, 30% said that they could not afford it. One-third said they would have enrolled, had the value of TEAS been the equivalent of the unemployment benefit (p. 83).

Higher education undoubtedly bestows future gains on individuals as well as providing an infrastructure of intellectual skills for the community. Undoubtedly too it has ramifications for students' families. Ryan and Senyard (1984) talk of the "dependence of the student on family support" and Chapman talks about not enough notice being taken of parents' "willingness to pay" (1992, p. 112). Partly in response to awareness of these difficulties, since 1993 students in financial need have been encouraged to convert their Austudy entitlements to a loan double its value. No such option exists for those people, whose parents, despite earning over Austudy cutoff limits, do not support their children at university. Even for those eligible, the Austudy loan scheme is not a solution. A study by Jones found only 18.8% of those eligible took out loans, despite 86% of them acknowledging that they had experienced financial difficulties. Forty-four percent of those who had not taken out loans said that they had either 'often' or 'always' been in financial difficulty in 1994. Fear of debt impinging on their future was a factor in student reluctance to take up loans. Students were also concerned "that even repaying their HECS debt would have a significant impact on their financial futures" (Armitage, 1996. p. 4).

For the finely balanced budgets of some students, any fee for university courses is a barrier. Mark Jones, a Melbourne University financial adviser, said that his university "received 1200 requests for assistance at the beginning of this year from students who could not pay the $310 service fee" and that similar situations occurred in other institutions (Armitage, 1996. p. 4).
Comments by employed students in the QUT study emphasised that they found that the demands on time during teaching practice and for full-time study affected their capacity to support themselves. Student life was stressful for many of the QUT sample. Fifty-four percent of the respondents reported severe/high stress due to study, 38% reported severe/high stress due to balancing work and study, 28% reported severe/high financial stress, 16% reported severe/high stress due to health, and 16% reported severe/high stress from interpersonal relationships. There was a significant correlation ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) between the stress ratings for balancing work and study and the total numbers of hours worked. Illustrative comments from respondents reflected the demands of study, part-time work and the attempt to maintain a personal life.

Twenty-six year old Susan is in the fourth year of the Bachelor of Education. She completed an Associate Diploma of Business Management (Hospitality and Catering) at TAFE and has full-time employment experience in such positions as a secretary, as a fitness instructor and as a waitress. She returned to study because she wants to "make a difference" in Early Childhood Education. Until her recent marriage, Susan was working 25 to 35 hours per week. She worked both days of the weekend as a children's activity organiser, and full-time during vacations in vacation care and was also waitering three or four nights per week.

For three and a half years of this course, I was working three jobs. I tried to keep up volunteer work with child-based experiences, but I really needed the money. Sometimes I don't think that Uni. remembers that we still need to show a large commitment to part-time employment to retain the job. Employers' main concern is the dollar sign and unfortunately they don't have much understanding of our uni. commitments. This course needs to have the option of doing 1, 2 or 3 subjects only.

Cathy, 22 years old, is in fourth year of the Bachelor of Education. She has supported herself through the course through casual employment by working 20 to 30 hours per week in hospitality jobs. She has experienced severe stress trying to balance the competing demands of work and study.
This year (my 4th), I believe has been badly organised for the students. For example, we got six weeks off in the middle of the year - then came back to uni, went practically straight to Prac, and after Prac were forced to give up jobs and life for a huge amount of assignments that had to be completed in a very, very short span of time. This is very unfair as well as being incredibly stressful. This needs to be looked at for the future welfare of students.

Twenty one year old Rebecca is a third year student in the Bachelor of Education. She supports herself through part-time work for 12 hours a week in child care and as a "tea and tidy" in a hairdressing salon for 7 hours. Rebecca rated her financial circumstances and study as causing her high stress, while she rated the balancing of work and study as severe constant stress.

Up until this year all my experiences have been pretty positive. This semester, in particular, I am experiencing high stress with my personal life - money and relationship wise. All the assignments are due at the same time and I am becoming very disillusioned and severely unmotivated. I will admit the staff have been supportive. It is good that I have one day off, as it allows me to work. Without working, I would not be here at uni.

Organisation of the timetable, and the timing for assignment deadlines were commonly identified concerns for students.

Jenny is 22 years and single. Completing fourth year of the Bachelor of Education, Jenny supports herself by working 30 hours per week as an assistant in a video store. This is her sole means of support as she is unable to get Austudy.

I find that lecturers think only of this course, which I have found difficult as I have other priorities, such as work and my family. I have found it difficult at times to meet the expectations of the course, such as due dates for assignments when I also have other things to do. I think that by fourth year we should be given the responsibility of submitting our assignments when ready, as long as it's before the end of semester - I don't see how a
couple of extra days makes any difference when we have other things to do.
We shouldn't lose marks for being a day late.

Karen is 20 years old and is in third year of the Bachelor of Education. Karen supports herself through Austudy and part-time employment. She works as a cashier for 27 hours per week. She rated her financial and study stress as high.

The timetabling of subjects is good. I'm glad that lecture/tutorials are in the morning as this allows me to work in the afternoons. Without this work, it would be very difficult for me to attend University, as I am supporting myself. This semester, I feel, has been badly coordinated in terms of assessment as all major assignments have been due on the same days. The content of these subjects has been repetitive and this has made it hard to remain motivated. I must comment, though, that lecturers have been extremely helpful out of tutorial time.

Students in the QUT study have come to the course with a high commitment to teaching young children, as demonstrated by the high percentage who had selected this course as their first preference for tertiary studies and for the commonality in the reasons for choosing their course. Much of the part-time employment for these students is in fact working with children in formal programs (child care and in after-school care programs) and in informal ways as in nannying or babysitting. Their study in an early childhood education course both enhances their part-time employability in child care and after school care programs and provides further practical experience in working with children. This could be seen as an advantage for students in their preparation for teaching. However, such experience is not taken into account when assembling credit for practical experience. 'Sally' vehemently attacked the worth of practical placements because:

The setting I was placed in was a complete contradiction to all I have been learning at uni. I know prac should be viewed as learning what not to do, if you are unfortunate enough to find yourself in an inappropriate setting.

One can only sympathise with a student who may have had to relinquish a suitable placement in a child-care setting, where she was earning money to enable her to survive in
order to spend her time unpaid in a setting "a lot different from the ideals we learn at uni". When asked, students have some sensible suggestions about how courses can be taught and administered. One imagines that if they have not only to fund their living costs, but also to find more of the costs of their courses, they might be much more openly critical of these things and have even higher expectations of their universities.

Conclusions

The QUT survey data confirm that students are working a considerable number of hours each week, most of them working more hours per week than they spend at university. When practical work is scheduled to replace attendance at lectures, tutorials, research and study time, it becomes clear that many students are fitting in university study around the part-time jobs they do in order to survive. This sample gave no indication that they were working to provide 'opulence' in their lives. Many students felt they were under considerable stress from their study and/or from balancing the demands of work and study. Their comments identified a number of issues that they believed that the University could address in order to accommodate their need to be employed in order to support themselves through their studies.

The organisation of the yearly and weekly timetable, particularly with regard to the length of teaching practice for the fourth year students was a common concern.

As well, students wanted more coordination or negotiation of due dates for assignments within and across units. Awareness of this issue should allow staff to accommodate student concerns by improved coordination of assignment dates and/or negotiation of dates with students groups or individuals. Different forms of assessment may be more or less appropriate to accommodating students needs, either by group or individual negotiation.

The QUT survey also confirmed the extensive work commitments that many students have in order to support themselves through their tertiary studies. Student reports indicate that many are 'working all the time' cobbling together a livelihood and living the "best years of their lives" dashing from lectures and tutorials to one, two or three part-time jobs. Any change in routine, such a teaching practice on a full time basis for a few weeks, or having to produce assignments by a due date, disturbs the carefully organised equilibrium of their
lives and results in stress. And yet, these are the survivors; they have reached the third or fourth year of their courses, while those who perhaps succumb easily to stress or are possibly less determined to become teachers have dropped out.

As Aitken (1996) remarked, students want the university to adapt to them, to fit in around their work commitments or to make courses more flexible. Students' commitment and involvement with their study is affected by the quality and dedication and morale of the teaching staff and by the flexibility of course delivery. It is true that many students receive help and financial support from their families and can work full-time at their studies. However those who have to work to support themselves are no less dedicated, and no less idealistic about the difference they feel their education will make in their chosen professional career. Moreover, they are handicapped by a lack of time in which to become involved in their courses, when so much of their lives is spend in working to provide funds to 'keep going'.

Awareness of the concerns of these students and responsiveness to those issues by university educators would help make the tertiary experiences for all students more equitable, beneficial and enjoyable. One gains the impression in analysing students' comments, that any more financial stressors such as higher fees or higher HECS payments (which will reduce their spending power when they finally graduate hopefully to the luxury of having only one full time job) will cause many to abandon the struggle of higher education. The country will be the poorer if universities do not become more flexible in their teaching and assessment.

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