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Learning or Earning: Impact of Student Employment on Student Careers in the Eastern Region of the European Higher Education Area

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Abstract

While the number of higher education students doing paid work is increasing, there have been contradictory findings on the impact of student employment on student performance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, Perna, 2010; Riggert et. al., 2006). Our study focuses on the impact of student employment on students' careers and commitment in the Eastern Region of the European Higher Education Area. We used the PERSIST 2019 (N=2199) database. We assumed that paid work increases the chance of attrition and has a negative influence on commitment. Regarding commitment to one's studies, there is no significant difference between working and non-working students, but, regardless of country, students who work regularly have much closer connections with faculty. They also get better results, which means that work related to one's studies and keeping in contact with faculty have a positive effect on student performance.

Keywords: *student employment, part-time work, commitment, performance, attrition*

Introduction

The international literature of education research has been dealing with term-time student employment for several decades. Paid student work found its way to university campuses as a result of the expansion of higher education, which first culminated at the turn of the millennium, partly because the expansion opened

up higher education to student with low social and economic status, who needed to supplement their income, and partly because besides traditional theoretical training, practice-oriented training also gained ground (Pusztai & Kocsis 2019). There have been contradictory findings on the impact of student employment on student performance (Pascarella & Terenzini 1998, Perna 2010, Riggert et. al. 2006, Teichler 2011). It has been interpreted, on the one hand, as a risk factor increasing the chance of attrition (Darmody & Smyth 2008; Kocsis & Pusztai 2020) or, on the other hand, as a supportive factor enhancing academic commitment (Perna 2010, Pusztai 2019, Rothstein 2007). Our present study focuses on how often students do paid work during their studies and what impact it has on their academic commitment and performance.

Problem of Research

The decision to work also influences students' attitudes to their studies (Kocsis & Pusztai, 2020). Therefore, employment can be looked upon as a hazard since permanent work reduces students' time for studying and attending courses, which might increase the chance of dropping out (Curtis & Shani 2002, Darmody & Smyth 2008, McCoy & Smyth 2004). Furthermore, academic participation is not limited to participation in courses or seminars, but it also includes integration into academic society, networking and gaining "university experience" (Astin 1984, Tinto 1975, 1993). Tinto (1975) claims that successful graduation largely depends on students' academic environment, the interactions they are involved in, the experiences they gain and their ability to integrate their academic experiences. Student employment also increases the risk of attrition by preventing students from being integrated into the university culture and community (Riggert et. al. 2006, Darmody & Smyth, 2008, Perna 2010, Stiburek et al. 2017). Moreover, if students work in positions of great responsibility or in the night shift, these permanent challenges along with balancing their work, lives and studies may have negative consequences (Baffoe-Bonnie et al. 2007, Pollard et al. 2013). The time and energy invested in work distract students from academic activities (Brooks 2018, Neyt et al. 2017).

According to EUROSTUDENT VI data (Masevičiūtė et al. 2018), an average of 7% of students dropped out in the countries surveyed. Among the countries where we conducted our survey, the Hungarian average is the same as the EUROSTUDENT average; the lowest dropout rate is in Slovakia (less than 5%), whereas the rates in Romania and Serbia are 5%. As well as lack of motivation and financial difficulties, one fourth of respondents listed doing paid work as their main reason for giving up their studies. In Hungary 29% of students, in Romania 21%, in Serbia

18% and in Slovakia 11% attributed their attrition to reasons of work (Masevičiūtė et al. 2018).

In Hall's (2010) view, work reduces course attendance, yet it does not make students' perceptions of their university experience worse. A positive correlation was found between doing paid work and commitment among students who worked 20 hours or less per week (Pike, Kuh & Massa-McKinley, 2008). If the intensity of work does not exceed this, then positive outcomes (better time management, motivation, self-confidence) outweigh the negative ones (Kosi, Nastav & Šušteršič 2013). Furthermore, student employment may contribute to students' professional development as work experience proves to be useful for finding a first job after graduation (Joensen 2009, Ryan 2001). Some studies point out that horizontal congruence has a positive effect on student performance whereas doing work unrelated to one's field of study has a negative one (Geel et al. 2012), irrespective of the intensity of working (Yanbarisova 2014). Even a small number of working hours done outside one's field of study may deteriorate student performance, while work related to one's field of study, even if done in a large number of hours, may have a positive impact not only on performance but also on prospects of future employment (Di Paolo & Matano 2016). Other studies prefer the terms campus-on and campus-off (Astin 1993, Perna 2010, Pascarella & Terenzini 1998). Astin (1993) maintains that the effect of student work on academic performance is also influenced by the fact whether students work on campus or off campus. Pascarella & Terenzini (1998) conclude that there is only meagre evidence that either of the above forms of work hinders academic advancement as no negative effects were detected whether students worked on campus or off campus, whether in more or less than 20 hours a week. However, campus-on work can be credited with helping students' integration into university life (McCormick et al. 2010, Perna 2010, Pollard et al. 2013).

Research Focus

The aim of our present research is to explore the effect of student employment in Hungary and the neighbouring countries with the help of students' demographic (gender, age), social (financial situation of the family and students, parents education-level) and academic (field of study, the country of the training, the financial form of study) background variables. Based on previous research findings (Kocsis & Pusztai 2020, Masevičiūtė et al. 2018, Pusztai & Kocsis 2019, Saveanu & Ștefănescu 2019) our hypothesis is that paid work has a negative effects on academic performance, commitment and reduces the development of relationships between students and lecturers and other students.

Methodology of Research

Sample of Research

During our analysis we used the findings of CHERD-Hungary's research, done within a National Research, Development and Innovation Office project (no. 123847) in 2018–19, entitled Social and Institutional Factors of Student Dropout in Higher Education (PERSIST 2019, N=2199). The research was conducted in the eastern region of the European Higher Education Area, in higher education institutions of Eastern Hungary¹, Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, and Serbia². The final number of the Hungarian sample was 1045. Quota sampling was used. The starting point for the quota sampling was a table describing the student population of the institutions, which recorded the percentage distribution of faculties, the field of training and the financial form based on relative frequencies. Based on these control categories groups were formed and elements of the sample were selected from them. So the sample was representative for faculties, fields of study and forms of financing. In the institutions outside Hungary probability sampling was used. In cross-border institutions, we aimed for probabilistic sampling in the way that we approached randomly selected groups of students. They were contacted in groups in their courses, where they completed the questionnaire. In these institutions, students participate in Hungarian language courses. The sample number outside Hungary was 1154. The sample included second-year full-time BA and BSc students as well as second or third-year students from undivided majors.

“This area can be characterized by a common historical heritage. It was built as one single social, economic, and political area for centuries. All these similarities are reflected also on the educational processes.” (Saveanu, S.M., & Stefanescu, F. 2019: 273). The main goal of our current research is not to examine differences between countries, but to compare the performance and persistence of working and non-working students taking into account a large sample of students.

¹ University of Debrecen, University of Nyíregyháza, Debrecen Reformed Theological University

² Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, University of Oradea, Emanuel University in Oradea, Partium Christian University, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Romania), Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Janos Selye University (Slovakia), University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad and Hungarian Teaching Language Teacher Training Faculty, Subotica (Serbia), Uzhhorod National University, Ferenc Rákóczi II. Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute, Mukachevo State University, Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, Odessa National Polytechnic University (Ukraine)

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed with the software SPSS 22 by means of cross tabulation and analysis of regression. Our study compared the effects of student employment, academic performance and student engagement in five countries by analyzing closed questions. In our research, students were divided into three groups according to work (do not work; work once a year=yearly employment; work weekly/monthly= regularly employment). The study-related work was also coded along with two categories (0: the work does not fit the student's studies, 1: the work mostly/always fits the studies).

Results of Research

21% of Hungarian and 30% of Slovakian students do paid work on a weekly basis, and they are mainly motivated by financing their leisure activities, becoming independent of parents and gaining experience. Students from Romania, Ukraine and Serbia, on the other hand, work less frequently. Students who work in order to gain experience are overrepresented in the Romanian and Serbian samples, whereas in Ukraine the main motivation is making contacts. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are the ones whose work is in the closest connection with their fields of study ($p=0,000$). Weekly and monthly employment affects almost one fifth of respondents. For this reason, it is worth investigating what characterizes the study careers of working students.

Students' contacts inside and outside the institution

Studies on student performance have pointed out that higher education institutions promote student development through the diversity of interactions they facilitate. The more students integrate into the higher education environment, the more committed they will become to their studies and institutions, which has a positive impact on performance. Likewise, lack of integration and the influence of external forces may lead to attrition (Pusztai 2015). Student work, like a double-edged sword, may have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it can increase the likelihood of attrition by taking away students' time from studying and networking with faculty, and by hindering their institutional integration (Darmody & Smyth 2008, Perna 2010, Pusztai 2010, Riggert et. al. 2006, Stiburek et al. 2017). On the other hand, it can enhance academic commitment and spur students to do their best in order to achieve their career goals (Rothstein 2007).

The first item of our analysis was students' contacts inside and outside the institution as well as their persistence. Eleven³ and nine⁴ statements were used to analyze how many students, lecturers, and friends students can talk to about academic, public, and private issues. Interactions with lecturers are not typical for at least half of the students. Among the non-working students, those who have contact with several lecturers with whom they can talk about a subject ($p = 0.054$), literature, art ($p = 0.018$), public life issues ($p = 0.008$) and private life ($p = 0.000$) are overrepresented. Students who work regularly have several lecturers with whom they can talk about sports and lifestyle (adj.res. = 2.9, $p = 0.010$). Interactions with faculty are least common among occasionally working students. However, even regular working students have at least as much institutional contact as their student peers.

Persistence

We measured the degree of persistence to one's studies with the following items (a scale ranging from 1 to 4 points): My present studies will be useful in my career; I am determined to complete my studies; I try to achieve the best academic results possible; I do my best to attend lectures, seminars and practical classes. In the course of the research, we performed principal component analysis based on four indicators of persistence (Cronbach's alpha = 0.74). The persistence of working and non-working students compared to the mean (below the mean, mean, above the mean) was examined by Chi-square test. There was a significant relationship between students' employment and persistence ($p=0,000$). Among regularly working students, students with below-average persistence are overrepresented and students with above-average persistence are underrepresented.

³ Based on eleven statements, we examined their interactions and relationships with fellow students and friends outside the university: with whom they discuss their studies (1), private life (2), future plans (3). With whom they talk about culture (4), public life topics (5) and science (6). With whom they study (7), do sports (8), often spend their free time (9). They can call this friends for help (10) and borrow notes and books from them (11).

⁴ We analyzed the communication and contact with the lecturers on the basis of nine statements: whether they have an lecturers with whom they talk about the scientific issues outside of teaching time(1), with whom they talk about other topics in addition to the curriculum(2), with whom they talk about culture(3), public life(4), sports(5), private life(6) and future(7), speaks with whom they have regular e-mail contacts(8) and who has paid attention to their career development(9).

Table 1. Distribution of working and non-working students by persistence (N=2777)

Persistence	regularly	yearly	never
below average	41.2	29.5	31.6
average	33.3	38	32.4
above average	25.5	32.5	36

Underlined values indicate that this cell has a much larger value than it could be expected in a random layout.

Source: PERSIST 2019

Among the occasionally working students, those with average persistence were overrepresented while among non-working students we found that students with above-average persistence were overrepresented.

Based on previous results and literature, students with unfavorable social, intellectual and material backgrounds are less committed to their studies (Bennett 2003; Hovdhaugen et al. 2015; Lehmann 2007). This is because the lack of cultural capital makes it difficult for them to engage and integrate into the world of higher education. And the lack of material goods is often supplemented by paid work, but students from more favorable financial backgrounds are less likely to work during their studies. If they work, they are more likely to have study-related job (Bennett 2003; Lehmann 2007). Furthermore, the gender of the students also has an influence on the further study plans and their performance. (Hovdhaugen et al. 2015). Linear regression (Stepwise) was used to examine which of the socio-cultural, employment, and institutional indicators had an impact on students' persistence to their studies.

Table 2. Factors influencing persistence: linear regression results (Stepwise)

	(B)	(S.E.)	Beta	t	sign.
gender (0=female,1=male)	-,267	0,056	-,132	-4,747	0,000
student contacts (1= above average)	0,168	0,056	0,087	3,003	0,003
keeping in contact with faculty (1= above average)	0,149	0,053	0,079	2,838	0,005
student employment (0=not work, 1=working)	-,195	0,058	-,093	-3,372	0,001

Source: PERSIST 2019, Only variables that are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level are included in the table. Dependent variable: persistence index. Explanatory variables: gender, parents' education-level, financial situation of family, financial situation of students, frequency of student work, study-related work, field of study, the country of the training, the financial form of study, keeping in touch with faculty, friends, and students.

Gender has explanatory power, that is, men are less persistent with their studies than women. Persistence is positively influenced by relationships with groupmates and lecturers. These interactions occur within the walls of the university, allowing for easier institutional embedding and integration of students. However, the negative effects of employment have been proven, so that students who work alongside their studies are less persistent and committed.

Performance

We examined the university careers and performance of working students in every country. We created an index⁵ to measure student performance and compared its mean values in the different student groups. We found variance both within the student groups and the countries. The Hungarian sample displays significant variance between the frequency of employment and performance ($p=0.000$).

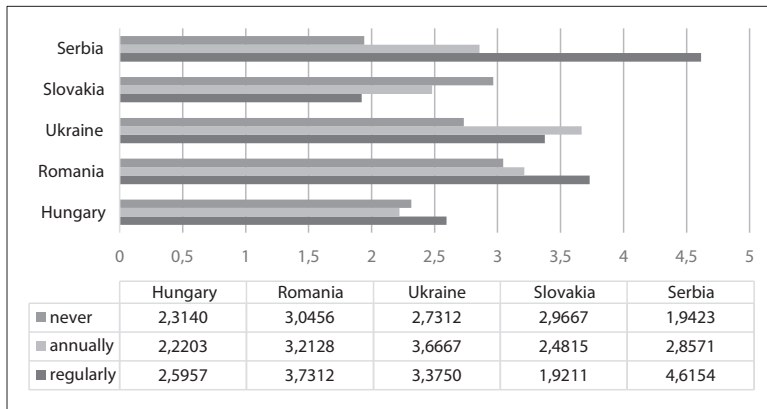


Figure 1. The mean of the performance index (0–19) in the student groups. Source: PERSIST 2020. (N=2199).

⁵ The variables used for measuring performance: I have joined a university research group. I have written a student research paper. I have participated in the National Scientific Students' Associations Conference. I have prepared a presentation or poster for a conference (other than the former). I have been a teaching assistant. I have an intermediate or professional language certificate. I have an advanced language certificate. I have a CV in Hungarian. I have a CV in English. I have been a representative of my group or cohort. I have a scientific publication. I have been awarded a sports scholarship. I have been awarded an art scholarship. I have been awarded a traineeship. I have a creation of my own (e.g. programme, application, invention, piece of art). I have been included in a higher education talent scholarship programme. I have been a member of a college for advanced studies. I have been awarded the highest possible amount of academic stipend. I plan to enrol in a doctoral (PhD/DLA) programme.

In our Hungarian sample, students who work regularly have higher mean values of the index than students who rarely or never work. The same applies to Romania and Serbia. In these cases, regular work does not weaken but strengthens students' performance.

Our results suggest that extracurricular activities, which are specifically related to study and academic success are characterized by a relatively low percentage of students. Less than one-tenth of students typically have participated in an academic competition or conference. Most of the items included in the performance study showed no significant correlation with frequency of employment, but in some cases there was a significant difference between students, the results of which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Performance indicators based on employment status (%)

	<u>regularly</u>	<u>yearly</u>	<u>never</u>	<u>sign.</u>
Participation in a research group	15,3	12,5	10,2	0,011
National Conference of Scientific Students' Associations	7	2,7	11,5	0,000
Intermediate language exam	53,4	54,5	42,7	0,000
CV in Hungarian	48,4	41,7	41,1	0,021
Foreign language CV	26,2	18,7	18,3	0,001
Talent development program	11	9	6	0,001
They want to participate in doctoral training	19,7	22,4	25,7	0,021

Underlined values indicate that this cell has a much larger value than it could be expected in a random layout

Source: PERSIST 2019.

Those who worked regularly were more involved in the work of a university research group as well as in a talent development program than their non-working peers. Some international research (Titus 2010; Roshchin & Rudakov 2015) explains that working students know how to combine work with their studies effectively and pay particular attention to the working hours. By reducing working hours, they have enough time to study. According to one of the performance indicators we used, students who worked regularly were also found to be successful. Contrary to assumptions, not only non-working students can be successful. However, the performance indicators of working students are not specifically academic, university success indicators, they are more likely to be utilized in the labor market. The existence of some of the performance indicators working

students have (language exam, CV) may be due to employment and not to other extracurricular activities.

Students performance can only be defined in a careful and complex way. Not only the characteristics of students (demographic, social, cultural and regional) are important for the study of academic performance, but also a resource consisting of the social experiences and relationships acquired during the university period (Tinto 1997, Pusztai 2012).

Table 4. Factors influencing student performance: linear regression results (Step-wise)

	(B)	(S.E.)	Beta	t	sign.
keeping in contact with faculty (1= above average)	1,418	0,143	0,273	9,928	0,000
study-related work (0=no, 1=yes)	0,960	0,168	0,157	5,724	0,000
father has completed higher education	0,599	0,160	0,103	3,744	0,000

Source: PERSIST 2019, only variables that are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level are included in the table.

Dependent variable: performance index. Explanatory variables: gender, parents' education-level, financial situation of family, financial situation of students, frequency of student work, study-related work, field of study, the country of the training, the financial form of study, keeping in touch with faculty, friends, and students

We included the social, demographic, institutional background, and employee variables in our linear regression model. Among the demographic variables, father's higher education has a significant positive effect on performance. In our current sample, employment has no effect on achievement, but similar to previous results, a student is more likely to be productive if they are doing study-related work. Like previous results (Pusztai 2012), our results suggest that contact with lecturers has a positive impact on performance.

Discussion and conclusions

Our results show that in the countries studied almost one fifth of students are in regular employment, so it is important to observe how work affects the students' university career. We hypothesized that employment would negatively impact student effectiveness and engagement. Our hypothesis below proved true, as students with below-average persistence are overrepresented among students

who work regularly, and students with above-average persistence are underrepresented in all countries. Our results confirm what we have found in previous research that study-related work enhances academic performance. A limitation of the study is that we were not able to examine working students' satisfaction with their education, which may influence their persistence. Thus, students who work regularly are at a disadvantage in terms of persistence in their studies. It would also be important to understand the relationship between their on-the-job experience, their satisfaction with university education, effectiveness and commitment. In the current regression analysis, the country of the higher education institution has no influence on effectiveness and persistence, but in a future study it would be useful to examine the correlations between the characteristics of the institution (trainings, number of students) and performance. We believe that the contact with lecturers can be related to the size of the institution as well as to the type of training. Presumably, interaction with lecturers is more typical for those courses where the number of students is smaller, and the nature of the course also allows lecturers to get to know their students better. The relationship established with lecturers can be a kind of protective factor against dropping out.

Because of the different effects of work (whether negative or positive), we must constantly monitor trends in student employment. It is necessary to research the importance of work in students' lives and identify the factors that determine working habits. The results would reduce the tendency and risk of dropping out of working students.

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