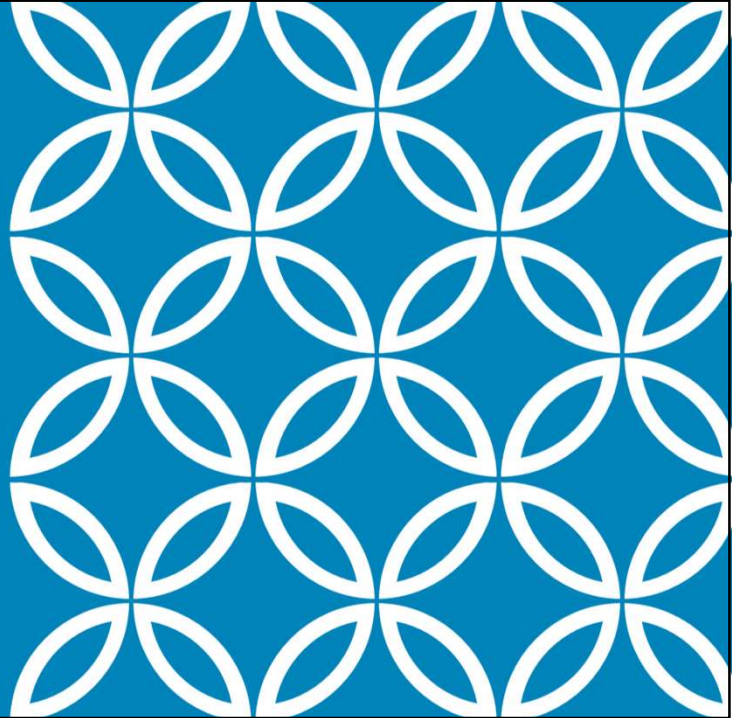


PARALLEL LIVES: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO WORK

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MY RESEARCH & WORK



- Careers Adviser and Occupational Psychologist turned academic
- PhD – Student experiences of unpaid work
- Current project with working students
- Book chapter on work/life/study balance (Antoniadou, Crowder & Cunningham, 2023)
- Forthcoming article in NICEC journal (Cunningham, Christie, Jones & Deakin, 2024)
- Partnership with Greater Manchester Combined Authorities GMCA – university resources relating to the Good Employment Charter
- Anecdotal experiences of students... and teenaged children!

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HE CONTEXT



- HE increased focus on 'employability' through work experience (Tomlinson, 2008 – 'the degree is not enough')
- Metrics which skew the focus of our work (e.g. teaching excellence framework - graduate outcomes, progression, student satisfaction)
- Financial imperative to work due to responsibility for tuition fees and maintenance
- Culture of working being the norm for students
- Burgeoning market for experiences such as placements, internships, voluntourism, etc
- Discourse in education around early orientation towards workplace – 'pre-professional identity' (Jackson, 2016)

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TYPES OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Placements

Internships

Paid work

Volunteering

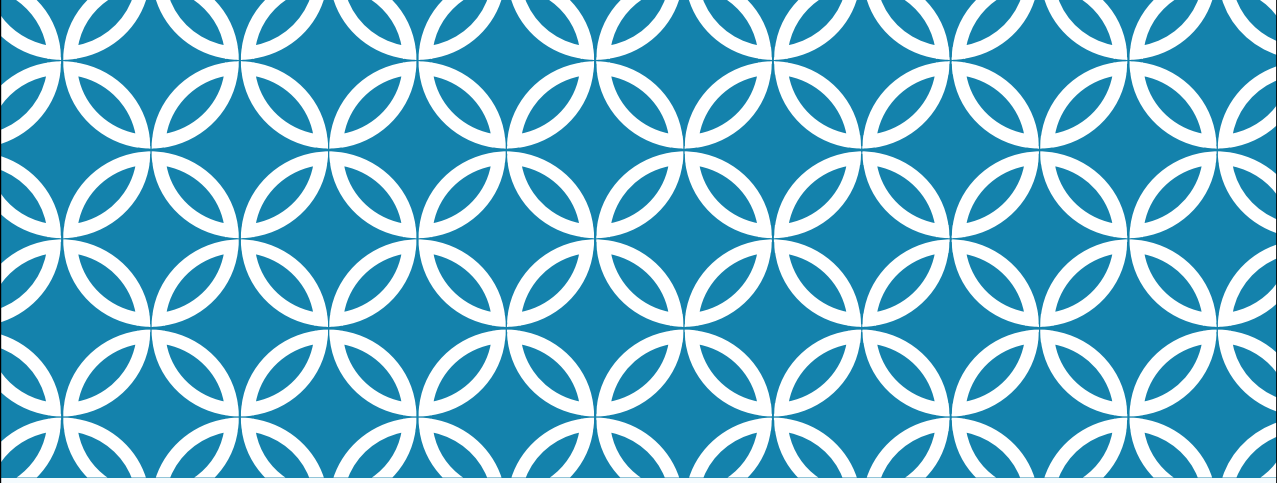
Work shadowing

Digital labour

Creative labour

Caring and home admin

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OBSERVATIONS OF WORK

Student experiences and the meaning they make of them

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WORK IS... TRANSFORMATIVE



- Work experience can have a huge positive impact upon students.
- It can enhance confidence, maturity, motivation and clarify career thinking.

'It's one of the most life changing things I've ever done... it's just made me, it's just changed me as a person completely, genuinely' (Zahir on voluntary work experience)

- However, students can tend to internalise and personalise failures, not always recognising the bigger picture.
- May need support to reflect upon and learn from experiences – even (or especially) bad ones. 'Career misery push' (Houston & Cunningham, 2018)

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WORK IS... COMPROMISING

Many students experience having to 'juggle' work, life and studies and the inherent stress of this (Antoniadou et al, 2023).



- Working can compromise time and energy available for achieving academic potential, social life, mental & physical self-care. It may compromise fundamental values.

'for me it really did feel like serfdom... It really did seem like this neo-slavery type approach where all your hours are taken and you have no time to do what you want' (Augustus on working 9 – 5)

- This was often a calculated risk and tolerated only for the short-term.
- Creating authentic learning and helping students translate work experiences to their studies can support 'work-life blend'.

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WORK IS... WHO YOU KNOW



- Work experience can help develop professional networks (social capital) and build supportive mentoring relationships:
- However, gaining quality work experiences can rely upon existing (parental and institutional) contacts:
- *'I got that only purely because I know someone who knows someone, which is very often the way'* (Harriet on work-shadowing a GP)
- Callender (2008) – class based, further embeds inequalities.
- Can also be gendered e.g. sectors or even role distribution in workplace (Rydsick & Kissoon, 2022)

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WORK IS...SOCIALISATION



- Cultural capital ('how work works')
- Less explicit aspects of working which can only be learnt through experience

'sure it was a year of many unsuccessful moments but I'm really good at jobs now (laughs) I think it's a skill you have to develop and now... I've got a lot of respect when I go into workplaces and I know how to work hard and I know how to please management and stuff' (Harriet)

- However, typical student jobs (retail, care, hospitality) may condition them to accept low standards and subservience (Rydsik & Kissoon, 2022)

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WORK IS...THE FIRST STEP



'I think it really helped to start young because every job you apply for will need experience so even if you have a tiny bit of experience that leads to a bit more experience that leads to longer experience, it helps every step' (Mary)

However, is it now essential rather than just desirable? Are students fully aware of this?

'Catch-22' situation – you can't get experience without having experience?

And do students know how to mobilise and build on the benefits?

'yeah it was a good experience and it didn't actually amount to anything and that's probably because of the choices that I made then, you know, it only means something if you do something with it... And I didn't really' (Rachel on her BBC work experience)

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SOME CHALLENGES IN HE



- How can we balance labour market realities with messages of hope and optimism?
- Current/recent lack of student engagement - don't always see the point of career input (until they leave)
- Students who really need the support & experience are least likely to come forward or be successful in securing & completing opportunities (especially competitive placements)
- Not enough relevant work experience for everyone who needs/wants it (e.g. Psychology-related)
- Some academics don't agree with or have time to embed work-integrated learning

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HOW CAN WE SUPPORT STUDENTS?



- Authentic 'real world' assessment which requires them to reflect on experiences of work and apply theory
- Optional work-based learning modules which give working students the chance to utilise workplace learning and attend flexibly/online
- Good working relationships between academics and careers service
- Encourage & facilitate discussions so students can critically share experiences and strategies
- Advocate for students with employers, university & policy-makers
- Raise awareness of rights - GMCA student resource to raise awareness of good employment characteristics
- Offer good quality jobs on campus
- Practicalities of timetabling (condensed over fewer days)

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GOOD EMPLOYMENT CHARTER – STUDENT GUIDE & TUTOR RESOURCE

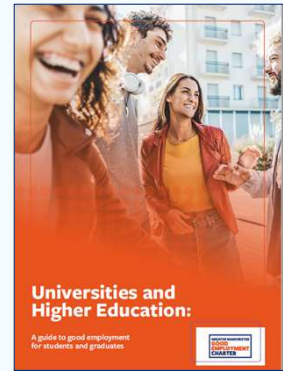


In partnership with Greater Manchester Combined Authorities we have developed:

- Guide for students
- Resource for universities to use with students to raise awareness of and strategies to challenge poor quality work

There is also a resource for schools and colleges

<https://www.gmgoodemploymentcharter.co.uk/resources-for-education/>



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THANK YOU