Abstract:

The relationship between paid employment and tertiary study is one of the most important in the field of higher education. Contemporary Australians students are not only working more, but they also do not have the security of those who were attending university in the past. In this paper a ‘key symbols’ analysis of the qualitative data from the most recent Australian youth/work research projects is presented to identify key scenarios in management of study and work-life. The analysis reveals that ‘student culture’ is defined as much by students’ perceived failures to enact key scenarios as by their successes. Being flexible, gaining independence and personal commodification are presented as key strategies in order to understand the experiences of working university students: how they perceive their own agency, and negotiate conflicting responsibilities and commitments. What emerges is the idea that in the data there exists no clear articulation of what engaging in university really means, and thus the implications of student disengagement cannot be fully understood.

Students thrive on diversity; however the escalating need to work longer hours while maintaining study commitments is impinging upon this freedom. (Osborne and Alde 2004: 7)

In its final report, the Australian Senate committee heading the Inquiry into student income support stated that the relationship between paid employment and tertiary study was one of the most important in the field of higher education (EWRERC 2005: xvi). Recent research by Applegate and Daly (2005: 10) has found that the average full-time student at the University of Canberra spends 20.9 hours in paid employment. An Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee (AVCC) survey conducted in 1984 indicated that the average was closer to five hours per week (Long and Hayden 2001: 13).
During the 1990s, the ‘stepping stone’ of full time work after school was removed, such that students today are living in the era of the contracting welfare state, with a current ideological emphasis on economic frugality, rationality and the personalisation of responsibility (Wyn and White 2000: 167). While from an etic perspective these changes seem like an alarming degeneration of working conditions, Wyn and White (2000: 170) point out that young Australians have never known anything else. It would seem that most working students do not know any way of relating to macro-processes other than to accept them. However, in this paper I analyse qualitative data from four of the most recent Australian youth/work research projects with an eye to demonstrating that student employment is ‘a complex and sociologically interesting phenomenon’ (Hakim 1998: 145). A ‘key symbols’ analysis is presented to identify key scenarios in management of study and work-life. The analysis reveals that ‘student culture’ is defined as much by students’ perceived failures to enact key scenarios as by their successes.

**Methodology**

My study looked at the representation of working university students in social research reports with the intent of creating a summary of the qualitative data within the field. A critical reading of this summary was then used to demonstrate, firstly, the limitations of existing data sets and, secondly, the ways in which qualitative-focused research methods may help overcome these limitations. My argument dealt with detailing and critiquing the data, results and methodology of four of the most recent and wide reaching studies relating to the field of working students in Australian universities. These four reports were:

- the AVCC ‘Paying their way: A survey of Australian undergraduate university student finances, 2000’ (Long & Hayden 2001);
- the Department of Education, Science and Training’s (DEST) ‘Managing study and work: The impact of full-time study and paid work on the undergraduate experience in Australian universities’ (McInnis & Hartley 2002);
- the DEST’s ‘The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies’ (Krause et al. 2005);
and the Australian Senate ‘Inquiry into student income support’ (EWRERC 2005) and Public submissions

Due to the fragmented nature of the available data a ‘key (cultural) symbols’ framework was set up as an analytical tool, and applied in order to identify ‘key scenarios’ within the culture of working students. These ‘key scenarios’ were then compared and critiqued with relation to contemporary youth studies’ literature.

Elaborating symbols in student culture

Evans-Pritchard (1962: 80) claimed that the most difficult task faced by ethnographic fieldworkers was determining the meaning of ‘a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends.’ I would argue that this is especially true in the analysis of qualitative data on working students because much of the existing qualitative data is highly fragmented or anecdotal. For this reason I have opted to conduct a ‘key symbols’ analysis of working students’ experiences. This form of analysis concerns itself with identifying the symbolic units that are used to create meaning within a cultural system (Ortner 1972: 1338). Key symbols operate on a spectrum, with summarising (commonly sacred) symbols at one end and elaborating symbols at the other. My analysis concerns itself with elaborating symbols, because they determine how experiences are ordered through recurrence in behaviours or actions (Ortner 1972: 1340).

Elaborating symbols either have conceptual elaborating power such as ‘root metaphors’ for conceptualising the order of things; or action elaborating power manifesting as ‘key scenarios’ for successful social actions (Ortner 1972: 1340-1341). The available qualitative data was better suited to an analysis of the ways student workers talked about their actions, and as such I articulated three key scenarios in working student culture. The first key scenarios, ‘being flexible’ and ‘gaining independence’, are closely linked to students’ management of personal responsibility. Key scenarios can also be tacit and unarticulated in everyday life, and it is in this second category that I situate the third key scenario, ‘personal commodification’. In essence I see key scenarios as normative expressions of the relationship between subjects and their environment (advising subjects how to think or act). Thus we can learn as much from failures to enact key scenarios as we can from successes.
Being flexible

There is an almost metaphorical relationship between labour market flexibility and the expectation that workers must also become flexible (Mørch 2003: 53). In the data, flexibility among student workers is clearly expressed through associated sequences of actions, which seek to ‘balance’ work and study commitments through ‘compromise’ and ‘sacrifice’. The Senate Inquiry found that students used to work primarily in the evenings, on weekends and during non-teaching periods, but the situation has now changed such that students often work during normal business hours on weekdays, and even at times which ‘compete directly with the normal scheduling of classes’ (EWRERC 2005: 54-55). It appears that students have not only become more flexible to labour market demands, but also that their attitudes towards university studies have become more flexible.

The idea of flexibility is tied closely to the idea of work intensification and the notion that students today, due to the diversity of life circumstance and wider global processes, are being forced to manage more and more responsibilities. ‘Being flexible’ is the strategy by which students attempt to control these responsibilities (McInnis and Hartley 2002: 49-50). Compromise has become synonymous with the idea of flexibility, and the negotiation of this key strategy is measured by the health of students. Being flexible means physically and mentally coping with the intensification of work and life (Byers, Ryan & Lee 2004: 9). As work pervades more of life, compromises are inevitably made in academic and social commitments. As one student said:

If I wasn’t living with my boyfriend, we would never see each other. The sacrifices (in working for an average of 25–30 hours per week) have been in terms of a social life at university and ‘a life’ generally. (McInnis & Hartley 2002: 42)

The students who are most successful are those who are able to be as flexible with their work as they are with their other commitments, as is clear from the following example:

Voula works regular hours in a small business, 28 one week and 23 the next in a two week cycle. She has a high level of responsibility… She really pushes herself and is not satisfied unless she gets good marks, which she does… What makes it all work for her are regular rather than irregular hours (she previously had casual work and found the irregularity really difficult), flexibility to say she can not work sometimes, and
being very organised and disciplined. (McInnis & Hartley 2002: 47)

Balance is the ultimate success story for those trying to ‘be flexible’, but it is a goal contingent on managing a number of personal attributes.

**Gaining independence**

Gaining independence for working students is about self-sufficiency and literally not having to depend on others (most commonly parents). However, independence is a key symbol complicated by the fact that it has two distinct meanings. One meaning, as discussed above, relates to self-sufficiency and control, while the other relates to the government classification of ‘independence’ as related to eligibility for income support. The following case study displays an interaction of both means of gaining independence:

Sandra lives with her parents. Her father is not in a particularly well paid job but she is not eligible for Youth Allowance… Sandra feels strongly that she can’t depend on her parents to support her at her age (22). Her brother, also living at home, is employed and contributing to the family; Sandra feels it is unfair if she too is not contributing. She is paying her university fees upfront, again in order to save her parents expense, and she runs a car. University life itself is expensive, especially the text books, which she pays for. During term-time she averages about 24 hours of work per week. During the long break, she will work up to 40 hours per week and will not have a holiday. (McInnis & Hartley 2002: 32)

Although Sandra is not independent, as qualified by Centrelink, there is another sense in which she is striving and succeeding to gain her independence.

As distinct from strategies for ‘being flexible’, agency is both more of a concern and more explicit in the strategies linked to gaining independence. Wyn and White (2000: 172) note that individual agency in contemporary youth studies has become synonymous with self-possession. Young people are becoming more individualistic in their perceptions of life circumstances, without seeing that many of these circumstances might be better explained by structural conditions (Wyn and White 2000: 165). If the positive of shifting macro-attitudes is that working students have greater agency than ever, then the consequence is a heightened sense of personal responsibility, and a tendency to personalise failures (Wyn and White 2000: 173). The failure to manage the work-study
balance is thus internalised such that structures of inequity can be obscured by personal experiences. Thus Mørch (2003: 65) argues that social class inequality is no longer a viable model for examining educational systems, and that inequalities today are the result of individual choices. According to this perspective, modern education is prone to creating ‘individual losers’ (Mørch 2003: 65).

We can now contrast this meaning of gaining independence with one that is embedded in structural forms. Student income support can be seen as a metaphor for the wider relationship between the state and higher education, as is evident in the AVCC’s (2002: 47) claim that the test of a student income support arrangement is how effectively it can reduce a student’s need to participate in paid employment due to economic necessity. The irony is that gaining independence by this definition is dependent on meeting and submitting to structural criteria. In order to function successfully, Youth Allowance and Austudy need to be perceived as alternative strategies to working as a means of securing or supplementing an income. However, they are clearly strategies that are inconsistent with working students’ broader goals of flexibility and independence.

The result is that students’ experiences with income support structures are very rarely smooth and uncomplicated.

It’s a bit of a catch 22 situation. I have to work to support myself while I’m at uni; however I can’t study full time because I have to work. Also, now as I am part time at uni, so I can work to support myself while studying, I am no longer at all eligible for youth allowance as you have to be a full time student. (UWA survey respondent, Byers & Ryan 2004: 5)

The problem is that the government’s current income support system fails to ‘manage the new realities of student financial hardship and student disengagement’ (EWRERC 2005: 58). Political structures and market demands are asking student workers to be fiercely independent and flexible, but the resulting heightened awareness of personal agency has made students critical of corporatism and structural inflexibility (Byers, Ryan and Lee 2004: 34). The resulting conflict means that the experience of gaining independence (by any definition) is one fraught with difficulties.

**Personal commodification**
The ‘personal commodification’ key scenario is concerned with the strategies that working students use to package themselves in preparation for the post-study employment market. As the market economy, new liberalism and consumer society become an insistent reality, more aspects of human life are becoming regulated according to market economy principles (Mørch 2003: 55). Personal commodification occurs through students’ numerous unseen interactions with market principles whilst in paid employment. For working students the workplace has become an increasingly important social site, providing a source of social interaction that students did not have time to pursue in other areas of their lives (McInnis and Hartley 2002: 29). As socialisation into work practices spreads, the discourse of liberal economics increasingly becomes the language by which working students are taught to understand their experiences, even of university. As Hastings et al. (2004: 43) argue:

In a culture that promotes a user-pays system of education and the understanding of a degree as a commodity that will enable students to find graduate employment, the broader social implications of education are often forgotten. Conceiving of students as individual consumers ignores the far wider cultural benefits of an individual’s education.

Hastings et al. (2004: 43) conceive these wider cultural benefits to be the broadening of students’ knowledge of – and exposure to – diverse aspects of society. To them, engagement with this diversity is ‘crucial in creating and maintaining a vital and progressive society’, which is threatened by students’ absence from the university campus (Hastings et al. 2004: 43). The University of Adelaide Students’ Association’s David Pearson told the Senate inquiry that he did not think that disengagement was a choice that students were making consciously. Rather, he suggested that ‘the majority of students… are unable to take it up because they are spending their time working’ (Evidence to EWRERC, 28 April 2005: 29).

However, according to Wyn and White (2000) disengagement from university is more than just a symptom of students’ increased participation in paid employment. Rather, it is indicative of the pragmatism in decision-making and personal choice that is implicit in the market ideology (Wyn and White 2000: 168). Working students are increasingly inclined to make decisions based on evaluations of practical and direct outcomes. The
problem is that the immediate and direct benefits of engagement in wider university life are unclear. Hastings et al.’s ‘diversity’ and Pearson’s ‘holism’ are hardly persuasive arguments to the pragmatic student.

Conversely, the benefits of work are clear to students. Students who do not work are at a serious disadvantage when they attempt to make the transition to work after university, because they lack the skills and experience that employers look for. Employers expect graduates to have experience in paid employment and in some degrees it is compulsory (McInnis and Hartley 2002: 72). According to one career’s officer, ‘the ones that get left behind are those who don’t have any work experience’ (McInnis and Hartley 2002: 72). Personal commodification requires that students conceive of themselves as both consumers and products.

Conclusion: Pieces of the picture

Presenting an analysis of the qualitative data has revealed new complexities in attempting to understand the experiences of working university students. The evidence of the increasing proportion of students participating in paid employment and consequent effects are prolific, but are they enough to suggest that we might be able to attribute them to a ‘student culture’? Wyn and White argue (2000: 172) that ‘individual feelings … are common to large groups of young people, although arguably they are not shared at the level of collective experience.’ Looking at the key symbols identified here it appears that the reports are not presenting us with an image of a student culture, but rather of a market economy culture within which students are operating.

There is a sense from the data that there exists no clear articulation of what ‘engaging in university’ really means. This suggests that fragmented qualitative data is not presenting the holistic sense of working students’ experiences. Yet, if social researchers have not fully articulated the experiences of engaging with university, they cannot hope to fully understand student workers’ disengagement.

In spite of numerous studies and reports, the implications for students of operating within a market economy culture remain unclear. What this analysis of the existing data points to is an urgent need to reframe the approach of such studies. Beginning with an
understanding of the key symbols by which students operate would seem a logical starting point for any new approach.

References


Evidence to Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee (28 April 2005) Parliament of Australia, Adelaide: 29 (David Pearson, Students’ Association of the University of Adelaide)


