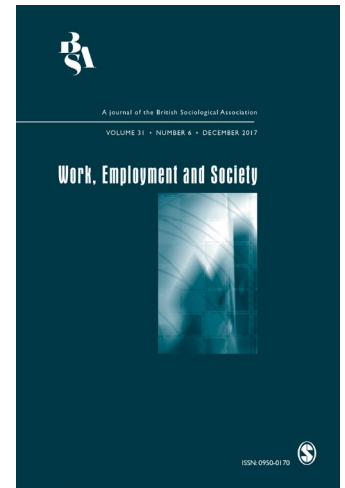


Call for Papers

Work, Employment and Society Special Issue

Earning While Learning: Experiences, patterns and the political economy of working students



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Deadline for full paper submission: 27 February 2026 17:00 GMT

Globally, most children and young people engage in paid employment before they leave education (Beerrens, Mägi, and Lill 2011; van der Meer and Wielers 2001), meaning most people's first experience of work occurs while they are studying. For instance, most school and college students have experience of paid work (Hobbs et al. 2006; McCoy and Smyth 2007; Raby et al. 2018) and cross-national studies show that on average 59% of university students are in paid employment (Gwosc et al. 2021). Recent surveys indicate that over half of working students in the UK work over 15 hours a week (Dickinson 2024), with US studies showing a significant minority working over 35 hours per week (Perna 2023). This is partly driven by labour market fragmentation and the growing demand for cheap part-time labour (Mizen, Bolton, and Pole 1999), as well as the rising cost of living and neoliberal funding reforms to post-compulsory education (Perna and Odle 2020). 'Employability' agendas within education also encourage the accumulation of work 'experience' as a way to improve future employment outcomes (Jones, Mann, and Morris 2016; Holdsworth 2017). Meanwhile, 'work-based learning' is mandatory on vocational programmes, apprenticeships, or professional degrees such as nursing or social work (Oke et al. 2023), and conceived as 'constrained labour' in Chinese context (Smith and Chan 2015). Work therefore plays an integral and growing role in the lives of many students, providing the earliest socialisation into workplace norms and expectations (Rydzik and Kissoon 2022). The work undertaken by young people during their education also makes a major economic contribution and is of social importance beyond students' own experiences. In the UK, for example, student workers comprise an important share of all employment (approximately 4 percent) and are especially concentrated in some sectors (e.g., 20 percent of retail and hospitality) (Zhong et al. 2025).

Despite their numerical and social importance, working students have been empirically under examined in sociological literature; a marginal status reproduced by employers and policymakers and further institutionalized in age-based Minimum Wage legislation in some countries. Framed as 'proto workers' (Hardy et al., forthcoming), whose working lives are incidental or secondary to their present education or future working careers, student workers are often highly exploited and penalised for their dual status as workers and learners (Sukarieh and Tannock 2017; Lucas 1997). Studies show that, while supporting students' financial needs,

paid work can also exacerbate insecurity (Rydzik and Bal 2023). Moreover, access to specific types of student work and experiences as student workers are shaped not only by age and educational stage, but also by social class (Hordósy, Clark, and Vickers 2018; Allen et al. 2013), race and gender (Besen-Cassino 2018; Kooreman 2009; Zhong et al. 2025). Meanwhile, international students experience circuits of labour-and-learning mobility, whereby visa regimes shape (interdependent) educational and working patterns and opportunities (Maury 2020). The ways that different groups of students engage in earning while learning and how this impacts their present and future lives requires further exploration.

Whilst sociological analyses of specific types of work or of 'young workers' (for example, in gig work, retail or hospitality) has identified students as part of this group, it has thus far not systematically interrogated the differences between young and student workers or how these overlapping demographic categories differently shape experience. Furthermore, existing frameworks in the sociology of work insufficiently capture nuances in the relationship between work and study, tending instead to focus on linear 'transitions' between education and work as separate, sequential spheres. In the Global North, a binary model frames some student work (e.g. internships) as 'CV-enhancing' (Howieson 1990), with other paid work (particularly term-time work) as damaging and detrimental to academic achievement (McCoy and Smyth 2007). Mirroring this, in the Global South, especially Africa, work viewed as 'child labour' is unacceptable and the focus of international bodies (ILO-UNICEF 2022). Conversely 'less harmful' child or student work is understudied. As a consequence, insufficient attention has been paid to the daily realities of student work: how earning and learning are integrated, the nature and conditions of students' work, how this labour force is formed, and how and why employers recruit students.

In this context, this special issue will interrogate and fundamentally reconceptualize the relationship between earning and learning, bringing together different disciplinary approaches to interrogate student work and the global political economy that shapes it. It will redress the invisibility and marginalization of student workers in policy and academic literature, exploring their varied experiences and identifying the extent to which they comprise a distinct group of workers. We are interested in explorations of earning while learning that use different methodological approaches (including qualitative studies, policy analysis, quantitative analysis of national or cross-national patterns and trends, ethnographies of student workplaces/ industries) and across diverse geographic and institutional contexts. This includes examining how student work is spatially differentiated, shaped by the interplay of different welfare systems, macroeconomic and labour market contexts, and education funding models.

As well as being novel, the special issue is also timely. There is increased policy interest in student workers with the global inflationary crisis and attendant problems for the cost of living and learning, and mounting concerns about the implications of student work for educational engagement, outcomes and wellbeing. Recognition of growing student debt in many countries, including the US and UK, has further pushed this issue up policy and public agendas. Student workers also face new vulnerabilities, with the rise and evolution of the gig economy creating new, less regulated, sites of student work. Meanwhile the Covid-19 pandemic reversed reductions in children in work worldwide and increased the importance of earning while learning for children and for their families' household strategies. This conjuncture of polycrises has impacted the experiences, necessity and impacts of paid work for learners across the world so that selling labour is increasingly interwoven into and during young people's educational experiences.

Potential topics (although not exhaustive) include:

- Novel theorisations and conceptualisations of the intersections between education and work;
- Temporal and spatial dimensions of earning while learning;

- Inequalities in student work related to social class, gender, 'race', disability, migrant status etc.;
- Analyses of the patterns of types of student work: occupations/industries/types of work especially reliant on student workers; including informal, irregular or illegal student work;
- Comparative approaches to student work, particularly between Global North and Global South;
- Student worker socialisation and ways in which student work is experienced as meaningful;
- Student worker voice and agency and collective organising: by, with or against student workers;
- Student work and household livelihood strategies;
- Policy relating to student work, including tensions between education and employment policy.

We are committed to inclusive academic practice and encourage contributors from scholars from the Global south, and early career researchers. There will be opportunities (online and offline) for prospective authors to meet informally with the Guest Editorial Team to discuss their submission and suitability for the Special Issue ahead of the deadline. This includes a session at the WES conference in Manchester in September 2025.

Submission instructions

The Special Issue welcomes research articles (up to 10,000 words). We will also consider other submission formats where these speak closely to the aims and scope of the call. This includes: Book Reviews (800 words), PhD showcase (10,000 words) and On the Front Line articles (5000 words). PhD Showcase provides authors doing doctoral work or within three years of their PhD with additional support. On the Front Line pieces offer a voice to frontline workers, and sociological insight into the contemporary realities of work and employment. For reference, previous On the Front Line articles can be found on the [journal's website](#).

Please note that there is no abstract stage for this call. Authors should submit full papers to the journal for the normal WES peer review processes. When submitting please select the box for the Special Issue and mention the Special Issue in your Cover Letter. To be considered for this Special Issue, submissions must fit with the aim and scope of this Call for Papers and the journal's [remit](#). WES submission guidelines and Notes for Contributors can be found [here](#).

Papers selected after full peer review will be published in the Special Issue. This ensures timely publication while maintaining the high standards of the journal. If high-quality papers fall outside of the scope and aims of the Special Issue but address those of WES, there is a possibility that these may be considered for publication in a general issue instead.

Deadline for full paper submission: 27 February 2026, 17:00 GMT

For further information and queries, please contact Kim Allen (k.allen1@leeds.ac.uk).

If you're interested in receiving updates about the Special Issue, including notification of opportunities to meet with the Guest Editorial Team, please complete [this form](#). (This is not mandatory but is designed to facilitate fit and support PhD students and early career researchers).

For queries about submission, please contact the journal: wes.journal@britsoc.org.uk

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