

Learning with Hard Labour: University Students as Workers

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Abstract

This article argues the growth in the number of university students working and in their working hours is the result of inadequate government funding and support and that student work commitments are now having a negative impact on class attendance and out-of-class study. This, however, is not simply an educational issue. With over 300,000 university students working, it is important to understand more about their employment experience. This is made possible by citing the results of a 2006 regional survey which examined the nature of student work in terms of industry, size of business, earnings, hours and union membership. In this way, student employment is firmly placed within the context of a deregulated industrial relations system. The article also discusses the problem of student paid employment in the light of the Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia.

1. Introduction

A university education is about learning. It represents an individual and a societal investment in the skill formation of at least one or two generations of a variety of skilled workers. However, coincidentally and incidentally it has also usually been about learning and experiencing things beyond the curriculum. In this way student life at a university has always been about more than books, lectures, study and assignments. One of the common experiences has been making do, being frugal and simple in taste and quality of lifestyle; the student life is a cliché with a 1000 year history. Another common experience has arisen from the need to perform occasionally a variety of jobs which, mostly low paid and undemanding, usually have little to do with ultimate career aspirations; jobs which offer an income sufficient to finance the modest living expenses incurred by full-time study. This balance of experiences, however, seems now to have changed.

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In the last decade an increasing proportion of Australian university students has been required to learn more and more about the world of paid employment (Lucas and Lammont 1998; McInnis et al 2000, Edwards and Sharma 2003; Robbins 2006). A recent nation-wide survey of over 18,000 students found that 70 per cent of all full-time under graduates are now engaged, on average, in 14.8 hours of paid employment per week (AVCC 2007). A 2006 study looking at students enrolled in a regional (non-metropolitan) university found that 66 per cent of its students were working an average of 14.5 hours per week (Robbins 2006). This trend toward greater paid employment is apparent elsewhere in the world, although the situation seems accelerated in Australia (Kelly 1999; Geron 2000; Edwards and Sharma 2003; Metcalf 2003; Marriott 2007).

The concerns raised in this paper about this trend are twofold. Firstly, the steady increase in the need for students to work during semesters is now impacting negatively on the quality of the educative experience (AVCC 2007; Robbins 2006; Marriott 2007). In examining this concern, the article will look at the impact of paid employment on student class attendance and study commitment. The second concern is that the growth in student paid employment is occurring at a time when the regulatory protections offered to all workers, but particularly the low skilled and casual, are declining (Peetz 2006). The working student, employed for a growing number of hours, is now part of an increasingly vulnerable and marginal work force (ACTU 2007; OEA 2006). Little is known, however, about the student worker as such.

To redress this lack of information, the regional student study examined the type of work students perform, the hours they work, the types of business which employ them, the nature and status of their employment as well as their levels of earnings and expenditure (Robbins 2006). In examining the vulnerability of student workers, the paper also establishes the level of union membership amongst university student workers and their attitudes toward and their perceptions of unions. With over 300,000 university students now involved in the world of paid work (ABC 2006), it is necessary to appreciate what students know of this world and how well they are able to protect their own interests.

2. Literature Review

The literature examined for this paper falls into two broad groups: first, that dealing with the generic growth in paid employment amongst university students and second, the literature dealing with the broad but changing industrial relations environment. The first group involves the findings of a series of surveys, large and small and mostly Australian, which make plain that paid employment amongst university students has increased steadily and significantly for the past decade or

so. In 1994, a survey of full-time first-year university students at a small number of universities established that 43 per cent were engaged in paid employment whilst studying (McInnis 2002; Lucas and Lammont 1998). In 1999, a further study showed that 51 per cent of full-time students were then engaged in some form of paid employment (McInnis, James and Hartley 2000). Although some attempt was made by these surveys to capture the experience in a range of different types of universities, this was of limited success. Neither study was national: both looked only at universities in Victoria and New South Wales, while the number of students from a regional (non-metropolitan) university was very small and not disaggregated from the overall findings. None of these early surveys looked at the nature of student employment or the industrial relations context.

In 2000 a study of university student finances was commissioned by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. This was not specifically about the extent of their paid employment but was an attempt to establish the level of student income and expenditure and how the income was derived. The survey estimated that the average income per annum for a full time university student in Australia was \$8,939, while average expenditure was \$12,694. It was this gap that students filled through savings and through reliance on family. In 2003, a similar study was conducted at Swinburne University in Melbourne in order to contrast the individual university result with these national figures (Edwards and Sharma 2003). This study found that Swinburne students earned an average yearly income of \$7,443 and incurred costs of \$11,469. Again, the gap between expenditure and income was seen as a mechanism driving students to seek more paid employment. In neither study were government support schemes viewed as adequate. Moreover, it was found that the need to work or the inability to meet educational costs was interfering with the educational experience of students. These studies also warned not only of equity issues associated with the cost of higher education but also of the personal hardships that were increasingly apparent amongst student cohorts. Edwards and Sharma (2003, p. 25) were alarmed to learn, for instance, that three universities in Victoria had set up soup kitchens for their students. This hardship concern has not diminished. In August 2008, it was reported that the Australian Catholic University (ACU) was operating 'a cupboard stocked with essential food items' in order to feed hungry students' (Evans, ABC News). In its submission to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, the ACU claimed that 'use of the food cupboard has consistently increased over the past five years' (Submission 2008). A University of Melbourne submission to the same Review suggested that '15 per cent of undergraduate students had gone without food or other necessities' (Submission 2008).

In 2006 the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC 2007) commissioned the first fully Australia-wide survey of university students' income, expenditure and extent of paid employment. While this survey conducted an exhaustive examination of student working commitments and finances it did not examine employment relations issues such as nature of job, industry, employer, spread of hours or how students were employed. In addition, although this survey differentiated between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous undergraduate (and post graduate) students it did not draw any comparisons between the experiences of students studying at a regional and metropolitan universities. As a consequence, the survey of regional students (Robbins 2006) was conceived to contrast the existing national surveys with a regional focus and with information on the general employment relations of undergraduate university students.

The reasons why student employment has grown were not explicitly examined by the early surveys, but it has been discussed in the two most recent (AVCC 2006; Robbins 2006). Each of these firmly places responsibility on the inadequacy of government support schemes. Both the AVCC and the regional surveys identify limitations in family and partner support - another traditional alternative to the need to work. In its submission to the Bradley Review, the University of Melbourne claimed: 'Students seeking income support ... face a confusing array of different government programs' which did not, in any case, adequately or equitably deal with student needs (Submission 2008). Similarly, the University of South Australia described 'lack of money as the single most negative factor affecting' students while problems with income support schemes meant that more students had to work while studying (Submission 2008). A recent UK study into university student indebtedness raised the possibility that a growth in the admission of students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds created a greater necessity for student debt and thus the need to work (Marriott 2006). Although the federal government in the late 1980s identified a need to expand the number of people attending university from a low socio-economic strata of society, this has not been the driving agenda in government policy in the last decade (Edwards and Sharma, pp. 3-5; University of Ballarat Submission 2008). The recent but sustained rise in student paid employment has not been significantly fuelled by broader policies of access equity. On the contrary, the federal Coalition government's policy was based on a user-pays philosophy which saw real funding to universities fall and a deterioration in government support to individual students (Edwards and Sharma 2003, p. 4; AVCC 2007; www.centrelink.gov.au Youth Allowance and Austudy).

Australia is not alone in experiencing a growth in student paid employment. Higher education students in Europe also work but usually at significantly lower levels

than here. A study in 1999 estimated that 47 per cent of UK university students worked during term times while Carney et al (2005) found that this had risen to 50 per cent by 2005. More worrying from a British point of view is the rise in the average debt of students from £2,212 in 1994 to over £13,000 in 2004 (Marriott 2006). The cost of higher education to students in both the UK and Australia has clearly risen in the last decade or so, but the methods of paying for it have been quite different. In the UK, student loan and debt schemes have controlled the growth in student employment, while in Australia the inadequacy of support has encouraged a growth in the numbers working. While more Australian students are working than their UK counterparts, however, they are not avoiding debt. On the contrary, they generally accumulate and defer it under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS).

There are a number of other studies of university student employment which have confirmed its growth, although this was not their prime focus. These studies are distinguished by their efforts to evaluate the impact of paid employment on the academic performance of students (Cockfield 2006; Hunt et al 2004; Rubin 1977). Most studies seem to find a negative correlation between paid employment and student grades, although its significance varied. Craig Applegate and Anne Daly (2005, pp. 11-12), for example, while fully accepting the growth in paid employment, came to the guarded conclusion that student employment did 'not show a large negative effect ... on average grades ... unless students are working more than 20 hours per week during term time.' However, from their own calculations of the marginal effect of extra time in paid employment, it is apparent that the optimum number of hours of work was 12 and that any more did in fact begin a deterioration in grades. Certainly, by around 20 hours the impact on grades seems fatal, but the trend toward deterioration began well before this. In any case, at least two of the most recent estimates of student hours of work suggest the national and regional averages are already at this point of damage. Even more troubling is the assumption of student choice by these writers. They argued that students 'will only be willing to engage in paid employment up to the point where the benefits of a higher income are equal to the costs of acquiring that income.' (p. 4). In other words, students will pull back on hours of work when they perceive a negative impact on grades. It is a rational world in which all participants calculate the cost-benefit of their actions. But this seems an unworldly view in the light of the disparate but consistent evidence of growing numbers of students who 'are turning up to classes hungry [and] forced to skip meals' (Evans 2008). The complexities of life and the balancing of priorities or conflicts are sometimes the result of lack of choice rather than poor choice. Another feature of some of these studies is the

value placed on the work experience (Applegate and Daly 2005, pp. 3-4 and 11). Employment can focus effort, and demand teaching-time management skills as well as provide a range of useful interpersonal interactions. None of these studies, however, actually looked at the type of work performed by students. Different types of jobs offer quite different levels or qualities of experience. Understanding the nature of student work is important because different work rewards in different ways and some more than others.

The employment relations literature understandably concentrates on the reforms introduced by the Workplace Relations Act 1996 and more recently those created by the Work Choices Act 2006 (Sappey et al 2007; Alexander and Lewer 2007; Bray et al 2007). It is not yet clear what impact the rescission of Work Choices in early 2008 by the Labor federal government has or will have. The effect of Work Choices is lingering. The loosening of the traditional dimensions of Australian industrial relations regulation in the past decade (Baird et al 2006) seems to have permanently restricted the influence of awards and entrenched an individual stream of bargaining. Many Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), which were a highly deregulated form of individual contract, remain and will continue until at least 2010. In addition, some employers are seeking ways of further extending their use of AWAs, despite political if not legal prohibition. Traditional forms of protection offered by trade unions are still weakened because of the continued decline in union density (Peetz 2006). At the same time there is a continuing growth in part-time, casual employment (ABS Cat 4102.0 2008). The effective eclipse of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) also seems destined to continue. Even under Labor, the Commission is promised no role in national industrial relations (Stewart 2007). Similarly, unfair dismissal protection for all workers has not been restored. This will continue to affect large numbers of enterprises and a very significant number of employees in the Australian economy.

From the literature it is evident that there has been a steady increase in paid employment amongst university students. While some researchers contest the notion that paid work is reducing student grades, virtually all commentators are concerned that it is impacting negatively on the student educational experience. The cause of the growth in paid employment is inadequate (if not actually falling) levels of government funding and support to higher education institutions and individual participants. While university students may well be reluctant workers, however, they are, nevertheless, workers: distinctive members of the national workforce and as such subject to the realities of industrial relations generally.

On the other hand, of the surveys into student employment, only the regional survey has examined industrial relations detail and context (Robbins 2006). The broad industrial relations literature confirms employment in Australia is now increasingly de-regulated, more individually determined and less open to public or trade union scrutiny. Paid work by students is not just an educational issue: it is also one of industrial relations.

3. Why Do Students Work?

There may be a variety of reasons why students seek paid work to the extent that they do. In the first instance, there is simply the cost of higher education. Under HECS, most students in Australia are now charged a fee per subject. Students can pay this up-front, but most defer it until they graduate and are earning significant annual incomes. Living and study expenses, however, cannot be deferred until graduation as they are often in the UK through various loans schemes (Marriott 2007).

In order to attend classes, study and complete assessment items, students need to finance their living and other related costs. This can be done in a number of ways: parental/partner support, government support or student employment. The Vice-Chancellors' survey (AVCC 2007) found that undergraduate students 'were more likely to rely on gifts of food, accommodation, telephone, childcare and textbooks' from their family in 2006 than in 2000. While this survey found that reliance on family support is increasing, it was hard to gauge the capacity of families to continue or increase their levels of support.

In 2000, it was found that 57.6 per cent of university students received no support from the government. In 2006, 64.4 per cent of the students in Australia received no support (AVCC 2007: 12-13). The University of Melbourne in its submission to the Bradley Review claimed that 67 per cent of students 'do not receive any direct income support' (Submission 2008). The regional student survey found that 57 per cent of respondents received no support, which probably reflects lower rural income levels as all government assistance is means tested (www.centrelink.gov.au Youth Allowance and Austudy). It also needs to be appreciated that there is no indication in any survey of the extent of government support of those who do receive some level of living allowance or assistance. In other words, it would be wrong to assume those who were supported received full living allowances. In fact, in the light of the large numbers of students working it would seem reasonable to assume that few students receive such support. The decline in support also shows a correlation with the incidence of students working: the decline in public

support for students is a direct cause of the increase in the number of students working and the increase in the number of hours worked.

Finally, consumer habits have been suggested as another reason why students work. One federal Minister of Education in the Coalition government felt that rising student employment was due to student expectations of consumption (ABC Interview 9 March 2007; Smith 2007). Research does not bear this out. The Vice-Chancellors' national study and the regional student survey both generated expenditure estimates that suggested students work in order to afford basic necessities (AVCC 2007, p. 2; Robbins 2006). Moreover, students have little capacity to reduce their consumption below the levels of the two survey estimates. Levels of student poverty are already high, with a growing proportion of students regularly forgoing meals (Edwards and Sharma 2003, p. 25; National Union of Students in The Age, September 2006; AVCC 2007, p. 39; ACU Submission 2008; University of Melbourne Submission 2008).

4. Profile of Student Work: Extent and Nature

Work is a highly significant factor in the lives of university students today. The AVCC national and the regional surveys found that between 70 per cent and 66 per cent of students work. The surveys also found that the national and the regional student work similar hours (14.8 and 14.5 on average, respectively) and that they earn similar amounts. The annual income for students Australia-wide was estimated to be \$12,560 and for regional students \$12,695 (AVCC 2007, p. 12; Robbins 2006, p. 3). Another dimension of student work that should be of interest is whether it has any direct relevance to study. The AVCC survey found that 68 per cent of students perform work that is not related to their area of study. This situation was marginally worse for regionally located students, of whom 73 per cent performed work that bore no relation to their study (AVCC, 2007, p. 36; Robbins 2006, p. 3). Another measure of the importance of work is the number of jobs students are required to perform and the results of this aspect of the national and regional survey are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentages of Students Employed at One or More Jobs

	1 Job	2 Jobs	3 jobs
AVCC Survey	80	17	3
Regional Survey	71	14	15

Although most working students manage on the earnings from one job, it is alarming that so many need to work more than one. This is particularly evident amongst regionally-based working students: nearly 30 per cent feel the necessity to work at two or more jobs, compared with 20 per cent nationally. The large number working more than one job suggests that some student jobs do not pay sufficient to meet student needs. The marginally worse situation for regional students must reflect lower wage levels. Low paying jobs mean that students must increase hours of work and, where this is impossible, take on more low paying jobs. The level of minimum wages, therefore, is important.

Another area of contrast between the national and regional situations is the employment status of student workers - whether they are employed as full-time, part-time or casual employees. The employment status of students is important because it will significantly shape not only earnings and hours worked but also the level of regulatory or union protection and the degree of worker security. From Table 2, it is apparent that student workers are almost exclusively casual or part-time. This status often signals worker vulnerability in terms of rewards and security.

Table 2: Employment Status of Student Workers (%)

	Full Time	Part Time	Casual	Contractor
AVCC Survey	5	20	61	NA
Regional Survey	10	14	72	3

The Vice-Chancellors' national survey did not provide any further information on the nature of student work. The regional survey, however, found that employment of regional students was concentrated in two main industries, retailing (28 per cent) and hospitality (24 per cent). Business and Finance and Other Services each employed 11 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. The rest of the student workers (25 per cent) were evenly spread throughout the broad range of industries identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics classification of industries. It was also found that students were employed in a variety of different sized businesses. Small business employed 38 per cent of student workers; medium size businesses 26 per cent; and large businesses 29 per cent. Government employed only 6 per cent while 1 per cent were employed in not-for-profit enterprises. The large number of students employed by small to medium business is unsurprising in view of the importance of small businesses to the Australian and regional economies.

According to the ABS, small businesses represent 97 per cent of all enterprises and employ 47 per cent of the national workforce. (ABS 2008 Cat 1321.0). On the other hand, it was somewhat surprising that so many students worked in a large or medium sized enterprise. This spread probably reflects the dominance of retailing by large national corporations and the concentration of hospitality activities in large service or sporting clubs. It is also apparent that most students who are working are employed by the private sector of Australian business.

5. Impact of Student Work

Combining study and work is not necessarily easy and places pressure on the time-management skills of student workers. The Vice-Chancellors' national survey found that students were working to purchase or pay for basic necessities rather than to maintain a consumer-led lifestyle. Indeed, the AVCC report was alarmed to discover that a significant number of students were forgoing some meals because of cost. This report also found that 22 per cent of full-time undergraduate students regularly missed class because of work commitments and 40 per cent believed that work adversely affected their studies (AVCC 2007, p. 31). The regional survey found that 17 per cent of students felt that work had a negative impact of their class attendance while 53 per cent felt that work negatively impacted on their ability to study out of class (Robbins 2006). The reasons for this are apparent from the spread of student working hours in Table 3.

Table 3: Spread of Regional Student Working Hours (%)

Before 9.00am	9 to 5	After 5.00pm	Weekends	No Regular Hours
6	36	20	10	27

Since so many regional students work regularly between 9.00am and 5.00pm, it is surprising that so few complain of missing classes. The proportions of students working 'No Regular Hours' or 'After 5.00pm' make the negative impact on study commitment more understandable.

The findings of both surveys indicate that student work is often in direct competition with student educational commitments and that student employment has, by and large, a negative impact. The regional survey results also emphasised that while work may not yet be greatly impacting on class attendance it is having a much more negative and widespread impact on student's ability to read, research,

write and complete assignments outside the class room: on life-long learning skills. An increase in student work will increase the disruption of the educational experience even more. This means educational policies should be looking at ways to cap if not reduce student work commitments. On the other hand, a fall in employment opportunities will have an even more fundamental impact on educational experience, for some students at least.

6. Industrial Relations Issues

As already indicated, both the national and the regional surveys found that the vast majority of student workers were employed as casuals. The regional survey also identified the range of ways under which student workers are employed and these are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Employment Arrangement for Regional Students (%)

Written contract	AWAs	Enterprise agreement	Award	Verbal agreement	Don't know	No Answer
17	6	6	23	25	11	22

It should be of some concern, at least to employment relations academics, that 11 per cent of respondents did not know under what arrangement they were employed. This figure may also be understated, as a large number of respondents who did not answer this question. The real importance of these figures is that they suggest students that may be passive in the determination of the terms and conditions of their employment. While arrangements such as awards and enterprise agreements are collective and do not involve individual negotiation with an employer, the interests of employees are nevertheless dealt with collectively and formally by trade union representation, even for non-members (Peetz 1998). On the other hand, AWAs and contracts are, by their nature, individual arrangements and involve negotiations between an employer and employee over hours, duties and rewards (Andrews 2006). The regional survey found, however, that no student with an AWA had negotiated its content with their employer and that only about 1 per cent with individual contracts had engaged in negotiations. The conclusion that individual contracts for casual and part-time student workers under Work Choices were take-it-or-leave-it offers by employers seems inescapable. Further, even if student workers are in a position to influence negotiations with their employers, they may have to concentrate their bargaining efforts on agreeing flexible hours rather than rates of pay. A representative of the National Union of Students

claimed recently that students 'choose their work timetable before their university timetable', emphasising the priority of hours of work (Evans 2008).

Despite the lack of influence over the terms and conditions of their employment, few students are union members. The regional survey found that only 12 per cent of student workers were members of unions, 82 per cent were not members and 6 per cent did not answer this question. These figures are considerably below the national membership level of around 20 per cent; but the level of student membership of unions is actually not so far from the national private sector density level of 17 per cent (ABS 2008 Cat. 6310.0), and over 90 per cent of students work in the private sector. A low density level amongst this group of workers also reflects the fact that unions find it difficult to recruit casual, contract and part time workers (Peetz 1998). In addition, there is a lower propensity generally for young workers to join a trade union (Haynes and Charlwood 2006; Oliver 2005; Biddle et al 2000; Allan et al 2006).

The survey asked those student workers who were members of union why they joined and only 2 per cent identified "Peer Pressure" while the rest felt it was "A Good Idea". Of more interest are the reasons the survey respondents gave for not joining a union. This information is provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Why Students Did Not Join Unions (%)

Opposed to unions	Not worth it	Never asked	Don't care	Don't dare
7	14	54	20	4

The fact only 7 per cent did not join because they were opposed to unions should offer some solace to unions. That 14 per cent felt it was not worth joining may be rational given the precarious, short-term nature of most student employment and the fact that it had little relevance to their study or prospective careers. Similarly, the 20 per cent who 'don't care' may also express an attitude strongly related to the nature of their employment. In other words, this may not be a reflection of apathy. It may be a sign of rational cost/benefit analysis (Buttigieg, Deery and Iversen 2006, p. 105). The small percentage of students who 'don't dare' join because their employers would disapprove may reflect the nature of some small business employment.

Most significant of all is the 54 per cent who say that they have not joined unions because they had not been asked. While this shows a certain level of passivity on the part of these student workers, it also reflects on union organisation and recruitment strategies. Asked whether there was a union representative in the workplace, 49 per cent said they 'didn't know', 32 per cent said 'no' and 19 per cent said 'yes'. That so many student workers were unaware of union presence should concern trade unions but perhaps is not really so surprising. A related question was whether student workers had ever 'seen' a union representative in their workplaces and the results of this were predictable. Eighteen per cent of students had seen a union representative, while 82 per cent had not. Unions and their organisational structures are not visible to many student workers and there are perhaps a number of basic, even obvious, reasons for this. It should be remembered that 37 per cent of students work in small businesses where an active union presence is unlikely. Even in larger sized businesses, however, many students still seem ignorant of unions. This is probably due in large measure to the nature of student employment. As most (72 per cent) are casual employees, many students would not necessarily have much 'quality' or mainstream contact with their workplaces and fellow workers even if there were unions. The survey also found that only 36 per cent of students worked during the hours of 9 to 5 and obviously only on some days. On the other hand, the rest worked early mornings, at night, at weekends or irregular hours. The student perception of the invisibility of unions in their workplaces may also reflect the fact that, for unions, casual student workers might also be invisible.

7. Conclusion

Student work in paid employment is increasing and it is widely agreed that this has damaged the educational experience. This article also suggests that the growth in paid employment is impacting negatively on study commitments. Whether this will translate into a negative impact on actual grades is another question. Some literature suggests a negative impact but perhaps less than expected. This reassurance may, however, prove fleeting. The level of the average hours worked by students would seem now to be at a watershed; any more hours worked must lower grades. The growth in paid employment has been fuelled by the lack of adequate government assistance and support. Considerably less than half of university students receive support from the government and even fewer receive living allowances. Families and partners are significant sources of support, but the limitations on this support have, for most, been reached. For families to offer more significant support students will probably have to live at

home. In Australia this is not always possible. Limits to government and family support have been the main reasons why more students than ever before support themselves by taking paid employment. Estimates of student living expenses also make it clear that they are working, not to maintain lavish lifestyles, but largely to pay for basic necessities. More importantly, there is little likelihood of students being able to curtail their living expenses, unless there is an increase in the level of subsidised accommodation, meals and study costs by either families, universities or governments.

The industrial relations environment is now critical. Levels of student pay are not determined by social considerations, need or higher education concerns. The living standards generated by student employment are determined by the nature of the labour market and by the processes and protections provided by the regulation of employment. Unfortunately, university students are engaged mostly in areas of employment which are lowly paid and insecure (Brosnan and Loudoun 2006, p. 94). The regulation of casual hospitality and retailing jobs has been weakened. Indeed, the demise of the AIRC and awards has diminished public scrutiny of the employment of the lowest and most marginalised members of our workforce.

Further, the regional survey found alarmingly little interaction and negotiation by student workers with their employers over the terms and conditions of employment. Low levels of protection of casual and part-time student workers are exacerbated by their low level of unionisation. Only 12 per cent of student workers are members of unions. Most, therefore, are unable to rely on either collective or individual representation in bargaining over employment or for advice and assistance. Even where there is a union presence, poor organisational structures and communication may be minimising the role or visibility of unions. The low rate of union density amongst university student workers seems, however, to be largely due to structural reasons rather than student hostility. The types of jobs largely occupied by students are casual, many with small businesses, and these characteristics make it difficult for unions to recruit them.

Today is a challenging time to be a university student: the cost of a degree is high and the level of government support low. For the past decade, the solution has been individual rather than collective, but this is no longer sustainable. A collective response is surely the only viable one left. Minimum wages could be raised, which might reduce the pressure to work more hours, but this is unlikely at a time when the national and international economies are slowing. An alternative approach is to fund student living expenses. This can be done, as already noted,

by directly reducing living expenses by encouraging universities to subsidise meals, accommodation, entertainment and learning materials. A return to compulsory student union contributions would have to be a component of this. More likely still is the introduction of student scholarships and/or loans schemes. Student loans however, will essentially delay then transfer these costs to graduates. This is the solution in the UK and it might be acceptable here, were it not for one thing: HECS. Australian students are already paying for their education. A living expenses loan would be a further burden. On the other hand, this might be a better solution than the current growth in employment and one which might mitigate student hardship now. It seems inevitable that students will be required to pay for their living expenses; the question is whether this will be now or later. A loans scheme may also be unavoidable if student employment opportunities were to decline. Thus far students have been able to find employment to sustain and support themselves, even in regional economies. A contraction in employment levels, a fall in the need for hospitality or retail workers, would force the issue. Perhaps students who are working should not give up their day/night jobs just yet.

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