Learning to Work: Australian university students and the growth of paid employment

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Abstract: LEARNING TO WORK: AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND THE GROWTH OF PAID EMPLOYMENT For the past decade there has been a steady increase in the number of Australian university students working in paid employment. During the same time there has also been an increase in the hours they work. These work commitments are now having an impact on student ability to attend classes and to engage in out-of-class study. Work commitments clearly have implications for the quality of the university experience, for the management of university facilities and for the educational principle of life long learning. On the other hand, with perhaps over 400,000 university students working in some paid capacity, it is important to understand more about their employment experience. This paper will identify the nature of student work in terms of industry and employment status, earnings and hours as well as other employment relations issues such as union membership and whether students are able to find employment in the area of their study. This paper will also examine aspects of student worker expenditure which throws light on why so many students are now seeking paid employment. From these details the paper will argue that the growth in the paid employment of university students is a reflection both of higher education funding and of the changing character and nature of the contemporary labour market in Australia and other developed economies; namely the casualisation of employment generally. However, the implications of this employment growth need also to be understood in the light of recent changes to the regulation of industrial relations in Australia. Theses changes have reduced levels of minimum protection for all workers, but most critically for casual workers. In this way this paper will explore the human resource and industrial relations implications of this growing cohort of young workers.
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Learning to Work:

Australian university students and the growth of paid employment

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ABSTRACT

For the past decade there has been a steady increase in the number of Australian university students working in paid employment and in the number of hours they work. These work commitments are now having an impact on student ability to attend classes and to engage in out-of-class study. Work commitments clearly have implications for the quality of the university experience and for the educational principle of life long learning. On the other hand, with perhaps over 400,000 university students working in some paid capacity, it is important to understand more about their employment experience. This paper will use the findings of a national survey of student work commitments and a smaller one that looks at regionally-based university students in order to identify the nature of student work in terms of industry and employment status, earnings and hours as well as other employment relations issues such as union membership and whether students are able to find employment in the area of their study. This paper will also examine aspects of student worker expenditure which throws light on why so many students are now seeking paid employment. From these details the paper will argue that the growth in the paid employment of university students is a reflection both of higher education funding and of the changing character of the contemporary labour market in Australia and the industrial relations environment.
INTRODUCTION

Student life at a university has always been about more than books, lectures and study. However, in the last decade an increasing proportion of Australian university students have been required to learn more and more about the world of paid employment (Lucas 1998; McInnis et al 2000; Marriott 2007). Surveys of university students in Australia over the last decade confirm that the number of full-time students who are also employed in the paid work force has steadily increased (Lucas 1998; McInnis et al 2000, AVCC 2007, Robbins 2006). A recent nation-wide survey of over 18,000 students found that 70% of all full-time under graduates are now engaged, on average, in 14.8 hours of paid employment per week (AVCC 2007). A smaller study which looked at students enrolled in a regional (non-metropolitan) university found that that 66% of regionally-based students are now working an average of 14.5 hours per week (Robbins 2006).

The concerns raised in this paper over this employment trend are twofold: firstly, the steady increase in the need for students to work during semesters or terms is impacting on the quality of the educative experience (AVCC 2007; Robbins 2006; Marriott 2007) while secondly, the growth in paid employment is occurring at a time when the regulatory protections offered to all workers is declining (Peetz 2006). The working student is now part of an increasingly vulnerable and marginal
work force (ACTU 2007; OEA 2006). In examining these concerns the paper will look at the impact of paid employment on student class attendance and study commitment and will highlight the expenditure pressures on students which partly drive the necessity to work. In addition, the focus of the regional student study explores in some detail the work experiences of these students: the type of work students perform, the type of businesses which employ them, the nature and status of their employment as well as their levels of earnings and hours. 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 the perceptions of unions. With nearly 400,000 university students now involved in the world of paid work (ABC 2007) it is necessary to appreciate what students know of this world and how well they are able to protect their own interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examined for this paper falls into two broad groups: firstly that dealing with the generic growth in paid employment amongst university students and secondly, the literature dealing with industrial relations and union membership theory. In the first literature group it has been established that paid employment amongst university students is increasing. In 1994 a survey of full-time first year university students at a small number of universities established their patterns of paid employment and study (McInnis 2002; Lucas & Lammont 1998). In broad terms the 1994 study found that 43% of these students were engaged in paid employment whilst studying. In 1999 a further study was conducted in order to provide comparison with the 1994 data (McInnis, James & Hartley 2000). This new study showed that 51% of full-time students were engaged in some form of paid employment, representing an increase of 9% over 5 years. 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. The study only looked at universities in Victoria and New South Wales while the number of students from a regional (non-metropolitan) university was very small.
In 2006 the Australian Vice Chancellor Committee (AVCC 2007) commissioned yet another Australia-wide survey of university students and their paid employment. While this survey conducted an exhaustive examination of student working commitments and finances it did not examine any employment relations issues. In addition, although this survey differentiated between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous undergraduate students it did not draw any differentials between the experiences of students studying at a regional or metropolitan university. As a consequence the survey of regional students (Robbins 2006) was conceived to duplicate and compliment the existing national surveys while at the same time allowing contrasting analysis based on student locality to be drawn. In addition, this smaller survey was also explicitly designed to generate information on the employment relations implications and issues associated with the employment of increasing numbers of undergraduate university students.

With regard to the employment relations issues and experiences confronting university student workers the literature can be divided into two broad categories. The first relates to literature which establishes or examines the nature of the newly emerging de-regulated industrial relations environment. This literature in particular examines the impact of the Work Choices Act 2006, which has so significantly altered the nature of industrial relations in Australia. The second broad category of literature is that dealing with trade union membership and the propensity of some and not other workers to join a union.

In the first body of literature there is increasingly a common perception amongst industrial relations academics that the Work Choices Act has de-regulated, decentralised and de-collectivised much industrial relations (Sappey et al 2007; Baird et al 2007; Alexander & Lewer 2007; Bray et al 2007).
Work Choices has strengthened the trend toward the number of individual employment contracts and virtually abolished all awards (ACTU 2007; OEA 2007; Sappy et al 2007). In this way the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) now has virtually no role or authority. Indeed a High Court case which confirmed the constitutional expansion of the federal government’s role in industrial relations means now that the role and authority of the state-based tribunals can be challenged (Stewart 2007). The current legislation has also abolished unfair dismissal protection for all workers employed in businesses with less than 100 employees. This affects a large number of enterprises and a very significant number of employees in the Australian economy even though there was essentially no evidence to suggest unfair dismissals were a problem to businesses (Robbins & Voll 2005). Work Choices has also severely restricted the rights and abilities of trade unions to recruit and represent workers with restrictions on rights of entry, representation and industrial action (Baird 2007 et al).

Compared with the traditional Australian model of industrial relations regulation Work Choices represents a radical and dramatic departure. The minimum standards established in elaborate detail in industry and occupation awards has been replaced with a raft of 5 basic minimums which are mainly to do with leave entitlements (Alexander & Lewer 2007). Minimum wages are now regulated and set by the Australian Fair Pay Commission. This organisation is not required to seek representation and input from trade unions or employer associations nor is it required to review wages on any regular basis (Baird et al 2007).

The impact of this legislation is now a bitterly fought political battle ground. The government defends the new system with the assertion that wages have grown, the terms and conditions of employment are more flexible and responsive to economic conditions and that they are fairer to
workers and employers alike. These assertions and assurances are hotly contested by the trade unions, most notably through the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and by the political opposition of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Greens etc. On the other hand, it is fair to say that virtually all scholarly research is finding a deterioration in wages and conditions for the less skilled labour in the Australian economy.

The other industrial relations literature relevant to this paper is that which looks at the broad reasons why people do or don’t join trade unions. In this we find the Frustration-Aggression Theory in which it is argued people join unions in response to frustration or dissatisfaction in the workplace; Interactionist Theory suggests people join unions because their social environment generates ideological beliefs that support the altruistic objectives of unionism; Rational Choice Theory which explains membership in terms of a rational cost/benefit analysis; and, finally the Business Cycle Theory which identifies macro economic experiences such as unemployment as a key variable in the decision to join or not join a union (Buttigieg, Deery & Iversen 2006; Haynes & Charlwood 2006; Griffin & Svensen 1996; Visser 2002).

Another dimension of this literature deals with explaining the fall in union density in most national economies (Peetz 1998). In this literature a number of explanations are argued; structural changes in industry from high unionised businesses to low service based businesses, changes in patterns of employment from full-time ‘typical’ employment to non-typical, non-permanent casual and part-time employment, and employer union avoidance or busting strategies. It is argued that unions find it difficult to recruit casual workers with highly variable working hours in service industries. Employer resistance and even legislation that curtails union contact are other factors which are encouraging unionists to leave their unions or which prevent the recruitment of new workers.
Another distinct body of literature looks specifically at the propensity of young workers to join or not join unions (Allan, Bamber & Timo 2005; Biddle et al 2000; Lowe & Rastin 2000). It is clear from this literature that falling or stalling union density is not simply an Australian phenomena or trend but is apparent in many industrialised nations (Haynes & Charlwood 2006). Some recent studies have looked at the low levels of union membership amongst young workers in the retail and recreation industries (Oliver 2005) and in the fast food industry (Allan, Bamber & Oliver 2006). Oliver (2005 pg 413) found that union membership amongst workers aged between 20-24 years fell from 30% in 1993 to 16.6% in 1999. Allan, Bamber & Oliver (2006 pg 30) found a similar result in their study of student workers in the fast food industry.

**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 the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) most students in Australia are now charged a fee per subject. Students can pay this up front or they can defer it until they earn an income of over $40,000. The majority of university students at Australian universities are HECS students and choose to pay their debt after graduation. However, living and study expenses cannot be deferred until graduation.

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 Chancellor’s 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 that 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. On the other hand the regional survey (Robbins 2006) found that 23% of respondents received no support from their family, 23% received occasional support, 16% received a small but regular level of assistance, while 35% received substantial support from their family. Of this latter figure it should be noted that this included students who are living at home. Nevertheless, it seems that with 23% of families providing no support and 39% providing low levels of support, the family is not an obvious source of more income support.

The regional student survey found that 43% of respondents received some level of government living allowance or assistance. Unfortunately this did not establish the degree of support although from the rest of the survey results it is more than apparent that few students receive a full living allowance. More significant were the findings of the AVCC survey (2007 pgs 15-21) which was able to establish a decline in levels of government support and a decline in the number of students getting government allowances. The decline in these levels of support also shows an inverse correlation with the incidence of students working. In other words there is evidence that suggests the decline in public support for students is a direct cause of the increase in the number of students working and for the increase in the number of hours worked.

Finally, in the face of rising student employment it has been suggested by the federal Minister of Education that the increase is due to shifts in consumer habits (ABC Interview 9 March 2007). In other words students work because they are products of the consumer society and therefore have expectations of consumption that forces them to work. If they were more frugal and less demanding they would not have to work as much as they did. Unfortunately for the Minister this line of reasoning is not supported by the results of either the Vice Chancellors’ national study or the regional student survey. Indeed, both generate expenditure estimates that suggest students undertake ‘substantial hours of work simply to afford basic necessities’ (AVCC 2007 pg 2). Moreover,
the capacity of students to reduce their consumption below these two survey estimates is neither possible nor desirable. Levels of student poverty are already significantly high with a growing proportion of students regularly forgoing meals (National Union of Students, *Age* Sept 2006; AVCC pg 39).

**PROFILE OF STUDENT WORK: EXTENT AND NATURE**

Work is a highly significant factor in the lives of university students today. Both the AVCC national and the regional surveys found respectively between 70% and 66% of students work. The surveys also found that the national and regional student works similar hours (14.8 and 14.5 on average) and that they earn similar amounts of money. The annual income for students Australia-wide was estimated to be $12,560 and for regional students to be $12,695 (AVCC 2007 pg 12; Robbins 2006 pg 3). Another dimension of student work that should be of interest is whether it has any direct relevance to student study. The AVCC survey found that 68% of students perform work that is not related to their area of study. This situation was marginally worse for regionally located students where it was found 73% performed work that bore no relation to their study (AVCC pg 36; Robbins 2006 pg3). 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 is shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students employed at one or more jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of those students who work in paid employment the majority manage on the earnings from one job. However, what is alarming is that of regionally-based students who are working, nearly 30% feel the necessity to work at two or more jobs. Given the level of income earned by regional students and their patterns of expenditure it is fair to say that need forces students to cobble together such a demanding regime of work.

Another area of contrast between the national and regional surveys is in the employment status of student workers. By this it is meant whether students are employed as full-time, part-time or as 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 as well as the degree of worker security. These are important employment relations variables. From Table 2 below it is apparent student workers are almost exclusively casual or part-time. This status often signals worker vulnerability in terms of rewards and security.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full Time</th>
<th>Part Time</th>
<th>Casual</th>
<th>Contractor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVCC Survey</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Survey</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The regional survey of student workers examined the nature of student employment in much greater detail than the national or any other survey. As a result the material presented below comes from the regional survey unless otherwise stated. Amongst regionally-based students employment was concentrated in two main industries, retailing (28%) and hospitality (24%). Business & Finance and Other Services each employed 11% and 12% respectively. The rest of the student workers (25%) were evenly spread throughout the broad range of industries identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classification of industries. It was also found students were employed in a variety of different sized businesses. Small business employed 38% of student workers; medium size businesses 26%; large businesses 29%. Government only employed 6% while 1% were employed in no-for-profit enterprises. The large number of students employed by small to medium business is mostly to be expected, given the importance of small businesses to the Australian and regional economies. According to the ABS small business represent 97% of all enterprises and employ 47% of the national workforce. (ABS 2006 Cat 2321.0). On the other hand it was somewhat surprising that so many 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.

**IMPACT OF STUDENT WORK**

Combining study and work is not necessarily easy and will place pressure on the time-management skills of student workers. The Vice Chancellors’ Association national survey measured a range of impacts from ability to afford accommodation, food, travel and study expenses. It also found that 22% of full-time undergraduate students regularly missed class because of work commitments and 40% believed work adversely affected their study (AVCC pg 31). In contrast, the regional survey found that 17% of students felt work had a negative impact of their class attendance while 53% felt
that work negatively impacted on their ability to study out of class. Moreover, of those whose attendance was adversely affected, most claimed this was relatively minor. On the other hand the impact on study was considered a much more serious problem by many more students. The reason for this is apparent from the spread of student working hours in Table 3.

Table 3
Spread of Student Working Hours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>9 to 5</th>
<th>After 5.00pm</th>
<th>Weekends</th>
<th>No Regular hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 9.00am</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 5</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 5.00pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Regular hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the significant number of students whose hours of work fall regularly between 9.00am and 5.00pm it is surprising that so few complain of missing classes. However the proportion of students working no regular hours or after 5.00pm makes the negative impact of study commitment more understandable.

The findings of both surveys indicate that student work is often in direct competition with student educational experiences and that student employment has, by and large, a negative impact. From this it follows that an increase in student work commitments 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 commitment. The regional survey results also emphasise 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; that is, the educational principles of life-long learning.
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. However, the regional survey also identified the range of arrangements under which student workers are employed and these are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

Employment Arrangement, in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Contract</th>
<th>Australian Workplace Agree’t</th>
<th>Enterprise Agree’t</th>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Verbal Agree’t</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be of some concern, at least to employment relations academics, that 11% of respondents “Don’t Know” under what arrangement they are employed. This figure may also be understated given the large number of respondents did not answer this question. Ignorance of the terms used may be an obvious explanation. The real importance of these figures is that they suggest students do not significantly participate 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 addressed collectively and formally by trade union representation, even for non-members (Peetz 1998). On the other hand, arrangements such as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) and contracts, written and verbal, are by their nature individual and should, according to supporters of the Work Choices Act, involve genuine negotiations by an employer and employee over work arrangements and rewards (Andrews 2006). However the survey found that no student with an AWA had negotiated the content with their employer and only about 1% with an individual contract had engaged in any negotiations. In
this way the survey suggests that individual contracts for casual and part-time student workers under Work Choices are take-it-or-leave offers by employers.

Despite the lack of influence over the terms and conditions of their employment few students are members of a trade union. The regional survey found that only 12% of student workers were members of a union, 82% were not members and 6% did not answer this question. These figures are considerably below the national membership level of around 22% (ABS 2006 Cat. 6310.0). However, the level of student membership of unions is actually not so far from the national private sector density level of 17% (ABS 2006 Cat. 6310.0); over 90% 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 (Bamber, Lansbury & Wailes 2004; Peetz 1998).

The survey asked those student workers who are members of a union why they joined and only 2% 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opposed to Unions</th>
<th>Not Worth It</th>
<th>Never Asked</th>
<th>Don’t Care</th>
<th>Don’t Dare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are a number of interesting issues that can be drawn from these figures. The fact only 7% did not join because they were opposed to unions should offer some solace to unions. On the other
hand, that 14% felt it was not worth joining may be rational given the precarious, short term nature of most student employment and the fact it had little relevance to their study and future career prospects. Similarly, the 20% 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 & Iversen 2006: 105). The small percentage of students who Don’t Dare join because their employer would disapprove, may reflect the nature of small business employment.

Most significant of all is the 54% who claim they have not joined a union because they had not been asked (c/w Biddle et al 2000; Allan, Bamber & Oliver 2006). While this reflects a certain level of passivity on the part of these student workers it also reflects on union organisation and recruitment strategies. As will be seen below, not being asked or recruited reflects the lack of union presence in most of the places where students work. On the other hand, this attitude also suggests the ACTU’s recruitment strategies have some logic and appeal. If unions could only make contact more effectively student workers may be more willing to join a union. There is not an ingrained hostility to unions preventing the consideration of a recruitment approach. Perhaps the problem is trying to recruit only in workplaces and that an alternative site might be in universities themselves (Oliver 2005 pg 414).

An additional but related question asked by the regional survey explored what would make student workers join a union. A significant number, 18%, thought that a direct recruitment approach would make them join a union which is interesting because this figure is nowhere near the number (54%) who claimed they hadn’t joined because they were never asked. Clearly the large percentage who seemed vexed by not being approached will not translate directly into members even if they are
approached. Or at least, that will not be the only or even major reason for joining a union. This suggests that the Representation Gap is a more complex issue than perhaps first thought (Allan, Bamber & Olver 2006 pg 30).

The survey also found there might indeed be more fundamental reasons for joining a union. These are outlined in Table 6. Reflection on the weighting given to these reasons suggests the traditional protections offered by unionism are still strongly perceived. In this survey 43% identified basic economic and wage issues as reasons which might make them join a union. In other words the fall in unemployment, the steady rise in wages and the seemingly easy mobility offered by good national economic performance may have reduced the appeal of unions. A return to more difficult employment conditions and prospects may therefore be a harbinger of a new demand for union membership in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Uncertainty</th>
<th>Poor Wages &amp; Conditions</th>
<th>Union Services</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, the fact that 18% of students wanted to be asked and a further 30% identified appeal in union services suggests that for nearly half of student workers the models of recruitment and servicing have appeal.
A final area that was explored by this survey was the visibility of unions in the workplaces of student workers. Asked whether there was a union representative in the workplace 49% said they ‘Didn’t Know’, 32% said ‘No’ and 19% said ‘Yes’. The fact so many student workers are unaware of union presence is not really so surprising. A related question was whether student workers had ever ‘Seen’ a union representative in their workplace and the results of this were predictable. It was found that 18% of students had seen a union representative while 82% 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% of students work in small businesses where an active union presence is unlikely. However, even in larger sized businesses many students still seem ignorant of the union. This is probably largely due to the nature of student employment. As most (72%) are casual employees many students would not necessarily have much ‘quality’ or mainstream contact with their workplaces and fellow workers even if there was an active union. The survey also found that only 36% 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. This means they are really a non-core workforce. The student perception of the virtual invisibility of unions in their workplaces may also reflect the reality that casual student workers are also invisible to workplace union structures.

CONCLUSION

Student work in paid employment is increasing and is beginning to impact negatively on study commitments. This growth in paid employment is fuelled by the lack of adequate government assistance and support. Less than half of university students receive support from the government and even fewer receive a living allowance. It was also found that families or partners were probably not able to greatly increase the level of support from that which they already give. For families to offer more significant support students will probably have to live at home. In Australia this is not
always possible. The decline in government support and the limitations in family support mean students have to support themselves by taking paid employment, which they try to fit around their study and class times. The impact on both class attendance and study commitments is negative, particularly on the latter. On the other hand, estimates of student living expenses also make it clear they are not working to maintain lavish lifestyles but are working largely to pay for basic necessities. More importantly, there is little likelihood of students being able to curtail their living expenses, to reduce their spending unless there is an increase in the level of subsidised accommodation, meals and study costs by either families, universities or governments.

Given that a significant level of student sustenance is derived from paid employment the industrial relations environment is now critical. However, levels of student pay are not determined by social considerations, need or by 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 largely in areas of employment which are lowly paid and insecure (Brosnan & Loudoun 2006: 94). Casual hospitality and retailing jobs are either not greatly regulated by public minimums or the regulation of them is being weakened. Indeed, the eclipse of the AIRC under the Work Choices Act has diminished the public scrutiny of the employment of the lowest and most marginalised members of our workforce (Peetz 2006). The loss of unfair dismissal protection under Work Choices is another example of the lower protection afforded marginal employees in the current employment environment. Further, this new industrial relations legislation encourages the employment of workers on individual contracts whose content is not easily influenced by student workers (Rice & Davies 2006). The regional survey found that there is alarmingly little interaction and negotiation by student workers with their employers over the terms and conditions of employment.
The declining level of protection of casual and part time student workers is exasperated by their low level of unionisation. Only 12% of student workers are likely to be members of a union and therefore most are unable to rely on either collective or individual representation in bargaining over employment or for advice and assistance. Again, the new legislation, by restricting union workplace visits, reduces the ability of unions to offer their services and protections. Even where there is a union presence poor organisational structures and communication may be minimising the role or visibility of unions. However the low rate of union density amongst university student workers seems 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.

In conclusion it should also be noted that the employment of growing numbers of university students in low paid, casual, non-unionised and insecure jobs which demand little skill is not accidental. It is being created by the inadequacy of government and family assistance. The levels of family support cannot be easily increased. However government support can; this is a political issue. Finally, today is a challenging time to be a university student because increasingly most are also required to be a worker. Students may now be learning about the world of work but there is the danger that this new source of knowledge is being gained at the expense of academic learning (McInnis 2002). The mix of work and study is not simply difficult to blend it is also increasingly inefficient.

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