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Student Workers and Trade Unions: a preliminary report of findings

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Abstract

This paper reports the finding of a late 2006 survey into the paid employment experiences of students at a large regional university. The objectives of the survey were multi-faceted but in this paper the focus is specifically on industrial relations implications and issues. The study found that 66% of students are now working one or more jobs in any given week and that most of these jobs were casual and located in retailing and hospitality. However the concern is that the minimum wages and conditions offered by this type of employment are increasingly less regulated or protected by either legislation or organisations like the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. On the other hand, new types of employment arrangements such as AWAs are apparent amongst student workers but there is no sign that these are determined by any interactive negotiation. The survey also found a low level of union membership amongst these types of workers, a reality which further reduces the levels of protection under which they work. Despite their low rate of membership the study found there was little ingrained hostility to unions and that many would, under different circumstances, be prepared to join a union. In examining the perception of unions held by student workers the study found unions were often invisible while there is also the hint that student workers may, in some workplaces, be invisible to unions.

Introduction

This paper analyses the work and industrial relations issues raised by a survey into the paid work commitments of undergraduate university students. At the one level this survey highlights the growing commitment students are required to make to paid employment in order to self-finance their study. It was found that 66% of undergraduate students work. However, the central focus of this analysis is on the arrangements these young workers are employed under and their attitudes toward trade unions. As expected over 70% of those students who performed paid work did so as casuals while only 12% of them are members of a trade union. The paper attempts to explain why there is such a low level of union membership amongst these young workers, what their attitude toward unions is, what might induce them to join a union, why they wouldn't join a union and what the level of union visibility is in the workplaces these workers are commonly employed.

In this way the discussion here involves the preliminary presentation of results which will contribute to the theory of why people join unions. This is a critical issue for the trade union movement in Australia, and indeed in most developed economies in the world. Union density levels are generally at historic lows and it is only with enormous efforts that trade unions have been able to arrest the downward spiral of membership. On the other hand young workers aged between 18 and 25 years are a significant segment of the national workforce but are not members of trade unions to anywhere near the same degree as older workers (ABS 2006). Indeed there are signs that union membership is being confined to older workers (both male and female) in public sector employment. The realisation that young workers are increasingly less likely to join a union has at least in part motivated recruitment drives organised through the ACTU in last decade.

Interest in this project arose from anecdotal observations that more students were working in paid employment for longer hours than in the past and that few seemed to be aware of their employment relationships or rights at work. The implications of these trends for university educators, employers and trade unions are more than apparent. This study involved a 50 question questionnaire which was distributed to students via their lectures. It was a confidential survey which

does not identify individual respondents in any recognisable way. Thus far there have been 239 respondents mostly from the Bathurst (49%) and Albury (46%) campuses and a few located in Dubbo and Orange. The survey also identified where students came from, their family income levels, the occupations of parents, their attitude to unions and their voting preferences. In a final survey analysis these correlations will be tested against student attitudes to trade unions although some brief comments are offered at the end of this paper.

Literature

The literature examined for this paper fell into two broad groups: firstly that dealing with the generic growth in paid employment amongst university students and secondly, the literature dealing with union membership theory and the attitude of student workers to trade unions.

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. Time spent on campus by these students was estimated to be 4 days and the class contact times for them was 17.6 hours per week. This survey did not, however, explore the industrial relations implications of the work experience of students.

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. Days spent on campus by students fell by 11% while contact hours had reduced slightly to 17.1 per week. The implications of the contrast between the 1994 and the 1999 studies is that there is a growing incidence in student reliance on paid employment. This growth was interpreted as having a negative impact on the quality of student on-campus life and their study patterns.

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 university was only around 150. The same researchers conducted yet another survey in 2001 although this time with only second and later year undergraduate full time students (McInnis & Hartley 2002; McInnis 2002). Although there was a regional university included in this survey there was little specific breakdown in the report which identified the experience of students enrolled at this university. The objective of the study reported in this paper is not to challenge the so-called national studies but to supplement them and to offer more comprehensive perspectives on the broad implications attached to the growth in student paid employment.

In contrast there is now a very comprehensive body of literature 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 people join unions in response to frustration or dissatisfaction in the workplace; Interactionist Theory suggest people join unions because they possess ideological beliefs generated by their social context 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 across all workers in 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 unionist 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, Croce, LeQueux, Rowe & Stevenson 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 (2005:413) 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: 30) found a similar result in their study of student workers in the fast food industry.

In this regional study it was found that only 12% of student workers were members of a trade union. Unfortunately there are no estimates of earlier levels of union membership amongst regionally based student workers but this slightly lower figure than those found elsewhere is unlikely to be the result of a greater fall in union density. It probably simply reflects the more conservative nature of employment in regional business. On the other hand, like student workers elsewhere, it was found that over 70% of those students who work are employed on a casual basis and that their hours are outside the standard spread of working hours.

Profile of Student Workers

The students surveyed were all undergraduates of whom 92% were studying full time and 8% part time. Of the respondents 88% were Higher Education Contribution (HECs) students and 12% Fee Paying students. The range of ages covered by the questionnaire were from 18 to 25 plus. The average age was 20 while the spread of age was uniform and as expected. The work experience of different age groups does not appear to be significantly different. Students aged 18 appear to be as likely to work as students aged 21. Older students, those over 25, are perhaps more likely to be working longer hours and in better paying jobs because they more often have a broader range of financial and familial responsibilities to balance and more employment skills to offer. The gender mix of respondents was 43% male and 57% female which is in line with the gender mix of all student enrolments for Charles Sturt University as a whole (CSU 2005). Students in the survey came mostly (77%) from non-metropolitan locations.

The survey examined that area of student Support and Assistance in two different ways, the level of government support and the level of family support. The Level of Government support was, in broad terms, as might be expected with 43% of students receiving some financial support from the federal government and 55% receiving none. There was no direct indication of how much government assistance was given to the students from the federal government but from hours of work, earnings and expenditure levels it is clear that few students received a full living allowance. In contrast, 23% of students

received no support from their family, 23% received occasional assistance, 16% received small but regular assistance, 17% enjoyed substantial support on a regular basis while 18% of respondents received complete support from their family. This latter was composed mainly of students who lived at home. The most common places students live are at home (30%), in Shared accommodation (26%) and in University accommodation (22%).

The survey found that student income levels earned by paid employment varied from \$800 to \$50 per week. The higher income figures invariably related to part time students who were working full time. Nevertheless the average weekly earnings of students who worked was \$244.76. The average hours that students worked to earn this was 14.5 per week. Table 1 indicates student expenditure on a variety of basic costs.

Table 1: Estimates of Student Expenditure in \$s

Accom'	Food	Utilities	Phone	Entertain' t	Study	Transport
\$99	\$62	\$43	\$19	\$52	\$19	\$33

From these figures it is clear that the basic costs of accommodation food and basic living expenses represent the great bulk of student expenditure. The entertainment expense of \$52 does not suggest a lavish lifestyle. There is, therefore, no support in these figures for the notion that students are working in order to enjoy a consumer fuelled existence.

Profile of Student Work: extent and nature

Work is a highly significant factor in the lives of university students. It was found that 66% of respondents were employed in paid work of some kind. This contrasts with the 1994 national study which found 43% of students worked while in 1999 this had risen to 51% (McInnes 2002; McInnes, James & Hartley 2000; Lucas & Lammont 1998). It was also found that of those who worked, over 73% of respondents performed work that bore no relation to their area of study. On the other hand 22% indicated that their work was related to their area of study while 4% did not answer this question.

As Table 2 shows, the number of jobs held by those respondents who worked varied considerably.

Table 2: Number of Jobs Held by Student Workers in percentages

1 Job	2 Jobs	More than 2 Jobs
71%	14%	15%

It is alarming that so many (nearly 30%) feel the need to work two or more jobs in order to support themselves.

Student 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 rest of the industries identified by the ABS classification of industries. Students were employed in a variety of different sized businesses but it was surprising that so many worked in a large or medium sized enterprise. This demands some reflection given that the small business sector is such a dominant form of business in the Australian and regional economies; they represent 97% of all enterprises and employ 47% of the national workforce. (ABS 2006; Robbins, Murphy & Petzke 2004). In contrast, the survey found that 38% of students worked for a small business, 26% for a medium sized business and 29% for a large business. This spread probably reflects the dominance of retailing by large national corporations. It is also apparent that most students who are working are employed by the private sector of Australian business rather than the public or not-for-profit sectors. Only 6% of students were employed in the public sector. This would surely reflect the fact that the private sector has the majority of the part-time and casual jobs in the Australian economy (ABS 2006).

Industrial Relations Issues

The survey also examined how student workers were employed and under what arrangements their employment was regulated or stipulated. Table 3 shows most students are employed as casuals and part-timers.

Table 3: How Student Workers are Employed, in percentages

Casual	Part Time	Full Time	Contractor
72%	14%	10%	3%

The 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

Written Contract	AWA	Ent. Agree't	Award	Verbal Agree't	Don't Know	No Answer
17%	6%	6%	23%	25	11%	22%

It should be of some concern, at least to IR 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.

From the survey it is apparent that 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 the employer the interests of employees are nevertheless addressed collectively and formally by trade union representation, even for non-members (Peetz 1998). On the other hand arrangements such as AWAs and contracts both written and verbal, are by their nature individual and should, according to supporters of the Work Choices Act, involve genuine negotiations over work arrangements and rewards which reflect and balance the interests of both employee and employer (Andrews 2006). They should, in other words, explicitly reflect the outcome of employee and employer *negotiations*. However the survey found that no student with an AWA had negotiated the content with their employer. This should alarm the supporters of the choices made available in the WorkChoices Act. This is evidence that AWAs

operate at take-it-or-leave it negotiations for student workers and perhaps, therefore, all other casual employees (Rice & Davies 2006).

Despite the lack of influence over the terms and conditions of their employment few students are members of a trade union. The survey found that only 12% of student workers were members of a union, 82% were not members and 6% did not answer. These figures are considerably below the national membership level of around 22% (ABS 2006). However, the level of student membership of unions is actually not so far from the national private sector union density level of 17% (ABS 2006); 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: Why Students Did Not Join Unions, in percentages

Opposed to Unions	Not Worth It	Never Asked	Don't Care	Don't Dare
7%	14%	54%	20%	4%

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 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 to join because their employer would disapprove may reflect the nature of small business employment. Such fears could, of course, be resolved through the WorkChoices Act because it so firmly enshrines "freedom of association".

Most significant of all is the 54% who claim they have not joined a union because they had not been asked. This confirms the findings in other studies (Biddle *et al* 2000; Allan, Bamber & Oliver 2006). While this reflects a certainly 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 2005:414).

An additional but related question asked by the 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 a union 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: 30).

The survey found there might indeed be more fundamental, reasons for joining a union. These are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6: Reasons Why Student Workers Might Join Unions, in percentages

Economic Uncertainty	Poor Wages & Conditions	Union Services	Don't Know	No Answer
17%	36%	30%	9%	8%

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. 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. These sometimes competing models of union membership regeneration are not insignificant strategies and it would seem the union movement was right to debate and utilise them.

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" there was. The fact so many student workers are unaware of union presence is perhaps 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 not a regular fixed set of 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 students surveyed receive support from the government and even fewer receive

a living allowance. It was also found that 46% of students receive no support or only occasional assistance from their families. Students have to support themselves and they do this by taking paid employment which they try to fit around their study and class times. Estimates of student living expenses also make it clear they are not working to maintain lavish lifestyles. Past generations of frugal university students should be well able to relate to the standards of living enjoyed and earned by today's university student.

Given that a significant level of student sustenance is derived from their paid employment the industrial relations environment is now critical to their well being. The levels of student pay are determined not by higher education processes and concerns but 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 by the erosion of awards. Indeed, the eclipse of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission under the WorkChoice 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 WorkChoices is another example of the lower protection afforded marginal employees in the current employment environment. Further, new industrial relations legislation encourages the employment of workers on individual contracts, either private or in the form of the AWA. However, these are mechanisms of employment which are increasingly difficult for workers to effectively influence (Rice & Davies 2006). This survey found that there is alarmingly little interaction and negotiation by student workers with their employers. The contracts or AWAs under which students work appear to be take-it-or-leave-it arrangements and as such are unlikely to reflect their interests and needs. This is also borne out implicitly by the survey in that some students appear unable even to arrange work around their class attendance.

The declining level of protection of casual and part time student workers is exasperated by their low level of unionisation. Only 12% are members of a union and therefore 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 further 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 fact, even if they were unionised the nature of many student jobs would continue to make it difficult for unions to represent and protect these types of members.

In contrast, while student workers seem alarmingly ignorant of industrial relations generally they are not inherently hostile to the notion of trade unions. There is no marked ideological hostility even though the vast majority of students come from coalition voting families with little or no contact with unions. Indeed, the fact that so many of the student workers who come from political and industrially conservative backgrounds still seem prepared to contemplate the possibility of joining a union in certain circumstances casts a shadow on the effect of socialisation (Buttigieg, Deery & Ivesen 2006). On the other hand, few student workers have been approached to join a union and the level of so-called apathy therefore has a certain logic to it. There is an understandable reluctance to antagonise an employer by joining a union in an occupation or job that has only very short term importance to the student. The most significant reason why student workers did not join a union was that they had no opportunity to do so. However, union approaches to student workers may not translate into a rush to join. Recruitment strategies are important but there are other motives in play as well. The appeal of unions, for example, is still firmly associated with such traditional concerns as low wages and uncertain conditions. It may also require work at a career or less favourable economic conditions to prioritise the joining of a union.

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 figures on the relatively mixed levels of family support suggests that this cannot be easily increased. However government support presumably can and that it is not is a prime reason for the increased participation rates of students. It may be too dramatic to describe the growth in student paid employment as the creation of a reserve army of workers but it is nevertheless part of a deliberate and conscious policy.

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