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WORK ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THEIR STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Work engagement and studying, are shown as two parallel but also simultaneous tracks. The theory and the researches connected with the analysis are showing that the work engagement

during the study, affects the quality of the study. In most cases the effects have been negative, that is, the result is avoiding the performance of student tasks, insufficient dedication to studies, in some cases even leaving the studies. Things have changed - something once considered as a harm to the quality of education nowadays, working engagement during studies is appreciated and respected. We are outlining what working engagement during studies really represents, why do we observe it, what is its value in the course of studying, what is the widest range of modalities in which it occurs and so on. Upon theoretical basis and different country practices, we conduct primary research (survey, interviews and ethnography) for today's modern developments on the cultural-economical-societal-environmental-technical front where young people are manoeuvring the levers of studying and working, at the same time. Our conclusions and recommendations are towards the most appropriate combination of work and studies are presented, the source of which are the insights of the respondents and what the co-authors learned for themselves.

Keywords: Work during studies, studying, students, citizen science, student jobs

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, us youngsters, we live in a modern society in which there's almost no place for repetitive stuff, outdated thinking and almost everything that's traditional. We live one life, we choose one profession and one direction in which we want to walk. Pressed by the hectic everyday events, family worries and our own worries and problems, we often forget that reality can be brighter and more beautiful, inspired by the modern, but also by the traditional and lead towards more than one direction.

But, we are witnessing this new time of dynamics and changes. If the statement that was known previously was, "learn, so you know", nowadays more acceptable would be "experience it and you will know". Therefore, this paper will be written about a current topic that dominates among young people. The attitude of the young people towards this topic is massive and almost identical. Youth working engagement during studies or student job, is one challenging topic that triggers more discussions and directions, which lead to analysis of the situations, understanding the reasons why young people enter working engagement during studies and why not, and also discovering positive and negative sides of working and studying combination, as well as youth's potentials for the future, all in the context of our country, as part of the Western Balkans and Europe.

At the very beginning, theoretical approaches were reviewed, as well as, each of the previously made researches on this topic. And yes, there is lots of research that shows the depth and the weight of the problem. About the significance of these two parameters, that are working engagement and studying, and their mutual influence, we find out from the analysis of the research.

In fact, the context of this research is student employment, where respondents are primarily students of the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola, and, through the snowballing technique, also, all other students from all faculties throughout the Republic of North Macedonia. The aim is, primarily, to describe the problem and to highlight the importance of the situation. Through respondents' shared experiences, this paper will highlight whether, how and why it is necessary for the combination of working and studying to exist.

METHODOLOGY

The research of working engagement of students, was conducted to answer our research challenge, which is: (1) What does 'working engagement during studies' mean, (2) what sort of modalities we have in our, but also in other countries, and (3) which are the positive and

negative effects and potentials for students' professional carrier. Our approach towards this problem, especially the research and the writing of this paper is within the framework of citizen science (University of Reading 2022), whereby as a group of co-authors we have conducted open collaboration using a shared document and cloud forms, communication channels and crossing of individual and team productions, so that we could complete the research, as well as, this paper, which is a new and unusual experience compared to individual work.

Following a qualitative methodology (Bryman, A 2006), with elements of ethnography (Britannica n.d.), based on the knowledge of theory and literature analysis about this problem, as well as, practices of other countries in the region (Slovenia and Croatia), and our own experiences and viewpoints, we made semi-structured questionnaire, which was a base for survey with the snowball method (Question Pro n.d.) and interviewing where 141 respondents were included. They were from the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola, as well as from other state and private universities across the country. Later on, we conducted a comparative analysis, thematic analysis, with quantitative indicators and meaningful in-depth analysis. All these findings from the theory, practice, as well as, from primary and secondary sources, enabled discussion, conclusions and recommendations for explaining the problem that is working engagement during studies and improving the potentials of the problem, both for those involved - the students, as well as for the faculties, universities and institutions of the system in the country.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

The interest in this issue began through the initial encounters with existing research. For our study, the analysis of Marsh's (1991) research was particularly significant. Both his study and the broader theoretical framework indicate that the greater the work engagement of students during their studies, the lower the quality of education they receive. The reason for this is the stress, pressure, and fatigue that, consciously or unconsciously, become part of every student with a work commitment. This, in turn, results in a lack of dedication to studies and a tendency to avoid academic activities and tasks. These analyses also highlight both the positive and negative effects of combining work and studies. The positive effects are reflected in the improved standard of living and enhanced social status of students. The negative effects often manifest in students becoming overly fascinated with the financial compensation they receive. As a result, they tend to neglect academic responsibilities, fail to dedicate themselves to their educational progress, and, in some cases, even decide to abandon their studies altogether. Among other existing studies and conducted analyses that examine students' motivations for engaging in work and the timing of such decisions, an interesting finding is that some research suggests students who decide to work during their studies do not necessarily consider their level of academic progress. As a result, both final-year students and first-year students are equally involved in work commitments. However, analyses have also shown that the negative effects of working while studying decrease as students advance in their studies and approach graduation (Kamp 2021).

Nevertheless, modern life presents a different perspective on values. While in the past, working while studying was considered detrimental to education, today, it is increasingly valued. It has been proven that this combination has significantly more positive effects than negative ones. It allows students to gain new knowledge, experiences, and skills that cannot be acquired solely through theoretical and formal education.

Theoretical aspects of work during studies

Today, working alongside studying is common, with around half of all students taking up paid work at some point during their studies globally. There are various reasons why students

work, including gaining professional experience to help them prepare for their careers after graduation and earn their own money so they can function independently (Indeed n.d.).

A student, who is allowed ie. enabled to work while studying and use the money earned to pay for his studies doing work while studying. It also has other meanings such as: providing work experience, training, additional knowledge, skills, exchange of thought ideas, developing the communication skills, etc. With the work itself, students learn how to manage money, that is, make important decisions in the way they will use it.

Part of the students proactively voluntarily (without being forced from basic income earning circumstances) work to provide new experiences, knowledge, skills (leadership, verbal communication, cooperation and teamwork work), as well as additional income that they can use for travel, vacations, related expenses with studying, looking for networking opportunities, that is, the opportunity to develop professional relationships or friendships that would be useful in the career. But the majority of students are forced to work due to poor financial conditions in order to overcome it during their studies, that is, to be able to pay for their studies.

In the Republic North Macedonia, some of the students work due to lack of financial resources and funds during studying to be able to overcome the problems and costs such as tuition, books, accommodation and other costs that students face during study.

Experiences from Other Countries and the Western Balkans Region

Unemployment and the inability to cover the costs associated with studying are the main reasons why students work during their studies in the Western Balkans.

Besides the mentioned benefits, student employment can also have downsides, such as the inability to attend lectures, which drastically affects the student's knowledge. As a result, this may lead to repeating a year or poor results in final assessments. Additionally, working while studying limits the student's time, reducing opportunities to participate in social events and gatherings, leaving less time for studying and attending courses. Moreover, simultaneously working and studying causes increased stress and exhaustion, and the time spent with family becomes very limited.

In the Western Balkans, labor market performance is a major concern, with youth unemployment rates ranging from 30% to 50% (World Bank 2022). "More than one-third of young people under 25 are unemployed in Montenegro and Albania, more than two-fifths in Serbia and North Macedonia, more than half in Kosovo, and over three-fifths in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Erasmus-Plus n.d.) In an ecosystem that must operate at multiple levels, factors such as poor coordination among different stakeholders, inadequate skills development among young people, and migration trends all play a role. Consequently, alignment with European cohesion policy, the European Social Fund, the Youth Employment Initiative, and the European Regional Development Fund must take place (European Commission n.d.).

For the analysis of conditions in more developed countries in the region, Slovenia and Croatia will be included as EU member states that share many characteristics, including geographic proximity, student mobility, and similar factors.

Student work in Slovenia is a type of employment intended for all enrolled domestic and foreign students at Slovenian higher education institutions. Through student work, the state enables students to actively participate in the labor market, allowing them to gain work experience and competencies before graduation—unlike in our country, where full-time students are restricted from working.

Slovenia is one of the few countries in the EU and worldwide that allows students to work up to 40 hours per week. All full-time and part-time students enrolled in higher education institutions in Slovenia have the right to such employment. In contrast, in Macedonia, if a student is employed, they can only enroll in university as a part-time student (University "St.

Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola 2022). Although student work is not considered formal employment, the state recognizes it as work experience.

The available jobs can be either short-term or long-term. Students can choose from a wide variety of job types. Some of the opportunities include sales, service industry jobs, translation, programming, administrative work, promotions, tastings, jobs in hospitality, and more. The student's working hours depend on the employer's needs and the student's available time. These conditions are agreed upon in a mutual contract, which defines the student's workload and all working conditions. Once the contract is signed, the employer is required to sign and stamp the referral form issued by the student service.

This type of student employment has significant benefits for students. One of them is gaining work experience with different employers, which can later be used for regular employment. Any knowledge acquired during student work greatly influences personal and professional development.

In Croatia, the high number of students in higher education is due to the fact that good employment opportunities with only a high school diploma are very limited. Therefore, higher education is necessary to reduce youth unemployment in Croatia. Young people in Croatia are aware of these trends, which is why they choose to pursue higher education and take advantage of the benefits it offers. Some students choose higher education because it allows them to work while being enrolled at a university. In some cases, students enroll in university for entirely different reasons (Cavar 2018).

In our country, there are laws regulating internships (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021) and volunteering (Parlament Of The Republic Of North Macedonia 2021), while the Higher Education Law (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia 2018) defines the requirements for full-time study, the status of full-time students, the right to part-time study, and the status of part-time students, as well as the regulations for practical work. At the university and faculty level, there are specific rules (University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola 2019) regarding the conditions, criteria, and regulations for enrollment and studying at the first, second, and third cycles of education.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For the purposes of this research, based on theoretical concepts, learning from practices in other countries, and personal perspectives and viewpoints, we created a semi-structured questionnaire that served as the basis for gathering experiences from the University of St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola, as well as public and private universities from the entire country.

Upon analyzing the completed survey questionnaire, which was closed after receiving responses, we determined that it was answered by 141 respondents, leading us to specific conclusions.

Namely, out of a total of 141 responses, 64.5% of the respondents were aged between 18 and 22 years, 21.3% were between 23 and 26 years, 8.5% were over 30 years old, while the remaining respondents fell within the intermediate age ranges. The obtained results, which clearly show that the majority of respondents are aged 18–22, add even greater significance to this research, as the responses come from individuals for whom this topic is currently relevant. But which gender predominates in the responses?

Regarding gender, more than half of the respondents, or 64.5%, were female, while the remaining 35.5% were male.

Using the base of 141 respondents, we found that the majority, 55.3%, were from Prilep, 26.2% from Bitola, which are the cities our university has significant student population, while the remaining respondents were from Skopje, Kavadarci, Makedonski Brod, Kichevo, Ohrid, Strumica, Negotino, Tetovo, Kriva Palanka, and Resen. The demographic data is presented in Figure 4.1.

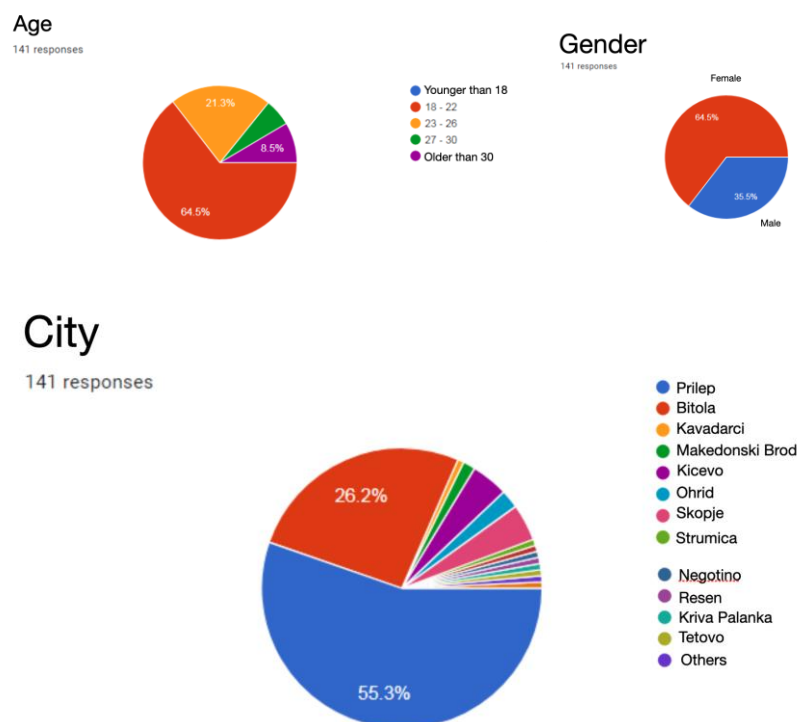


Figure 4.1. Demographic data (Source: Authors)

The female population responded more actively to the questions in our survey. We assume that the reason for the lower participation of the male population is that women are generally more active, responsive and engaged on questionnaires, quizzes, social media, whereas, during this period, men are predominantly focused on ongoing sports events.

Regarding the faculty at which respondents are studying or have studied, 54.7% are from the Faculty of Economics, while the remaining 45.3% come from different faculties from different public and private universities across the country (the Faculty of Security, FICT, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Pedagogy, Higher Medical School, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Technical Faculty, Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences, Faculty of Music Arts, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Medical Faculty at UKIM, Military Academy in Skopje, Faculty of Philology, etc.) This confirms that our survey was successfully conducted across a large part of the universities and academies in the country.

The majority of responses came from students of the Faculty of Economics, which we assume is due to the fact that, as authors, we study at the same faculty. This means that our social circle overlaps significantly, allowing us to reach more respondents from this faculty. However, this does not imply that the responses are only representative of this faculty; we are confident that the situation is similar for students across all faculties in the country.

The largest group of respondents, 29.8%, are already graduates and likely answered the survey based on their experiences during their studies. They are followed by second-year students with a 20.6% share, fourth-year students with 26.6%, third-year students with 14.2%, and first-year students with 9.2%.

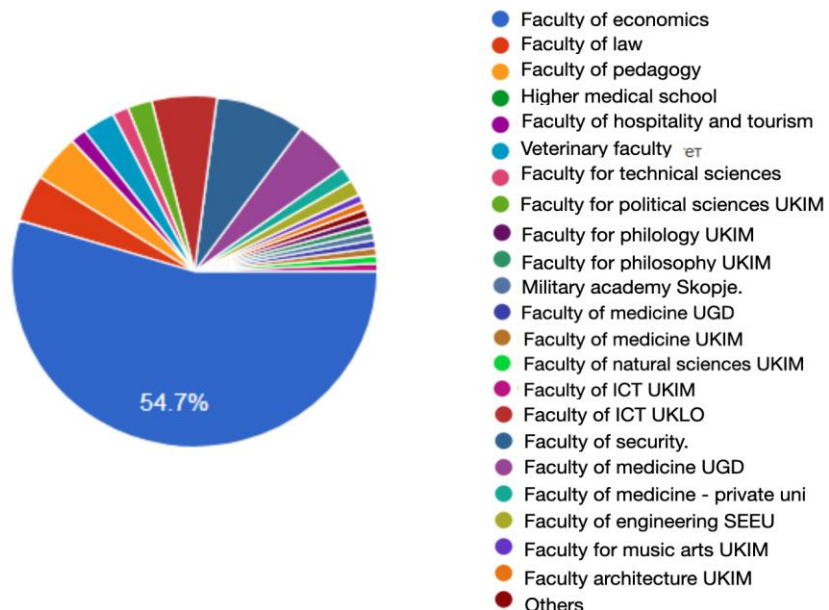
A total of 95.7% of respondents are full-time students, while the remaining 4.3% are part-time students or enrolled in the third cycle of studies, where there is no specific distinction between full-time and part-time status. These three categories are presented in Figure 4.2.

Our initial expectation was that part-time students would be more engaged in work commitments compared to full-time students, given their relatively freer schedules. However,

based on the responses, it is evident that even full-time students often work alongside their studies.

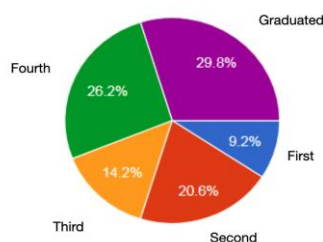
Faculty you are/have studied in

139 responses



Year of studies

141 responses



Status of enrolment

139 responses

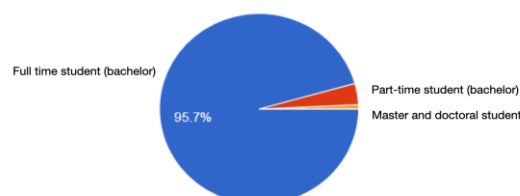


Figure 4.2. Dispersion of students per university/faculty, year and enrolment status (Source: Authors)

In the subsequent main section of the survey, questions were designed to assess employment engagement. Respondents could select multiple options (not just one), and the results show that the highest percentage—39%—stated that they had undertaken seasonal work. Additionally, 28% reported being informally employed, while 24% were employed full-time.

Lower percentages were recorded for part-time employment (10%) and participation in the "Work and Travel" program (11%). Other responses, accounting for 1%, included activities such as agriculture, family business, and practical training followed by informal employment, which still represents a form of work engagement (Figure 4.3).

Types of employment/engagement during studying

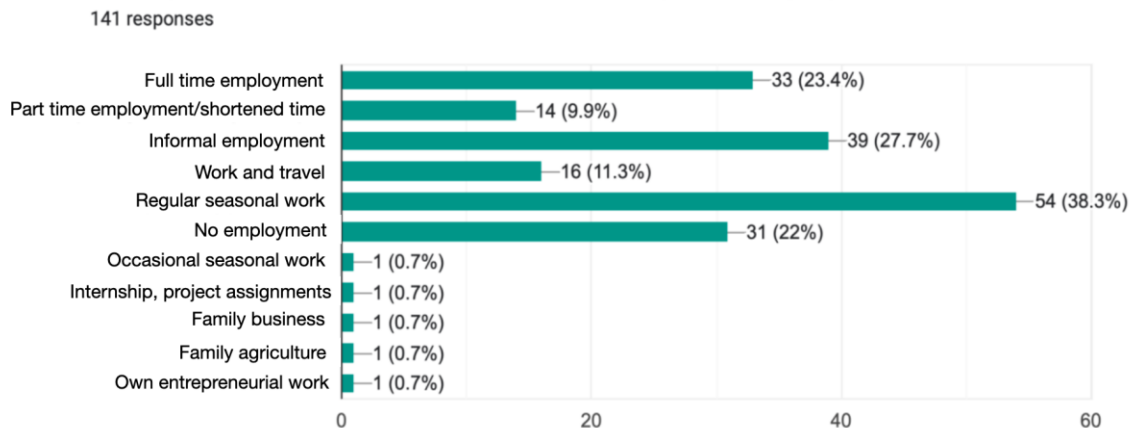


Figure 4.3. Modalities of engagement during studying (Source: Authors)

Of those employed, 64% carried out their work within the country at a specific geographical location, while 16% worked abroad. An equal percentage of respondents (8%) reported working online or in a hybrid mode (Figure 4.4).

Location of the work during studying

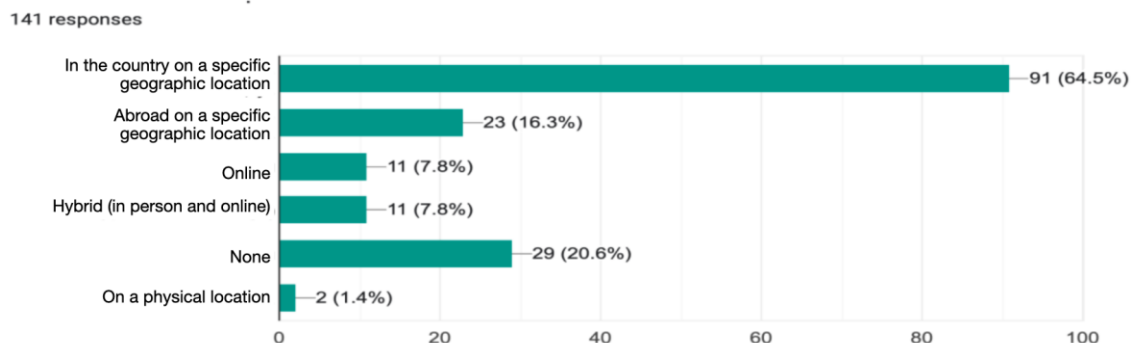


Figure 4.4. Location for the work while studying (Source: Authors)

The majority of respondents worked seasonally, which, in my opinion, is mainly due to the availability of free time during the summer. Naturally, when it comes to working in another country, the primary motivation for such employment is the significantly higher earnings compared to those in our country. Some respondents were informally employed, which can be attributed to the lack of responsibility from both employers and students. Employers often do not take formal employment seriously, while students may not qualify for scholarships or student meal benefits if they are officially employed. There were also respondents employed part-time, allowing them to earn a minimal income while still having enough time to focus on their studies.

In response to the question, "In which sector was/is your employment?", multiple options were provided, along with the possibility for respondents to add their own if none applied. The results were as follows: The largest portion of respondents (52 individuals) worked in tourism and hospitality, as this sector frequently requires workers, does not always demand previous experience, and offers flexibility in work schedules and conditions, 16 respondents were employed in agriculture and manufacturing sectors, 42 respondents worked

in the service sector, which is understandable since many people develop hobbies they monetize, such as beauty services, IT services, crafting decorations, etc., 1% of respondents were distributed across sectors like construction, marketing, trade, the non-governmental sector, and floristry, with these categories collectively representing 5% of the service sector (Figure 4.5).

Sector of work while studying

141 responses

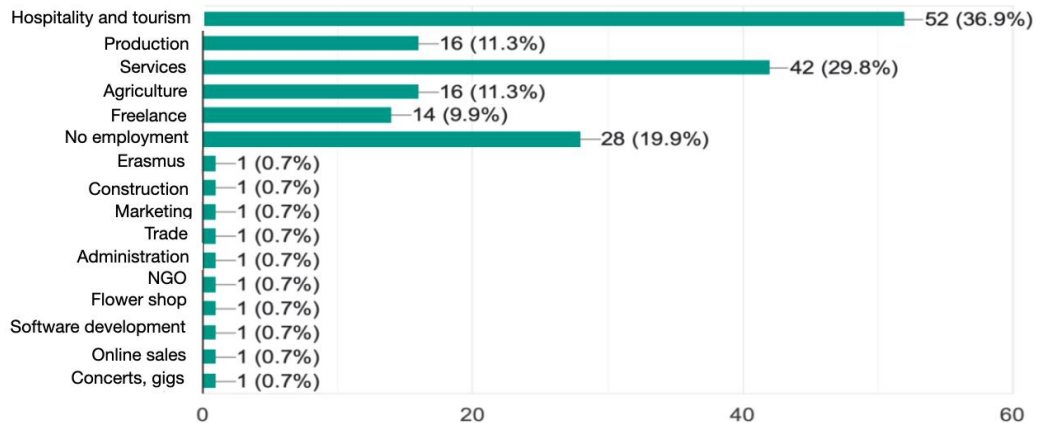


Figure 4.5. Sector (industry, civil-society, institutions, ...) of the workplace while studying (Source: Authors)

Respondents have various motivations for seeking employment during their studies. The primary motivation cited by 47% of respondents is gaining experience and skills, which is crucial for personal development, securing future job opportunities, and building a strong work ethic, 40% of respondents work to earn extra income, 33% rely on their employment as their main source of income, likely due to their desire for financial independence or to support their parents, who may not always have sufficient resources, 17% help in a family business.

In the 21-25% range, respondents also mentioned motivations such as: developing specific and additional competencies, networking, turning a hobby into a source of income, meeting new people, and the desire for independence (Figure 4.6).

Motivation to work while studying

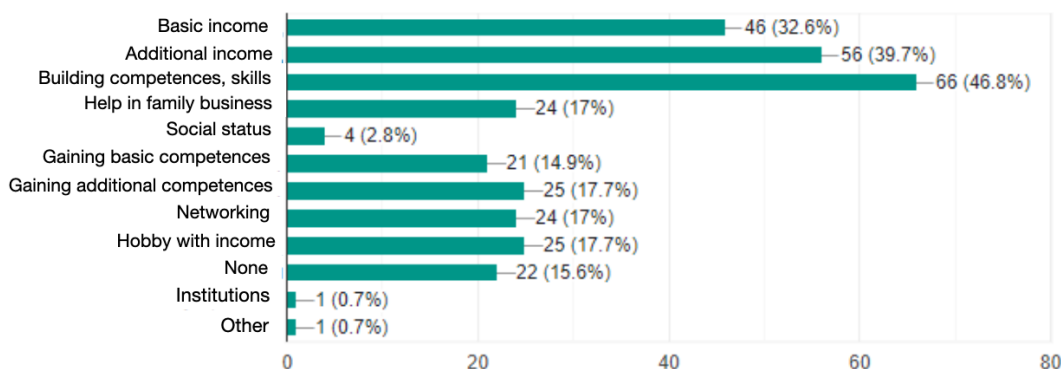


Figure 4.6. Motivation to work while studying (Source: Authors)

The majority of respondents rated their work engagement with a score of 5, or 41%, meaning they were satisfied with the working conditions and atmosphere during their

employment. The contract, relationships, and communication style with the manager, as well as with other employees, were important factors that influenced their decision to give such a rating.

Less than a quarter of respondents, or 20%, rated their work experience with a 4, while almost a third of respondents, i.e., 30%, were partially satisfied with their engagement, giving a score of 3. Finally, the least satisfied respondents, possibly due to additional stress or unmet expectations, were 11%, who expressed their (dis)satisfaction with a score of 1 or 2 (Figure 4.7).

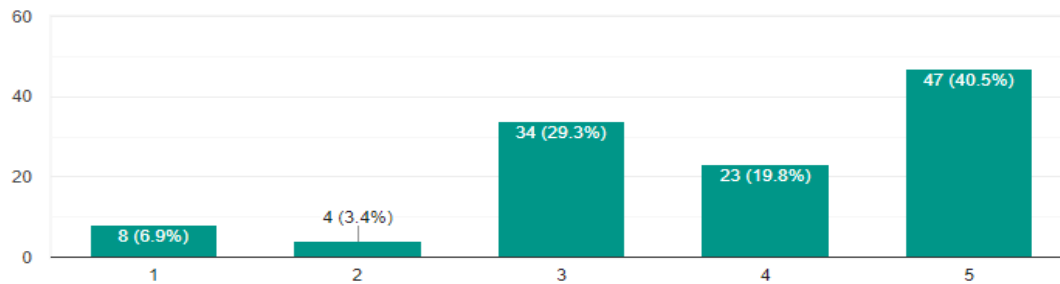


Figure 4.7. Grading the satisfaction (usefulness and the experience) of work while studying (1-bad, 5-excellent) (Source: Authors)

The respondents were given the opportunity to express their reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their work engagement during their studies with a brief elaboration. In the thematic analysis of the large number of responses, they were classified into groups, and the following were distinguished:

Expressed opinions for satisfaction:

- Gaining new experiences and competencies
- Productively filling free time
- Income, independence, and a certain degree of autonomy
- Love and desire for the job position
- Improved financial situation
- Excellent management and collegiality
- Flexible working hours

The expressed opinions for dissatisfaction overlap and fall into the categories: insufficient time to dedicate to studies, stress, and too much work.

After expressing their opinions, the respondents chose the ideal combination for work engagement and simultaneously studying as seasonal work, as during that period they are truly free. 47% agree with this answer, 39% believe that reduced working hours will allow them to both work and study, 21% express that they can only work during weekends, specifically on days when they don't have obligations at the university, 38% opt for physical studying and online work engagement, while 17% prefer the opposite situation. Only 10 out of the total number of respondents who indicated they have a work engagement, believe they can have full-time work engagement parallel to their studies (Figure 4.8).

Ideal combination for work during studies

141 responses

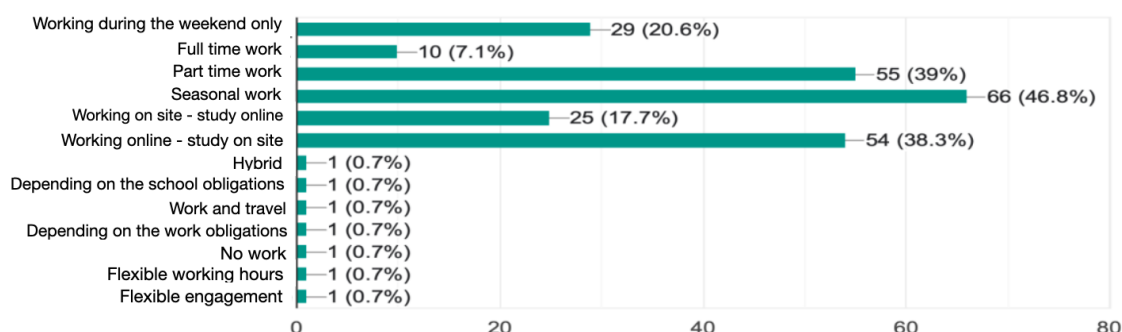


Figure 4.8. Ideal combination for work during studies (Source: Authors)

According to the thematic analysis conducted on the numerous responses regarding the reasons for not engaging in work, the main categories of reasons are distinguished as follows:

- Insufficient time
- Insufficient organization
- Insufficient experience
- Lack of interest, laziness
- Significant commitment to university

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Working during studies is often the first professional encounter and financial source for some students, but on the other hand, performing a job while studying can also affect your success due to insufficient dedication to studying. According to the research for our paper regarding students' work engagement during their studies, we can conclude that in our country most students work in order to fund their education. However, there are also other reasons and needs for work, such as the desire for autonomy or the ambition to gain work experience. A large part of the students work exclusively to earn money and gain more work experience, which actually allows them to gain independence from their parents, a very significant beginning of the process of autonomy. As students who have, at least at some point or during some period of our studies, faced part-time jobs, weekend jobs, or summer work, we recommend to future generations to gain work experience, even if the job is not directly related to their studies, as it allows you to enrich your CV and develop transversal skills that are highly sought after for an academic citizen.

From the surveys and interviews conducted, and according to the responses of the respondents, we can conclude that 65.4%, or most students, work in Macedonia, while 17.3% are students who work abroad. Half of our respondents work seasonal jobs, which means that students do not have enough free time to work full-time while studying. According to the area of work engagement, 38.3% of students work in tourism and hospitality, which means that employers in these sectors seek young, ambitious people, do not require prior experience, and at the same time, they compensate very well for the effort put in. On the other hand, this means that the majority of respondents who are students from economic fields do not have enough space, opportunities, or chances to gain work experience in their fields, and decide to take advantage of income opportunities in other areas, where their efforts will be valued and they will appreciate the given opportunity at the same time.

Recommendations

While we were writing this mentored student paper, we were able to consider lots of situations and problems in ways in which we have never thought before - through co-creation. We successfully pursued the original idea and the first vision that came to our mind as coauthors - the specific context of work during studies, until the very end, resulting with this research and conclusions. Between the presentation of this paper in 2022 and today, in 2025, the university introduced a rulebook and effectively validates extracurricular activities with ECTS and other ways of recognition and remuneration; our university was the first one in history of the country which became part of the European university alliance COLOURS which offers such engagements and activities for students; while our country has worked on a law which regulates work during studies. Hence, we can say that our work was the inception of a really important transformation for the status and benefits of the students in North Macedonia.

Although placed at the very end as the last paragraphs, the recommendations are no less important, as we believe they will capture attention and serve as a stimulus to eliminate or at least minimize the problems and obstacles in the functioning of the education system concerning work engagement in building students' knowledge, skills, and competencies for the labor market.

Some of the recommendations that students, including us, address to the Government and state institutions, Universities, and Faculties regarding work engagement during studies are listed here.

The Government and institutional system should offer programs for student employment, supporting student work engagement. This could include financial assistance for companies hiring students, modifications to learning programs, greater involvement of employers in student employment, and similar initiatives. The system should also prescribe more than on and off status for work during studying, as new trajectories (such as gig-work, seasonal jobs, part-time student jobs, internships and various engagements are very good modalities for students, employers and the economy).

Universities should ensure active and functional collaboration between faculties and the private sector, offering practical training with the possibility of student work in the field of their studies. There should be an option for students to enroll in university online, register for exams online, and make payments online to avoid wasting time waiting in lines at faculties or traveling across the country for a five minute activity in student affairs. For students from other cities, this would mean saving unnecessary travel expenses, time, and energy, and possibility to dedicate to a chunk of work instead.

Faculties should enable students to have their work recognized as an internship. They should also be more flexible with schedules, provide opportunities for additional student work, and collaborate with companies where students can apply their theoretical knowledge in practice while being paid and rewarded with additional credits for the internship. On the other hand, the potential of students in real jobs should be utilised to generate problem-based seminar works, research and education which acts as a lever for the win-win situation between academia and the real sector.

Imagine how well the well-known "Mini-job" program would function in our education system. Students would have the right to (student/part-time/gig) employment, be appropriately compensated, taxed less, receive discounts when shopping, possibly discounts in canteens for student meals, and similar benefits. Instead of outsourcing a café to manage the faculty's internal buffet, students could do it in shifts outside their lecture hours. Instead of hiring an external bookstore and copy shop to provide literature, students could work in the faculty second-hand bookshop. They could even be employed in a city kitchen offering meals for students and young people at affordable prices. They could provide economic, legal,

consulting, or marketing services while working in a virtual faculty office, all with appropriate compensation for their efforts.

A recommendation also goes to students, our colleagues—there are countless ways to gain applicable knowledge, skills, and competencies: working during studies, volunteering, participating in associations, projects, travel, organizations, hackathons, helping, getting involved, internships, assisting professors, advising colleagues in need, and many more opportunities. The key is to have the desire and take action. We must be aware and contribute our part to the story.

Future avenues - as the new era of studying and work has come to the University St. Kliment Ohridski Bitola, North Macedonia as the only non-EU partner in the European university alliance COLOURS, many, if not most of these recommendations and aspects took place in reality. Students are engaged, paid, mentored, proactive and inspired to co-create in the building, functioning and improvement of the European university of the future, in our country, with roots and wings. This research is to be continued to capture those novel experiences and benefits.

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