

# THE CHALLENGES THAT WORKING STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE



## Introduction

**Full-time students at university today are akin to jugglers, except students' juggling acts are often accompanied by stress.** Working students struggle to juggle the competing responsibilities of life. The analysis below is a glimpse into some of the challenges that working students encounter as they juggle term-time work and undergraduate studies along with their other commitments.

## Finances: Challenges, Obligations and Independence

Students attending UT and UBC live in two of the most expensive cities in Canada, and experience some of the highest costs of living in relation to inflation. The impetus to work is sometimes a necessity in order to pay for one's bills including food, rent and tuition fees. **Working-class students' motivation to work is often correlated with limited financial supports from their families and concerns over debt.** Students of marginalized class position are often recipients of student loans such as OSAP in Ontario or Student Aid in British Columbia. Term-time work can be a means to limit one's debt load following graduation or supplement insufficient public aid or loans from the government for tuition fees. The need to reduce debt leads to a situation where students often have to work more than is ideal, and accept jobs which are stressful, routinized, or involve long commutes.

## Context: HWS Study

The Hard-Working Student (HWS) project is a longitudinal and mixed-methods study conducted at the University of Toronto (UT) and University of British Columbia (UBC) that spanned four years (2018–2022). We collected qualitative data at UT, and both qualitative and quantitative data at UBC. The policy brief reflects the narratives of 51 and 57 full-time and undergraduate students at UT and UBC; as well as the opinion of 1,732 and 2,987 students at UBC in the 2018 and 2019 surveys.



...could buy some things and not have to ask my parents about it. Because I felt bad about taking their money just to buy random stuff. So I got a job.

- Daisy Mae

Term-time work can allow students to have some financial freedom in alleviating some of their financial challenges and obligations. At the same time, working students can have supplementary income for social and leisure activities that may be difficult to fund without part-time work. Supplementary income or "pocket money" has the benefit of increasing students' sense of independence, especially if students express some concerns over burdening their family including parents. For students of marginalized class positions, financial independence was less of a choice, as the compulsion to be financially self-sufficient was necessary in the context of limited familial wealth or support.



But it also meant that my family is not as privileged to be able to afford that kind of schooling, so I had to depend a lot on OSAP [government loans for tuition in Ontario] and my own grants while other people, some of them just don't work and I'm like, "How do you not work, how do you support yourself?"

- Amelia



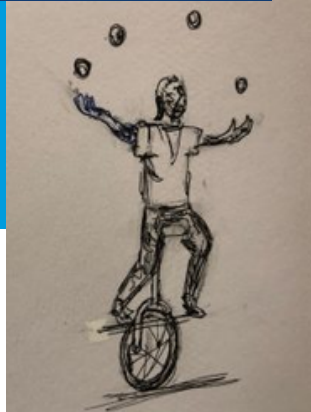
I work all year. ... Yeah, I have to. I live here and pay rent, so I guess I don't have another source of income

- female working off-campus

## Full-time Student Norm versus Part-time Working Student Reality

“ In the first semester, I actually had to drop a course. I had always taken a full course load, five courses every semester. And the first semester, I couldn't. I was so overwhelmed. And even after I dropped that course, I was still super overwhelmed

- Sara



Full-time, working-students are expected to spend long hours on their course work and academic activities. **However, students are juggling many (often) competing responsibilities during their undergraduate studies.** Full-time students are also part-time workers that are often engaged in term-time work out of necessity, while completing an average of five courses every semester. The necessity to work includes financial obligations such as high tuition fees, and the need to build one's resume for a future career following graduation. Students also juggle other responsibilities such as care work, supporting one's family financially, and extra-curricular activities including volunteer work.

Professors, including course instructors, expect the student norm where students are perceived as only engaged in studies and who can also spend full-time hours on their course work and other academic activities. **Students experience mental health challenges and academic difficulties due to the institutional expectation that full-time students are literally full-time and not also working.** Students reported experiencing high levels of stress and felt overwhelmed due to demanding course work, while participating in term-time work and attending to other responsibilities, like care work.

“ ...[university name] is very much based on academics and stuff but I don't know the exact answer on what they could do better. But definitely, I think there's just -. They put so much more stress on working students... [university name] wants you to just succeed as a student. And they don't factor in the other aspects of your life as much.

- Amelia

## A Competitive Culture: Hyper-productivity and Comparativeness

Elite universities feature competitive cultures of hyper-productivity and competition. Students feel the need to be hyper productive in their course work to achieve exceptional grades and in their efforts to build their resumes through paid work and extra-curricular activities. **The inability to be hyper-productive was often associated with feeling 'guilty' and 'behind' in one's studies,** even when students needed time to rest or were spending considerable time on course work.

“ I always feel that I'm not doing enough because...it's just so easy to compare yourselves to everyone else.... it seems to me; everyone is doing so well...I just can't keep up. There's just so much that I should be doing!

- Margaret

Simultaneously, students spoke about the competitive university culture that propelled them to exert considerable effort to distinguish themselves as exemplary students. **The competitive culture facilitated a sense of individualism in which peers were perceived as competitors in a race for better jobs, grades, and accolades.** The pressure to be a hard-working student caused stress for students and created challenges with self-care, including one's ability to focus on their mental health.

“ I guilt trip myself even when I take time to focus on my mental health or focus on self-care, because I could be doing something else. I could be studying or I could be working. It makes me feel bad that I take time doing stuff like that even though they're still important

- Shanar



## Work-Life (im)balance and Self-care

Working-students often struggled to attain work-life balance—an equilibrium amongst the competing necessities of paid work, academic activities, and self-care. **The challenges of attaining a work-life balance emerged from the demanding responsibilities that students have for full-time course work while working part-time** (for an average of 16 hours a week). The challenge of achieving a work-life balance was often exacerbated during 'peak seasons' at work, as students had to increase their working hours to meet employer needs. Work-life balance was also a challenge for working students to attain during exams or mid-terms, as students had to prioritize their 'education' and spend more time on course work

“ I told this to my parents, 'I'm so grateful that you put me in a position where I don't need to be stressed about rent and stuff like that'. So, I'm going to take a hold of that and work an appropriate amount so I can still pay off my line of credit, savings, not just sit on my butt and do nothing. That's kind of what I learned about myself, to get myself a work-life-student balance. ”

- Julia

Students' demanding course work along with the compulsion to participate in paid work was often detrimental to self-care. **The significant time crunch that students experienced posed some difficulties in allotting time for self-care or activities conducive to self-care such as leisure and recreational activities with friends.** Students who were unable to allot time for self-care due to an imbalanced work-study schedule often encountered mental and physical health issues that included stress, burn out or sleep deprivation. The negative impact of imbalanced work-study schedules propelled some students to adjust their time accordingly. One of the most significant strategies that students utilized to attain work-life balance was by reducing their working hours. Students in privileged class positions were often able to reduce their working hours as financial obligations can be (at least partially) offset by one's parents.

“ I found my first job in the first month of university, but I was still adjusting and balancing. So, during the first semester, I was struggling a lot because I was working and studying. And I couldn't find the balance between them. And then second year started, I feel a lot better. I was still at [work-place name] but I felt a lot better because I told my manager that I wanted less hours. So, I have more time to manage my time. And then, I had a little bit more time for my friends and school. ”

- Cindy

## conclusion

**Working students face 4 sets of interrelated challenges:**

- **Finances**
  - Educational debt and the high cost of living are many students' reasons for seeking jobs, along with the desire for independence. For students from marginalized class positions, limited family support often means working more hours than ideal.
- **Full-time student norm**
  - Working students often face an institutional expectation that conflicts with the reality of their situation, creating stress and a lack of understanding from professors and administrators.
- **Competitive culture**
  - Students feel compelled to compete for jobs, grades, and achievements. The pervasive sense of individualism and comparison to one's peers causes emotional distress, like feelings of guilt, and impedes the ability to self-care.
- **Work-life imbalance**
  - The combined pressures of working and being a student creates difficulties in achieving a balanced schedule, and leads to various physical and mental health challenges, including stress and sleep deprivation during peak work or school seasons.

**Employers, educators, and policymakers can work together to address these challenges by changing institutional norms to better reflect the reality and needs of working students' lives.**

