



Paid part-time employment and academic performance of undergraduate nursing students

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SUMMARY

Nursing students are increasingly undertaking paid term-time employment to finance their living expenses and studies. However the type and duration of this part-time work is unknown; furthermore there is a limited evidence on the extent to which this part-time employment is impacting on academic performance and the student's experience of higher education. To address this shortfall this study undertook a cross-sectional survey of undergraduate nursing students to explore the incidence of student involvement in term-time employment and to develop an understanding of the relationship of employment on student's academic and clinical achievement, and on their experience of higher education. The results found that the vast majority of the sample were working in part-time employment during term-time. The average number of hours worked per week was sixteen. The number of hours worked per week was found to be a predictor of course performance, the student's experience of college and grades achieved. Students who worked greater hours reported negative outcomes in each of these three domains. The findings also support the contention that it is not working per se that has a detrimental effect on student outcomes but the numbers of hours' students are actually working while attending college. Therefore policy makers, educationalists and health service providers need to be aware of the burden that nursing students may have to contend with in combining work with their academic studies.

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Introduction

The last decade has seen major restructuring of nurse education in Ireland following its move from hospital-based schools of nursing to full integration into the higher education system. Nursing students are now full-time university-based undergraduates subject to the impact of changes in government educational policies and student financial support schemes. Previously, in the traditional model of nurse education, students were paid employees of the training hospital to which they were attached and the majority of students did not undertake part-time employment during their studies. Now nursing students attending higher education programmes are undertaking part-time employment to financially support their studies. However, there is a paucity of evidence on the extent to which this part-time employment is impacting on academic performance and the student's experience of higher education. The objective of this study was to explore nursing undergraduates' term-time employment commitments and the effect that this employment may have had on course outcomes. In-

creased awareness of nursing students' wider experience of university life will help academic and clinical staff understand the impact that term-time working has on student outcomes.

Literature review

There are a number of factors that can impact negatively on a student's experience of their nurse education programmes including the stresses of clinical placement and financial strain leading to, in some cases, economic hardship (Rhead, 1995; Lauder and Cuthbertson, 1998; Cuthbertson et al., 2004; Nicholl and Timmins, 2005). Financial strain may, in particular, impact on mature nursing students due to family and housing commitments; however there is emerging evidence that this monetary strain is now impacting on a broad range of nursing students. This financial strain is resulting in an increasing number of full-time nursing students undertaking significant amounts of term-time employment. Although there is evidence of student involvement in term-time employment there is limited research on the relationship between term-time employment and course outcomes for nursing students (Ferguson and Cerinus, 1996; Lee et al., 1999; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006).

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Students' reasons for undertaking part-time employment

The rationale for a student contemplating and undertaking term-time employment are complex and multi-factorial and include poverty, financial hardship, inadequate income and debt (Ford et al., 1995; Curtis and Shani, 2002). For example, Ford et al. (1995) in a study of over a thousand undergraduate students in four United Kingdom (UK) universities identified factors such as inadequate parental contribution, low personal income and debt as largely influential in a student's decision to work whilst studying. The extent of parental financial contribution to students was identified as a particularly important factor in influencing a student's decision to work during their studies. A third of students who did not receive a monetary contribution from their parents worked while only a fifth who did receive a contribution were identified as working during their studies. Many students were also found to have reached their borrowing limits with banks, while a significant majority was experiencing pressure to repay loans (Ford et al., 1995).

The majority of studies on student term-time working conclude that students that sought work did so to supplement inadequate incomes as opposed to career development. For example Happell (2002) found that nursing students who undertook part-time employment in nursing homes were least likely to express a desire to work with older people following graduation. This finding suggests that students undertook term-time employment in care of the elderly facilities not so much for practical experience but more out of financial necessity. This theme of working for financial necessity rather than practical experience has also been identified by Hunt et al. (2004) who examined growth in term-time employment and its impact on academic attainment among full-time undergraduates at a university in the United Kingdom. The study, utilising data from three large-scale surveys undertaken between 1999 and 2001, identified that the growth in term-time employment coincided with changes in funding arrangements for students in higher education in the UK. The main reason cited by students for undertaking employment was financial, principally to maintain personal borrowings at a minimum. This longitudinal survey further established that many of those in term-time employment were disproportionately drawn from less well-off backgrounds. This theme of students working for purely financial reasons has also been found in studies in Wales (Tangney, 2002), Scotland (Carney, 2000) and Ireland (Clancy and Wall, 2000; Clancy, 2001). In addition Carney identified that a majority of students were worried about their financial situation during their time in higher education. The financial necessity of working during term-time was highlighted by the finding that relevance of the term-time job for their future career was given as the least important incentive to work (Carney, 2000).

Type and extent of part-time employment

The number of students engaged in term-time employment is variable however the trend is upward. A study by the National Union of Students (1995) in the UK highlighted that 70% of students are in some form of employment. Similar studies by the Union of Students in Ireland (2000, 2002) found that students in higher education work on average 17 h per week. The number of hours worked in Ireland is slightly higher than that in the UK where it was reported that students spent approximately 14 h per week working during term, with 12% of students reporting that they worked greater than 20 h per week. The majority of higher education students undertaking term-time employment work in the retail and catering sectors, however nursing students, tend to work in health related areas such as nursing homes or care homes (Happell, 2002). Although the number of students undertaking

term-time employment is increasing, Ruscoe et al. (1996) suggest that working seems less important than the numbers of hours' students are actually working. This view suggests that the detrimental effects of employment on the student's experience of higher education are associated with the intensity of work involvement (Taylor and Smith, 1997).

Impact of term-time employment on student's experience of college

There has been a debate about the effect of term-time employment on the academic experience of students especially with students working in bars, clubs, catering industry and healthcare sector which can require long and unsocial hours. There is emerging evidence that term-time employment can negatively impact on a number of aspects of student life including attendance (Carney, 2000; Warren et al., 2001; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Tangney, 2002; Oakey et al., 2003), attrition (Callender, 1999), academic achievement (Hunt et al., 2004; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006), and stress (Howard, 2001; Lo, 2002).

Stress has been identified as an outcome due to the financial pressure experienced by nursing students during their studies. For example Howard (2001) in a survey of students completing pre-registration nurse education in a UK university identified financial pressure associated with an inadequate bursary as a major source of stress for nursing students. Many of the students surveyed experienced severe financial difficulties and 50% had taken additional employment. Though this succeeded in alleviating some financial pressure, it also increased the demands placed on student time for study, a factor with which many reported that they already struggled. Similar findings were reported in Australia where Lo (2002) identified that, after academic factors, financial worries were reported as a major source of stress while at college. Lo (2002) further found that many students reported that they lived on or around the poverty line. These financial worries can lead to increased levels of stress for students throughout their academic career (Timmins and Kaliszer, 2002).

Attendance in particular has been identified as being effected by term-time employment with approximately 25% of students reporting that it was the principal reason for being absent from college (Tangney, 2002; Curtis and Shani, 2002). Poor attendance at lectures related to term-time working can eventually result in student attrition. Studies identify that many students consider 'dropping out' of college courses due to financial hardship (Palmer, 2001). For example in the UK a survey by the National Union of Students (1995) found that a quarter of undergraduates had considered leaving higher education as a result of financial pressures. Callender (1999) in a survey of one thousand UK university students also identified that the need to work during term resulted in a large minority of respondents deciding not to continue their participation in higher education. Similar findings were found by Morgan et al. (2001) whose study of students in Irish Institutes of Technology highlighted that over 40% of those surveyed did not finish their course with many citing financial difficulties as the main reason for non-completion.

Term-time employment has also been associated with low levels of academic achievement as a consequence of missed lectures or late submission of assignments leading students to perceive that their academic grades were lower than they would have been had they not been working (Marsh, 1991; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Pearce, 2004; Hunt et al., 2004). One reason postulated for negative academic outcomes is tiredness as a consequence of term-time work which impacts on the student's ability to attend lectures and the effect that this has on their overall attention to academic work (Oakey et al., 2003). The number of hours worked by the student in part-time jobs has been identified as a predictor of academic outcomes with students working greater than 16 h per

week having an increased likelihood of poorer academic outcomes (Sorenson and Winn, 1993; Taylor and Smith, 1997; Carney, 2000; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006). In a study by Paton-Saltzberg and Lindsay (1993) on second year full-time undergraduate students in one university in the UK the frequency of work, hours worked, and effects of employment were studied. The use of an objective measure, in the form of exam results, demonstrated that students involved in term-time employment scored significantly lower average grades than those not in employment. Furthermore, approximately a quarter of all students holding permanent jobs during term-time employment expected to achieve a degree one class lower as a result of employment. One finding in particular, which may be applied to nursing education, found that students on highly structured courses with high contact hours, inflexible patterns of class organisation and heavy course workloads were particularly likely to show impaired academic performance as a result of working during term-time.

The Study

Aims

The aims of the study were firstly to explore the incidence of student involvement in term-time employment and secondly, to develop an understanding of the relationship of employment on students' academic achievement and on their experience of higher education. In particular the study set out to test Ruscoe et al.'s (1996) contention that working while attending college seems less important than the numbers of hours' students are actually working.

Design

A cross-sectional survey of the impact of paid part-time employment on the clinical learning experience and academic performance of undergraduate nursing students was carried out using the Paid Part-Time Employment Questionnaire (PPTEQ).

Participants

A convenience sample of nursing students was identified from a Bachelor in Nursing Science degree programme in a major university in the Republic of Ireland. A convenience sample was chosen as the research was undertaken at one site only. At the time of the study the sample size included 179 participants. Inclusion criteria included being a full-time, undergraduate student and enrolled in the general and psychiatric division of the nursing degree programme. The questionnaire used in this study was distributed to students through the postal system with follow-up to increase response rates (Dillman, 2000).

Instrument

Following an extensive review of the literature no instrument that pertained specifically to nursing students employment was identified. Therefore the Paid Part-Time Employment Questionnaire (PPTEQ) was developed specifically for this study. The items developed for the PPTEQ emerged from a review of the literature on student employment. The PPTEQ is a self-administered questionnaire that consists of three sections. Section one measures the demographic profile of respondents. Section two examines the student's current employment status. Section three consists of items that measure students' self-reports of the effects paid part-time employment on course performance, personal and professional development, the student's experience of college and grades achieved.

Reliability and validity

Principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was completed to measure the construct validity of the PPTEQ. This process identified that 30 items from the PPTEQ measured four constructs which included: the impact of employment on course performance (12 items); the impact of employment on personal and professional development (7 items); the impact of employment on college experience (6 items) and the impact of employment on grades achieved (5 items). Following PCA internal consistency measures using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) of the four scales was completed. All scales were identified as having acceptable internal consistency measures (α ranges from 0.71 to 0.87).

Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the research ethics committee of the university in which the study took place. By completing and returning the questionnaire students were deemed to have given consent for inclusion in the study.

Data analysis

The four scales that comprise the Paid Part-Time Employment Questionnaire were linear transformed to a 0 to 100 scale for ease of interpretation using the formula provided by Ware et al. (2000). A score close to 0 on the impact of employment on course performance scale would indicate that students perceived that working did not have a negative impact on their course performance whereas a score close to 100 would indicate that students did perceive that working had a negative impact on course performance. A score close to 0 on the impact of employment on personal and professional development scale would indicate that students perceived that working had a positive impact on their development whereas a score close to 100 would indicate that students perceived that working had a negative effect on their development. A score close to 0 on the impact of employment on overall college experience scale would indicate that students perceived that working had a negative impact on their experience of college whereas a score close to 100 would indicate that students perceived that working had a positive effect on their experience of college. Finally, a score close to 0 on the impact of employment on college grades scale would indicate that students perceived that working had a no impact on their grades whereas a score close to 100 would indicate that students perceived that working had a negative effect on their grades.

Multiple regression analysis with blockwise (hierarchical) entry was conducted to determine the linear combination of variables that best predicted outcomes affected by work. Predictions used in the model were at both categorical and metric level. Categorical predictors were transformed to dummy variables using the procedure outlined by Field (2005). Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2007) version 15.0 (SPSS, Chicago Illinois).

Results

A total of 179 students were surveyed, 79 usable responses were received resulting in a response rate of 44%. Table 1 outlines the demographic and work profile of the sample. The majority of the sample was female with a third classified as mature students (aged 23 years or older). The sample was evenly distributed between living at home or in external accommodation.

Of the 79 respondents only 4 had never undertaken term-time employment. Therefore approximately 95% of the sample had

Table 1
Demographic and work profile of students.

Characteristic	N = 79
Age in years <i>M</i> , (SD), (minimum–maximum)	22.77 (4.9) (18–41)
Gender % (<i>n</i>)	
Female	92.4 (73)
Male	7.6 (6)
Place of residence % (<i>n</i>)	
Family home/own home	54.5 (43)
Rented accommodation external to college	41.8 (33)
Student residences	3.8 (3)
Currently employed % (<i>n</i>)	88.6 (70)
Type of employment	
Health care assistant	60.0 (45)
Catering services	10.7 (8)
Other	29.3 (17)
Hours worked per week <i>M</i> , (SD), (minimum–maximum)	16.11 (7.0) (5–35)
Average pay per hour in Euros <i>M</i> , (SD), (minimum–maximum)	11.05 (1.8) (7–15)

worked since commencing their nurse education programme. Almost 90% of the total samples were currently engaged in part-time employment, while approximately a tenth of the respondents were currently not in employment at the time of the survey. Of the respondents not in employment all stated that they were seeking some form of term-time work. The majority of students reported that they worked part-time in the healthcare sector with a tenth working in the catering services industry. Approximately a third undertook employment in other spheres including babysitting or secretarial services.

The number of hours worked by students in employment per week ranged from 5 to 35 with over half of the sample indicating that they worked between 11 and 20 h per week. The vast majority of the sample worked at weekends, however over a tenth indicated that they undertook some form of night work. Students were paid approximately 11 Euros per hour, which is above the national minimum wage in Ireland of 7 Euros per hour.

For the majority of students (47%) the need to finance day-to-day living expenses was the most influential factor in their decision to work. Furthermore a significant minority of students reported that they worked in more than one job. Almost a quarter (22%) of respondents worked in two part-time jobs, while a minority (4%) reported that they were employed in three part-time jobs.

Most students had at least one alternative source of income along with their employment. Parental support was identified by 25% of all respondents as a supplemental source of income. The government maintenance grant provided income for 24% of students, while approximately 13% utilised bank overdraft facilities as an alternative source of finance. A minority of students, just fewer than 4%, had a student loan while 8% were in receipt of spousal/partner financial support.

The scores of the Paid Part-Time Employment Questionnaire indicated that working had a moderately negative effect on course performance such as attending lectures, using the library and concentrating while on clinical placement. Students did perceive that working had a slightly negative effect on the overall experience of college due to tiredness and reducing their involvement in college life. Although working was not strongly endorsed as affecting assignments and examination grades a mean score of 45.89 (SD = 19.47) indicates that it caused problems for some students. Students did perceive that working part-time while in college did have some impact on the development of personal and professional skills such as the ability to communicate and increased self-confidence (Table 2).

Four hierarchical multiple regression models were performed to identify the predictors of the impact of employment on course

Table 2
Scores of the PPTEQ scales*.

Scale	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Impact of employment on course performance ^a	0	100	31.49	21.67
Impact of employment on personal and professional development ^b	0	100	33.39	20.94
Impact of employment the student's overall experience of college ^a	0	100	52.78	24.58
Impact of employment of student grades ^a	0	100	45.89	19.47

* Scores range from 0 to 100 following linear transformation.

^a A high score on this scale indicates that working had a negative impact on the outcome whereas a low score indicates that working had a positive impact on the outcome.

^b A low score on this scale indicates that working had a positive impact on the outcome whereas a high score indicates that working had a negative impact on the outcome.

performance, the impact of employment on personal and professional development, the impact of employment on the overall experience of college and the impact of employment on grades. The variables were entered according to previous theoretical assumptions concerning their impact on student outcomes. Therefore, using hierarchical multiple regression the variables were entered in two blocks. The rationale for this was to enable variables at each stage to be used as predictors of student outcomes and as factors of statistical control. Block one included student characteristics such as gender, age and current residence (at home/living away from home). Block two comprised variables that related to the students work status such as hours worked per week and hourly pay. The four scales that comprise the Paid Part-Time Employment Questionnaire: the impact of employment on course performance, the impact of employment on personal and professional development, the impact of employment on the overall experience of college and the impact of employment on grades were identified as the dependent variables in the model. Each dependent variable was analysed and reported on separately. Therefore the use of hierarchical regression analysis allowed for the determination of employment factors that influenced student outcomes by controlling for student demographic factors.

In the first regression model student pre-entry characteristics (step one) had no significant influence on course performance explaining 17% of the total variance on the dependent variable. In step two, when work variables were added, the hours worked per week had a significant effect course performance, accounting for 22% of the variance on the dependent variable. These findings indicated that longer working hours negatively impacted on the course performance of students when controlling for demographic variables (Table 3).

In the second regression model student demographic characteristics (step one) or work variables had no significant effect on students' personal and professional development, accounting for just 7% of the variance in the dependent variable. These findings indicate that neither demographic nor work variables had an impact on the student's personal and professional development during their time in college (Table 4).

In the third regression model student demographics (step one) had no impact on the students' overall experience of college explaining 11% of the total variance on the dependent variable. In step two, when work variables were added, the hours worked per week had a significant negative impact on students' overall experience of college, accounting for 26% of the variance on the dependent variable. These findings indicate that longer working hours negatively impacted on the experience of college for students (Table 5).

Table 3

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the impact of employment on course performance.

Variable	B	SE B	β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Constant	34.07	11.71	
Age	-0.31	0.50	-0.07
Gender (female = 0, male = 1)	36.07	9.85	0.12
Residence (home = 0, away from home = 1)	4.47	4.69	0.10
<i>Step 2</i>			
Constant	34.21	16.71	
Age	-0.36	0.50	-0.08
Gender (female = 0, male = 1)	34.65	9.73	-0.08
Residence (home = 0, away from home = 1)	4.22	4.63	0.09
Hours worked per week	0.70	0.34	0.23**
Hourly rate of pay	-0.89	1.34	-0.074

Note: $R^2 = 0.17$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.22$ for Step 2.

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the impact of employment on personal and professional development.

Variable	B	SE B	β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Constant	33.57	12.12	
Age	-0.07	0.51	-0.02
Gender	19.12	10.18	0.23
Residence	0.12	4.85	0.01
<i>Step 2</i>			
Constant	48.22	17.61	
Age	0.06	0.53	0.01
Gender	17.92	10.26	0.23
Residence	0.53	4.88	0.01
Hours worked per week	0.13	0.36	0.44
Hourly rate of pay	-1.78	1.41	-0.15

Note: $R^2 = 0.05$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.07$ for Step 2.

Table 5

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the impact of employment the student's overall experience of college.

Variable	B	SE B	β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Constant	23.99	13.78	
Age	1.05	0.58	0.21
Gender	14.00	11.58	0.14
Residence	8.53	5.51	0.17
<i>Step 2</i>			
Constant	15.90	18.43	
Age	0.86	0.55	0.18
Gender	11.66	10.74	0.12
Residence	7.75	5.11	0.16
Hours worked per week	1.41	0.37	0.40***
Hourly rate of pay	-0.88	1.48	-0.06

Note: $R^2 = 0.11$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.26$ for Step 2.

*** $p < 0.001$.

In the final regression model student demographic characteristics (step one) had no significant impact on course performance explaining just 5% of the total variance on the dependent variable. In step two, when work variables were added, the number of hours worked per week and hourly rate of pay had a significant effect on student grades, accounting for 21% of the variance on the dependent variable. These findings indicate that both longer working

Table 6

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables predicting the impact of employment on student grades.

Variable	B	SE B	β
<i>Step 1</i>			
Constant	54.21	11.28	
Age	-0.42	0.48	-0.11
Gender	17.84	9.48	0.23
Residence	0.34	4.51	0.09
<i>Step 2</i>			
Constant	75.96	15.11	
Age	-0.29	0.45	-0.08
Gender	14.69	8.80	0.19
Residence	0.71	4.19	0.02
Hours worked per week	0.87	0.31	0.31**
Hourly rate of pay	-3.45	1.21	-0.32**

Note: $R^2 = 0.05$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.21$ for Step 2.

** $p < 0.01$.

hours and poorer pay negatively impacted on the academic performance of students (Table 6).

Discussion

This study found that the vast majority of nursing students were in paid term-time employment. The main source of term-time employment was in the healthcare sector. There are two main central reasons for this growth in participation by students in the work force; firstly the availability of jobs through the growth of the nursing home sector and the need for experienced assistants who are generally recruited from the student nurse population and secondly, inadequate financial support for students in the higher education sector (Flemming and Gallagher, 2003; Hunt et al., 2004). This research substantiates literature from both nursing and general student population studies in its identification of financial necessity and inadequate income as the most common factors associated with the growth of participation in paid part-time employment among third-level students (Ford et al., 1995; Lee et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2001; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Oakey et al., 2003).

Students worked, on average approximately 16 h per week, however there was wide variation in the number of hours worked with a small number of students reporting that, in some cases, they worked in excess of 30 h per week. These hours combined with college attendance indicate that students are spending anywhere between 45 and 70 h per week combining study and work.

In the regression models identifying the independent variables that had an impact on the dependent variables of course performance, the student's overall experience of college and the impact of employment on student grades the one consistent factor was number of hours that the student worked per week. Those students who worked more hours per week had poorer outcomes on each of these dependent variables. The number of hours worked has been identified in the literature as a major contributory factor to poor student outcomes, and can adversely affect overall academic performance (Taylor and Smith, 1997; Carney, 2000; Salamonson and Andrew, 2006). In particular the results in this study support Salamonson and Andrew's (2006) finding that nursing students who work greater than 16 h per week have lower academic outcomes than students who do not work or work less than 16 h per week during term time. Tiredness as an effect of working long hours has been cited in many research studies and has been associated with reduced attendance at college as well as affecting the experience of college life (Curtis and Shani, 2002; Tangney, 2002; Oakey et al., 2003).

Despite the negative relationship between hours worked and the student's experience of college and overall performance, part-time work did not affect the personal and professional development of the students surveyed. A possible explanation for this may be the nature of the work undertaken by the majority of those surveyed (Health Care Assistants) and the relationship of this work to their course content (Stern and Nakata, 1991; Ford et al., 1995; Lee et al., 1999). Nursing students may take the view that working part-time in the healthcare sector might have a positive affect on their personal and professional development however this was not measured in this study. Both nursing research and studies in other domains of higher education have identified the benefits associated with term-time employment, including the gaining of valuable work experience and the development of confidence and personal and professional skills (Ford et al., 1995; Lee et al., 1999; Curtis and Shani, 2002). Furthermore the findings in this study support Ford et al.'s (1995) suggestion that employment is of benefit to students when it is related to their course of study.

Limitations

The limitations to this study include the relatively small sample size and the use of only one research site which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the PPTEQ used in this study requires further testing and development. Replication using a larger sample from a number of sites and an objective measure such as grades achieved in exams and assignments may provide more in-depth information about the impact of term-time employment on course performance. However, the strong psychometric properties of the PPTEQ and the relatively good response rate should add to the external validity of the findings presented in this research.

Conclusion

This research identifies that involvement in term-time employment, especially when students work excessive hours, can negatively impact on a number of course outcomes; not least the student's overall experience of college and their academic achievements. The findings also support the contention that it is not working per se that has a detrimental effect on academic outcomes but the numbers of hours' students are actually working while attending college. Nursing programmes are highly structured and demanding of the student's time both in terms of theoretical contact hours and clinical placements. Therefore policy makers, educationalists and health service providers need to be aware of the burden that nursing students may have to contend with in combining work with their academic studies. The awareness among these key stakeholders that term-time employment does have the potential to influence student learning and experiences puts the onus on them to ensure that nurse education programmes are funded and organised in a way that meet both the needs of the health service and the educational needs of the student.

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