



‘Earning while learning’, youth transitions and social justice – researching for impact

National Research Conference for Careers Practitioners

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Project overview

L-EARNING

Rethinking young women's working lives

- National 3-year study investigating young women's earliest experiences of work and how these shape transitions and outcomes across the life course
- Mixed method – quantitative and qualitative research
- Brings together expertise across sociology of work and employment, youth studies, and the sociology of education
- Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of their *Transforming Working Lives* scheme

Background

- Despite dramatic increases in women's participation in education and the labour market, **gendered inequalities persist** – including gender pay gap, occupational segregation and concentration in precarious and insecure work.
- Explanations have focused predominantly on the 'motherhood penalty' (Tomlinson 2006) and occupational segregation (Hegewisch and Hartmann 2014) - focus on the aspirations and educational choices girls make.
- BUT..... a gender pay gap exists for women without children (Dias et al 2016) and literature on occupational segregation tends to omit young women's **very earliest experiences** of work – including the jobs they do before they formally transition from education....



Rethinking 'earning while learning' (EwL)

- Student employment increasingly commonplace at all educational levels (Howieson et al., 2012; Wright et al. 2024);
- Positioned through narrow binary as either facilitating future careers and employability ('work experience') OR as a hindrance to academic achievement
- EwL as temporary, 'incidental' work that prefigures 'real' jobs/ future 'careers'- bracketed off from 'labour market entry'
- The nature of this work and its potential gendering is rarely considered
- We position EwL as part of a 'working life course' - a potential site of (gendered) inequality and 'anticipatory socialization', shaping future choices, values and decisions about work



Project design and methods

WP1: Using existing data to map young women's working lives and trajectories

- Secondary data analysis (Labour Force Survey, APS, COSMO, LYPSE) to map broad patterns and changes over time in young people's engagement with work while studying and post-studies

WP2: Earning while Learning: Young women encountering work & imagining working futures

- 16 x focus groups with 83 young women (14-23) in schools, colleges and universities about working while studying. Creative 'emoji elicitation' method.

WP3: Consolidating careers: young women's trajectories into and through work

- One-to-one biographical interviews with 90 young women workers (23-29) about their working lives
- Analysis of job profiles on 4 major national careers websites

WP4 : Supporting young women's working lives: Stakeholder engagement and impact

- Advisory Board
- Young Women's Advisory Group
- **Engaging Stakeholders...**
 - Policymakers
 - Employers and unions
 - Educational institutions and careers professionals.

Research for Impact: going beyond 'box ticking'



- Funder requirements – Anticipating and delivering 'impact' beyond the academy....

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) defines research impact as the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.

This can include both:

- academic impact, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes in shifting understanding and advancing scientific method, theory and application across and within disciplines
- economic and societal impact, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research has on society and the economy, and its benefits to individuals, organisations or nations.

- Sector-wide and institutional agendas (e.g. REF, University strategy): *'addressing major societal challenges and making a positive difference to people's lives'*
- But....Impact agenda heavily criticized as: too narrow, disciplining, risk to academic freedom, as heavy (gendered?) academic labour, as instrumental, performative and colonial (Chubb et al 2017; Colley 2013; Gill 2010; Quinn, Allen et al. 2014; Watermeyer 2014)
- Our own 'epistemic responsibility' and ethical commitments as academics to 'make a difference' – supporting policies and practical interventions that improve young women's working lives and transitions.

REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

CHANGING THE WORLD, FOR THE GOOD OF ALL

Faculty of Social Sciences

Vision and Strategy 2023-2030

Emerging Findings

- **The vast majority of young people in education engage in paid work alongside full-time study:** About two-thirds of students have worked during their (full-time) studies for some time before they leave education
- **Young women are about 50% more likely to engage in paid work while studying than young men.**
- **Most student workers are concentrated in low paid occupations in retail and hospitality** (sales assistants and retail cashiers, bar staff, coffee shop workers)



- Nationally, pay for student workers is low, often below national minimum wage levels for their age
- Students report poor, and potentially illegal, treatment by some employers, including not being paid, being paid late, as well as low pay.
- Many feel disposable and fear that they could be easily replaced. This undermines their willingness to raise concerns or ask about pay or entitlements

“I started waitressing at 13 and worked long weekends....I didn’t get breaks. They didn’t feed me. I was on like, below... **like £4 an hour**....I was spending all my time there, sometimes over 12 hours... [it's] been kind of bad”

‘It’s really difficult because a lot of jobs you’re getting **quite exploited**, it’s kind of difficult to try and get change or ... like say anything about it really, because **employers don’t really care**’.

“I had an issue where my boss didn’t tell me that minimum wage had gone up... **I got underpaid massively**.... I think it was like £70 odd quid that I was not paid”

- Some students report working long or inconvenient hours, and find it hard to balance work and study
- Poor mental health and wellbeing related to work is common, including stress, exhaustion and burnout
- Student workers often feel powerless in the workplace and sometimes unsafe.
- Abuse, disrespect and (sexual) harassment are commonplace but young women see few avenues for support or redress

"It completely **ruined my mental health**. I would literally cry before every shift and I would cry after every shift. It was terrible"

"I feel like **you do get a lot of abuse...**it makes you so angry **because people treat you horribly**"

"Grown men would come in and talk to you and then ask for your number...like it was weird...it's typically grown men that would come in and overly fetishise [you]...I **knew my store wouldn't do anything and there wasn't people higher up that I could speak to**".

Impact and implications for careers practice?

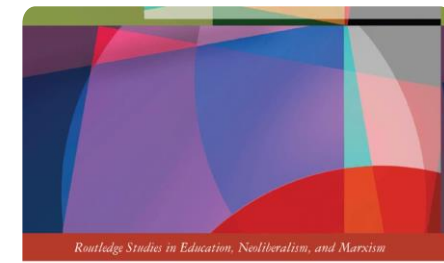
- Our research suggests that Ewl is characterised by poor pay and conditions for all students, yet women are more likely than men to engage in it.
- This means that young women are more likely to be managing the challenges of EwL and be exposed to harmful and exploitative working practices
- Supporting student workers may therefore be an equality duty
- What role can and should careers practice and policy play in this context?



Harnessing the Social Justice turn in Careers Practice

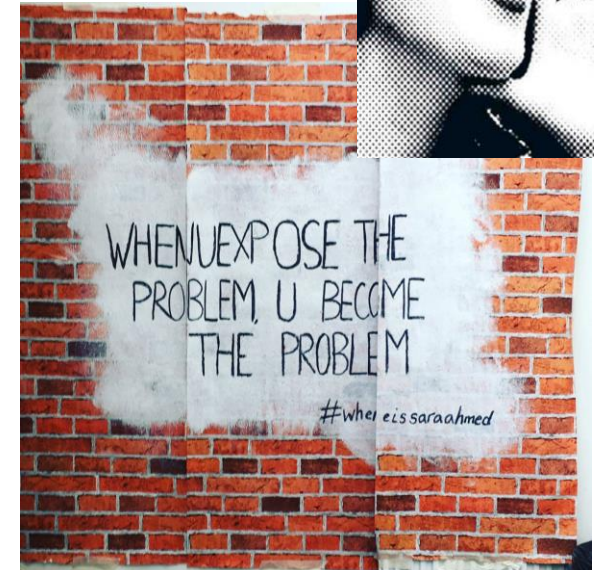
*‘Career guidance can be used in socially transformative and **emancipatory** rather than **reproductive and oppressive** ways’ (Hooley and Sultana 2016: 3)*

- Raising critical consciousness among young people/ clients about social inequalities in the workplace....**not just in future careers but in their present working-lives**
- Helping name oppressions, question norms and work together to challenge harmful or exploitative practices (e.g. sexual harassment, pay)
- Advocating for young people with employers, policy makers, education leaders... *‘Acts of naming and calling out injustice.....must be taken strategically and with the support of advocates who carry weight’* (Nirmal Puwar 2004:155)
- But.... social justice work is hard work (Sara Ahmed 2014)



CAREER GUIDANCE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE CONTESTING NEOLIBERALISM

Edited by
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Your thoughts....

- **What might 'impact' look like - for careers professionals? For other stakeholders and users of the research?**
- **How – practically - can this research help support your work?**

Suggestions welcome!

