

A serendipitous synchronisation of interests: Employers and student-working

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Abstract

Part-time working while studying full-time is now the norm for young Australian students, whether they are at school, TAFE or university. Australian research in this area currently comprises one body of research looking at learning from part-time jobs, and a second focusing upon the problems that time spent at work may cause with young people's study load. To date there has not been any major Australian research into the ways in which employers utilise student-working as part of their management strategies. This paper draws upon part of the research carried out in the first year of an Australian Research Council Linkage project on student-working. Case studies carried out with three major employers of part-time student labour and focus groups with university students have shown how the needs of young people for suitable work at convenient times and those of some employers coincide remarkably well. These employers have learned to shape their human resource management strategies around the nature of their student workforces, and continually adapt their strategies to make themselves more attractive to their current and potential workforces.

Introduction

The majority of Australia workers now enter the workforce initially through part-time work while studying. Research such as that using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australia Youth data, and other studies such as Smith & Green (2001), show that at least two-thirds of school students of working age have formal part-time jobs, and university students show even higher proportions (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). But students' part-time jobs have not generally been recognised as of importance except as a preparation for what is seen as 'real' working life (ie that which commences once full-time study ceases). A small number of studies have, for example, looked at whether part-time work while at school influences career choice (Hull, 1999) and uncovered the positive effects of student-working on post school employment rates and wages (Greenberger, 1988); but there appear to be no previous studies which examine the actual careers that young people have while they are still students. Student-working careers are therefore both almost universal and also almost invisible. This is because it is generally held that education is the main 'business' of young people, but other, more general, reasons include a lack of acceptance of the worth both of part-time jobs vis a vis full-time work, and of service sector jobs, which are often depicted as low-skilled (Korczyński, 2005). Thus more general changes in work, the labour market and the economy have relevance to student part-time working, including changes in the world of work which give rise to the need to prepare individuals with the necessary skills for multiple job/career transitions; policy changes in relation to facilitating the post school transition; and the shift in the balance of industries within the Australian economy from primary and secondary to tertiary industries.

This paper reports on the findings from the first year of an Australian Research Council 'Linkage' project that set out to examine student-working careers and their importance to major employers. By student-working careers we mean the careers that young students have in their part-time jobs during the period when they are at school and, for those who do not go straight into full-time work on leaving school, in immediate post-school education such as university, TAFE and other education providers. The industry partners for this project were Service Skills Australia (the industry Skills Council for the service sector) and three major employers of student-workers who, in this paper, are given the pseudonyms Burgers Inc, Bread Basket, and Discount Co. Burgers Inc is a international fast food chain, Bread Basket is a retail bread chain based in Australia but with overseas operations, and Discount Co. is an Australian variety store offering low-cost goods. The first two companies utilise a large proportion of franchisees. The project as a whole continues until 2008 and includes research with school students as well as with university students and employers; but the former is not reported in this paper. This paper focuses on the ways in which companies and student-workers' interests coincides, using data from university students (which includes discussion of their pre-university working careers) and employer case studies.

Background

While the context for part-time working and the links with other areas of students' lives, especially school and university (eg in the Australian literature, Smith & Green, 2001; Billett, 2006) has received some attention, part-time jobs *per se* (as opposed to their effects on other aspects of young people's lives such as their grades while studying) have rarely been studied; and most specifically the career that is formed by the series of part-time jobs before entry into the full-time workforce has not been examined in Australia.

Careers and employability skills in the 21st century

It has been exhaustively argued that workers' career patterns and attachments to employers are changing compared with previous centuries, in that workers are more likely to experience several changes of occupation and the skills required within those occupations may also change quite rapidly (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Poehnell & Amundson, 2002). Thus students' initial experiences within industry areas that they may not choose as long-term jobs is consistent with this new concept of career. Partly because of the fluidity of individuals' working careers and of jobs themselves, employability skills have become increasingly important in both employers' requirements of workers (BCA/ACCI, 2002) and in educational policy planning. Employability skills may be partly developed in educational environments but it has been argued that they may best be developed in the workplace; hence student part-time jobs are prime sites for early development of such skills (Smith & Comyn, 2003).

Part-time work for students

The implications for young people preparing for career in this broader context of changing world of work and changing notions of career have only begun to be explored. Career development contexts which have been explored have largely been the school, the family and the peer group. But of increasing importance is the workplace as a site for adolescent career development. An aspect of working life that

has undergone a profound change is the manner in which young workers first enter the workforce. While early work experience in a full-time job has been the major stepping stone for Australian young people to adult life since the end of the Second World War, this stepping stone is no longer utilised by most young people. In 2003, the proportion of people aged 15-19 years in full-time employment was only 15% (ABS, 2004a). Instead most young people of this age group are at school or in tertiary education; but this does not mean they are not working. Most workers now have a lengthy part-time work history before leaving full-time education and this work history is most likely to take place in the retail and fast food industries which may not be the site of their eventual 'career jobs'. While this phenomenon was commonplace in the US by the second half of the 20th century (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986), it has only recently become widespread in Australia. The Australian youth labour market has seen a marked increase in part-time employment between 1983 to 2003, from 28% to 68% of employed people aged 15-19. By 2003, 79% of 15-19 year olds who were studying on a full-time basis were employed part-time (ABS, 2004a). The average number of hours worked per week is around 10 (Robinson, 1999). Around 30% of Australian school students continue straight on to university with a much smaller percentage studying full-time at TAFE or other Registered Training Organisations (Smith & Green, 2005). It is often, therefore, not until they reach the upper end of the youth age range (15-24) that a substantial proportion of today's new workers take their first full-time job (ABS, 2004b). The literature on school students' part-time work is now being supplemented by literature on university students' part-time jobs but the latter literature mostly focuses on effects on, or links with, their studies (eg McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Stevenson & Yashin-Shaw, 2004) rather than the students' working careers from school through to university.

Student-working careers and their importance for employers

Young people are more job mobile than older age groups. During the year ending 2004 17.4% teenage workers and 22% aged 20-24 changed their employer compared, for example, with 7% of people aged 45-54 (ABS, 2004a). This 'milling and churning' has been noted internationally as a feature of youth labour markets (Athanasou, 2001). Moreover, the effects of 'milling and churning' in part-time student-working have yet to be explored in relation to career building from an individual and the employer's point of view. Overseas studies (eg Canny, 2002) note that senior retail managers prefer to recruit from the student workforce.

The retail and fast food industries

The industries in which school students most often find formal part-time work are retail and fast food, with around two-thirds of school students working in these industries (Smith & Green, 2001). Full-time university students are able to work in a wider range of industries because of their age, but there has been no study mapping their industries of employment. The retail and hospitality industries form the largest sector in Australia's economy. In 2003 \$181.3 billion of revenue was generated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) category 'retail' and there were 184,944 enterprises operating in the sector. The industry faces a number of unique challenges which, together with the low productivity and profits on turnover generated compared with other industry areas (Maglen, Hopkins & Burke, 2001), explain the industry's need to minimise on labour costs, and hence, to some extent, their need for student-worker labour. Employers however cite a number of other reasons why they like to employ young student-workers (eg Smith & Comyn, 2003) including their higher

‘calibre’ compared with young school-leavers (Canny, 1999: 296). Labour turnover among student-workers is high. Employers are typically viewed as tolerating high labour turnover and high disaffection among their workers because of the standardisation of work and low levels of skill required (Lucas & Ralston, 1996). High labour turnover, however, among student workers is not simple. While many workers leave within a few weeks of commencing work, many remain in their jobs for years (Curtis & Lucas, 2001; Smith & Green, 2005).

The retail trade in Australia has been an enthusiastic adopter of qualification-based training (including for their student-workers) with changes under Australian ‘training reform’ in the 1990s allowing for more work-based training (Smith & Keating, 2003). Part of the industry’s interest relates to the career progression that is offered by qualifications which span Certificate I to Advanced Diploma level, and in some cases (eg Coles) link to qualifications offered through partnering universities. While skill or labour shortages have not been identified as serious in the retail trade to date in Australia (although they have in the US, as Hughes, 1999 points out) a recent study of the retail industry (Retail Industry Working Group, 2003) identified, in large companies, middle management as an area where skills shortages were increasingly being felt. In this context, retention and development of student-workers is vital.

The nature of students’ jobs

Such literature as exists on student-worker jobs (as opposed to the effects of those jobs on other aspects of young people’s lives) tends to come from the industrial relations or sociology disciplines. Implicit and sometimes explicit assumptions of such literature are that student jobs are ‘stop gap’ (Oppenheimer & Kalmijn, 1995); that students generally dislike their work, that they would not consider such work in the long term and that those who do remain in their student-worker occupation after ceasing to be students have failed in some way (eg Tannock, 2001). Management staff in retail and fast food companies are often characterised in the industrial relations literature as being uncaring and under-educated. While the retail trade (although not the fast food trade) is generally well-organised by trade unions, in Australia as in North America (eg Walsh, 1993), trade unions are often seen as unresponsive to the needs of student workers (Tannock, 2001). The industries in which student workers are employed tend to be regarded more generally as low skilled and second rate. It is assumed that few people would want long-term careers in such work (Leidner, 1993). Considerable variations in skill requirements and job interest among typical student jobs have, however, been noted (Bailey & Bernhardt, 1997).

This review of the literature illustrates the many factors that affect both students’ actions with relation to their part-time work and their employers’ motives in recruiting and managing student workers. It also underlies the context within which student-working operates.

Research method

The following methods were employed for the part of the research that is reported in this paper. All of the field work took place during 2006. Qualitative methods were used to access the target population (student-workers) at work and at university, as well as including the viewpoints of managers and staff in the three partner companies. We used qualitative methods because we were attempting to find out ‘how’ and ‘why’

answers as well as ‘what’ answers (Yin, 1994). Perspectives are vitally important in this research area, and qualitative methods are particularly suitable to identify and account for the different perspectives (Maxwell, 2002).

University-based research

University students who had left school in 2004 and later were accessed via focus groups organised through university student services. Three universities took part in the research, covering a range of locality types and ‘prestige’: Charles Sturt University (Wagga Wagga campus), Queensland University of Technology, and Sydney University. In total, 47 students were interviewed. Students were from courses that attract a high proportion of school-leavers and were from a range of ability levels (based on tertiary entrance rankings required for entry). The focus of the university-based research *was to* describe the students’ part-time careers over several years and the relationship between such work and their long-term career plans.

Employer-based research

Semi-structured interviews were held with senior staff of the three companies involved in the project. These companies are three of the collaborating organisations, viz Burgers Inc, Bread Basket and Discount Co. Interviewees (6 in total) included national and State/Territory human resource and training managers. For each of three sites for Burgers Inc and Discount Co, managers, assistant managers or senior workers, and a group of student-workers were interviewed (Total interviews were 27 student-workers, and 11 managers/ assistant managers/ senior workers). At Bread Basket, two store managers were interviewed. The focus of employer-based research was to show links between student-working and human resource and business strategy and three States were included in the field-work: New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The next phase of the research will involve returning to the company case study sites and the universities in the second half of 2007 to examine the changes in the student-workers’ part-time working histories over a twelve-month period. The school-based research (in four schools in two States) will involve annual surveys of students that were first accessed in Year 10 in 2006.

Findings and discussion

Availability and flexibility

Among the companies interviewed there was a very clear understanding that their branch operations depended entirely upon student-labour. Students at varying ages and degrees of maturity filled different positions in the stores and branches. University students were available during the week and school students after school and at weekends. Schedules were changed every semester to take account of the university students’ lecture timetables. Most of the branches ran on a skeletal staff of adults, with a manager and perhaps an assistant manager or one or two other senior workers. As one student-worker at Burgers Inc put it,

There are about two or three older people, they can fill the empty shifts ... They got (sic) young people and old people as well. So the old people maybe they can work a day shift ... and then when they finish the youngsters come.

The intensive use of student-labour created some challenges. For example, the very young teenagers, aged 14 or 15, lacked maturity and needed close supervision. Companies developed procedures for work that involved the youngest staff in simple repetitive work. As they became older, their duties were expanded to more complex and responsible work. A mix of very young and older students was desirable for quality reasons. In the case of Burgers Inc's city centre stores, older students were also needed for safety reasons. Stores that were open all night or until the early hours needed to employ people aged over 18. Recruitment of university students that had not previously worked for the company was quite common for these reasons. The relative 'expense' of such students did not appear to be an issue.

Discount Co had recently reviewed its use of student labour and found that stores that relied predominantly on student labour on certain days of the week had developed a different culture from those that had a more even distribution of student labour and adults. While the culture was not necessarily better or worse, the company decided to re-align the procedures across stores so that each store had a mix on each day of the week. Managers needed to be very aware of the needs and likes of teenagers and those managers that were able to relate best to this age group seemed to have the most success in attracting and retaining young workers. For example the case study of Burgers' Inc included two city centre stores. One branch manager was clearly regarded by the young workers as being 'cool' while the other, although caring and conscientious, did not have the same 'hipness' and therefore the former store found it much easier to attract staff.

The imperative to recruit for senior management

The companies differed in their use of student-working as a recruitment device for senior managers. Burgers Inc had a strong preference for recruiting its future senior managers from part-time student workers. Good workers were targeted for recruitment into part-time traineeships which were viewed as a track to managerial careers. All of the store managers and the national/State managers interviewed had previously been student workers; one of these interviewees the difficulty she faced in telling her parents she had decided to leave university and work full-time for Burgers Inc.

It really took me a long while to come to the realisation that actually I really enjoyed what I was doing at Burgers In) and I could have a career and I wanted to have a career. I remember calling my parents overseas saying I know you've just paid my university fees again but I don't want to do this and this (Burgers Inc) is what I want to do.

Discount Co also looked to its student workers for future management but had a less strategic approach. The primary focus in stores was on efficient management of the store and there was less focus towards the needs of the company as a whole. Bread Basket preferred to recruit its senior managers from the internship program that they participated in. Few of the university students expressed, at this stage, a predisposition to working for their part-time employing company; however as they were only in the first year of their degrees at this stage of the research this was probably to be

expected. As one of the senior managers put it, there was also a status issue with typical student-worker companies; there was

...a perception thing that it's not as aspirational as we would like it to be having a career at Burgers Inc. A lot of times if you're out and about and I travel a lot on planes talking to people, they say "where do you work?" and I say "Burgers Inc" and then you get into the whole conversation. I find as a business person they like to talk about it because they obviously understand the structure behind it. But if you're talking to people who aren't actually involved in business in any way and it's not just their (special) interest, it's very hard because Burgers Inc is such a big brand and it's so clear in what people's minds what Burgers Inc is for most (people) - its hamburgers and fries. Those people wouldn't give a second thought to the fact that well it's a workforce of 50,000, it requires a HR departments, it's a huge marketing machine and so on.

Therefore part of store managers' role was actively to encourage good student-workers and educate them about the openings within the company.

The importance of 'loyalty'

As the companies were all national (and indeed, two of them were international) loyalty extended beyond the branch in which the students worked. Students often transferred between branches when they moved house or as vacancies arose at branches nearer their home. The transition from school to university often promoted a major move for the young people that moved away from the parental town or city. Informal arrangements for transferring to a job at the new location were made between managers at the different sites. Managers expressed a strong preference for students that had already worked for the company for two reasons. Firstly the learning time before the student-worker became effective was much shorter; and secondly they could be confident that the student-worker would enjoy the work and would stay in the job.

In some respects though, this 'loyalty' was more like inertia than an active sense of loyalty. Some students who did not move away from home to go to university reported these processes. They said that on leaving school they really thought they should move into a more 'adult' type of part-time job, but they stayed in their school-day jobs because the jobs were comfortable and easy, and they had earned enough 'capital' at work to be able to ask for changes of shift and other concessions when they needed it.

I thought I'd leave at Uni but I didn't think, like I thought once I finished Year 12 I'd go find another job .. while at Uni but like I dunno, I think I just grew ... and it's just too hard with Uni. Like (I can only work) certain hours and I just know that I'll get shifts here and so it's a bit too hard to find anywhere else.

This finding underlines the importance of employers' flexibility with their student-workers; if they did not allow time off or shift changes they would not retain staff. In general it appeared that students found employers very flexible; time off was given when it was asked for, often to an extent that surprised the interviewers. The following is an exchange at a Burgers Inc focus group:

F: Also the managers are very understanding, they'll give you the time that you need, you say like you know I've got something to do and they will be like, okay just put it in the book –

F: And you just write it down and the shift is all arranged, you don't have to work that shift.

Interviewer: Okay that's good. And if you want extra hours, if you're saving up, can you ask for that?

F: Yeah you can ask for it and –

M: Anything. You can ask for anything. The manager says ... They take care of everything. They're all the same.

M: They're like your friends you know.

A Discount Co assistant manager said:

Yeah, like one of the girls asked to go back (home), she can't work Christmas Eve cos she's got to go back to her family and I understand that she's got to travel - and you know the girl that's from Melbourne will have to do the same thing because her family's there...she's got no one else here so you take that into consideration.

The effects of the tight labour market

In an increasingly tight labour market, with unemployment below 5%, employers suffer from the natural mobility of young workers. The case study employers were competing in many geographical areas for scarce part-time youth labour. Burgers Inc reported that it n found itself needing to recruit adults for jobs in inner city areas and that student-workers would 'walk down the road for a few cents an hour more'. For this reason the company had instituted a special position for university students that involved some managerial responsibilities that are able to be undertaken in part-time hours. Among the students interviewed, there was some discussion of the relative rates of pay of different employers, indicating that they were aware that they might move between jobs for more money, but in general the major factor in their satisfaction with their part-time jobs appeared to be whether the work was enjoyable and the willingness of employers to accommodate study and family schedules.

Conclusion

The research clearly indicated the complexity of decisions that companies and students alike were involved in. Companies needed to recruit young people that could adequately do the job, that would stay with them for reasonable periods of time, and, in at least some cases, would be willing to consider long-term careers in the organisation. Students needed jobs that paid a reasonable wage, were enjoyable, provided flexible working hours yet also security, and, if possibly, provided transfers among different locations. There was little evidence from the focus groups either with

university students or with student-workers at the company case sites to support the views of Tannock (2001) or Oppenheimer & Kalmijn (1995) about the unpleasantness of student-worker jobs. While it might be supposed that those who did not like the work would have left the companies being researched, the university focus groups which involved discussion of previous as well as present jobs did not evince examples of jobs that had been unpleasant or oppressive.

Perhaps the most interesting point for consideration when examining the findings is the extent to which the tight labour market is currently influencing actions and perceptions. This had not been anticipated as a finding of the research as the tightness of the Australian labour market has developed quite quickly since the year 2000. It was clear, though, in discussion with the national HR managers that the tight labour market dominated their thinking. Companies know they need to exhibit flexibility and offer interesting work in order to retain people. But should the labour market become looser then it is possible that companies might become less accommodating to their student workforce. While this point cannot be tested, our feeling is that companies would be unlikely to change their policies to any great extent; the need for workforce stability and the desire to recruit future senior managers (Canny, 2002) would still exist even if companies were able to 'pick and choose' among many applicants for each vacancy.

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