TIME ALLOCATION FOR STUDY AND WORK AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS – HOW MUCH FREE TIME DO THEY REALLY HAVE?

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Abstract: The employment of university students has become a widely recognized phenomenon throughout Europe. Motivations for engaging in work can vary, and the number of hours students dedicate to employment per week often depends on their field of study. Findings from the Eurostudent surveys indicate that for a substantial portion of students, the primary driver for employment is income generation, as it frequently serves as a prerequisite for continuing their higher education. Significant variations exist across academic disciplines and countries in terms of the time students spend in formal educational settings, the time dedicated to preparing for lectures and exams, and the amount of time left for paid or unpaid work, as well as for leisure activities.

Keywords: student work, time budget, labor market, time allocation, work-study balance

The Rise of Student Employment

Due to ongoing economic changes, the labor market continually produces evolving trends, reflecting broader shifts in the global economy. On the labor demand side, it has become evident that from the 2000s onwards, an increasing number of students are expected to participate in the labor market. This trend can be attributed to several factors, one of the most significant being the flexibility that students often possess in managing their work schedules. Students, by virtue of their academic commitments, tend to have more adaptable hours, allowing them to work during evenings, weekends, or other non-traditional hours. This flexibility makes students highly attractive to employers offering short-term contracts, part-time positions, or temporary jobs that require irregular working hours (van der Meer & Wielers, 2001).

This growing trend of labor market flexibility has a considerable impact on the ability of tertiary education students, particularly in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, to combine studies and work. The increased demand for flexible labor, coupled with the rise of part-time and temporary job opportunities, has made it easier for students to find employment without compromising their educational pursuits. As these flexible positions become more widely available, they provide students with a chance to gain valuable work experience while continuing their studies. In fact, research has shown that part-time and temporary jobs are often filled by students, who are able to take on such roles due to their adaptability and availability (Péter & Saar, 2012). These work experiences also serve as stepping stones, offering students a chance to develop skills, establish professional networks, and prepare for full-time employment post-graduation.

However, while the availability of jobs suitable for students has certainly increased, the nature of the labor market itself also plays a crucial role in determining the scope and impact of student employment. In particular, rapid employment growth in an economy can positively affect the employment rates of students, making it easier for them to find jobs while studying. As economies expand and industries grow, new positions are created, and students can tap into these opportunities to gain work experience. Conversely, in economies where growth is slower or where the labor market is saturated, the situation may be different. In countries where school leavers, including students pursuing tertiary education, experience difficulties transitioning into the labor market, the opportunities for students to secure part-

time or temporary employment are likely to be limited. In such scenarios, even if students are willing and able to work, the lack of available positions or the mismatch between their qualifications and the job market's needs can hinder their ability to find relevant employment (Müller and Gangl, 2003). This further highlights the importance of the overall health and dynamism of the labor market in shaping students' work prospects.

Notable Changes in the Educational System

Another significant factor influencing student employment is the marketization of higher education. Over the years, there have been several policy changes aimed at increasing the financial sustainability of higher education institutions, particularly in response to rising educational costs. One of the most notable changes has been the deregulation of student tuition fees, which has led to a shift in the way higher education is funded. As a result, student grants have been partially replaced by student loan systems in many countries (Ford, Bosworth & Wilson, 1995). This shift has significant implications for students, as the rising cost of tuition places additional financial burdens on them. To cope with these costs, many students are increasingly turning to part-time or temporary work as a way to finance their education.

Moreover, in some countries, universities have started enrolling full-fee-paying students to compensate for declining state funding. This shift towards a more market-driven approach to higher education has led to changes in the relationship between students and universities. The increased emphasis on revenue generation may result in a greater focus on attracting students who can afford to pay higher tuition fees, potentially changing the overall dynamics of the student population and influencing the availability of financial aid or student support services (Devlin, James, and Grigg, 2008).

Flexibility and Opportunity in the Evolving Labor Market

Richardson, Evans, and Gbadamosi (2009) argue that the increasing participation of students in the labor market is not solely driven by a desire to enhance employability but is primarily a response to the financial pressures brought about by rising tuition fees and reduced government funding for higher education. While gaining work experience can certainly improve a student's employability and career prospects, for many students, the decision to work while studying is more about financial necessity than a strategic career move. Faced with the challenge of covering the costs of their education, students often turn to the labor market as a way to mitigate the financial burden. This situation has led to a significant shift in the motivations behind student employment, as students increasingly work not just for career development but as a means of supporting their education financially (Péter & Saar, 2012).

This growing trend of student labor market participation also raises important questions about the role of education in shaping future employment opportunities. As higher education becomes more market-driven, there is a risk that the focus on financial sustainability may overshadow the fundamental purpose of education: the development of knowledge, skills, and critical thinking. The growing reliance on student employment to fund education may also have broader implications for student well-being and academic performance, as students struggle to balance their work and study commitments. Ultimately, while the trend towards increased student employment may be seen as a response to economic and educational challenges, it also reflects deeper issues within the higher education system and the changing nature of work in contemporary society.

The work performed by students is therefore economically based; however, one must also consider the investment coming from the students themselves. If a student takes up a job during their university years, a status accumulation inherently occurs. In this case, they are no longer just a university student but also an employee simultaneously, and they must perform in two completely different roles. The question arises as to how this can be managed and

sustained in the long term, and how working university students can balance this in terms of time distribution.

Entire fields of study and important courses, such as time management and related training in conscious planning and efficiency enhancement, have been established because we cannot always fit everything we plan into our schedule. Given that we strive to perform well, complete our basic tasks, advance professionally, live healthily, spend quality time with those close to us, and thereby maintain a social life, we all know that effective time management is often no easy task. We frequently encounter situations where tasks accumulate around us in various roles, and this is also the case for students, who are the focus of this research.

Across Europe, it is widely accepted that a significant number of students work alongside their university studies, which requires a certain amount of time investment on a weekly basis. The latest Eurostudent research shows that 44% of students across Europe work during the academic year, while 15% only take on occasional work. Romania is not far from this average, as 42% of students regularly work alongside their studies, while 6% take on occasional jobs. Unfortunately, based on this research, we cannot determine how these figures have changed in Romania in recent years, as Romania was not included in earlier Eurostudent studies. However, looking at student employment across Europe, the proportion of students working during the academic year has increased by 5-10% in all countries (Menz & Mandl, 2024)

Students' Time Budget

By comparing the Eurostudent V, VI, VII, and VIII studies, I investigated how the time spent by university students on studying and working has changed in recent years.

The distribution of time spent on different types of activities shows that students allocate the most time to attending classes/seminars, specifically about 18 hours per week, and to individual study, approximately 13 hours per week. Exceptions to this trend are students who report spending less than 20 hours per week on learning-related activities (low intensity). Comparing the results to those from 2011, we find that the situation has remained relatively constant, with the time dedicated to attending classes/seminars being the most significant. When comparing this situation with reports from students in other countries participating in the study, we notice the relatively low total time reported by Romanian students, especially the time spent on individual study, which is among the lowest in Europe. As age increases, students are observed to dedicate more hours per week to paid work activities. Thus, while students under 21 years old dedicate about 5 hours per week to such activities, students in the 25-29 age group allocate around 19 hours per week, and those aged 30 and over reach approximately 27 hours per week. In this regard, the situation remains relatively similar to that of 2011. The research data aligns with a natural trend, as the time allocated to paid work typically increases with age. Regarding time allocated to paid work activities, the research data shows a relatively even distribution across the three options, indicating no clear trend in this area. However, the majority of students, specifically 38%, would like more time for paid work activities; 30% consider the time they currently allocate acceptable, while 33% would prefer to spend less time on these activities. Students' assessments of their desired workload (study and paid work) in hours per week indicate that they would prefer to dedicate about 18 hours per week to study and approximately 13 hours per week to paid work activities. Therefore, students would ideally like to spend around 31 hours per week on work-related activities (study and paid work) (Hauschildt K., Gwosć C., Netz N., Mishra S., 2015; Hauschildt K., Gwosć C., Vögtle E. M., 2018; Menz & Mandl, 2024).

In terms of time investment, university students across Europe, on average, spend 16 hours per week on institutional (in-class) study, 18 hours on individual study, and 14 hours on work-related activities. In Romania, this breaks down to 21 hours spent in classes, 17 hours

on individual study, and 15 hours on work-related activities per week. Compared to previous Eurostudent studies, we can observe that across Europe, institutional study time has been decreasing by approximately 3 hours every four years. However, Romania is an exception, showing a reverse trend, with students dedicating increasingly more time to institutional study. With an average of 21 hours spent in-class per week, Romania ranks second in Europe.

On the other hand, time spent on individual study outside university settings has remained stable across Europe, whereas in Romania, there is a marked increase. The average time students spend studying at home has risen from 13-14 hours to 17 hours per week compared to previous periods. Thus, according to this data, a Romanian university student spends, on average, 38 hours per week on study, whether in university settings or independently, nearing the weekly hours of a full-time job.

According to the Eurostudent VII study, which examined student employment from 2018 to 2021, the average weekly time investment for European students was distributed as follows: 16 hours in-class, 17 hours on individual study, and 14 hours on work, totaling 47 hours per week spent on study and work combined. There is considerable variation among countries, but Romania ranks among the top, with students investing a total of 52 hours per week in study and work combined. This breaks down as follows: 22 hours on institutional study (the highest in Europe), 15 hours on individual study, and 15 hours on work (Hauschildt K., Gwosć C., Schirmer H., Wartenbergh-Cras F., 2021).

If we examine the relative time investment in the countries studied, we see that, on average in Europe, a student spends 69% of the time a full-time employed person dedicates to work, solely on studying. However, if the student also works, then their combined time for study and work amounts to 113% of a full-time employee's work time. In Romania, the ratio is slightly better in terms of total time investment; an employed, actively working student spends only 104% of a full-time employee's time on study and work combined. However, their time dedicated to studying alone corresponds to 77% of a full-time employee's working hours.

As a recommendation, the authors of the article suggest that a time management course should be introduced into the university curriculum, ideally for first-year students. If a student spends too much time on studying and working, they will inevitably have to sacrifice their free time, which in turn may harm their social life and, in some cases, their overall health. The consequences of being overworked include stress, poor-quality sleep, and a negative impact on academic performance. Over time, university students' perception of their own status may change, as the increased time commitment could shift their self-perception toward viewing themselves as employees who study on the side rather than students who work part-time.

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