

# ‘Earning while learning’ (EwL): Student jobs, gender & future work imaginaries

## COCAG Launch Event

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# L-EARNING

Rethinking young women's working lives



**UNIVERSITY  
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**Economic  
and Social  
Research Council**

# - Paper outline

## 01

Background to  
EwL

## 02

Overview of the  
project

## 03

Findings (and a  
provocation)



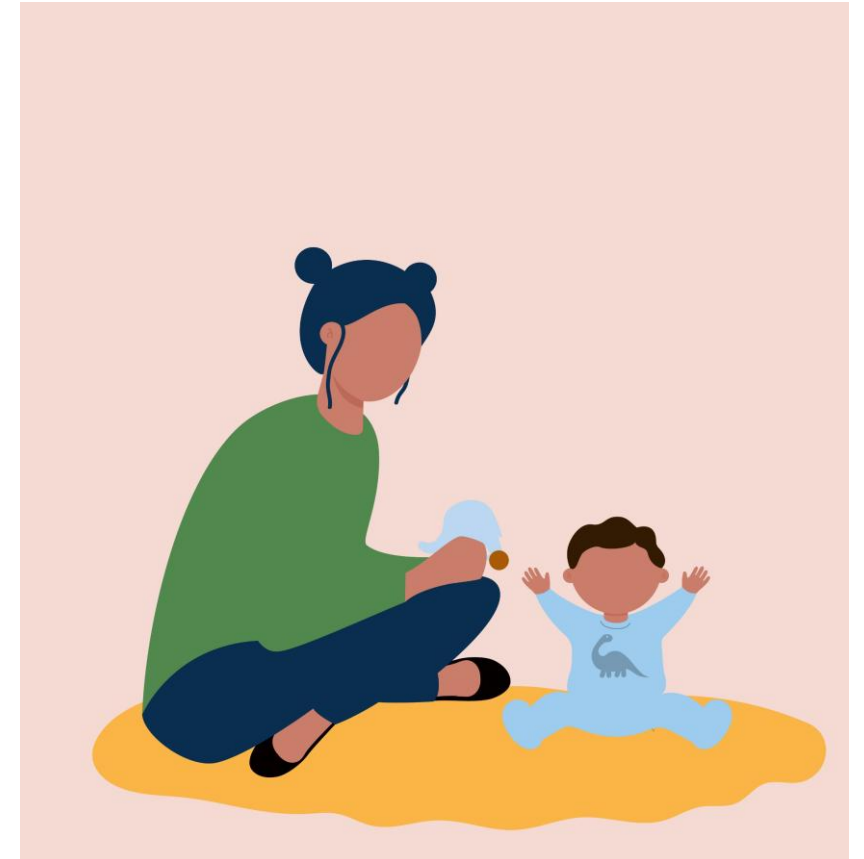
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# Background

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- Despite increases in women's participation in education and the labour market, **gendered inequalities persist** – including gender pay gap, occupational segregation and women's concentration in 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....



# Student employment ('EwL')

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- Student work commonplace in UK and globally **at all educational levels** (Beerkens et al., 2011; Mizen 2006; Lucas 1997).
- Most school and college students have experience of paid work (Hobbs et al. 2006; McCoy and Smyth 2007)
- On average 59% of university students are in paid employment (Gwosc et al. 2021).
- Dual Cost of living / Cost of learning crisis
- 'Employability' agendas - accumulation of work 'experience' (Jones, Mann, and Morris 2016; Holdsworth 2017)



# Existing framings of EwL

## Education / work as separate spheres:

- ‘Youth Transitions’: work and education as two distinct temporally ordered spheres. Students as ‘future workers’ (Brooks 2018)
- Sociology of work: student workers insufficiently attended to. Assumes ‘Labour Market Entry’/ ‘First jobs’ as post-education employment.

## Binary thinking: EwL as CV enhancing, future oriented OR a dangerous distraction

- EwL as ‘CV enhancing’, esp. Internships/ work placements (Howieson et al., 2010; Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Raby et al., 2018; Toft and Friedman, 2021)
- EwL – esp. Term time jobs - as a hindrance and distraction (Broadbridge and Swanson, 2005; Curtis and Shani, 2002)



# (Under)theorisation of student work

## EwL rarely theorised as work.

‘Student’ is the prioritised, dominant identity for young people.

Transitions as linear, one-directional: education --> work

Narrow focus on impact of student work on *future* work or *current* study.

**Framed as temporary, ‘incidental’, ‘proto-work’ that prefigures ‘real’ jobs/ future ‘careers’**

*But.... ‘Working and studying become habitual and normative for most young people. In other words, it is **no longer useful or appropriate to divide education and work**’ (Lucas and Lamont 1998: 44)*

## We propose an alternative framework of: “working-life-course”

Work and study as interacting contemporaneously, rather than sequentially

EwL as site of **anticipatory socialisation** into workplace norms, shaping future choices, values and decisions about work

Shaped by and productive of wider (gendered) inequalities across the life course



# The research



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## UKRI-funded study, 2022-2025

ESRC *Transforming Working Lives* scheme

- **WP1:** Analyses of high-quality national UK survey datasets: APS & Next Steps
- **WP2:** 15 focus groups with 83 women (aged 14-23) from 5 schools, 5 FE and 6 HE institutions across England (northern, southern, coastal, rural, suburban)
  - Diverse sample wrt ethnicity, class, disability
  - Used innovative 'Emoji elicitation method'
- **WP3:** 60+ Interviews with women 23-29 working in feminized sectors following education (ongoing)

# Findings

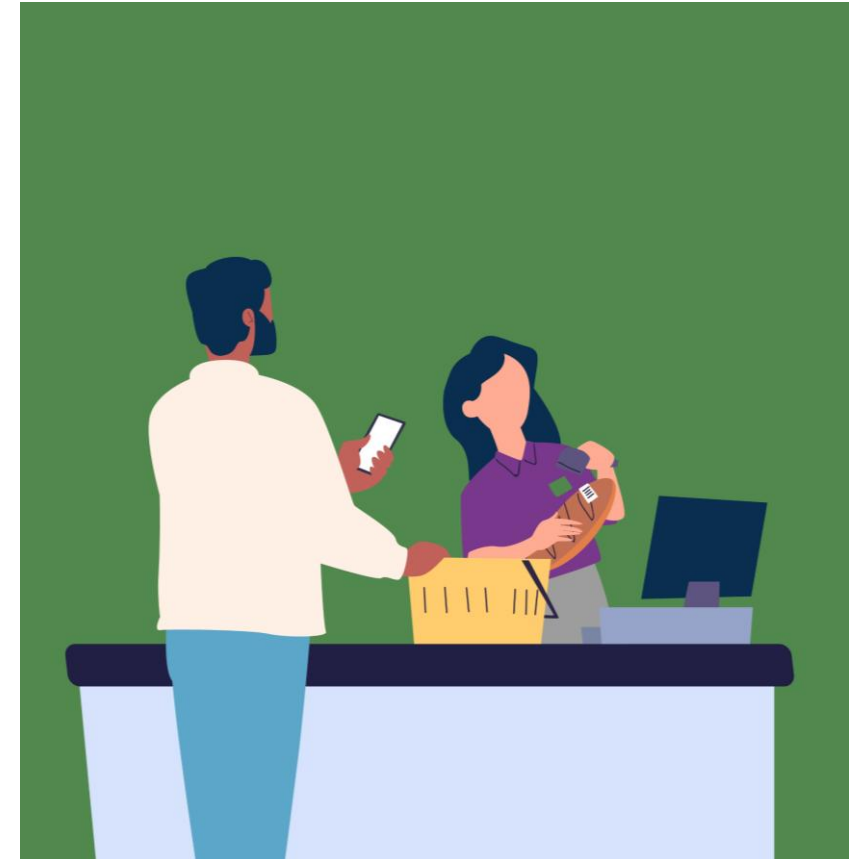




# EwL matters to the economy

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- Students comprise 4% of overall labour force. But as much as 20% of all workers in specified occupations.
- National data shows **most student workers concentrated in low paid occupations in retail and hospitality** (sales assistants and retail cashiers, bar staff, coffee shop workers)
- Reflected in qual data (participants worked in range of jobs e.g. hospitality and retail work, personal tutoring, care work, babysitting, pharmacy dispensing, receptionists)



# Gender and EwL equally bad, unevenly distributed



- Higher level of labour market engagement by women across all age groups:
  - 16-18 year-old students – **15.5% women, 9.9% of men, 17.3% non-binary** working (COSMO 2021-22)
  - 16-22 year-old students – **31.4% women, 23.8% men** (APS Jan 2021-Dec 2023)
- Average hourly pay: no significant gender pay gap BUT **not a ‘gender utopia’... student workers at all ages are poorly paid** with significant minority earning below national minimum wage rates *for their age* and the large majority earning below the full adult minimum wage.
- Therefore, young women (and non-binary) students disproportionately undertake poorly paid work while still in education

# EwL matters to young women (in complex ways)

“Right now, I’m **just working to live.**” - AZIBO

“I **[need the] money to live off** I’m on the max [student] loan, so the entire loan goes on accommodation.” - CLAIRE

“[I’m] **financially supporting myself through the degree....**having parents who are financially worse off than you... you don’t want to take money from people you love.” – MAISIE

“We are all of the same age group, and **we tend to have a lot of fun....**it's a lot of music that we vibe to so we can work around and **vibe very well.**” - YATIKA

“I think the best thing is **the skills you gain, it's very useful** actually.” - BUSHRA



# Student workers matter to the workplace

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"I'm **working with six people, and I'm training them....** They are like, 'what am I doing?' [I'm like] I'm not your mum and I'm not here to teach you. I am paid the same as you, why am I training you on what to do?..... [yeah, you **unintentionally become the supervisor**]" – **SARAH**

"With dispensing, **you just can't get it wrong** because these are people's medication. You get it wrong and **not only I'm screwed but they're screwed too**" – **ELIND**

"It feels easier for me to not go to college than not go to work.... You **have a responsibility to do your job and be there for the customers.** Especially in [café]...you feel like you're letting them down and they do get annoyed and obviously you don't want to get fired" – **CLARA**

# Student work: poor conditions and pay exploitation

“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” - **ESME**

“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” - **NORAH**

‘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 ... say anything about it really, because **employers don’t really care**... you’d just be replaced by another 15 year old’ - **LAURA**



# Incivility, abuse and (sexual) harassment commonplace and normalised

“Some of the customers are so rude. I think **they forget that I’m an actual person** not just a till op.” - **VIOLET**

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

“I’ve worked in a lot of bars and clubs and the harassment is really, really, bad, like **people will touch you....** I have the authority to get them banned.... but you also kind of can’t do it to every single person, because they’re your money, they’re your clients. **Sometimes you just have to suck it up**, which is not great.”  
- **MARINA**



- Some discussed positive aspects of work – sociality, fun, ‘having a laugh’ - but largely framed work negatively as stressful, boring, emotionally and physically exhausting, overwhelming
- 50 out of 83 participants selected at least one emoji typically representative of a **‘negative’ emotion**
- Ambivalence - managing complex feelings about work/ within the workplace

“I’ve got the tired emoji, because I normally work quite late, 11 o’clock normally. The angry one because we had a really angry customer yesterday who swore at me. And the love heart one because I work with my boyfriend so it’s fun [to hang out]” - ANA



‘One’s a sigh. And one’s a smile but with a tear beside it. **Trying to cover up a tear with a smile.** And the tired one because when we’re busy [in] the restaurant, **half of it’s good**, like speaking to people, but **then it’s just stressful...**and my managers and everyone annoys me’ - ELLA



" I put the bomb emoji because it was like only this long until I would **not be able to do this anymore and explode.** The job just wasn’t sustainable...It completely **ruined my mental health.** I would literally cry before every shift and after every shift” - CARRIE

# EwL and future imaginaries

- Emoji elicitation conducted to draw out hopes and ideas of working futures (end of FG)
- EwL experiences already informing attitudes and orientations to relationships with work
- Emphasis on balance, wellbeing and space for life beyond work
- Many felt EwL experiences possible to endure for now, expecting that balance and happiness could be prioritized later...
- Perhaps unrealistic?
- Tentative findings from WP3....





# The research



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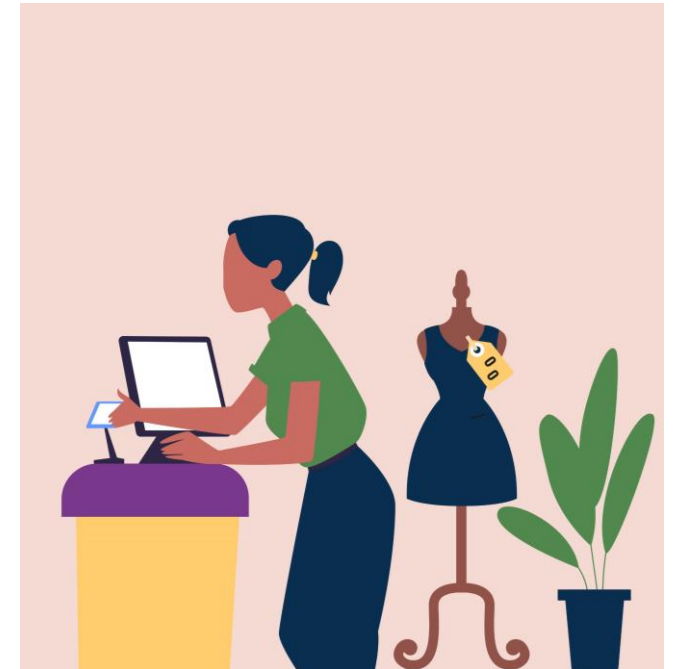
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**How do early work  
experiences shape later  
careers & work choices?**

# EwL as formative to women's understandings of current trajectories

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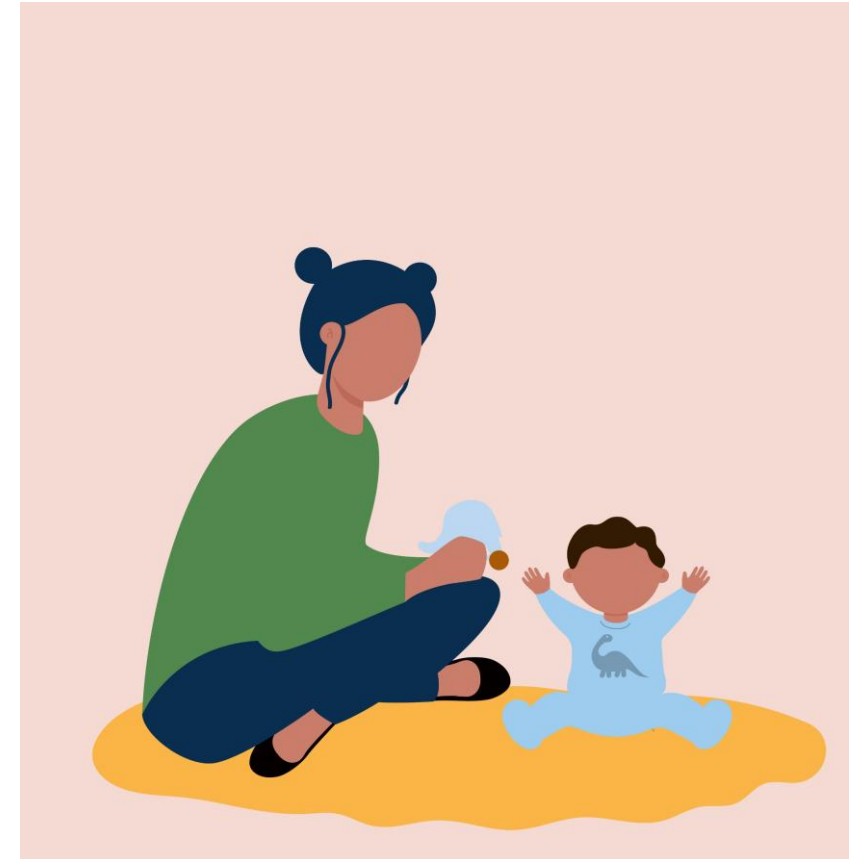
- “I've always really, really enjoyed teaching, so I probably started teaching as, like, a sort of assistant role when I was about 15. So, it's been something that's always been very much a part of my life.” *Lucy, children's performing arts teacher*
- “I did a placement at a local nursery and I worked across the ages to get experience. So my placement was at this nursery and I really enjoyed it and that's when I thought: OK, maybe childcare is for me” – *Ellie, senior leader at an afterschool club*
- “My first job was working at [*beauty shop*] on the shop floor as a Christmas temp and I loved every second of it. I was sort of a 16-year old girl (...) I did thrive in that environment. The older I get, less so. But at the time, I just loved talking to people about beauty” *Mia, beauty executive*



# Learning what is suitable, sustainable and desirable over the working life-course

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- “I mean, I think one of the things I've learned working in childcare is that I don't want to be in childcare forever. (..) Would I have ever thought about working with children at all if I hadn't worked with children and know that I can handle it? Maybe not.” - *Molly, childcare assistant*
- “[After finishing the degree] I realised I couldn't do social care. I can't, I couldn't stand it. Everything I learned about it just made me angry. And that's not saying social workers don't do a brilliant job, they do. But they get so much grief and so much upset.” – *Bianca, youth domestic violence advocate*



# EwL experiences integrated within ongoing experiences and understandings of (difficult) work

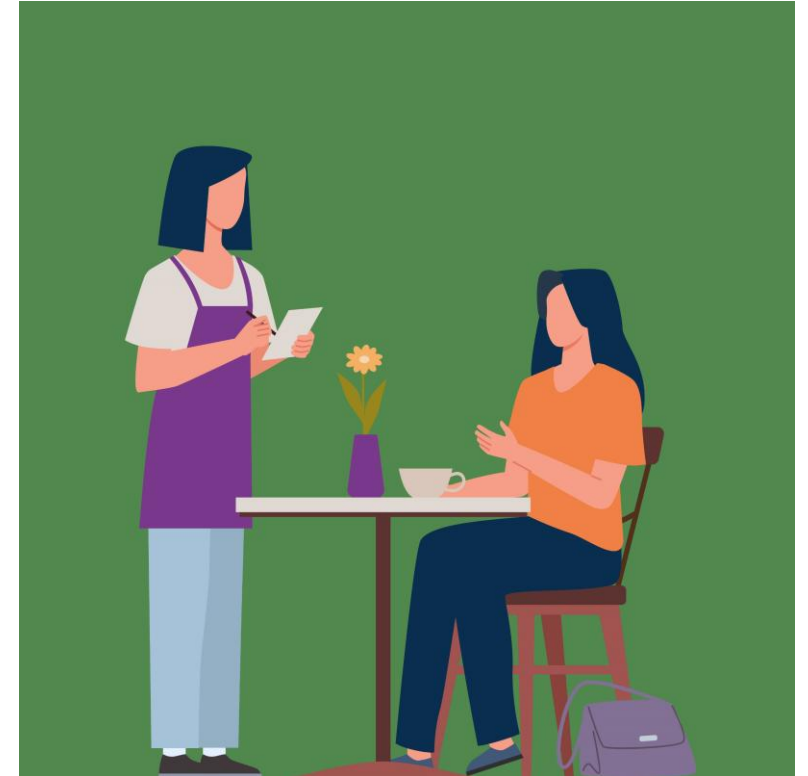
“My first ever paid job was working in a tapas bar (...) It was just a weird place to work, you know, like the chefs were a bit pervy and stuff (...) And it was the comments and, like, the touch of the bum and stuff like that, if you walk past (...) Then I went into a career where it's very heavily female. But then now I've realised that females can be awful people to work with.”

*Elsie – childcare entrepreneur*



# Concluding thoughts

1. EwL is a common and gendered phenomenon, embedded in youth years.
2. EwL is not only important to student workers, but also shapes youth life trajectories, later careers choices, and work experiences.
3. EwL is a form of anticipatory socialisation into labour expectations.
4. There is no clear delineation between EwL and “real” work.
5. A definition of workforce “entry” that excludes young people or people in education does not reflect the reality of many career paths.
6. A “working-life-course” perspective can bring “work” to the centre of young people’s activities and life experiences.



## – A provocation

How can careers education provide a place where young people can reflect critically on their experiences of EwL and the impact of these on present lives and future transitions?



## New publication!

Zhong, M.R., Cohen, R.L., Allen, K., Finn, K., Hardy, K. and Kill, C. (2025), Equally Bad, Unevenly Distributed: Gender and the 'Black Box' of Student Employment. *British Journal of Sociology*. Available here.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.13210>



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