

L-EARNING

Rethinking young women's working lives

Final Report

L-earning: Rethinking Young Women's Working Lives

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Foreword

We are not finished breaking down the barriers that keep young women down in the workplace and beyond.

When we, as ambassadors and peer researchers from the Young Women's Trust, met with the research team to reflect on the findings in this report, the common thread in our discussions was how much we all could relate to the findings. This research report evidences the true experiences of young women's working lives. Our experiences echo the findings of low-paid student jobs, sexual harassment and a fear of speaking up. We've also felt disposable in the workplace, with quitting often being the only form of recourse, reinforcing poor working conditions.

Reading this research feels like a puzzle piece slotting into place, as it not only fits with our own experiences of the workplace as young women, but helps us to understand them. Much like the participants in this research, we are eager for change. Education, outreach and support established early on are key to us moving forward and creating better and fairer working lives for everyone.

We are at a pivotal moment. The Fair Work Agency is just the first step. This research outlines exactly why this intervention and the other recommendations in this report are so urgently needed.

Catherine Roberts & Xheni Shehaj
Young Women's Advisory Group Members
Young Women's Trust



Executive summary

This report presents key findings and recommendations from the 3-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study ‘L-earning: rethinking young women’s working lives’. The research team is based at the University of Leeds, University of Manchester and City St. George’s, University of London. This mixed-methods study draws on data from: a) analyses of **national datasets** of student employment (Annual Population Survey (APS); Next-Steps; and the Covid and Social Mobility study); b) focus group interviews with 83 young women students (aged 14-23) attending state schools, Further Education (FE) colleges and sixth forms, and universities across England; and c) one-to-one interviews with 76 young women (aged 23-29) no longer in education and who are working in feminized sectors.



Key Findings:

The landscape of 'Earning while Learning' (EwL)

- EwL is commonplace: about two-thirds of those in education at 18 have worked at some point during their educational careers. Young women are about 50% more likely than men to engage in paid work during their studies.
- The 'student worker' is not homogenous, with motivations and experiences of EwL differing across educational stages (school, college and HE).
- Low pay is almost universal among student workers. A large minority are paid below legal age-specific minimum wages (with the large majority receiving below adult national living wage).
- Women students regularly encounter mistreatment, abuse and widespread sexual harassment – from co-workers, managers and customers.
- Despite the challenges of EwL, students describe paid work as having value and meaning and hold high levels of commitment to their jobs.

The Student Labour Regime

- Poor conditions and low pay for EwL are systematically reproduced by a policy, legal and cultural setting that treats student workers primarily as students and either denies them worker rights or makes it hard to enforce these.
- Older students are subject to age-specific minimum wages, below adult living wage rates. The wages of younger students, still in compulsory education (under 16), are entirely unregulated.
- Specific sectors rely heavily on student workers. Although students make up 4% of the overall working population, they comprise over 20% of the workforce in sales assistant/elementary service roles, with many holding positions of significant responsibility.
- Student workers have few voice mechanisms, collective strategies of contestation, or access to representative institutions including unions. Typically, their response to problems at work is individualised, most often to 'quit', reproducing their disposability and the Student Labour Regime.

Earning while Learning and future trajectories

- Contrary to widespread concern, EwL does not have a negative impact on educational outcomes and has complex impacts on longer term employment outcomes.
- Early experiences of EwL decrease the chances of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training).
- EwL operates as a form of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ producing expectations and understandings of what it means to be a ‘worker’, including normalising bad working conditions, conceding to managerial discipline and demonstrating persistence.
- EwL can be ‘sticky’, with young people remaining in or returning to types of work undertaken as students in post-education employment.

Young women’s post-education work trajectories

- Women’s working trajectories following education are complex and non-linear, with career ambitions easily thwarted or derailed by structural barriers and workplace problems.
- Young women’s working lives and sense of the future are shaped by austere institutional landscapes including low pay, a lack of affordable housing and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Many experience their work in feminised sectors as ‘unaffordable’ and feel forced to either leave their sector or be dependent on partners or family for stable housing.
- Women prioritise ‘meaningful work’ - often oriented around nurturing - as an important aspect of their work, including caring for others or improving the world.

Young women in feminized work

- Women describe poor working conditions in post-education work, including low pay, limited or opaque progression pathways, insufficient hours, bullying, discrimination, workplace stress, and sexual harassment.
- Young women, overrepresented in public services, bear the brunt of ongoing public spending cuts in terms of persistent high workloads, understaffing, low pay, and dangerous working conditions.
- Low union-engagement typically means that young women seek to resolve problems individually – with limited success. They also fear retaliation and have a lack of visible examples of successful workplace contestation.
- Failed workplace contestation and workplace injustice reinforce patterns of gendered occupational segregation.

Key Recommendations

- ‘Student Work’ must be recognized as real work with full rights and protections.
- Action must be taken by educational institutions, the government, trade unions, employers and career practitioners to improve the working conditions and rights of student workers, including through promoting and embedding Employment Rights Literacy across all educational institutions and stages.
- The enduring issues faced by women in feminised work and the structural conditions in which it takes place must be remedied through:
 - Eliminating discriminatory National Minimum Wage youth rates.
 - Empowering the incoming Fair Work Agency to prioritise students and young workers and to take action to enforce compliance amongst employers.
 - Stronger measures to support workers in individually and collectively challenging discrimination or poor treatment.
 - Reversing public sector under-investment that has reproduced gendered pay inequalities and led to low pay and poor conditions for workers in feminised sectors.
 - Regulating the housing market in ways that increase young women’s autonomy.



Findings

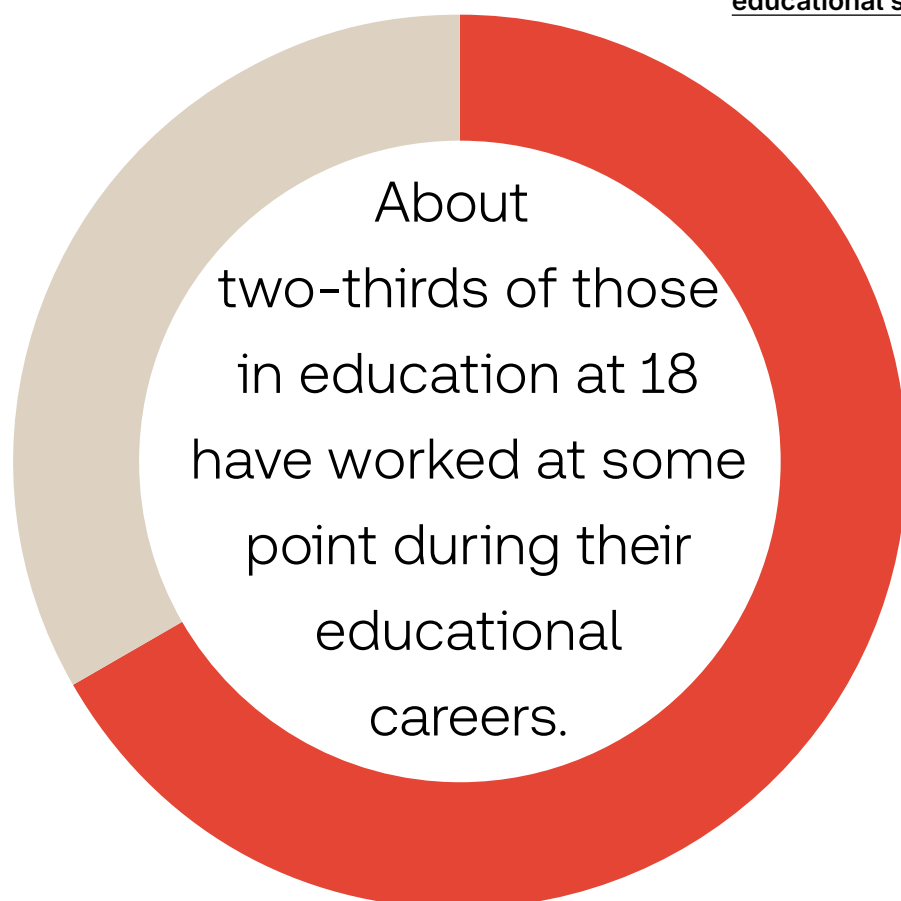
1. Earning while Learning (EwL) is commonplace, varied and gendered

EwL is commonplace.

- Over 40% of students have worked before completing Year 11 (age 15-16).
- About two-thirds of those in education at 18 have worked at some point during their educational careers.

EwL starts early and varies.

- Despite policy and academic focus on university student workers, most students first experience EwL during school or Further Education and move in and out of work throughout their educational careers.
- EwL takes place concurrently with full-time study, during term-time as well as holidays.
- Some EwL involves relatively few hours, but work is often spread across multiple days and may involve long hours and/or late weekend shifts.
- Types of work and reasons for engaging in EwL differ between students and evolves throughout educational stages.



EwL is gendered.

- Among students, young women are about 50% more likely to engage in paid work than young men (this finding is robust - consistent across data sources (Zhong et al. 2025)).
- Rates of pay are low - 'equally bad' (Zhong et al. 2025) - for young men and women because most work in similar sectors (retail and hospitality). But since women are more likely to undertake EwL, they are, however, disproportionately exposed to poor pay for student work.
- Where they work, men on average work slightly longer hours than women, and therefore on average have higher total income.
- There is a slight pay advantage for moving into more gendered occupations among older students, providing an early financial incentive for occupational gendering.
- Types of informal EwL with family and friends (including babysitting and care) often reinforce gendered norms.

Female students are **about 50% more likely** to engage in paid work than male students



EwL evolves across different educational stages



What are students' motivations for EwL?

Gain independence (financial and social) from family.

Gaining 'experience' for future employability.

Money for consumption and spending on self.



Financial drivers prominent including: meeting everyday costs; saving for university; and reducing financial burden on parents.

Establishing 'adult' worker identity.

Opportunities for socializing.



Accumulating further 'experience'.

Opportunities to socialize with other young people, particularly through work in the night-time economy.

Work to cover daily living expenses not met by student loans/family.



What types of work do they do?

Informal (e.g. babysitting).

In workplaces run by family or wider personal networks.

Often hours are unspecified or explicitly organised around study.

Likely engage in some official (school-organized) work experience.



Increasingly contractual work in more formal settings.

In some instances, aligned to an imagined future careers.

In retail and hospitality.

Additional formalised work experience gained through educational institutions.



Formal work.

In retail and hospitality, often alongside other students /friends.

Some work in or via their university.

Often combined with unpaid 'employability-focused' work experience.



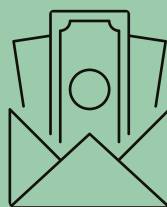
2. There is a distinct Student Labour Regime

Legal, political and cultural institutions systematically produce a 'Student Labour Regime' that makes conditions of hyper-exploitation likely.

- The national living wage only applies to those aged 21 or over. Most university and FE students are therefore subject to lower minimum wage rates. The wages of those still in compulsory education (under 16) are entirely unregulated.
- Policy and educational institutions primarily recognise students as learners or 'future workers', implicitly or explicitly positioning current paid work as 'trivial', marginal or a learning experience, in ways that devalue student work as 'proto-work' (Hardy et al, forthcoming). This obscures students' status as workers and the support required in this status.
- As **discussed above**, most students undertake paid work and dependence on employment income is exacerbated by policies that have reduced alternative avenues for student support.

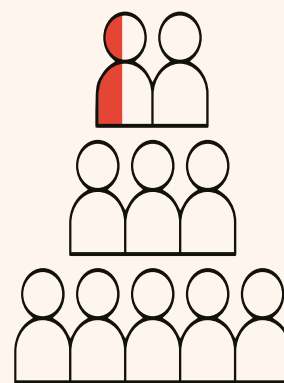
Specific sectors benefit from and depend upon concentrations of low-paid student workers.

- Although students make up only 4% of the overall working population, they comprise over 20% of the workforce in sales assistant/elementary service roles, many holding positions of significant responsibility.
- About 54% of student workers are in sales assistant/elementary service.
- Student workers are disproportionately concentrated in less formal work; often work is embedded in personal relationships, especially at a younger age.



The wages of under 16s are entirely unregulated

Students make up **4%** of the overall working population...



...but they comprise over **20% of the workforce** in sales assistant/elementary service roles.



Student workers are exposed to low pay and poor conditions.

- A large minority are paid below legal age-specific minimum wages (with the large majority receiving below adult national living wage).
- Many students report being paid late or not being paid at all.
- There is a student penalty - students aged 21-29 earn lower hourly wages than similarly aged non-student workers.
- It is not unusual for students to undertake more than one day of 'trial shifts' for which they receive no pay (contravening UK Government guidelines).
- Students regularly encounter mistreatment, abuse and harassment, with young women reporting widespread sexual harassment – from co-workers, managers and customers.
- Some university students reported working long hours (30 hours/week), sometimes in very compressed hours (e.g. 25hrs+ over two days).
- Students report little control or choice over shift patterns and many feel unable to refuse or change shifts.

- Student workers face challenges in balancing the demands of work and study, which becomes more complex over time and can result in significant mental health issues, including burnout and anxiety.

'You can be proper tired. Like I had my exams and everything, my mocks, and then I'll go into work and just be like [sighs]'

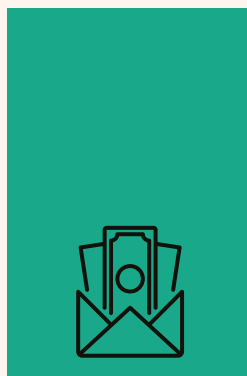
Millie, 15 years old, School

'Some of the customers are so rude. I think they forget that I'm an actual person, not just a till op.'

Violet, 17 years old, Further Education



Student



Non -student

'Students aged 21-29 **earn lower hourly wages** than non-student workers of the same age'

Student workers' main source of contestation is 'quitting', which reproduces the student labour regime.

- Student workers are highly aware of their replaceability in sectors considered 'low skill'.
- Student workers struggled to address workplace problems, since they felt they were perceived as young and therefore less experienced.
- The framing (by themselves and others) of student work as 'proto work' - work which precedes 'real work' - reproduces consent within the student labour regime.
- Student workers have few voice mechanisms or collective strategies of resistance or contestation, or access to representative institutions including unions. Unions were rarely visible or seen as accessible or effective.
- Typically, students' response to problems at work is individualised, most often to 'quit', which reproduces the very conditions it seeks to contest (Hardy et al. forthcoming).
- Student workers' inability to contest poor workplace treatment is exacerbated where work is embedded in informal relationships.

'[I] went three months without being paid.'

**Lyra, 15 years old,
School**



‘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, 22 years old,
Higher Education**

‘I started waitressing at 14 and worked long weekends... I didn’t get breaks. They didn’t feed me. I was on like, below... like £4 an hour.’

**Esme, 17 years old,
Further Education**



3. Earning while Learning establishes expectations for and shapes trajectories of future work

Contrary to widespread concern, EwL does not have a negative impact on educational outcomes and has complex impacts on longer term employment outcomes.

- Using longitudinal data we find no negative impacts of EwL on degree award, degree classification or obtaining an advanced degree.
- Conversely, we find that early experiences of EwL decrease the chances of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training).
- Young women – but not men – who undertake high hours EwL during university (e.g. 20 hours plus) are more likely to be in work immediately after graduation, but also less likely to be in higher professional and managerial roles several years post-graduation. This may be a result of the ‘stickiness’ of EwL, discussed below.

EwL operates as a form of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ producing expectations and understandings of what it means to be a ‘worker’.

- Students’ experiences of EwL normalise bad working conditions including sexual harassment.
- Students gain evidence of their future ‘employability’ by demonstrating persistence in (often bad) roles and conceding to managerial discipline.

‘I mostly got the job in the first place to get a bit of experience, because I didn’t want to go into uni without having been in that position where you have to be in that environment and have someone basically manage you and all of that type of stuff.’

**Elira, 18 years old,
Further Education**

‘I’ve worked in a lot of bars and clubs and I find that the harassment is really, really, bad, like people will touch you... They’re very persistent.... Sometimes you just have to suck it up.’

**Marina, 20 years old,
Higher Education**



EwL can be ‘sticky’, with young people remaining in or returning to types of work undertaken as students.

- EwL enables young women to accumulate experience of (and see themselves as inhabiting) specific sectors or roles and this can create a degree of path dependency.
- Many young women, especially those who undertook roles in babysitting, teaching, youth work or care as part of EwL, develop an understanding that paid work should be oriented around care for others (what we call a gendered ‘nurturing habitus’).

‘I did a placement at a local nursery and I worked across the ages to get experience. I really enjoyed it and that’s when I thought: OK, maybe childcare is for me.’

**Ellie, 25, senior leader
at an afterschool club**

‘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, 28, children’s
performing arts teacher**

‘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, 26, beauty executive



4. Young women's post-education work trajectories are often non-linear and easily derailed

Women's working trajectories following education are complex.

- Young women's working trajectories following education are often non-linear and follow a range of different pathways.
- By their 20s, many women have already accrued significant work histories and experienced several transitions between roles, sectors, employers, and between employment and self-employment.
- Having a 'side hustle' and/or juggling multiple jobs was a common experience for young women post-education. Multi-jobbing is often a result of financial need, a lack of a livable wage, or insufficient hours, rather than an entrepreneurial mindset.
- Easily derailed transitions: the major transitions that occur in young women's lives are often involuntary 'derailments' from a career path they are on, usually resulting in a shift to a different area of work.
- Women's ability to have career pivots, breaks or reduced hours typically relied upon partners, parents or other family.
- The pandemic impacted participants in education and those in work differently. While the pandemic was used to reconsider priorities and work by those post-education, for participants in education and job-searching the pandemic was experienced it as a time of crisis and derailment.

'I would love to be able to buy myself some brand new teaching clothes, but even that, can't afford it now.'

Ava, 27, supply teacher

Young women's working lives are shaped by austere institutional landscapes including a lack of affordable housing and the cost-of-living crisis.

- Women have low expectations and modest ambitions for their futures as a result of their political economic context. Modest ambitions were reproduced by negative experiences in the workplace (see [below](#)).
- The housing and cost-of-living crisis shape understandings of present and future possibilities, with participants describing a delayed or postponed adulthood, whereby the traditional markers of adult autonomy and independence were out of reach including home ownership and having children.
- High living and housing costs and low pay meant many young women were reliant on family or partners for stable housing.

'The only reason I can do [this work] is because I have a partner who has got very stable income, and that's great. But if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be doing this.'

Sarah, 29, home care worker

'I wanted to be a young mum, but I couldn't afford it working in childcare (...) I wouldn't have been able to work in childcare if I wasn't living with my parents. I can't be a proper adult.'

Maeve, 28, early years contact supervisor

A 'nurturing habitus' - fostered in early working-life-course, including EwL - orients decisions about work and shapes many young women's worker identities.

- Women prioritise 'meaningful work' - often oriented around nurturing - as an important aspect of their work, including caring for others or improving the world or lived environment.
- Young women tend to emphasise their (gendered) interpersonal skills over their (formally recognised or experience-based) technical skills and knowledge.
- While some participants viewed interpersonal skills as 'innate' to women, others believe that this naturalisation of nurturing skills leads to devaluation and low pay in feminized sectors.
- As a result of low pay, often directly or indirectly set by government funding, many experience their work in feminised sectors as 'unaffordable' but continued because of the importance meaningful work has to them.

'I just think if I could make that one little difference in that young person's life, I'm done. That gives me more job satisfaction than anything else. To me, that's probably why I stayed at the same pay grade just because that means more to me than having a big paycheck.'

Faiza, 27, youth worker

'I mean, I don't know if it's kind of sexist for me to think, but I do think women do tend to be more in nurturing kind of roles. And for me, I think that my nurturing and empathetic kind of curious spirit or personality really does help me a lot in my role and I have noticed a lot of the other women that I work with tend to be the same.'

Amal, 29, social worker

'I love the job, but it's the realities of living that make it difficult. There just needs to be a bit more pay (...) so I think I feel nervous about my future. There's, you know, simply feeding yourself. There's all those things, like being able to comfortably pay your bills and things like that. (...) [or] like whether you can afford to buy yourself a nice new winter coat or a holiday, for example. I've not been abroad. Well, I have been. That's a lie. But my nan paid for it.'

Chloe, 26, youth worker

5. Persistent workplace problems and a lack of remedy reproduce gendered inequalities

Despite some improvements in pay and working conditions, poor working conditions do not end with EwL but continue in working lives following education.

- Poor working conditions for young women following education include low pay, limited or opaque progression pathways, insufficient hours, bullying, discrimination, workplace stress, and sexual harassment.
- Funding cuts and under-investment in public services resulting in high workloads, understaffing, low pay, and dangerous working conditions shape the daily working lives of many young women.

Following education, young women are less able to simply 'quit' when they encounter problems at work and instead attempt to address them, with limited success.

- Young women try to contest workplace problems through formal and informal methods. The dominant mode of contestation was direct conversations with managers or colleagues, sometimes official HR voice mechanisms and very rarely involving a union.
- Generally, they aimed to solve problems individually, including structural rather than individual problems such as unsafe conditions or sector-wide low pay.
- Unions were either not visible in their workplace, not deemed affordable or effective, or were seen as adversarial and likely to result in retaliation.
- Exceptions are professions within the public sector where union membership is rolled into professional body membership or where union membership is common.

- In general, young women reported a lack of visible examples of successful contestation in the workplace, delimiting women's expectations and ambitions for their working life.

'I mean that's just the reality of a charity. I would say that our salaries are much lower than they should be. I think I'm currently on about like 25k (...) I'm line- managing, I'm networking, I'm doing all of this stuff and I'm only on that much... It's recently gone up [but only] because of the national living wage increase.'

Chloe, 26, youth worker

'Career progression from here is quite tricky, obviously I've been here for six years. I've not got a huge amount of promotion or progression, I don't have any formal progression for where I am now, so I'm a little bit stuck, there's nowhere for me to go. Yeah, I do love it. [But] I am stuck, I'm completely at the end of my progression here.'

Joanna, 28, helpline practitioner

Failed workplace contestation and workplace injustice reinforce patterns of gendered occupational segregation.

- Unsuccessful contestation of workplace problems results in a sense of disillusionment in their ability to affect their working conditions, and a lack of control over their career trajectories.
- This sense of disillusionment and a lack of control is exacerbated by encountering sexism, racism and ableism in the workplace.
- Quitting a job is often the end point and last resort, often following various attempts at resolution.
- For some women, especially those who experienced gender-based workplace problems feminized sectors are sought as a refuge or default destination. In many cases, this also involves accommodation with lower pay, poorer progression and adjusted aspirations for work.



‘I was the only person of colour in that team. I was subject of harassment, bullying.... I was off sick for 6 months because it was just awful, and I was just trying to find a new job. I was willing to do anything.... I took it all to HR and they’d filed an investigation... I didn’t really receive an outcome.... I could have taken it to tribunal. I could have gone the employment law route but I just didn’t have the strength. I just wanted to get out of there and never have anything to do with them ever again and my mental health was rock bottom. I’ve never experienced anything like that. [It] absolutely floored me. It’s taken me a long time to get my confidence back up again after that.’

Faiza, 27, youth worker

‘It’s so hard to do, because if you push back on something, the fear is that they’re going to take your money because they’re going to take your hours. A huge part of why things have been allowed to get worse and worse over the course of 30 years, I believe, is that we just are too scared to say anything on zero hours’ contracts. (...) Honestly, my approach is to just keep things sweet, that’s all I ever do. That’s where you end up feeling powerless, because you want to protect your own income and therefore you put up with shit.’

Sarah, 29, home care worker

Rethinking young women's working life course

Earning while Learning connects with and has implications for later working life.

Young women learn what it means to be a particular kind of worker (disciplined, feminised, compliant, nurturing) from the earliest point in their working-life-course.

Working transitions and trajectories are complex and non-linear, with anticipated pathways often derailed following education.

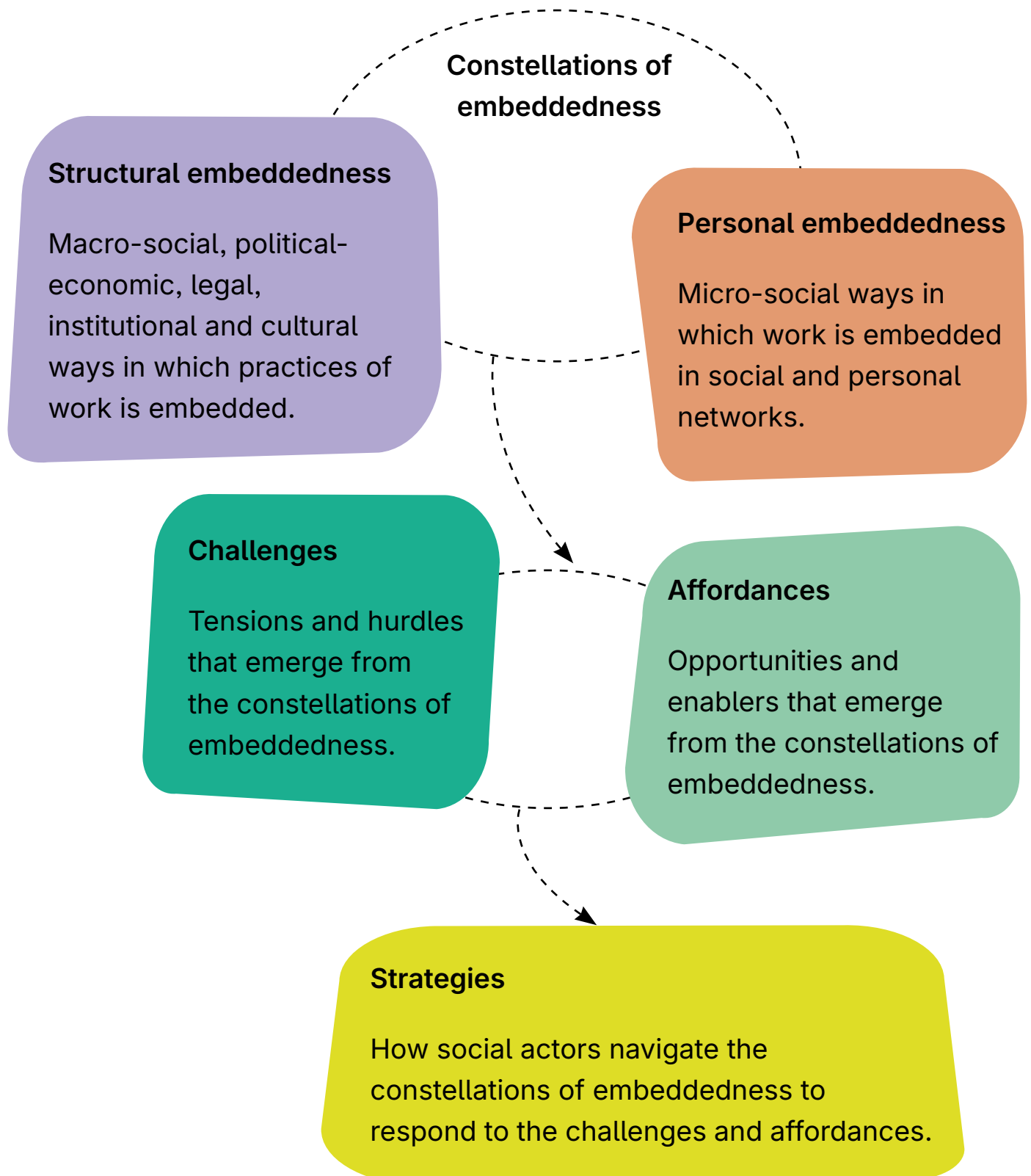
Accounting for Earning while Learning as part of the 'working life course' means that 'labour market entry' needs to be rethought as occurring before young people formally exit education.

Experiences and understandings of work are embedded within broader structures and personal lives: **constellations of embeddedness**. As these shift across the life course they produce particular challenges and affordances and alter the strategies workers deploy in response.



Constellations of embeddedness

These findings require we radically rethink women's working life courses, taking seriously young women's very earliest experiences of work, including work undertaken while students. It also means understanding and recognising the complex constellations of embeddedness which shape our working lives.



Recommendations

Our research findings suggest that improving young women's working lives across the workforce requires three key actions:

- **Recognising 'Student Work' as real work and improving the working conditions and rights of student workers.**
- **Prioritising Employment Rights Literacy for young people.**
- **Remedying the enduring issues faced by women in feminised work & addressing the structural conditions in which it takes place.**

Achieving these goals requires coordinated and concerted efforts by key stakeholders including educational institutions and practitioners, policymakers, employers and industry, and trade unions.





Government and Policymakers

The Employment Rights Bill represents an important opportunity to enhance workers' rights and conditions, particularly those of the most vulnerable workers including young people, students and women.

The Fair Work Agency (FWA) should:

- Make student workers, particularly the youngest, a priority as they represent an at-risk sector of the labour force for facing non-compliance with labour law.
- Be given powers to sanction employers and recover unpaid wages, something that is especially important to student workers.
- Be properly resourced in order to conduct this work.
- Support anonymous reporting mechanisms and protection for workers from employer retaliation.

To 'Make work Pay' the government must:

- Eliminate discriminatory National Minimum Wage youth rates and ensure a living wage is available irrespective of age.
- Clarify legislation to eliminate the use of 'trial shifts' for which workers receive no pay.
- Use the Employment Rights Bill to establish career and pay structures that enable pay progression, such as pay negotiating bodies; fair pay agreements and pay transparency, across heavily feminised sectors.
- Work with Educational Institutions to adapt the National Curriculum to better include 'Employment Rights Literacy.'
- Ensure the new duty on employers to inform workers of their right to join a union directly addresses student workers, including their concerns about retaliation.

The government's plan to 'Get Britain Working', including its 'Youth Guarantee', should recognise that:

- Protecting the most vulnerable and at-risk youth requires improving the working conditions and rights of the very youngest workers – including students.
- Many young people are both earning and learning and need to be supported to combine these.
- EwL may help young people avoid future NEET experiences.
- Poor employment is a driver of mental health problems and chronic conditions.
- For work to qualify as 'good work' it must include appropriate accommodations for disability, mental health and chronic conditions.
- 'In work' status does not necessarily improve health outcomes, especially where work is poor or unsuitable, or where workers face bad or abusive conditions.

Public investment is needed to:

- Improve young women's pay and conditions in public sector employment.
- Increase maintenance loans and ensure these keep up with inflation to enable university students' greater choice about how much paid work to undertake.
- Reintroduce the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for younger students to reduce financial pressures to work part-time or accept poor quality work.
- Expand and make accessible more properly affordable and social housing to reduce young women's dependence on partners and family, and enable them to have children if and when they choose.



Educational Institutions and Sector Bodies

Improving students' lives requires addressing the context in which students live and work, including decommodifying student housing markets and higher education.

Educational institutions should:

- Avoid policies restricting EwL, as these do not prevent or reduce this work and may make students reluctant to seek support.
- Provide students support in contesting problems at work.
- Work with sector bodies, trade unions and the National Union of Students to improve the working conditions and rights of student workers across all educational stages.
- Make 'Employments Rights Literacy' a priority and engage students in conversations about their current experiences of work, including discussions about students' rights at work and how to enforce these. 'Employment Rights Literacy' should be embedded in the curriculum (e.g. Citizenship Education or PSHE) and wider provision for student wellbeing, skills and employability.
- Recognise that enhancing student 'Employments Rights Literacy' develops their skills and capacities as future leaders in the workplace.
- Review and enhance financial assistance schemes, particularly for students facing acute financial hardship.

Due to high levels of sexual harassment in the workplace, EwL must be treated as a safeguarding issue. Educational institutions should:

- Institutions create spaces that enable students to identify and report this as part of wider initiatives and agendas to address sexual violence in education.
- Students are made aware of the measures for making sexual harassment in the workplace a 'qualifying disclosure' under whistleblowing law.





Careers, Employability and Education Professionals

Careers information, advice, and guidance (IAG) and Employability agendas must include ‘Employment Rights Literacy’ for all forms of workplace experience, including current EwL – not simply those directly or explicitly related to students’ future career aspirations.

Careers, employability and teaching practitioners should:

- Resist narratives of student employment as ‘proto-work’.
- Support students to identify and critically reflect on the transferable skills they develop in their experiences of paid work during their studies.
- Promote tools that enable students to contest poor or illegal conditions as part of ‘Employment Rights Literacy’.
- Work closely with institutions to effectively communicate that support is available to students who are navigating problems in the workplace.





Employers

Employers must develop robust strategies for ensuring that workplace sexism and sexual harassment, as well as other forms of discrimination including racism and ableism, are eliminated and effectively addressed when they do occur.

Employers should engage with local and regional ‘Good Work’ charters.

Employers in sectors with high numbers of student workers can significantly reduce turnover and improve retention by:

- Giving students more control over their hours.
- Ending the use of ‘trial shifts’ for which workers receive no pay.
- Collaborating with educational institutions to integrate work-related learning and ‘Employment Rights Literacy’ into the curriculum and become employers of choice for local students.

Employers should develop young workers’ skills in addressing workplace problems through formal pathways, including providing support through these pathways and preventing managerial retaliation against workers who flag problems.

To maintain a strong pipeline of young women, employers must:

- Ensure robust voice mechanisms work to support young women when contesting issues in the workplace, in order to guard against turnover and ‘brain drain’ and support diversity and inclusion.
- Improve pay progression structures which link improved qualifications to progression and which fully recognise skills.





Trade Unions and the National Union of Students

Trade unions should recognise students and young women as an important and organisable segment of the workforce.

The National Union of Students should drive efforts to join up local campaigns around student work, building on extant campaigns such as ‘A Fair Deal for Our Future’.

Trade unions should:

- Do outreach in workplaces which employ high proportions of young workers.
- Actively recruit students, offering free or low-cost membership for full-time students.
- Ensure a smooth and regularly reviewed transition process from student to full member category to ensure full support is accessible when needed.
- Highlight collective strategies to address common issues for young women, including sexual harassment.
- Create teaching resources around ‘Employment Rights Literacy’ to equip students with knowledge of their rights and tools to enforce these, including the role of unions in enforcement.
- Work with educational institutions to disseminate and embed ‘Employment Rights Literacy’.



References and Data Sources

References and further reading

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Future publications will be shared on our [website](#).



About the study

'L-earning: rethinking young women's working lives' is a 3-year national study of young women's earliest experiences of work, and how these experiences may contribute to gendered inequalities in later life. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the 'Transforming Working Lives' initiative.

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You can read more about the research here:

<https://ywworking.co.uk> →

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