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Financial and Working Conditions, Employment Motivations, and Academic Outcomes of Working University Students: The Case of Süleyman Demirel University, Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Paid work has become a common part of student life in Türkiye, yet its academic and social effects remain poorly researched. This study explores how financial conditions, working environments, and employment motivations relate to academic outcomes among undergraduates at Süleyman Demirel University.

Design/methodology/approach – Using survey data from 410 working students, the study applies descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to examine patterns of student employment and their academic implications.

Results – Most students worked to cover basic living costs, often in low-paid and frequently unregistered service jobs with little connection to their field of study. More than half reported schedules exceeding forty-five hours per week, and these long hours were strongly associated with lower GPAs. Students with limited family support were also more likely to view employment as a necessity. Despite some gains in independence and self-discipline, students described work mainly as a means of survival rather than career development.

Discussion – The results point to a structural problem in higher education. Employment enables access but often negatively affects academic achievement. Higher education policy thus should prioritise financial aid, fair working conditions, and academically relevant on-campus working opportunities.

1. Introduction

For many university students today, including those in Türkiye, higher education is increasingly combined with paid employment rather than pursued sequentially (OECD, 2023). This taking on two roles as student and worker aligns with Becker's (1993) human-capital theory, where education and labour are complementary investments that improve productivity and lifetime earnings. But the experience of today's working student goes beyond a logical decision about improving skills. As Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes, individuals possess different forms of capital such as economic, social, and cultural that shape their opportunities and positions within the social world. In higher education, paid work may increase students' economic capital and improve their job prospects, but it can also reduce the time and opportunities for academic engagement and social participation that help develop cultural and social capital.

In many developed economies, student employment has become typical of higher education. In the United States roughly forty percent of full-time undergraduates were employed during term time, and that rate for part-time students was 74% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Across the European Union about 23% of young people enrolled in formal education were also part of active labour force. That rate differs at the national level, with the highest in the Netherlands (70%), followed by Denmark (49%) and Germany (42%)

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(Eurostat, 2022). In the United Kingdom, some describe this trend as a "*hidden student job crisis*", mainly caused by economic necessity than career ambition, and it was estimated that 69% of full-time university students worked in part-time jobs (National Union of Students, 2023).

But this leads us to ask: what does student employment represent in terms of opportunity and risk? Scholars have continued to debate on it for a long time (Hammes & Haller, 1983), and various dimensions have been investigated (Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Moderate workloads can help students' career and professional direction (Soares & Taveira, 2024), whereas long or irregular hours often reduce academic performance and increase stress (Kurata et al., 2015). Sociological perspectives describe how student employees experience practical and identity incompatibilities (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022) and as part of an expanding precariat, a social class defined by insecurity and instability (Standing, 2011). Student dependence on casual employment and widening class disparities are now lasting features of higher education (Hall, 2010; Taylor et al., 2020). Across the literature, we see that student work is shaped not just by personal choice or time management, but also by structural inequality and institutional design.

The Turkish case follows these global changes but amid greater insecurity. Although there is no actual statistical data regarding the share of working university students in the workforce, some surveys indicate that approximately 36 percent of Turkish university students hold paid work, with 6% in full-time work (Marketing Türkiye, 2018). National labour-force data implies ongoing high youth unemployment (TURKSTAT, 2025) and a substantial share of informal work in total employment—26.27% as of 2024 (Social Security Institution, 2025). Students' informal employment probably exceeds this national average. It's because most student jobs are clustered in low-wage service sectors such as cafés, restaurants, and retail, where unregistered or temporary work is usual.

National research has shown the social and psychological costs of this situation as well. Quantitative analyses and qualitative studies implied that long working hours were negatively associated with academic performance, and caused fatigue, stress, and lessened campus engagement among working students (Aydemir et al., 2022; Kırlıoğlu & Özdemir, 2023; Açık Turguter, 2025). These describe Turkish working students as coping with economic pressures, limited time, and institutional constraints.

However, important gaps remain in the literature on working university students in Türkiye. Existing studies have provided valuable evidence on student poverty, psychological strain, informal employment, and the general relationship between paid work and academic performance. Yet limited attention has been given to how students' financial conditions, family support, working hours, and precarious employment conditions interact to shape academic outcomes within a single empirical framework. The relationship between paid work and students' economic, cultural, and social capital also remains underexplored in the Turkish context.

This study addresses these gaps by examining 410 working undergraduate students at Süleyman Demirel University. It contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the financial and working conditions of employed students, including income level, social security coverage, working hours, and employment motivations. Second, it analyses how these conditions are associated with academic outcomes, especially GPA and work–study conflict. Third, it interprets these findings through Becker's Human Capital Theory, Bourdieu's forms of capital, and Standing's Precarity Theory, thereby linking student employment in Türkiye to broader debates on inequality, labour-market insecurity, and higher education.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the international and national literature on student employment and outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study. Section 3 describes the data and methodology used in the analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical results, followed by a discussion of the results in Section 5. Section 6 outlines policy implications. Final section concludes with recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. International Perspectives

International literature sees student employment as a complex situation that results in both opportunities and challenges across higher education. Some studies claim part-time work can actually help, but only when hours stay low and the job is predictable. Limited part-time work can build time management, self-discipline, and

work experience for future employability without clearly harming academic performance (Hovdhaugen, 2015). Working between 10-19 hours weekly was considered optimal and could even boost the students' grades in comparison to other working and non-working students (Dundes & Marx, 2006). Work experience can strengthen students' career adaptability, improving students' self-management and confidence in the move to full-time work (Soares & Taveira, 2024). Moderate employment may in turn integrate with formal education by linking academic knowledge to real experience and backing financial freedom.

A growing concern in the literature is that negative outcomes increasingly outweigh the gains when workload exceeds manageable limits or occurs in unstable, low-wage sectors. Unfortunately, many previous studies like ours reported that student employment is often driven by financial necessity (Hall, 2010; Perna & Odle, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). High weekly workloads could lessen study time, delay graduation, lower academic performance, and could increase dropout rates (Torres et al., 2010; Theune, 2015; Hovdhaugen, 2015; Logan et al., 2016). Students tend to have less time to take part in social activities (Lang, 2012; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). After a full working day, they often lack energy during evening lectures (Stone, 2014). Excessive workload also contributes to fatigue and reduced concentration (Kurata et al., 2015). Student work has therefore emotional costs (Summer et al., 2025). By balancing study and work, students could display anxiety, have the feeling of inefficiency and a weakened sense of belonging (Mounsey et al., 2013; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Gorný, 2025). They could feel a less welcoming climate on campus (Soria & Bultmann, 2014).

Moreover, some studies link these pressures to rising living costs and insufficient institutional support (Perna & Odle, 2020; Summer et al., 2025). Differences between academic and work schedules make daily life harder (Summer et al., 2025). A conflict between work and class timetables could limit physical access to educational spaces (Gorný, 2025). On-campus work though can reduce negative academic and social effects in comparison to off-campus work (Halper et al., 2020). Overall, the trend appears consistent. Student work is beneficial only under limited, well-supported conditions. But in the case when driven by economic necessity, it has the potential to result in inequality and harm academic and mental well-being.

2.2. National Context: Evidence from Türkiye

Turkish research aligns with these global mixed outcomes but under more precarious socioeconomic conditions marked by unregistered work. Positive aspects of student work appear mainly in the form of economic independence and strength. Limited evidence suggests that part-time work can develop social skills and practical understanding of workplace relations if workloads stay moderate (Kırlıoğlu & Özdemir, 2023).

Turkish scholars, much like their international peers by expressing similar concerns, observed that negative consequences of student employment are more evident in Turkish case as well. Many Turkish university students work in low-paid, service-sector positions unrelated to their studies, often over forty-five hours per week and lacking social-security coverage (Aydemir et al., 2022; Açık Turguter, 2025). Such conditions produce continuing fatigue, reduced academic motivation, and constant stress (Açık Turguter, 2025). Qualitative studies described how economic need weakens social and cultural participation, leading to loneliness and disconnection from campus life (Kırlıoğlu & Özdemir, 2023; Açık Turguter, 2025). Flexible and on-call work arrangements intensify insecurity, making it difficult for students to stick to their study hours (Koç, 2017). Gender-based inequalities were also notable (Aydemir et al., 2022). Across these studies, working during higher education in Türkiye in practice, appears as a way of getting by rather than self-development, influenced by unstable employment and limited efforts from institutions.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Three main theories help explain the relationship between student employment and academic outcomes. In the view of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), student work can be seen as an investment that improve future productivity and earnings when aligned with education. The evidence so far shows that this holds true only for small-scale, skill-related work. When employment is long, compulsory, or disconnected from field of study, it interrupts learning and weakens the aimed human-capital gains.

Bourdieu's (1986) Forms of Capital explain the imbalance between economic, cultural, and social capital. Working students may temporarily increase economic capital but often lose cultural capital through reduced academic performance and social capital through weakened integration with peers and institutions. These

trade-offs worsen class gaps, particularly among students lacking family or institutional resources (Triventi, 2014; Reay et al., 2010; Koç, 2017; Açık Turguter, 2025).

Precarity Theory (Standing, 2011) connects these experiences to wider changes in the job market. The rise of temporary, insecure, and unregulated labour arguably places students within the precariat, a class marked by uncertainty, low protection, and constant anxiety. Turkish research illustrates to some degree this condition through informal work that leaves students exposed to unfairness and instability (Koç, 2017; Aydemir et al., 2022). Employment during higher education may contribute to skill development and self-reliance for some, but for most, especially under unstable conditions, it deepens inequality and harms both academic success and well-being.

2.4. Research Questions

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, this study examines how employment conditions and financial constraints shape the experiences and academic outcomes of working university students. In particular, the analysis focuses on the interaction between economic necessity, working patterns, and academic performance. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the financial conditions and employment characteristics of working university students in the Turkish higher education context?

RQ2: What motivations drive university students to participate in paid work during their studies?

RQ3: How do working conditions—particularly working hours and job characteristics—relate to students' academic outcomes?

RQ4: To what extent do socioeconomic factors such as family financial support influence students' participation in employment during university?

RQ5: Is there gender-based inequalities in the earnings of working university students?

3. Data and Methodology

We used a quantitative research design to examine the financial conditions, employment motivations, and academic outcomes of university students who take part in paid work during their studies. We employed a structured survey, which supported both descriptive and inferential analyses to understand how work overlaps with education in the Turkish higher-education context.

The survey instrument was developed in discussion with field experts to ensure conceptual validity and clarity. Our design covers three main sections. Demographic information contains seven closed-ended items capturing background characteristics such as age, gender, department, and year of study. Employment and educational experiences were examined through twenty-one questions, both open- and closed-ended, addressing income levels, working conditions, motivation, hours and sectors, housing, living costs, work-study balance, and knowing the rights in terms of Labour Law (2003).

There is also an attitudinal scale having sixteen statements rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*). The attitudinal scale was designed to capture students' perceptions of employment during their university studies. The items addressed several aspects of student employment, including perceived benefits (e.g., life experience, professional skills, and economic independence), potential negative impacts (e.g., health effects or academic strain), and students' motivations for working. Although the scale includes items reflecting both positive and negative perceptions of student employment, it was primarily used to describe students' attitudes rather than to construct a single latent variable. The reported Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.70 indicates an acceptable level of internal consistency (Taber, 2018). To secure contextual validity, items relating to income and expenditure were expressed relative to the national minimum wage at the time of the survey.

The target population comprised employed students enrolled at Süleyman Demirel University. Because there are no official institutional records identifying working students at the university, it was not possible to construct a complete sampling frame. Therefore, participants were reached using a convenience sampling strategy, targeting students who were both enrolled at Süleyman Demirel University and actively engaged in paid employment during their studies. At a 95 percent confidence level, the minimum sample size was

calculated as 381 participants. To make the sample representative and reduce nonresponse bias, data were collected from 410 students, exceeding the calculated requirement.

The survey has the approval of Ethics Board of Süleyman Demirel University (Meeting No: 178, Decision No:5). Data were collected during the 2020–2021 academic year through direct administration of the survey to students both on campus and, where possible, at their workplaces. Students joined voluntarily after being informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their answers. No identifying information was collected. The high response rate contributed to the robustness of the dataset and minimized typical survey-related biases associated with nonresponse.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. The dataset was checked for completeness, consistency, and outliers. Cases with large missing data were excluded, and isolated omissions were replaced using mean substitution. Frequencies, percentages, and mean values were computed to profile students' demographic characteristics, financial status, and working patterns. We applied the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to check normality assumptions. Several variables were found to deviate from normality. Hence, nonparametric tests were used. The Chi-square test of independence was used to measure associations between categorical variables, while the Mann–Whitney U test compared ordinal and continuous variables between groups (e.g., male vs. female students, part-time vs. full-time workers). These methods are reliable against non-normality and appropriate for categorical and ordinal data.

4. Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Working Students (N = 410)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Nationality	Turkish	403	98.3
	Foreign	7	1.7
Gender	Male	231	56.9
	Female	175	43.1
Age Group	17–18 years	8	2.0
	19 years	12	3.0
	20 years	56	14.0
	21 years	69	17.3
	22 years	72	18.0
	23+ years	183	45.8
Year of Study	1st year	49	12.1
	2nd year	79	19.5
	3rd year	69	17.0
	4th year	94	23.2
	5th & 6th years	24	5.9
	Extended study	90	22.2
Education Type	First Education	223	57.2
	Second Education	167	42.8

Note: Percentage may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Table 1 outlines the demographics of the 410 working students surveyed. Most of the students were Turkish nationals (98.3%), with a small number of foreign students (1.7%). While females represented 43.1% of the sample, the gender distribution was moderately skewed toward males (56.9%).

Age distribution indicates that around half of the students (45.8%) were 23 years or older, suggesting that a large share had prolonged their studies beyond the usual length of undergraduate programs. 22.2% reported being in an extended study period, and 23.2% were in their fourth year. In terms of enrolment type, 57.2% attended daytime programs and 42.8% evening programs, indicating that working students are distributed across both educational formats. These traits provide a varied and balanced sample for analysing students' financial and academic conditions.

Table 2. Employment Conditions of Working Students (N = 410)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Work Location	On-campus (part-time)	39	9.8
	Off-campus	359	90.2
Student-Dominated Workplace	Yes	314	77.3
	No	92	22.7
Job Related to Field of Study	Yes	57	14.3
	No	342	85.7
Weekly Working Hours	0–30 hours	99	24.0
	31–44 hours	60	15.0
	45–65 hours	210	51.0
	66+ hours	41	10.0
Years of Work Experience	1 year	179	44.4
	2 years	94	23.3
	3 years	44	10.9
	4 years	33	8.2
	5+ years	53	13.2
Salary Received Regularly	Yes	370	91.6
	No	34	8.4

Descriptive findings on students' employment conditions are presented in Table 2. While only 9.8% held part-time positions within the university, most students (90.2%) worked off-campus. 77.3% of them reported working in workplaces where students constituted most employees, particularly in cafés, restaurants, and retail outlets, those are typically characterized by temporary and low-paid work.

We observed a clear gap between employment and field of study. Only 14.3% of students worked in jobs related to their academic fields. Most (85.7%) were employed in unrelated sectors. Working hours were notably high. 51% reported working between 45 and 65 hours per week, and 10% even surpassed 66 hours, indicating that a large proportion effectively worked full-time schedules. These findings also suggest that students often work longer hours than those permitted under Labour Law (2003).

About work experience, 13.2% had worked for five years or more. 44.4% had been employed for one year. Salary stability was relatively high, with 91.6% receiving regular payments. However, 8.4% reported delayed or irregular wages, indicating vulnerabilities typical of informal work.

Table 3. Financial Status of Working Students (N = 410)

Variable	Category (in relation to Minimum Wage)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Monthly Earnings	≤¼ minimum wage	23	5.7
	¼–½ minimum wage	107	26.4
	½–¾ minimum wage	78	19.2
	¾–1 minimum wage	74	18.2
	Exactly 1 minimum wage	69	17.0
	>1 minimum wage	55	13.5
Housing	With family	48	12.0
	Shared apartment	162	40.2
	Single apartment	151	37.5
	Private dormitory	17	4.2
	KYK dormitory	24	6.0
Scholarship/Loan	Receiving	219	53.4
	Not receiving	191	46.6
Having social security	Yes	245	60.3
	No	161	39.7
Sending money to the Family	Yes	75	20.6

	No	288	79.4
Received Family Financial Support	<%30 of the Minimum Wage or None	262	66
	>30% of the Minimum Wage	135	34
Ability to Save	Agree	76	18.7
	Neutral	64	15.7
	Disagree	267	65.6

Note: Percentage may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

As seen in Table 3, nearly 70% earned below the national minimum wage, indicating that most student employment occurs in low-wage sectors. Only about 30% reported earnings at or above the minimum threshold.

Housing data demonstrates that 78% of students lived independently, either in shared or single apartments. Only 12% resided with their families and a small minority in dormitories. This pattern implies significant housing costs, intensifying the financial pressures on working students. Over half of the students (53.4%) received state scholarships or loans. Two-thirds (66%) received no financial support from their families or receiving only up to the %30 of the minimum wage. On the other hand, roughly 21% supported their families to a degree from their own earnings. Only 18.7% reported to being able to save from their income.

We also found that 39.7% of students lacked social-security coverage, even though such protection is legally mandated for formal work. These figures reveal the financial vulnerability of students. Employment is used mainly to make ends meet rather than to build a career.

Table 4. Motivations for Student Employment (N = 410)

Motivation	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Essential needs	236	61.0
Better quality of life	101	26.1
Professional experience	33	8.5
Family business	7	1.8
Other reasons	10	2.6

As listed in Table 4, the leading motivation for student employment was financial problems. A majority (61%) reported working primarily to meet essential needs. 26.1% sought an improved standard of living. Only 8.5% considered work an opportunity to gain professional experience. Only a small share worked in family businesses (1.8%) or for other reasons (2.6%).

Table 5. Academic Outcomes of Working Students (N = 410)

Variable	**Category**	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
GPA	<2.0	180	44.0
	2.0–2.49	133	32.5
	2.5–2.99	50	12.2
	3.0–3.49	43	10.5
	3.5–4.0	3	0.7
Class–Work Conflict	Most of the time	47	11.5
	Sometimes	104	25.4
	Rarely	135	33.0
	Never	123	30.1

Note: Percentage may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

From Table 5, around half of the students (44%) reported a GPA below 2.0, and an additional 32.5% were in the 2.0–2.49 range. Only 11.2% maintained a GPA above 3.0. This clustering at the lower end of the performance scale indicates a significant negative association between intensive employment and academic success.

Work–study conflict was also widespread. Approximately 11.5% reported frequent scheduling clashes between work and classes, and 25.4% faced such conflicts occasionally. Combined, more than one-third of students struggled to manage work with coursework. Conversely, 63% experienced rare or no conflicts,

suggesting that a portion of students managed to balance both demands effectively. These findings indicate that employment commitments may create significant pressures on students' academic schedules, especially for those working longer hours.

Table 6. Attitudes Toward Employment While Studying

Attitudinal Item	Agree / Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree / Strongly Disagree (%)
My job negatively affects my health	19.6	14.7	65.6
My employer supports my education	44.8	19.2	36.1
Working improves my life experience	89.6	5.7	4.7
Working improves my professional skills	64.3	12.2	23.4
Working provides economic independence	75.2	14.0	10.8
After graduation, I would like to continue working here	18.5	16.1	65.4
I would not work, if I were not financially obliged.	60.3	11.5	28.2

Students' perceptions of their work experiences, shown in Table 6. Most of them (65.6%) disagreed that employment negatively impacted their health. Around one-fifth (19.6%) noticed adverse effects, showing the physical and psychological pressure of tiring jobs.

Employer support for education varied. 44.8% of our sample felt supported, while 36.1% disagreed. Despite these mixed experiences, most students emphasized positive aspects of employment. An overwhelming 89.6% agreed that working enriched their life experience, 64.3% believed it improved professional skills, and 75.2% viewed it as a source of economic independence.

Still, only 18.5% expressed a desire to continue working for their current employer after graduation. 65.4% rejected that idea. What's more, 60.3% indicated that they wouldn't work if they weren't financially obliged. These findings imply that students value the developmental and practical gains of employment. But they tend to perceive it as a temporary necessity rather than a long-term opportunity.

Table 7. Key Inferential Results (Chi-square & Mann–Whitney U)

Test Type	Variables Compared	Test Statistic	Df	p-value	Key Finding
Chi-square	Weekly working hours × GPA	$\chi^2 = 29.316$	12	0.004*	≥45 hrs/week linked to GPA <2.0
Chi-square	Family support × 'Would not work if not necessary'	$\chi^2 = 85.252$	16	0.000*	Less support → necessity-driven work
Mann–Whitney U	Gender × Monthly earnings	U = 14032 (Z=-5.149)	–	0.000*	Male students earned more

Note: χ^2 = Chi-square statistic; U = Mann–Whitney U statistic; * indicates significance at $p < 0.01$.

Table 7 summarizes the key statistical relationships identified in the analysis. Results corresponding to these questions showed:

- A significant association between weekly working hours and GPA ($\chi^2 = 29.316$, $p < 0.01$). Students working 45 hours or more per week were substantially more likely to report GPAs below 2.0. This suggests the negative academic effects of heavy working hours.
- A strong relationship between family financial support and motivation to work ($\chi^2 = 85.252$, $p < 0.01$). Students receiving little or no financial support were more likely to report that they worked out of necessity rather than choice.
- A significant gender difference in monthly earnings (Mann-Whitney U, $p < 0.01$), with male students reporting higher pay than their female peers.

Taken together, these findings highlight how financial pressure and social inequality shape students' academic and labour outcomes in Türkiye.

5. Discussion

The results highlight the intersection of economic necessity and structural inequality in student employment. In line with earlier national and international work (Hall, 2010; Aydemir et al., 2022), the findings suggest that student employment in Türkiye is driven less by the desire to acquire skills than by financial pressure. Most students worked long hours in low-paid service jobs disconnected from their studies, treating paid work mainly as a way to get by rather than a step toward career growth. The findings suggest that economic survival often outweighs academic ambition.

From a human-capital view (Becker, 1993), student work is often framed as an investment that builds future productivity through real experience. But our results question that assumption. Only 8.5 percent of students described their jobs as professionally useful, and just 14.3% worked in areas linked to their discipline. Consistent with Theune (2015), working during studies associated with weaker grades. Almost half of all students reported GPAs below 2.0, and those working 45 hours or more each week were the most affected. Does Human Capital Theory still hold in a setting where work stems from necessity rather than choice? The findings seem less applicable here. When labour is driven by pressure, the educational benefits Human Capital Theory assumes are largely lost.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital helps interpret these pressures more broadly. Limited economic resources often push students into informal and insecure jobs. As a result, their cultural capital may weaken due to reduced study time, lower academic engagement, and disrupted learning activities (Taylor et al., 2020). Social capital may also decline, as long working hours reduce participation in campus life and weaken institutional ties. These dynamics raise questions about the extent to which higher education can function as a pathway to social mobility. The pattern observed here aligns with the findings of Reay et al. (2010) and Taylor et al. (2020), who describe working-class students balancing survival work while simultaneously struggling to achieve a sense of academic belonging. In Türkiye, where public support remains limited and living costs continue to rise, these pressures appear even more pronounced.

Our findings fit with precarity theory (Standing, 2011). Around 70 percent of the sample earned below the national minimum wage, and about 40 percent had no social-security cover. That reflects the unregistered and unstable nature of the wider labour market (Social Security Institution, 2025). Many students thus can be defined as part of what Standing calls the precariat. That means people's work is often insecure, poorly paid, and detached from long-term stability. Instead of being a route to professional life, precarity has basically become a regular student experience in Türkiye. In addition, gender differences reinforce this inequality. Male students earned noticeably more than female peers, reflecting the wider gender pay gap in the Turkish labour market.

Even so, many students felt that working built their independence, sense of duty, and maturity. These views may connect limited work to self-discipline and strength. Within Bourdieu's (1986) framework, these experiences can be understood as symbolic capital, forms of recognition and self-worth that gain value when socially noticed, partly offsetting material disadvantage. Yet they don't change the basic economic reality. Most students said they would stop working if financial pressure disappeared, indicating that independence often comes from necessity.

The results imply a core tension in Turkish higher education. Paid work allows students from poorer backgrounds to stay in university, but it may also weaken their academic success and well-being. That's why work often functions both as a lifeline and as a barrier to social mobility. This double role captures what Bourdieu (1986) and Standing (2011) describe as the reproduction of inequality. Other than closing social gaps, higher education risks widening them when financial needs drive students into precarious work.

The Turkish case illustrates how limited support, rising living costs, and informal labour markets produce restrictions to student life. Addressing these conditions calls for policies that treat student work not as a lifestyle choice but as a symptom of systemic inequality. Universities and policymakers need to move beyond the idea that any work experience is automatically beneficial and recognise that, under current conditions, it often undermines the goals of education and social mobility that higher education is meant to promote.

6. Implications

Our findings have important implications for higher education policy, labour regulation, and social welfare in Türkiye. Universities need to recognize that financial restrictions aren't secondary but central to students' academic performance. The frequency of long working hours and low wages indicates that financial difficulties, rather than voluntary participation, drives student employment. Expanding government aid, for example through scholarships or need-based grants, could lessen students' dependence on precarious work. Affordable student housing could help to ease financial stress.

Meanwhile, universities could create more on-campus job opportunities that remain flexible, legally protected, and aligned with students' studies. Roles such as research assistants, library aides, and administrative interns can help students earn income while remaining connected to their academic environment. These jobs also help skill development useful to students' fields of study, partly realizing the productive potential of work meant by human capital theory. Academic advising systems also need improving to spot students under financial strain. Integrating financial counselling, time-management training, and health support into student services can help reduce the negative academic effects of overwork. By taking a more integrated approach to student welfare, universities can improve both educational equity and learning outcomes. This policy was also suggested by Halper et al. (2020), who specifically examined the effects of on campus jobs and highlighted that student employment programs of universities have the potential to contribute to academic integration.

At the macro level, aligning education and labour-market policies can help close the gap between academic study and work opportunities. Encouraging collaborations between universities and private firms to provide internships or cooperative education programs, where work experience is both paid and academically credited, could improve the quality and relevance of student employment. These programs would turn work from a survival strategy into an integrated component of professional training.

The findings may reveal the scale of unregistered employment among university students, with roughly 40 percent lacking social-security coverage. Simply put, weak oversight and low awareness let these problems continue. Strengthening the regulatory framework governing student work could ensure compliance with minimum-wage, working-hour limits, and occupational safety standards.

Introducing a legal status for student employees like models adopted in some European countries could offer a balanced system for protection and flexibility. Germany addressed this through the Social Code under which students are allowed to work 20 hours per week during the semester while being part of the social insurance system and exempt from certain social insurance contributions but remain in the legal framework (Sozialgesetzbuch III, 1997). Full-time work also up to 40 hours per week is allowed during the breaks, but for a maximum 26 weeks per year without losing student status. Therefore, education remains the primary activity of students, and the system recognizes them as a student rather than a full worker. That rule helps protect students and make their jobs legally visible.

Such a status in Türkiye would assure access to health insurance and social security while recognizing the distinctive needs of students as part-time workers. It would also make clear employers' obligations and encourage formal work in sectors that depend heavily on student labour, especially hospitality and retail. We would like to note that Labour Law (2003) in Türkiye already covers part-time working. But this concept sadly does not necessarily meet the specific requirements of working students. Indeed, one of the authors of this study already proposed a legal reform (unpublished) in Labour Law in the context of part-time work that would enable Ministry of Labour and Social Security to regulate student employment like in Germany, aligning labour, social insurance, and higher education law. We hope that such a reform will in the future be put in place and help address the problems students face.

7. Conclusion

We have been observing for a long time that more students have becoming part of the labour market. At first, we assessed this trend positive, because we thought that it may help students to gain future career perspectives, and they could develop professional skills. In the meantime, they could earn their own money and become self-reliant. Yet we noticed that this was not what we expected. Lower attendance in classes, lack of energy and academic motivation made us increasingly worried and led us to analyse this trend empirically.

In light of this research direction, this paper examined the financial conditions, working patterns, and academic results of university students who took part in paid work in Süleyman Demirel University, Türkiye. Most students worked out of economic necessity rather than choice, usually in low-paid service jobs unrelated to their studies. Some of them even support their families financially. Nearly seventy percent earned below the national minimum wage. More than half worked forty-five hours or more each week, often without social-security protection. These conditions likely reflect the informality of the broader Turkish labour market and reveal the structural vulnerabilities facing young people who try to study while supporting themselves.

While employment offered some personal gains like greater independence, discipline, and broader life experience, its effect on academic success was mostly negative. Students working long hours more often reported lower GPAs. Gender pay gaps among student workers echoed existing inequalities, implying that these patterns take root even before graduation.

These results conflict with Human Capital Theory, which presents work experience as a route to skill development and future career chances. Instead, they relate more to theories of social reproduction, stressing how financial constraints and family background shape opportunity. For many students, working during university is less an investment in future capital and more of a coping strategy that weakens academic progress.

What we found points to an urgent need to improve both institutional and public support for students who work while studying. Universities expect full academic commitment while many students struggle with living expenses. To fix this, education should be seen not just as a personal investment but as a shared social responsibility. Making sure that students can complete their studies without sacrificing health or learning potential is vital to both fairness and the long-term strength of higher education. Universities could especially develop flexible, academically linked on-campus jobs. That would help students earn income without losing contact with their studies. Government, for their part, should strengthen financial-aid frameworks, broaden scholarship access, and better enforce labour laws so that part-time student workers receive fair pay, reasonable hours, and social-security coverage. Further social actions like affordable housing could also reduce the financial stress that pushes many students into insecure work. Together, these steps would help reduce the economic obstacles that limit equal participation in higher education.

Although this research offers useful empirical evidence, several limitations should be noted. The data were collected from students at a single university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of university students in Türkiye. Student employment patterns may differ across regions, universities, and fields of study depending on local labour-market conditions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research could address this limitation by conducting multi-institutional studies that include universities from different regions. Comparative studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how financial pressures, working conditions, and academic outcomes vary within the Turkish higher education system. Longitudinal research designs could also help examine how student employment patterns evolve over time and how they influence labour-market transitions after graduation.

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