

The impact of a Student vs Worker identity on work-study conflict and facilitation in university students.

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Abstract

Students enrolled at two Australian universities were surveyed about their work and study demands, their control over their job and work schedule, and their levels of work-study conflict and work-study facilitation. While they were completing both university studies and paid employment, their primary identity was either as a student (n = 908) or as a worker (n = 486). Average scores on all measures were significantly different between those whose primary identity was as a student (who works) or a worker (who studies). The demographic variables also showed that those with the student identity worked fewer hours and were considerably younger than those with the worker identity. The four predictor variable significantly predicted work-study conflict and work-study facilitation for both identities. Implications are discussed in terms of the development of their identity.

Introduction

Tertiary students in Australia are undertaking increasing amounts of work during their studies but are still struggling to meet the financial costs of studying (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008). While students' annual incomes are rising, the level of government support is declining (Devlin et al., 2008). A likely outcome of this trend towards increased working is that students may be less engaged in their studies with a greater priority given to earning money over studying (Devlin et al., 2008).

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) and Work-Home Resources (W-HR) literature provides an enormous platform for understanding contributors to employee engagement and burnout, and it has recently been extended to the study domain (Calderwood & Gabriel, 2017; Cinamon, 2018; Creed, French, & Hood, 2015). Owens, Kavanagh, and Dollard (2018) also drew on the JD-R literature to develop a conceptual framework called the "work-to-study model" (p. 505). These studies suggest that there are dual processes operating with important roles for both work-study conflict (W-SC) and work-study facilitation (W-SF) in mediating the impact of a range of antecedents on students' health and academic outcomes.

Park and Headrick (2017) summarised the literature and grouped the antecedents of W-SC and W-SF into three types: work-related predictors, nonwork/school predictors, and individual predictors. Outcomes of W-SC and W-SF were also grouped into three types: work-related outcomes, school-related outcomes, and individual-related outcomes. Moderators were

identified as individual characteristics, situation characteristics, and demographic characteristics. The complexity of capturing the influence of different types of predictors on different types of outcomes, with different moderators, while simultaneously considering the dual pathways (W-SC and W-SF) presents a challenge for researchers. Park and Headrick (2017) also highlighted that much of the previous research has been conducted using “traditional” college student samples, with “non-traditional” students being largely ignored. They suggested that “non-traditional” students tend to be older, have dependents besides a spouse, and have delayed commencing their tertiary studies.

The current research into W-SC and W-SF is the initial and somewhat exploratory phase of a three-year longitudinal study across two universities, one with a focus on school leavers and the other with the focus on the non-school leaver student. The current study included both W-SC and W-SF as two key indicators of students’ experience of working and studying. The predictors of W-SC and W-SF included two types of demands and two types of resources (work-related and study-related). The initial model included a measure of primary identity (either as a student or as a worker), as well as other demographic questions. We then examined whether the student and worker identities differed in their demographic responses, as well as the possible differences between the two universities and the respondents’ gender.

The importance of identity development is also central to many higher education frameworks. An emphasis on “learning as becoming” points to the critical role of higher education in facilitating students’ awareness of their own development as a professional, scientist, or scholar (Carroll et al., 2018). It was expected that the primary identity that is reported would assist in explaining differences in the antecedents of W-SC and W-SF, as well as in the levels of W-SC and W-SF. We considered that “non-traditional” students would be more likely to adopt the worker identity as their primary identity, while “traditional” students would be more likely to adopt the student identity.

Method

Participants:

The participants were recruited from two universities using an online survey. Demographic characteristics for the whole sample are shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows how the respondents differed according to their primary identity (student or worker). Table 3 shows the demographics for each university, and Table 4 shows the demographics each gender.

Analyses of the demographic variables showed that those with the student identity worked many fewer hours (mean hours of 16.95 vs 35.78) and were considerably younger (mean age of 21.46 vs 32.64) than those with the worker identity. There were also significant differences in mean work hours between the two universities (mean hours of 19.56 vs 32.27) and between females and males (mean hours of 22.09 vs 25.15). Finally, the average age was significantly different between the universities (mean age of 23.12 vs 32.16) and between females and males (mean age of 24.97 vs 27.06).

Characteristic	N = 1461	%
Age (M, SD)	25.54 (SD=9.74)	
Missing cases	263	
Work hours per week (M, SD)	23.58 (SD =12.47)	
Missing cases	8	
Gender		
Female	877	72.4
Male	334	27.6
Other	1	.1
Missing cases	249	
Identity		
Student	908	63.9
Worker	486	34.0
Other	67	2.0
Missing cases	41	
Type of student		
Domestic	1162	96
International	29	2.4
Other	20	1.6
Missing cases	250	
Degree type		
Undergraduate	1088	89.8
Postgraduate certificate/diploma	50	4.1
Masters	49	4.0
Other	24	1.4
Missing cases	250	
Cultural background		
Australian/mixed Australian	990	81.8
Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander	15	1.2
Non-Australian	206	17
Missing cases	250	
Economic situation		
Living comfortably	374	31.0
Coping on present income	551	45.6
Difficult on present income	226	18.7
Very difficult on present income	57	4.7
Missing cases	253	

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey sample.

Characteristic	Student (n=908)	%	Worker (n=486)	%
Age (M, SD)**	21.46 (SD=6.29)		32.64 (SD=10.42)	
Missing cases	131		113	
Work hours per week (M, SD)**	16.95 (SD =7.67)		35.78 (SD=10.19)	
Missing cases	1		2	
Gender				
Female	574	73.6	261	68.9
Male	206	26.4	117	30.9
Other			1	.3
Missing cases	128		107	
Type of student				
Domestic	747	95.8	365	96.6
International	26	3.3	2	0.5
Other	7	0.9	11	2.8
Missing cases	128		108	
Degree type				
Undergraduate	743	95.3	297	78.6
Postgraduate certificate/diploma	8	1.0	40	10.6
Masters	15	1.9	32	8.5
Other	14	1.8	9	2.4
Missing cases	128		108	
Cultural background				
Australian/mixed Australian	637	81.8	312	82.3
Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander	7	0.9	5	1.6
Non-Australian	135	17.3	61	16.1
Missing cases	129		107	
Economic situation				
Living comfortably	202	26.0	157	41.6
Coping on present income	368	47.3	160	42.4
Difficult on present income	161	20.7	53	14.1
Very difficult on present income	47	6.0	7	1.9
Missing cases	130		109	

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of survey sample by identity.

Characteristic	First Uni (n=998)	%	Second Uni (n=463)	%
Age (M, SD)**	23.12 (SD=8.32)		32.16 (SD=10.27)	
Missing cases	117		141	
Work hours per week (M, SD)**	19.56 (SD=10.37)		32.27 (SD=12.18)	
Missing cases	2		1	
Gender				
Female	652	73.8	225	68.4
Male	230	26.0	104	31.6
Other	1	0.1	0	
Missing cases	115		134	
Identity				
Student	785	78.7	123	26.6
Worker	185	18.5	301	65.0
Other	28	2.8	39	8.3
Missing cases	0		0	
Type of student				
Domestic	849	96.1	313	95.4
International	26	2.9	3	0.9
Other	8	0.8	12	3.6
Missing cases	115		135	
Degree type				
Undergraduate	800	90.6	288	87.8
Postgraduate certificate/diploma	40	4.5	10	3
Masters	26	2.6	23	7
Other	17	1.7	7	2.1
Missing cases	115		135	
Cultural background				
Australian/mixed Australian	721	81.7	269	82
Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander	10	1.1	5	1.5
Non-Australian	142	17.2	54	16.5
Missing cases	115		135	
Economic situation				
Living comfortably	243	27.6	131	39.9
Coping on present income	426	48.4	125	38.1
Difficult on present income	163	18.5	63	19.2
Very difficult on present income	48	5.5	9	2.7
Missing cases	118		135	

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of survey sample by university.

Characteristic	Female (n=877)	%	Male (n=334)	%
Age (M, SD)**	24.97 (SD=9.56)		27.06 (SD=10.10)	
Missing cases	8			
Work hours per week (M, SD)**	22.09 (SD=11.41)		25.15 (SD=13.99)	
Missing cases	8		2	
Type of student				
Domestic	843	96.1	318	95.5
International	18	2.1	11	3.3
Other	16	1.8	4	.3
Missing cases	0		1	
Degree type				
Undergraduate	790	90.1	298	89.5
Postgraduate certificate/diploma	38	4.3	12	3.6
Masters	33	3.8	15	4.5
Other	16	1.4	8	2.4
Missing cases	0		1	
Cultural background				
Australian/mixed Australian	728	83.1	261	78.1
Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander	13	1.5	2	0.6
Non-Australian	135	15.4	71	21.3
Missing cases	1		0	
Economic situation				
Living comfortably	248	28.3	126	38.1
Coping on present income	407	46.5	143	43.2
Difficult on present income	175	20.0	51	15.4
Very difficult on present income	6	5.3	11	3.3
Missing cases			3	

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of survey sample by gender.

Measures:

Job demands was assessed with nine items from the Psychological Job Demands Scale (e.g., “There is excessive work to do”), which is contained in the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek et al., 1998). The Cronbach alpha in the current study was .86.

Study demands was assessed using a six-item scale (e.g., “I cannot ever seem to catch up with study”) derived from the role overload scale reported in Thiagarajan, Chakrabarty, and Taylor (2006). The Cronbach alpha in the current study was .87.

Job control was captured by three items (e.g., “How often do you have control over what happens on your job?”) from Butler (2007). In addition, a five-item measure of Work-Study Role Conflict (e.g., “Because of my job, I go to university tired”) and a five-item measure of Work-Study Role Facilitation (e.g., “The things I do at work help me deal with personal and practical issues at university”) also were drawn from Butler (2007). The Cronbach alphas for these three scales in the current study were .85, .87, and .83 respectively.

Finally, a measure of schedule control, drawn from Henly and Lambert (2014), and containing four items (e.g., “How much control do you have over the number of hours you work each week”) assessed the degree of input into the work schedule. Cronbach alpha in the current study was .78.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for the six scales are reported in Table 5. The differences between those with a student identity and those with a worker identity are reported in Table 6. The upper diagonal shows the inter-correlations for the student identity, while the lower diagonal shows the inter-correlations for the worker identity.

A multivariate ANOVA assessed the initial question as to whether the scores differed between the student identity and the worker identity, when considered as a multivariate composite. This comparison was significant ($F = 75.40$, $df = 6, 1193$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .28$). Univariate tests confirmed that scores on the six scales were significantly different between student and worker identity, with $p < .001$ and partial η^2 ranging from .01 to .10.

In addition, work-study conflict and work-study facilitation were each regressed on the other four variables to determine the extent to which they were predicted by a linear combination of the four measures. The results for work-study conflict for those with the student identity were significant with $R = .65$, $Adj R^2 = .42$, $F = 144.70$, $df = 4, 795$, $p < .001$. Each predictor added significant unique variance. The results for work-study facilitation for those with the student identity were $R = .31$, $Adj R^2 = .09$, $F = 21.44$, $df = 4, 793$, $p < .001$. Apart from study demands, each predictor contributed unique variance.

The results for work-study conflict for those with the worker identity were significant with $R = .65$, $Adj R^2 = .42$, $F = 74.70$, $df = 4, 405$, $p < .001$. Only work demands and study demands contributed unique variance. The results for work-study facilitation for those with the worker identity were significant with $R = .33$, $Adj R^2 = .10$, $F = 12.08$, $df = 4, 394$, $p < .001$. Only work demands and job control added unique variance.

Scales	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job demands	31.21	7.25	9-45	1				
2. Study demands	19.05	6.06	6-30	.45**	1			
3. Job control	8.52	3.42	3-15	-.09**	-.10**	1		
4. Schedule control	8.21	3.32	3-15	-.19**	-.17**	.45**	1	
5. Work-study conflict	19.61	6.00	5-30	.41**	.62**	-.19**	-.27**	1
6. Work-study facilitation	18.04	5.69	5-30	.16**	.03	.31**	.11**	-.00

Table 5. Overall Mean and Standard Deviation scores for each scale and inter-correlations. ** p < .01

Scales	Student (n=801)		Worker (n=399)		1	2	3	4	5	6
	M	SD	M	SD						
1. Job demands	29.94	7.27	33.78	6.48		.40**	-.07	-.13**	.34**	.17**
2. Study demands	18.51	6.07	20.14	5.91	.46**		-.11*	-.16**	.63**	-.02
3. Job control	8.24	3.33	9.07	3.54	-.15**	-.12**		.52**	-.19**	.27**
4. Schedule control	8.75	3.04	7.13	3.60	-.14**	-.15**	.46**		-.23**	.15**
5. Work-study conflict	18.32	5.94	22.18	5.26	.36**	.61**	-.25**	-.22**		-.07
6. Work-study facilitation	16.75	5.34	20.62	5.49	.07	-.01	.28**	.20**	-.17**	

Table 6. Mean and Standard Deviation scores and inter-correlations by identity. * p < .05, ** p < .01. Inter-correlations for worker identity are above diagonal, study identity are below.

Discussion

The current study was part of a much larger multi-year project that is focused on the ways that tertiary students who are working manage the boundaries between their work and studies. The conceptual model reported by Park and Headrick (2017) highlighted the critical mediating role of both work-study conflict and work-study facilitation, and the focus on this paper was on the important role that the student/worker's primary identity plays. Differences in the antecedents of W-SC and W-SF were found such that those with a worker identity reported greater levels of demands, and greater job control (but lower schedule control). Differences were also found in the levels of W-SC and W-SF, which were both greater for those with a worker identity.

It is important to better understand the nature of the demands and available resources that students are experiencing, as there may be strategies that can be adopted to better manage their competing priorities. The type of management strategies may be influenced by their primary identity with the students (who work), favouring strategies that minimise the level of W-SC, while the workers (who study) may favour strategies that enhance W-SF. The students who are working longer hours tended to be the older students and to have the "worker" identity.

The link between W-SC and W-SF is still unclear, with some studies finding no connection, some finding a small positive correlation, and some finding a small negative correlation (Park & Headrick, 2017). There may also be important moderators of the relationships between the antecedents included in this study and both W-SC and W-SF, such as the type of degree program being undertaken, the density of the enrolment (i.e., full-time vs part-time), and whether the participant has previously studied.

The value of this research is substantial in an environment of decreasing resources to the tertiary sector and a greater emphasis on the employment outcomes for students (Choo, Kan & Cho, 2019). While a student who is working will have gained valuable experience at the completion of their degree, there may be some employment experiences that are detrimental to the students' academic outcomes and personal level of well-being. The current study is attempting to identify the optimal management strategies across a student's degree program whilst recognising that there may be important differences between the "traditional" and "non-traditional" students.

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