

hobbies, interests, non-formal education, etc. Even if not directly complementary to the study programme, these activities are complementary to any formal education when thinking in terms of employability, career orientation and career building.

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Drivers of Student Employment in Kazakhstan

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Socio-economic factors, structural issues within job markets and changing modes of education have been key drivers for combining work and study over the past few decades. Similar to global trends, Kazakhstan continues to experience growth in university student employment. While official statistics are unavailable, a survey of 4,000 students by HeadHunter Group in 2013, showed that 67% of Kazakh students were employed while studying at university [1]. In 2016, 163,000 students registered for part-time employment on HeadHunter – the most prominent job search website in Kazakhstan. Research is required to better understand the impact of this trend on educational outcomes and distributional impacts, particularly for women and households in rural communities.

Drivers of student employment

Four factors are driving growth in student employment in Kazakhstan: (1) increasing tuition fees, (2) competition in the job market (3) the introduction of distance education and blended learning programs and (4) an increase in part-time job availability.

Increasing tuitions fees

While the government continues to offer state scholarships, 70% of students pay tuition fees. Increases in tuition fees has led to inequalities in access to education, particularly for rural households who cannot afford university fees for their children unless without the contribution of a state grant. In 2019, 142,400 students at Kazakhstani universities did not complete their degree requirements, and for 20% of them it was due to financial difficulties [2]. The rapid increase in tuition fees has forced students to take on part-time employment to support their parents and ease the burden of financial constraints.

Competition in the job market

Fierce competition for jobs is creating tremendous pressure on students, placing greater emphasis on their knowledge and skill development, and in differentiating themselves from others in the job market. Combined work and study has been a key avenue for many students to acquire the skills and attributes required in the job market. With significant investments made in education through various initiatives [3], over the last three decades, the pool of talented graduates has been increasing and leading to an oversupply of university graduates—leaving some graduates unemployed and others in jobs not related to their skills or educational background. The mismatch between the supply and demand of graduates has resulted in a situation where employers are raising the bar for jobs that decades ago did not require higher education. To ease the hiring process, employers often prioritise candidates with work experience relative to someone possessing only university credentials [4, 5]. Work experience is increasingly valued and this is one way through which recent graduates can differentiate themselves from others. Therefore, students start seeking employment at an undergraduate level to learn practical skills, gain experience, and to develop a professional network. Hence, those students who integrate work and studies have better employment opportunities [5].

Distance education

The expansion of distance and blended-learning degrees, and access to the internet has been another driver of students combining work and study. Distance education and blended-learning programs have made education more affordable and accessible, particularly for individuals who are unable to enroll in full-time programs because of an inability to cover the cost of full-time university education or the need to earn money to support a family. Such programs have enabled students to pursue university education without quitting their jobs. These programs have made education more accessible for students with special

needs and mothers with small children who may have otherwise not considered pursuing a university degree.

The COVID 19 pandemic in Kazakhstan has pushed universities to switch to distance education or blended learning. Unfortunately, not all universities have the capacities and resources to support online teaching and learning. This has led to concerns about inequity in access to the online provision of education, particularly for faculty and students residing in remote areas where internet connectivity remains poor [6]. It may have also resulted in a disadvantage for students in rural regions in combining work and study. One significant government response has been investment in distance education through training and improved access to technological resources.

Part-time jobs

An increase in part-time jobs has also been a driver for student employment in Kazakhstan. Better access to the internet and technology is enabling students to take on paid work while studying without traveling a great distance. More employers are now offering part-time jobs based on service contracts, helping employers to avoid paying for employee insurance, sick leave or annual leave.

Type of students combining work and study

Students who combine work and study are mainly those from low-income households [7] who have to earn a living and provide financial support to their families [8]. Among those who combine work and study, many are self-funded students [5, 8], who come from other cities and have to live far from their families and cover the cost of accommodation and living expenses [8]. However, there are also students who combine work and study for professional motives such as gaining work experience, developing practical skills, and building a professional network for future employment.

Challenges of student employment

Despite the increase in student employment, students in Kazakhstan face a number of challenges in combining work and study. Female students, particularly those who have small children, face tremendous pressure to combine work and study due to social and cultural norms surrounding household chores, child rearing and care. Similar to other Central Asian countries, women are the ones who are expected to manage household chores such as cooking and cleaning, grocery shopping—irrespective whether they work. Therefore, female students who combine work and study, experience a triple challenge: juggling work, study, and household chores. Although female students are known to be high achievers in Kazakhstan both at school and university, lack of support for female students (at home and in the workplace) combining work and study can adversely affect the quality of their education and their emotional wellbeing.

Students combining work and study, especially those through distance education or blended-learning programs, feel the lack of face-to-face interactions with their

instructors and fellow students whereas those who have chosen blended learning as a mode of instruction report being 'isolated' from their peers [9]. Within such a program, the dependency on computer, the internet and other technologies against the backdrop of unequal access to the technologies and IT literacy makes the learning process more challenging. For these reasons, not everyone can combine work and study, particularly individuals in rural areas or those from socio-economic backgrounds who do not have access to the required resources.

Concluding thoughts

The number of students balancing work and studies, either to earn a living or enhance employability, is likely to increase in Kazakhstan in the coming years. However, in the current economic situation, job cuts and freezes on hiring in Kazakhstan and globally, students who counted on combining work and study are likely to struggle financially.

The increase in student employment suggests that there is a greater need for higher education institutions to reconsider traditional ways of providing education and consider programs and teaching approaches that enable and engage working students in their academic life more effectively. Moreover, universities need to establish and strengthen links with industry to help students who seek part-time employment to find a job in fields related to their area of specialisation. Most importantly, and in areas not just related to combining study and work, greater support is required for female students with families and children to access opportunities at universities and in their workplaces.

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Work and studies in Finland during COVID-19

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More than half of Finnish university students work during the academic year, and even more do so during the summer break [1]. The importance of work in Finnish student life raises important questions about what happens when

many job opportunities disappear. This, for example, happened in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic caused a reduction in economic activity. In Finland, the number of new job vacancies decreased and unemployment increased especially among young people [2]. In this article, we draw on our own experiences, on an expert interview, and on national register data to show how under appropriate student finance schemes, universities can mitigate student unemployment risk and foster study progress even at times of great societal uncertainty.

Why work?

Even though most Finnish university students have been working already prior to their studies, they also work during their studies in order to gain further labor market experience [3]. Using Finnish data, Häkkinen [4] shows that working while studying causes better labor market outcomes immediately after graduation. This is however something of a double-edged sword. Time spent working is typically time that cannot be spent studying, and working while studying thus delays graduation itself, resulting in a zero net labor market benefit to students.

A second reason why students work is to finance living expenses. At first glance, it is not clear that this would be necessary in Finland as Finnish university students receive government financial support during their studies, including student grants, housing supplements, and government-guaranteed student loans. Finnish students are furthermore not required to pay tuition fees. In spite of this, nearly half of students report having at least some difficulties covering all of their expenses, with the main expense being housing [5]. When students cannot work, they must thus find a different way to finance their studies.

COVID-19 and student employment in Finland

Reported Finnish COVID-19 cases started to rise quickly in early March 2020. On March 16, the Finnish government declared a state of emergency and announced multiple measures to prevent the further spread of the virus. Public facilities such as schools and universities were closed, and had to move to online teaching. Public meetings were limited to 10 persons, and travel was restricted across internal and external borders. Following a decline in the number of daily new cases, most of these restrictions had been lifted by July. While the economic impact of COVID-19 has been smaller in Finland than in the eurozone as a whole, Finnish unemployment rose quickly during the first half of the year, and by June 2020, youth unemployment was at twice the level it had been a year earlier [4].

Students' labor income reduces the level of student financial aid they can receive. At the same time, financial aid is tied to course completion. Students thus face a choice in allocating their time between work and studies. One should expect a lack of immediate labor market opportunities to increase both the time students have available to spend studying, and the financial necessity to do so. Indeed, student financial aid applications increased by over a third in summer 2020 compared to the year before [5],