

## Research Article

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# Work and study: exploring the social actions of undergraduates on a Social Protection Scheme in Ghana

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**Abstract:** In recent years with the various austerity measures put in place by governments, the main providers of welfare, funding of social protection programmes have shrunk. Yet, protecting the less fortunate has never been the preserve of the State; families, communities and civil societies had always contributed in the provisions. One of such contributors are universities, though their core mandate is to educate but in addition many universities have established schemes and scholarships to ensure access to tertiary education for students from low income families. However, as in many social interventions, including Ghana's, there is a gap between policy intent and practice, but often the focus is on the implementors not the beneficiaries. This paper therefore presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of participating students in the 'work and study' programme in KNUST using the Social Action theory to unveil the reasons underpinning actions of students who have to work. A case study research design was adopted for this study using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviewing as the method of data collection. Fifteen undergraduates, volunteered to participate in the study. Data collected were qualitatively analysed using the NVivo software. Findings from the study revealed that students had multiple reasons for joining the scheme and it was not based on the sole rational motive of earning an income. The study provides an analytical insight that predicts the behaviours of beneficiaries of social protection initiatives.

**Keywords:** Ghana, Undergraduates, Social Protection, Higher Education, Work

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## Introduction

The goals of social policies to improve the wellbeing of individuals have broadened to include social interventions that not only target a narrowly defined group of people but include interventions in relation to poverty alleviation, social protection, social inclusion and the promotion of human rights (Hall and Midgley, 2004). The concept of social protection, which is a set of public and private policies and programmes is aimed at preventing, reducing and eliminating economic and social vulnerabilities to poverty and deprivation (UNICEF, 2008). It provides a framework for better understanding of the many activities undertaken to ensure the bridging of the gap between the 'have' and 'have not's'. This has also necessitated the inclusion of diverse non-State agencies and organisations whose core mandates do not include instituting social interventions to assist the disadvantaged in the quest to improve the wellbeing of society. More so in recent years with the various austerity measures put in place by governments, the main providers of welfare, funding of social protection programmes have shrunk. Yet, protecting the less fortunate has never been the preserve of the State; families, communities and civil societies had always contributed in the provisions. One of such contributors are universities, though their core mandate is to educate but in addition many universities have established schemes and scholarships to ensure access to tertiary education for students from low income families.

Education has been argued as a good tool to break the poverty cycle and ensure that people gain access to other opportunities in life. However, students from low income families face challenges from the beginning of the college-planning process. First, they may not be aware of all the financial aid opportunities that are available to them, and may not have accurate information about the actual cost of attending college, or the relative costs of attending particular colleges (Grodsky and Jones, 2007). The perception that college is out of reach for those who

are financially disadvantaged can contribute to students giving up altogether on the idea of attending or continuing college.

In 2006, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) introduced a programme to enrol students from identified poor communities and low income families who have qualified but due to economic reasons could not have access to tertiary education. Such students were enrolled under a programme labelled 'less endowed students', the label was a problem in itself but this will be highlighted later. In 2010, the university further introduced another intervention for such students, under this programme all students who were admitted as needy students were given opportunities to take up jobs on-campus and study at the same time. These jobs were ring fenced and their academic performance protected with a cap on the number of hours a student could work. As in many social interventions in Ghana there is a gap between policy intent and practice (Manful and McCrystal, 2010); also most often the focus is on the implementors not the beneficiaries. The main objective of the 'work and study' intervention is to assist students financially but it could be that participating students have other reasons for joining. This paper therefore presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of participating students in the 'work and study' programme in KNUST using Weber's (1922) Social Action theory to provide insight of the behaviour of students.

## Nexus of Social Action Theory and Work

The diverse nature of individual actions, and how that action influences their circumstances and vice versa, provides an insight into how people might react to solve their social problems. In this instance why a student takes up a job can be interpreted using Weber's theory of Social action based on the four typologies (Weber, 1922). Namely:

- i. *Instrumentally rational action* ("rationally pursued and calculated ends"). These are actions which are deliberately chosen and performed after carefully taken into consideration other actions in achieving a specific objective. For example, a student who decides to work in order to earn an income as a means to paying his or her tuition fees. Such an action may be termed as an instrumentally rational action.
- ii. *Value-rational action* ("self-conscious formulation of the ultimate values governing the action" and consistently planned orientation of its detailed course"). This implies actions which only consider the intrinsic values to be gained. For example, a student

working because he or she considers working to be a trait of a modest and honourable person.

- iii. *Affectual action* ("determined by the actor's specific emotional state"). This refers to actions performed solely based on the individual's emotional state. This means, every action is relative to the specific emotion one is feeling during a particular period of time. Emotions such as fear, love, sadness and anger affects or determines the action of an individual. For example, a student's friendship could be the possible reason for him or her engaging in a particular job.
- iv. *Traditional action* (habitual social action). This refers to actions performed due to the individual's tradition or cultural make up. Therefore, the means and ends of an individual's actions are determined by custom and tradition. For example, engaging in work because in one's culture, at a certain age, it is a social expectation for the individual to work.

These typologies provide the framework that could be used to explain students' actions towards work. Yet, there are some criticisms of this theory based on its emphasis on subjectivity of individuals' actions (Parsons, 1937; Schultz, 1967; Cohen (1968). These arguments suggest that the decision to work is not necessarily based on subjectivity but there could be an objective reason. Often than not, that objective reason for students to take on a job is the need to earn an income to finance their education.

Furthermore, Weber's theory also highlighted the difficulty in determining the placement of certain actions within the various forms of action. Some actions may fall within two or more forms of action. Therefore, the criteria for determining placement of action are ambiguous; for example, a student working because of parental demands. Initially, this will fall within affectual action because the student is working due to emotional investment. However, in a situation where the parental demands compel the student to work in an effort to gain experience or career opportunities, the action will fall within the instrumental rational form of action. This suggests that an individual's action is always triggered by one factor but it could be multifaceted. Therefore, this theory better explains the study because the main aim of this research is to explore the different reasons students have for participating in the 'work and study scheme' in KNUST.

## Factors that necessitates students to work

In a study on focus groups, Cheng (2004:9) discovered that students had the notion of "constantly searching for meaningful works as well as meaning in their work".

This is one reason why students work where they develop a more innovative approach towards their work, initially considering it to be simply for monetary gain, and afterward with developing gratitude for the scholarly, social, and job opportunities of their work. This implies the evolving nature of the reasons for working. Initially being exclusively for financial gain but through the years, different reasons arise and the search for “meaning to work” is an option. This particular reason for working can be attributed to the value-rational form of action under Weber’s forms of action, implying a self-conscious, self-fulfilling reason to work. Similarly, Choy (2002) reported that 26 percent of students who viewed themselves as students working part-time imagined that working had advantageous outcomes in regards to their course work and 55 percent implied that working helps prepare them for their future jobs. Thus students who work are working for another alternate reason besides income. Hence, they are working using calculating means to achieve a rational goal. This is also linked to another of Weber’s forms of action known as the instrumentally rational action. However, not all the different reasons lead to positive outcomes as sometimes the primary reason for working is undermined if it affects academic performance negatively (Horn and Berkold, 1998). This means, if the motives for working are not rational or lead to rational goals and achievement, in this case working on a whim or through peer pressure, adverse effects on the academic performance of students may occur. This suggests that some adverse effects may be attained if the reason for working is not from a rational standpoint. However, this is not sufficient enough to conclude that affective and traditional forms of action could lead to poor academic performance. Coincidentally, affectual reasons could prevent students from working because he or she could lose friends or not make any due to the pressures of taken up a job. Therefore, it can be concluded that students face several influences and the popular believe of financial gain being the only reason for working can be disputed.

### **Undergraduates working part-time**

Part-time work can be defined as working between 1 and 32 hours per week, albeit at lesser hours relative to full time work (Hill, Martinson and Ferris, 2004). Globally, undergraduates can be found working part time in different settings. For instance, Gose (1998) argues that in the United States 39 percent of first year undergraduates work 16 or more hours for every week, an increment of 4 percent since 1993. Furthermore, in Australia, 78 percent of full-time selected undergraduates have some

paid occupation and 72.5 percent have paid jobs (Long and Hayden, 2001). Another pattern developing was the increase in the numbers of undergraduate student employment as part-time or full-time. The 2002 review led by the Higher Education Research Institute in the United States of America (California, Los Angeles) found that 65.3 percent of first year students have concerns (“some concern” or “major concerns”) about not having enough finance to finish their professional educations (Higher Education Research Institute, 2002). This suggests that students work mainly for financial benefits; however, the significance of such an indication is to determine if financial benefits are the only motive for working.

This trend of an increased number of undergraduate employments has been observed to be common in other countries like Australia and Finland (Bradley, 2006; Holmes, 2008; Callender, 2008). Therefore, it can be assumed from these studies that the majority of students in tertiary institutions work part-time and their numbers have been increasing over the years. Among the reasons contributing to an ever increasing trend of students working part-time could be attributed to the increasing financial pressures from higher college fees, the necessity of gaining work experience, and academic requirements for practical internships. However, the studies just mentioned focused on available jobs for undergraduates but not one reserved for those from low income families.

### **Impact of part-time paid work on undergraduates**

Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992) suggests that students who had reasonable hours of work while studying possessed the highest grade point averages. Also other studies have found that students in on-campus paid jobs appeared to have gained academic performance benefits through working and fulfilment with school (Terenzini, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora, 1996). Furthermore, in other studies, students working part-time showed satisfaction with education and had a higher chance of graduating (Cermak and Filkins, 2004). Certainly, this proves a positive effect of working on students’ academic success; however, there are several studies which prove the opposite. A negative relationship between working and academic performance was found which suggest that working while schooling may have a negative effect on future job opportunities after college (Hamalainen, 2003; Stinebricker and Stinebricker, 2003; Paul, 1982). The main issue with the various findings on the effects of working and studying is the ability to deduce a one true effect of the type of work on the academic performance of students.

## KNUST's 'Work and Study' Scheme

KNUST's "work and study" scheme began in 2010 to provide part-time work for undergraduates who have been identified as 'needy'. Under the "work and study" students are placed at the University's Halls of Residence, University Health Services, Engineering Guest House, the Senior Staff Club and group placements with Zoomlion company during vacations. For students to be accepted into the scheme, they must have been screened by the Students' Financial Services office. If they are able prove their low financial status and difficulties through an interview, they will be allowed to work. Under the scheme, students are expected to work three hours a day and a maximum of twelve hours a week. These students are engaged in on - campus jobs assigned by the University. Students are given the opportunity to work as student porters, lab assistants, study room supervisors and waiters in the various Halls, Health Centres, Staff Clubs and Guest Houses. They are paid by the agencies that utilise their services but not paid by the university. Hence, the university is not held accountable for any shortcomings in refusal to pay students. This was a major flaw noticed with regards to the programme since students' wages may be reduced at the convenience of the various halls and participating institutions. Table 1 presents the data on the beneficiaries of the scheme up to December 2016.

The statistics in Table 1 reveal that the number of students accepted since 2014/2015 academic year has not exceeded 40. This indicates that fewer students are being provided with the opportunity to participate in the scheme.

## Research Method

The research design adopted for this study was a qualitative case study design. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not

clearly evident (Yin, 2009). The case study design was used with the main objective of exploring the perception of participating undergraduates on the 'work and study scheme'. More specifically to examine the reasons why undergraduates participate in the scheme, identify their perceived benefits, the challenges faced by them and evaluate how they cope with the challenges. The research participants for the study were undergraduates who were beneficiaries on the scheme at the time of the study. The basis of this choice was to gain in-depth information from the students participating in the scheme. The study was conducted in the second semester of the 2015/ 2016 academic year. Therefore, only students in year 1 to year 3 were eligible to participate as year 4 students in the second semester ceased to be eligible to apply to join the scheme.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to obtain the primary data. The questions in the interview guide was structured to explore what informed research participants' action to participate in the 'work and study scheme' Fifteen undergraduates volunteered to participate in the study; although there were 39 beneficiaries at the time of the study many refused, irrespective of the assurance of anonymity, citing the stigmatisation of being labelled as poor. Nevertheless, data saturation was attained after the ninth interview, yet six more participants were included to ensure data validity. The NVivo software was used to perform a four-coding level analysis for conducting a content analysis.

- i. The first phase was importing the transcribed interviews into the NVivo data analysis software and to ensure anonymity each transcript had a designated number.
- ii. The next phase was to create case nodes from the interviews. These case nodes included the demographic details of participants, such as age and occupation.
- iii. The third phase dealt with a running a text search query in order to determine the most important comments made in regards to the research questions. The specific areas of interest were made into mother nodes with emerging themes from the questions as child nodes

**Table 1:** Number of participating students in the "work and study" scheme

Academic Year	First Semester	Second Semester
2010/2011	41	41
2011/2012	41	42
2012/2013	47	50
2013/2014	55	57
2014/2015	38	37
2015/2016	39	Data was not available at the time of the research

Source: Scheme Manager (2016)

for categorisation. A word frequency query was used to determine the most frequent words and phrases used by the participants in regards to a particular node (theme).

- iv. The next phase was to code the results gained from the text search query and the word frequency query into the various themes created.
- v. The four categories of Social Action Theory were then used to interpret the emerged themes.

## Results

The findings of the study are presented in relation to the study objectives and emerging themes. One of the objectives of the study was to explore the reasons why students participated in the scheme. The reasons identified were to meet financial needs, to obtain work experience and other opportunities.

### Financial Constraints

Majority of the research participants explained that they had taken up the jobs being offered under the scheme mainly because of financial constraints, one stated;

*“Actually I need assistance. It’s like the allowance I was receiving from home was not enough to support me through even a month. Which led to some financial constraints so basically that’s why I am working.” P. 2*

Although financial concerns were the main reasons for the students to take up a job, other reasons were identified in the interview data.

### Work Experience

In addition, some participants highlighted they worked because they wanted to gain experience in the work environment. One participant stated;

*“I joined the scheme mainly due to financially reasons I needed support to purchase books and other reading materials. Yet, I am also working because of the experience I’ll gain.” P. 9*

The interview data also revealed that some participants worked to gain some form of intrinsic satisfaction such as gaining work ethic. As expressed by a participant:

*“Well besides the money, I am working here because I like to work. The job here is good and I’m learning how to behave in a work environment.” P. 10*

### Quest for other opportunities

The interview data further revealed that some research participants joined the scheme with the hope of likely opportunities that might come up whilst working. One stated;

*“Actually I want to support myself financially as a student. I also hope as a result I might chance on other opportunities for better job placements.” P. 4*

Another objective of the study was to ascertain the perceived benefits of working whilst studying by the research participants. The themes that emerged were social networking, work ethic and better time management.

### Social networking

One major theme that emerged from the data was the benefits of social networking whilst working. One research participant had this to say;

*“With regards to working and studying, you get to know more people and more officials and perhaps you get a little amount of money to support your studies with buying reading materials and books.” P. 3*

### Work relations

The interview data revealed that gaining work ethic was a perceived important benefit of participating in the scheme. For example, one participant stated;

*“I’ve learnt how to be polite to customers; I now know how to relate with people formally. Also all those who come here are senior members so you have to comport yourself and attend to them. No matter what is happening, when they call you at any time, you have to be there to work for them.” P. 4*

### Time management

Time management skills also emerged as one of the benefits identified by some participants in being part of the scheme. One participant expressed below:

*“Being a ‘work and study’ student, is a great learning opportunity, like you get to be punctual and effective. Also you must be punctual because you come at a particular time and leave at a particular time. Also it teaches you how to be effective in balancing your studies and work time.” P. 9*

The likelihood of study participants facing challenges was also explored. The undergraduates were asked *“Have you experienced any challenges being part of this scheme?”*. The interview data revealed that some experienced inter-personal conflicts; some had difficulties in juggling lectures with the work, yet others had no challenges. The emerging themes from the interview data are as follows:

### Inter-personal Conflict

The interview data revealed that a major challenge which participants faced was conflict with other people while working. As expressed by a participant below;

*“Yes there are always challenges. You know working with people is hard because some people are difficult to work with.” P.12*

### Time Constraints

The data also revealed that time constraints was a key challenge among participants. When asked about the challenges he faces, one participant said;

*“My programme for instance is very challenging. I go for lectures from Monday to Friday and I have to work 12 hours a week, one thing making working here quite tough for me is that they start at 8 and close at 3. Normally most of the lectures also begins at 8 and close like 3pm, sometimes you have to sacrifice the lectures for the work.” P. 4*

### No challenges

However, some research participants stated that they had not experienced any challenges with regards to working and studying as they were willing to take on extra tasks. As argued by one participant;

*“I have been cautious working here and making sure I don't make any mistakes or minimize the mistakes. So I have not faced any challenges, I prepared for this” P. 9*

The study further probed how those who faced challenges coped with it, they were asked *“What do you do when faced with challenges?”* The themes that emerged from the interview data revealed that they asked for help or tried to find a balance, specifically:

### Asking for assistance

The interview data revealed that a major coping mechanism for some participants was asking for assistance from their work superiors when faced with certain challenges. One participant who worked part time as a porter stated;

*“Sometimes when you are confronted with challenges beyond your control, you consult your senior porter for information and help. Also some issues which I can handle, I try and solve those challenges in my own way.” P. 1*

### Finding balance

Other research participants decided to find some sort of balance between working and studying. As one participant highlighted how he addressed his challenge of time constraints;

*“I decided to take up work that doesn't coincide with my lectures. For instance, this semester I don't have lectures on Thursdays, I have used that time. Also Saturdays 6-9 and Sundays 6-9. These are the only days that I work during this semester and it doesn't affect my studies. I might change the work schedule next semester if the working time conflicts with my lectures” P. 1*

One of the objectives of the study was also to explore students' perceptions of the impact of the part work on their academic performance. The interview data revealed two opinions, some of the research participants were of the view that working had helped them to put in more efforts in their studies whilst others were of the view that it had no adverse effects on their studies. Majority of the participants gave a description of how their Cumulated Weighted Average (CWA) has improved since they joined the “work and study” scheme. One participant stated;

*“I don't joke with my time and other activities. Every minute is very important to me because I have to work it has made me more focused on my studies and the spare time I used it for the part-time work. Well the first semester I had a very low average at 57.82 but the second semester, I was able to improve to 62.04 and first semester of 2nd year, I was able to improve to 63.52, whilst still working, it is ok for me.” P. 7*

A few participants expressed the need to improve their academic performance and were not satisfied about the level of their academic performance. As expressed by a participant below;

*“My academic performance is ok. There is always room for improvement but I think I have done what I can giving the circumstances.” P.14*

## Discussion

This study applied the four typologies to interpret the emerging themes from the in-depth interviews to explore why the undergraduates participated in the social protection intervention. Most of the participants in this study participated in the scheme for financial reasons. This falls within the scope of instrumental-rational form of action. Also, since students used their income to support their education, many argued that it had positive impact on their academic performance. This is relevant because it serves to create a link between rational means of working and an increase in academic performance. As implied by Choy (2002) that students who utilised rational means for working had advantageous outcomes in their academic performance. Contrary to this, traditional forms of action and affective forms of action led to a negative outcome in academic performance as perceived by few participants. According to Horn and Berkold (1998), the primary reason for working is destabilised when working has a negative impact on the academic performance of the students.

The findings also revealed that having a social network and obtaining work ethics were perceived as benefits of joining the scheme. Gaining social capital through interaction leads to determination (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983). Implying, getting to know more people increases your level of integration which further increases your determination to work, because the student is not only working for his/her personal achievement but for those around them as well. Gaining experience is a positive result of having a rational reason for working. Experience through practical work can lead to increase in academic potency as well as inculcating certain values and skills for the “work and study” student.

Further, the data also revealed that interpersonal conflicts and the difficulty of juggling work and studies were the main challenges faced by research participants. This therefore highlighted the need for reliable and efficient coping mechanisms to aid students in dealing with such challenges. According to Bosworth and Wilson (1995), gaining information on the varying times for working helps establish a cause and effect scenarios regarding the impacts time constraints have on the academic performance of students. This is important because if students are affected by time constraints and interpersonal conflicts, it may have a negative effect on their academic performance. Further, students who do not try to find coping mechanism are engaging in the traditional form of action according to Weber (1922), thus, the student is not thinking rationally by not trying to find

a solution to time constraints. The data also revealed that some students experienced no challenges. This is relevant because, there was a noticeable trend of these students using rational means such as double checking time schedules and paying particular attention to prevent an overlap of their studies with the part - time work. Also coping mechanisms such as asking for assistance and balancing jobs and studies were given by participants. In finding balance with time schedules, students are thinking rationally in solving the problem of time constraints, which is in accordance with the instrumental-rational form of action. This is relevant because, it leads to having a positive effect on their academic performance as according to Hood et al. (1992) students who had reasonable hours of work while studying possessed the highest grade point averages.

In short, participants had more than one reason for working besides the initial reason of financial gain. Thus, the research highlighted that in reality students do not only work for financial gain as initially procured by the “work and study” scheme but also have several reasons beyond earning income. Some students faced problems with regards to their work environment and in balancing working and studying times. However, other participants faced no challenges in their work environment and in their studies. Therefore, it is possible that students facing challenges were most likely unprepared for the complicated nature of working and studying while students who were fully prepared and highly invested in working and improving their academic performance faced no problems. The study further revealed that students were not only benefiting financially, but also gaining social capital and acquiring work experience which could enhance their future job prospects. The study highlighted the several coping mechanisms used by students to mitigate the challenges they faced. This is indicative that the coping mechanisms were successful in helping students mitigate the challenges since most of the participants had positive remarks about the “work and study” scheme. Furthermore, the “work and study” scheme generally had a positive effect on the academic performance of the students although this was mainly due to the attitudes of the students with regards to working and studying. Also, it can be suggested that an increase in the CWA of students was associated with possessing rational reasons for working and a decrease in the CWA of students was associated with possessing irrational reasons for working.

However, one major short coming of the scheme is its negative labelling because the jobs are ring fenced for those students who meet the criteria of being ‘needy’.

Hence, such jobs are perceived to be demeaning and all undergraduates that participate could easily be identified with low income families. This is one issue that was not considered by the University as it focused only on the main objective of provision of funding for students from low income families. Yet, as the findings revealed, the reason for participation was not solely based on the need to meet financial needs. That notwithstanding, the negative labelling could be addressed by allowing undergraduates who do not fit the criteria as 'needy' also the opportunity to participate. Therefore, a percentage, for example 20 percent, could be allocated for less 'needy' undergraduates.

## Conclusion

The main objective of introducing the social protection intervention, 'work and study scheme' is to enable undergraduates from low income families have income to fund some of their expenses whilst studying. The Social Action theory has provided an insight for this study which has highlighted that undergraduates' decision to participate in the scheme varied and not based entirely on the objective of earning an income to support themselves whilst studying. The first conclusion one might attribute to the reason a student from a low income family decides to take up a job whilst studying is as a result of rationally motivated reasoning of the need to earn an income to enable him or herself continue with the studies but a student might also take up a job based on value-rational actions to show his/her benefactors that h/she is hard working and also wants to contribute to the cost of the education. Secondly, a student could take up a job based on affectual action, the specific emotion one is feeling during a particular period of time. Or thirdly, students take up work solely based on traditional action, engaging in work because it is a social expectation that at a certain age, the individual is required to work.

Therefore, this study suggest that when Universities are introducing social protection programmes they have to consider that the likely reasons for students' participation could go beyond the main objective of the intervention hence other issues have to be considered in the promotion of the scheme and protection of participating students.

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