



# **Patterns of term-time working and zero-hour contracts**

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## **Executive Summary**

This report presents findings on the patterns of term-time employment among University of Nottingham students. Data was gathered via a survey conducted in November and December 2024, with 550 responses (with a 4% margin of error).

### **Findings on employment of students**

- Approximately one in three students work during term-time.
- Certain student groups, including part-time learners, mature students, and Black or Mixed ethnicity students, are notably more likely to work.
- The hospitality and education sectors (e.g. tutoring) are the most popular employment sectors. These sectors employ students differently and the hospitality sector is more likely to offer zero-hour contracts than in the education sector.
- Most students work between 5–15 hours per week. Financial necessity is the main reason for undertaking term-time employment.

### **Findings on zero-hour contracts**

- Around 44% of working students are on zero-hour contracts, although most students prefer guaranteed hour contracts.
- Most students are satisfied with their current working hours and cancellations of shifts at short notice are relatively uncommon.

### **Implications**

- Employers should consider the strong preference many students have for guaranteed hours contracts while maintaining flexibility for those who value it.
- The university may wish to explore timetable adjustments or additional support for working students to ensure equity of experience.

## Introduction

The following data was collected for two specific purposes. In the first instance, collection of the data was prompted by the government's Employment Rights Bill, which proposed specific changes to zero-hour contracts and compensation for cancelled shifts. Secondly, the SU wished to explore student term-time employment more generally, to document concerns and to spot patterns in term-time working among our students.

While this research is primarily explorative, the following overall research questions were used:

- 1) How many of our students work part-time in term-time, and which groups are more (or less) likely to be working throughout study?
- 2) How many hours do students work during term-time, and who might be working longer hours?
- 3) Of UoN's employed students, how many work on zero-hour contracts and do students more generally prefer zero-hour contracts in their term-time working?

Appendix A of this document will tell you how we went about doing this.

## Term-time working

### Rate of term-time working

Among our sample, **34%** worked part-time. The following groups were significantly more likely to work during term-time:

- 1) On campus part-time students (45%) and distance learners (72%)
- 2) Mature students (47%)
- 3) Black and Black-British students (46%) and Mixed or multiple ethnicity students (50%)
- 4) Postgraduate Taught students (51%) and Postgraduate Researchers (43%)

Bearing this in mind, it is worth potentially noting that some specific stereotypes around student workers may not necessarily be true in all cases. Far higher rates of students working are those who are likely to be older, may well already have work experience and may be making study work around their employment (and not vice versa). Student workers are just as (if not more) diverse than the overall student body at Nottingham. In purely numerical terms, however, higher numbers of undergraduate and full-time students were in part-time employment and as such, it is highly likely that standard restrictions around term-time seasonal working most likely do apply.

It is also worth noting that the proportion of students now working is high, with around 1 in 3 students now working during part-time. While not yet the majority, the high proportions of students working indicates that term-time employment is now a norm among students rather than an exception – this might make some elements of

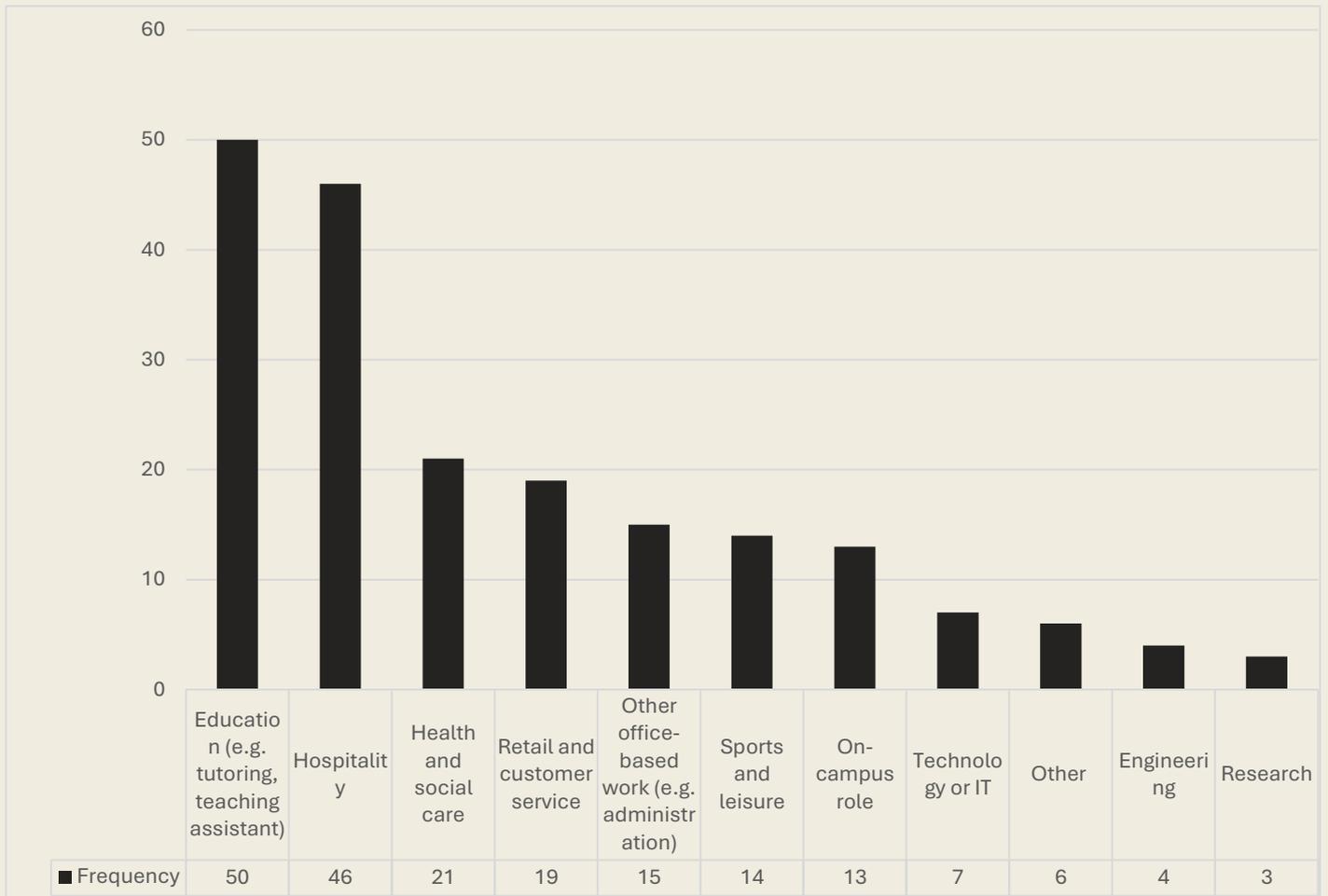
adjustment around term-time working more necessary, such as earlier timetables, block teaching and/or extenuating circumstances for part-time working.

### **Where students are employed**

Participants were asked to define the rough sector of their employment, which they could select from a pre-defined list. Where participants had more than one role during term-time, they were able to select as many as applied. In some instances, participants selected the other box, where they could insert their own entry - common trends emerged in this regard (such as sports coaching and on-campus roles such as ResX ambassadors) and where this occurred, these have been grouped together.

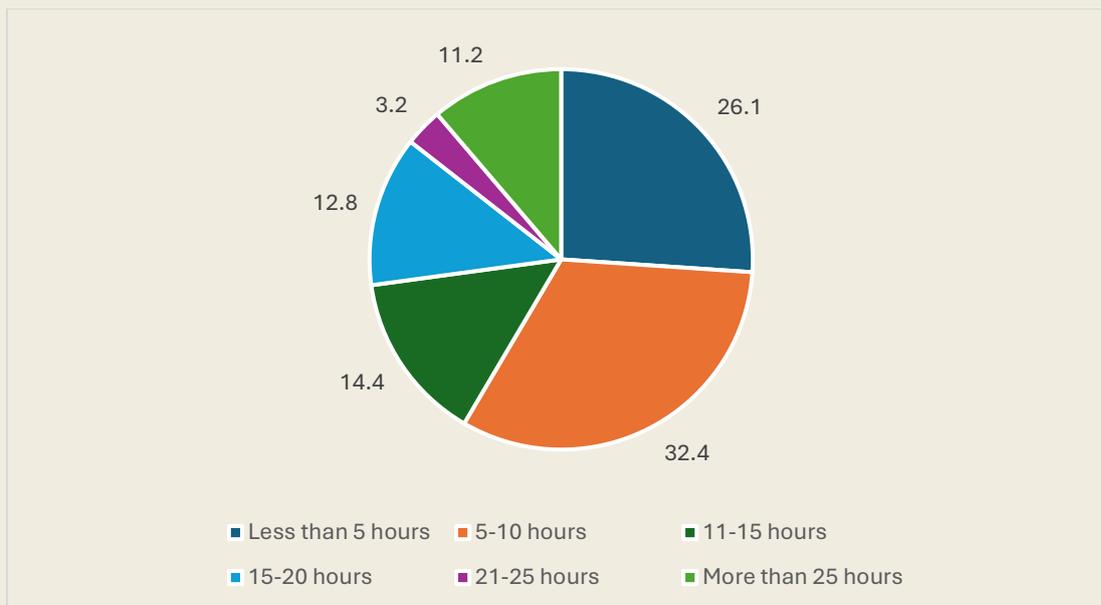
As can be seen from the chart below, two forms of employment were more popular than any other, making up nearly 50% of all employment from students. These forms of employment were in hospitality and within the education sector (e.g. tutoring). While hospitality working among students is stereotypical, the popularity of education (particularly tutoring) among students is a relatively new trend. Previous reporting from UoNSU has suggested that the popularity of this form of employment is due to the ease of flexible working and the relatively high pay rate that tutoring offers students.

As is apparent within the chart, there is significant variety among student employment and in many cases, this employment is unrelated to the degree programme itself. Unfortunately, due to the sample size of this specific work, we cannot know the popularity or ease of finding work in any specific sectors for specific groups.



### Hours worked

Participants were asked to self-declare the number of hours worked, during term-time at 5-hour intervals. The mean of this was 2.68, indicating on average, individuals work between 5 and 15 hours (which is lower than the 20 hours that is allowed by UK Visa rules for international students), and in total 58% indicated that they worked for fewer than 10 hours per week.



Analysis of frequency of hours worked has been carried out using the mean score. Firstly, it is worth noting that those who are uninvolved in student activity at all are significantly more likely to be working longer hours than those who are involved in any aspect of SU activity. This finding is unsurprising – those who work longer hours inevitably have less time for other activities – however, there is also a case that those who work longer hours are being excluded from some of the core activities that make students feel as if they matter to others at UoN. As some students are being excluded from the time and ability to make connections with one another, then this may mean an inequitable student experience for those who are working.

Other groups that were statistically significantly more likely to work longer hours include:

- 1) Part-time students and distance learners
- 2) Postgraduate Taught students
- 3) Those who live in their own, or their parental home
- 4) Mature students

In many instances, it is highly likely that these are closely related, given our knowledge of the make-up of our student body. However, it is potentially notable that of those who work the longest number of hours, 38% of them study full-time and on campus. For these individuals, it is highly likely that they face a significant amount of stress.

### **Why do students work?**

Those students in work were able to select their primary reason for work. It is unsurprising that 72% of these students specifically worked to cover their living expenses. While all students may get some employability benefit from their work, for most (but not all – 9% did) this is not their primary motivation. As part-time working is

increasingly normal, and is necessary for living expenses, some level of flexibility may be viewed positively for students in term-time employment.

### **What about students who don't work?**

While we did not seek to explore the experiences of those who don't work specifically, we did ask for the reasons why individuals don't work. This was partially to explore how much non-working is a choice, and how much it is built around circumstance. The primary reason for not working is choice, with 23% of students prioritising their studies. It is apparent, however, that there is some unmet demand, either through not being able to find suitable work or having not yet found work.

Reason	% of participants
I cannot find suitable work	14%
I do not need to work financially	7%
I prioritise my studies	23%
Aspects of course make term-time working unviable	13%
I have applied for work, but have so far been unable to secure employment	7%
Disability, physical or mental health	<1%
Postgraduate researcher in receipt of a stipend	1%
Lack of time or other commitments	<1%

### **Contract preferences**

The UK Government's Employment Rights Bill proposes major changes to the employment of students, specifically the availability of zero-hour contracts and the right to guaranteed hours. UoNSU does not have any specific stance in relation to this matter but noted in evidence that the right to guaranteed hours may cause issues with the availability of flexible term-time jobs for students.

For the purposes of clarity, a zero-hour contract is a highly flexible employment type, where an employee is not necessarily contracted to any minimum or set hours per week. A guaranteed hour contract will offer a consistent minimum level of hours per week, although not necessarily to the same schedule each week.

### **How many students are on zero-hour contracts?**

Of employed students, there was no clear contract type. 44% of students were employed on zero-hour contracts, with 56% of students employed on other types of contracts (presumably some form of guaranteed hours). Zero-hour contracts were more frequently used in certain types of roles, notably on-campus role (69%), hospitality (61%), health and social care (57%) and sports and leisure (57%). Should legislation change, students in these types of roles will most likely be the most impacted.

### **Are students satisfied with their hours?**

In general students were satisfied with their hours worked – 83% of employed students were either satisfied or very satisfied with their hours worked. Only 2% were very dissatisfied. There is no effect when comparing either the number of hours worked, or whether students are on a zero-hour contract, indicating that regardless of employment type, employed students are satisfied with their working patterns.

### **Do students prefer specific types of employment contract?**

In short answer, there is a clear preference for employment type. 46% of students do prefer guaranteed hours. A significant minority of students want the stability that guaranteed hours will present them. This is not true of all though – 27% of students do prefer the flexibility of zero-hour contracts and the rest have no preference at all. There is no change in this when we tested against current employment type or other factors. Employers of students, particularly on-campus employers of students, should reflect upon the fact that, generally, the preference of students is for some kind of guaranteed hours.

### **Short notice cancellation of shifts**

One of the core aspects of the employment rights bill is to offer employees right to payment of shifts that have been cancelled at short notice. Generally, this appears not to be a large issue for students currently – only around 6% of our students had this occur frequently.

## **Keywords**

Employment; term-time working; part-time; jobs; working; zero-hours

## **About the author**

Sam Nichols is the Policy and Impact Manager for University of Nottingham Students' Union, where he leads on the collection and analysis of research and data. He is an experienced social researcher, having worked within the field for over 10 years, with a specialism in research with students about their experiences during study. Sam holds a MA in Public Policy (Distinction) from the University of Nottingham, as well as a BA in Theological Studies from the University of Exeter.

## **Appendix 1: About our method**

### **About the survey**

All data was collected within UoNSU's Winter Survey for 2024-25, which was distributed in November-December 2025. This data was collected online via MS forms. Typically this survey operates as an omnibus survey, asking questions on a variety of research topics within one survey instrument. The questions on term-time working were designated as a specific set of questions within the survey and were open to all students at the University of Nottingham. When analysed, all results have been compared against the core demographic section of the survey.

### **About analysis**

All data was coded numerically and then analysed within SPSS. Data has been analysed using standard significance testing, primarily the chi-square test, and where differences between groups are shown this is the result of successful tests at the  $p < 0.1$  level (i.e. it is more than 90% likely that difference is not down to chance). Where differences between groups are not shown, this is as we cannot guarantee that differences between groups are not down to chance.

In the case of comparison of means, particularly in the section of this report that analyses the frequency of hours worked, the comparison of means has been carried out using a one-way ANOVA. Where results have been shown, in this instance successful tests have been validated up to the  $< 0.001$  level.

### **About survey turnout**

The total survey population was around 36,000. For the full survey, we had 897 responses, which is a response rate of 2.5%. Bearing this response rate and population in mind, we estimate that there is a margin of error of around  $\pm 3\%$  for our statistics. The rate of completion went down slightly during the specific section on term-time working, and there were 550 responses, which is a response rate of 1.5% (a margin of error of around  $\pm 4\%$ ). Where data is close to 50%, we recommend care in interpretation.

When analysing our statistics, we have a higher proportion of women than is expected (67% of the survey participants self-defined as women). This is not uncommon within our data collection but does suggest that our sample may hold some slight issues. To correct for this, a weighting protocol was tested, although weighting did not impact the results. As weighting did not impact the end results, all results are shown as unweighted.