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The relationships of employed students to non-employed students and non-student work colleagues: Identity implications

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Abstract
We explored how employed university students experience their relationships with their work colleagues and with non-employed students. Two research questions (RQs) were considered: RQ1: What experiences and conditions do employed students identify as contributing to a sense that they are a distinct and separate group from (1) their work colleagues and (2) non-employed students? RQ2: What experiences and conditions do employed students feel facilitate and/or inhibit their social adaptation and integration at work and university? We interviewed 21 part-time employed students in England, and analyzed the transcripts using reflexive thematic analysis. We adopted a deductive approach, using the Social Identity Approach as a theoretical framework. In relation to work colleagues, employed students identified a lack of empathy, being looked down upon, and experiencing hostility at the workplace as making them feel distinct from their work colleagues. In relation to non-employed students, employed students identified differences in experiences and values as increasing intergroup differentiation, which then resulted in feelings of not fitting in at university or social exclusion. Identified conditions, which supported social
integration in the workplace, were working with colleagues who held positive attitudes toward students, experiencing similar workplace circumstances and a sense of common fate. Employed students felt socially integrated when non-workers had positive regard for them or by discussing their employment with other employed students.

INTRODUCTION

The number of employed students in UK higher education is slowly rising (Eurostat, 2016), to the point where over half of the student population is engaging in paid part-time work, according to a representative survey (Quintini, 2015). Much research has focused on the reasons why students choose to work (Lucas & Lammont, 1998) or the effect of employment on students’ academic achievement (Callender, 2008; Curtis & Shani, 2002), but less research has considered the relations between employed students and the groups that they are in contact with most frequently—non-employed students and work colleagues. Therefore, this paper aims to add more depth to our understanding of the relationships between these groups and how they contribute to the social integration of employed students into both university and the workplace.

Students in paid employment generally straddle two positions—they are both part-time workers and full-time students. Occupying these two positions might mean that the employed student does not fully belong in either group (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2006; Butler, 2007; Hodgson & Spours, 2001) and thus has a different subjective experience from both full-time workers and non-employed students. Practically, employed students have to deal with a range of problems related to their employment; the need for and refusal of additional shifts (Christie et al., 2002; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), conflicting work and university schedules (Smith & Taylor, 1999), and often tense working conditions (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Moreover, in the university domain, employed students have less time for social activities (Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Lingard, 2007; Manthei & Gilmore, 2005) and thus are less able to attend extracurricular events at the university (Kuh et al., 2007). Employed students also feel socially isolated (McInnis & Hartley, 2002), report feeling less socially integrated at university (Rubin & Wright, 2015), have worse mental health (Roberts et al., 2000), and suffer from tiredness (Savoca, 2016), sleepiness (Teixeira et al., 2012), tardiness (Robotham, 2009), and stress (Bradley, 2006; Holmes, 2008). These practical and health challenges demonstrate the different lived experiences of employed students compared to their work colleagues and to non-employed students.

Nonetheless, to the best of our understanding, there has not been a systematic exploration of the relations between employed students and these groups. If these practical and health differences lead employed students to perceive themselves as a distinct group from their colleagues and non-employed students, this perception may fuel intergroup dynamics between these groups. Being perceived—or perceiving oneself—as a member of a distinct group may hinder the adaptation of employed students into both university and the workplace, as social support tends to be given within clearly defined group boundaries (Haslam et al., 2005) and thus employed students may

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1 The data for this study is not publicly available as no consent was obtained from the interviewees. The interview schedule is described in more detail in (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022). This qualitative report has not been preregistered.

2 Henceforth employed students
not receive social support from their colleagues and/or non-employed students. The first aim of this study was to investigate what aspects of their relationships make employed students perceive themselves as distinct from those comparator groups and note any detrimental social implications from such categorization. Additionally, we also aimed to discover the circumstances under which the relations between employed students and the other groups facilitate employed students’ social integration. The following sections will first review previous research that has discussed the relations between employed students and their colleagues, and employed students and non-employed students, respectively. The subsequent section will then present our theoretical approach.

**Employed students and their work colleagues**

Previous empirical research implies positive relations between employed students and their colleagues. In fact, Lundberg (2004) maintained that the relationships that employed students have with their colleagues could make up for any detrimental effects that employed students may face from being less involved with the academic community. To corroborate, Lammont and Lucas (1999) discussed the role of collegial relationships, which were seen as useful to “let off steam” by talking and moaning about management, providing evidence for the positive effects of social support in the workplace. Conversely, employed students in Outerbridge (2016) and Patterson (2016) report a good, mentee-like relationship with some of their supervisors, which is characterized by emotional support or even practical support with their studies wherever possible. Other studies have also found that support from colleagues and management can help to manage the combination of work and study (Cinamon, 2016; Kember, 1999) and reduce depressive symptoms in the employed students’ group (Koeske & Koeske, 1989).

The literature presented above suggests that, under certain circumstances, employed students perceive their colleagues as sources of emotional and practical support, suggesting they are members of a common ingroup. However, this is not always the case, and other works suggest employed students feel separated from their non-student colleagues (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Therefore, the first focus of the present study was to explore in further depth which aspects of the relations between employed students and their colleagues cause employed students to see themselves as a distinct group, and the specific conditions under which collegial relationships can offer support for the employed student.

**Employed students and non-employed students**

In comparison to the literature describing the relationships between employed students and their colleagues, less is known about the relationship between employed students and non-employed students. One example of strained relationships between employed and non-employed students comes from a student in paid employment who participated in Christie et al.’s (2001, pp. 378–379) study. She describes how her need to work meant that she was unavailable for her friend’s birthday party, which led her friend to become irritated with her. Her explanation for the strained relationship centered on her friend’s lack of understanding regarding her employment and the inherent disconnect between the reality of an employed student and a non-employed student. This is corroborated by a participant in Moreau and Leathwood’s (2006, p. 34) study who described how her employment makes her own experience at university different from her non-employed peers’ experiences, because she cannot join her fellow students in their activities and is ultimately left feeling isolated. A similar sentiment is provided by a participant in Outerbridge’s (2016, p. 68)
study, who contrasts her experience of employment to that of other female students who spend
their free time having fun, and describes how this contrast makes her feel sad. She values fun
more highly than work, and this contributes to the higher status she ascribes to non-employed
students.

In sum, these statements illuminate the social deficit that can be caused by being employed
while studying. Perceiving others enacting the behaviors that these participants wanted to do
themselves caused them to feel different from non-employed students, and in turn, sad and
worried that they do not fit in at university.

Nonetheless, the presented qualitative evidence does not offer a complete picture of the rela-
tions between employed and non-employed students. The quotes above suggest that employed
students perceive important differences between themselves and non-employed students; how-
ever, there has not been a systematic investigation into whether employed students perceive
themselves as a distinct group from non-employed students. Therefore, the current work’s second
focus is to consider what aspects of the relations between employed and non-employed students
cause the former to see themselves as a distinct group, and like the relationships between stu-
dents and their colleagues, find particular conditions under which these relations can offer social
support to employed students.

Theoretical approach

In order to shed light on which aspects of their relationships make employed students per-
ceive themselves as distinct from both non-employed students and their work colleagues, we
used insights from the Social Identity Approach (Social Identity Theory [Tajfel et al., 1979]; Self-
Categorization Theory [Turner et al., 1987]). At the core of the approach is the concept of social
identity, which is defined as the part of an individual’s self-concept that is derived from member-
ship in subjectively meaningful social groups (Tajfel, 1978). Identifying as a member of a particular
group motivates the individual to achieve a sense of positive distinctiveness, that is, to differ-
entiate their group from other relevant groups in a positive way through beneficial intergroup
comparisons. Achieving positive distinctiveness thus helps the individual to evaluate themselves
in positive terms (Turner et al., 1987). Identifying as a member of a particular group also moti-
vates individuals to offer and receive social support exclusively within the bounds of the ingroup
(Haslam et al., 2005; Levine et al., 2005), which could in turn promote feeling socially integrated
at the workplace or university.

Therefore, the Social Identity Approach provides a useful framework with which to understand
the conditions under which employed students might receive social support from their colleagues
and non-employed students and thus become socially integrated into their workplace and univer-
sity, respectively. Previous research has found that the identities of being a student (Obst & White,
2007) and a colleague (Ashforth et al., 2000, p.353) could be subjectively important to the employed
student as separate identities, thus employed students could, in theory, draw social support from
both their colleagues—which supports the qualitative evidence discussed above—and from other,
non-employed students. This notion is consistent with the literature on the Social Cure (Haslam
etal., 2012; Wakefield et al., 2019), in which memberships in multiple groups are associated with
increases in physical and mental health outcomes, partially due to the beneficial consequences of
receiving social support from multiple networks (Wakefield et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, there might be practical and symbolic reasons why employed students struggle
to identify and feel integrated with both non-employed students and their work colleagues. For
example, employed students may be immersed into either context (workplace, university) less than work colleagues or non-employed students, and so may not experience the same practical benefits that full-time workers (more days off, more job control) or non-employed students (more money, more time off) do. These differences may form the basis for social categorization processes, whereby the similarities within and differences between employed students, full-time workers, and non-employed students become exaggerated (Turner et al., 1987). In turn, these social categorization processes can lead to employed students being treated as outgroup members by work colleagues or non-employed students. Such categorizations can be particularly damaging for the adaptation of employed students into university life and the workplace as social support may not be readily given to them by members of the other groups.

To exemplify this with a different population, Thunborg et al. (2012) discussed the different experiences of mature learners in Sweden and noted that these experiences made them feel like outsiders in comparison to traditional learners. Although, these learners were still successful—they categorized themselves as “good learners”—this categorization was formed as distinct from the categorization of the traditional student group. We suggest that this might also be the case for employed students and that the categorizations into employed students, work colleagues, and non-employed students could make employed students feel isolated.

This possibility is also in line with the Ingroup Projection model (Wenzel et al., 2008) which suggests that members of a subgroup can perceive members of different subgroups as outgroup members if their norms, values and behaviors deviate from those that are perceived as prototypical for the overarching, superordinate group. To apply this to our theorizing, the norms, values, and behaviors of non-employed students may be perceived as more prototypical of the superordinate group of students than those of employed students, and so non-employed students may come to perceive employed students as outgroup members and thus withhold social support to them. It is plausible that the differences in experience of employed students compared to non-employed students and work colleagues can be perceived by the comparator groups as indicators of employed students’ non-prototypicality, which could then lead the comparator groups to treat employed students as outgroup members and withhold social support, with detrimental consequences for the social integration of employed students at both their workplace and university.

However, it is also possible that employed students actively want to perceive themselves as a group with a distinct social identity that is separate from work colleagues and/or non-employed students. Indeed, Sani’s (2008) research on schisms within groups suggests a mechanism through which a new identity emerges when the definition of a group’s identity changes. Members who perceive the change in the definition of the identity as threatening to the identity rather than enhancing it may leave the group to preserve the essence of the original identity. Returning to employed students, this evidence suggests that employed students may want to perceive themselves as a distinct group if the norms of the comparator groups (work colleagues and/or non-employed students) are dissonant with their conception of being a worker or a student. For example, in the student community, the normative behaviors may be perceived as studying and attending classes. However, if non-employed students place more emphasis on extracurricular or social activities, then employed students could perceive that as discrepant from what they believe a student is supposed to be. Therefore, employed students could opt to perceive themselves as a distinct group from non-employed students to preserve the essence of what a student is.

Altogether, the multiplicity of identities that employed students possess and that can be activated in the two contexts of the workplace and university suggest that employed students should be able to draw on social support from both their colleagues and non-employed students. However, we postulate that that is the case only if employed students and members of the comparator
groups perceive employed students as full members of those groups. When this is not the case, the social categorization processes that can occur can make employed students feel distinct from these groups and thus sad and/or isolated. Therefore, we explore which aspects of the interactions, conditions, and relationships between these groups employed students identify as contributing or inhibiting their integration into these comparator groups, and the consequences of these for their social integration.

Indeed, if employed students do perceive themselves as a separate group, it is most likely that they receive social support primarily (or even solely) from other employed students. Cooper (2018) and Kiernan et al. (2015) have demonstrated that non-traditional learners in the UK who combine their studies with part-time employment identify strongly with their respective groups (social work students and student nurses) and develop identity-based communities where support is shared. As such, identifying as the distinct category of employed students could be beneficial for employed students if such specific support networks do exist.

The present study

To date, no research has explored the relations between employed students, their work colleagues, and non-employed students through the lens of the Social Identity Approach. Therefore, the primary aim of the present study is to investigate what experiences and conditions do employed students identify as contributing to a sense that they are a distinct and separate group.

A related second aim of this study is to understand the conditions under which the aforementioned relations between the groups can offer social support to the employed student. As evident in some of the previous literature, evidence was present for supportive collegial networks, which may exist only when employed students perceive themselves and their colleagues as part of a common ingroup. However, this may not be the case if employed students describe themselves as distinct from non-employed students because of salient differences in experiences. Therefore, the second goal of this study is to discuss the experiences and conditions employed students feel facilitate and/or inhibit their social adaptation and integration at work and university. However, if employed students do categorize themselves as a distinct group, it is also possible that they receive social support from other employed students as well.

To address these aims we conducted a thematic analysis with a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as guided by the Social Identity framework. The details of our approach are discussed at large in the Analytical Approach section.

METHOD

Participants

A sample of 21 (20 currently employed, one previously employed) students from a university in the South of England (six men and 15 women, aged 18–25 years; 20 undergraduates and one postgraduate) was interviewed by the first author. One participant requested a timeslot, but never appeared for her interview, all others participated as agreed. Sixteen of the participants were Psychology students, two studied Neuroscience, two studied Physics, and one participant studied International Relations. All participants but one had not been previously acquainted with the interviewer, the other participant was a colleague of the interviewer. No repeat interviews were carried out.
Materials

In order to conduct the semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule was devised by the first and second author. The interview schedule was then pilot tested by the first author with three employed students in order to improve the wording on some of the questions and assure their clarity for the interviewees. The full details of the interview schedule are described elsewhere in more detail (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022) as the data for this study formed part of a larger qualitative enquiry into the adaptation of employed students in university life.

Procedure

Data collection for this project took place between December 2018 and March 2019. The place where this research was conducted was a medium-sized university in the South of England, which has a focus on producing world-class research and is in the top 120 of most UK and world university rankings. Participants were recruited through flyer notes, situated at different places across the university, through which they could select a timeslot to conduct the interview in. The one-to-one interviews then took place in experimental cubicles to ensure that the participants were comfortable at discussing their experiences at large. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were given an information sheet stating that the aim of the study was to discuss their experiences as employed students with the goal of improving the overall university experience of employed students. The participants were also told by the interviewer that he is a PhD student in Psychology. The participants were then presented with a consent form outlining their right to withdraw their data at any stage before the publication of results and assured of the anonymity of their data (protected by a participant number). The semi-structured interviews then took place ($M = 42.45$ mins, $SD = 9.07$ mins) and were audio recorded. During some of the interviews, the interviewer made notes to prompt the interviewee to explain what they meant in more detail. Following the completion of the interview, any questions posed by participants were answered by the interviewer and participants were verbally debriefed about the purposes of the study. After this, the participants were asked to sign a copy of the original consent form to restate their consent to participate. They were then thanked and dismissed. The participants later received their transcribed interviews but feedback was not sought from them. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee at the hosting institution.

Analytical approach

The analysis approach of this study was a reflective thematic analysis with a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this study was to offer both credible (as evidenced by previous research) themes surrounding the relationships between employed students and their referent groups, but also to offer novel themes in order to establish generativity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed us to utilize our knowledge of prior literature and the Social Identity Approach to scrutinize the interview transcripts, but also allowed us to be flexible so that new themes could emerge from the data.

Another important facet in qualitative research is the role of the interviewer. To aid the validity of interpretation, it is crucial that the researchers are self-reflexive of their involvement with the
collected data and research question (Elliott et al., 1999). The first author is himself an employed student, thereby possessing an “insider” perspective into the data. This has allowed him to express empathy and understanding toward the interviewees yet may have narrowed the scope of interpretation (Stiles, 1993). During the interview process, the researchers were aware of the first author’s position and, as he was conducting all of the interviews, he sought to bracket off his assumptions (Ahern, 1999) and maintain objectivity as he was conducting the interviews. This consideration could have affected data collection, as participants may have not been asked potentially interesting follow-up questions as those questions could have stemmed from the researcher’s assumptions. Contrastingly, the second author is a lecturer in Psychology, who is further removed from their own experiences of combining working and studying. Their “outsider” perspective allows the interpretation of the data to be validated through inter-judge consensus (Packer & Addison, 1989).

In terms of data analysis, the first author conducted the interviews and completed all of the transcriptions. He also analyzed all of the interviews. The second author analyzed 15% (three interviews) of the interviews. This allowed for convergence and divergence of perspectives. Upon consultation, the authors decided to stop data collection after the 21st interview as the accounts of the later interviews conceptually overlapped with those of the earlier ones. All interviews were included in the final analysis.

Coding and analysis were conducted at this stage by the first author using the NVivo 12 software (NVivo qualitative data analysis software, 2018). The relationships between employed students and their colleagues as well as the conditions under which they foster social support are discussed in the following section. The relationships between employed students and non-employed students as well as the conditions to foster social support are discussed in the subsequent section.

RESULTS

Relations between employed students and their non-student colleagues

Intergroup interactions

Some of the students in our sample outlined how they were treated by their colleagues at work. Importantly, these experiences of mostly negative treatment stemmed from the students’ status as students and were detrimental for the students’ adaptation into the workplace. In Participant 2’s case, his fellow workers are quite dismissive about the pressures of study:

*It is quite a mix, this is more of like an adult job. There’s a lot of older people who have already done their degrees and stuff like that, but there are a couple of part-time students and they understand what it’s like ‘cause their assignments are in too, but a lot of the adults just kind of like ‘Yeah, of course it’s hard for you to go to uni’, like, yeah, yeah, kind of write you off.* (Participant 2, male, Physics, 2nd year, retail assistant)

Participant 2 refers to his older colleagues who have completed their degrees as non-empathetic and dismissive of his and the other employed students’ struggles. While other employed students can offer support as they have common experiences, the lack of empathy exuded by older colleagues can encourage the student to differentiate non-student workers from student workers, including himself. Experiencing this difference between groups (lack or presence of empathy) also helps the participant draw the intergroup boundaries—thus, he can categorize himself as part of
the employed students collective as he and other employed students share similarities (collective empathy) and common fate as employed students (Campbell, 1958).

In another example of negative relationships with colleagues, Participant 16 perceives that she is looked down upon by her fellow colleagues:

I think a lot of [participant's colleagues] see me as below them 'cause they are older, like a lot of the older staff members think they are a lot better than anyone else where actually we are all doing the same job, we are all getting paid the same. (Participant 16, female, Psychology, 2nd year, disabilities worker)

Similar to Participant 2, Participant 16 also describes her colleagues as older colleagues, which allows them to treat her differently and ascribe her lower status at the workplace. In line with the Ingroup Projection model (Wenzel et al., 2008), her colleagues might see themselves as more prototypical workers and thus ascribe her a lower status due to her perceived lack of work experience. This difference in treatment can also allow Participant 16 to draw intergroup boundaries between her as a student and her older colleagues (as based in differences in work experience).

Indeed, Participant 16 continues by stating that she also perceives hostility from her fellow colleagues due to her student status:

I think [my colleagues] are annoyed that, I think there is like a bit of like hostility that I don't have to be there all of the time whereas they have to be there all of the time 'cause I am a student like so I don't have to be there all the time, like I don't need as much money as they do, so I guess there is a bit of hostility 'cause of that sometimes I feel that. (Participant 16, female, Psychology, 2nd year, disabilities worker)

While the fact that she is a student is not problematic for her colleagues per se, the fact that she is not employed full-time also means that she is not able to participate in the work experience on par with her colleagues. This yields a lack of shared experiences for the whole collective, does not allow all colleagues to bond under their common fate as workers, and ultimately forms another criterion on which employed students differentiate from their colleagues—being a part-time worker. Being different then yields hostility toward the employed student.

Treatment from management

Indeed, the formation of these different collectives (employed students, older colleagues) can also occur in the workplace via different treatment from senior management. To illuminate this, Participant 18 explains how her management treats her colleagues differently:

On the weekend, 'cause we finish at 7:30 on a Saturday, but for example [the management] are allowed to keep us 15 minutes extra if the shop is not up to their standards and on the week day if [full-time workers] finish at 7:30 and like they walk out, the weekday staff won't stay the extra 15 minutes. They are either told they get to leave or they literally walk out the shop so that they are not staying these 15 minutes but like if we did that that would not be something that would be tolerated. (Participant 18, female, Psychology, 2nd year, retail assistant)
This quote represents the status quo, which Participant 18 outlines at her job; full-time employees are granted work privileges that employed students are not granted, which clearly demarcates the two distinct groups (non-student workers and employed students) through differences in workplace treatment. Despite the actual difference in treatment being benign (15 minutes extra working time), it is enough to serve as an important signifier of differentiation between the two groups and ascribe the non-student workers a higher status in the workplace akin to the dynamic that Participant 16 described above.

Altogether, the quotes above clearly show that differences in the workplace exist and that they are enough for the students in the sample to draw clear boundaries between themselves as employed students and their colleagues. Some of the participants also revealed that they perceive their workplaces as having a hierarchical structure in which full-time work colleagues perceive themselves of a higher status, which could lead them to treat employed students as less prototypical members of the working collective. Additionally, if any experienced hostility or lack of empathy is the behavioral manifestation of the intergroup categorization, it is likely that these manifestations can enhance the intergroup boundaries further and impede employed students’ integration in the workplace.

**Conditions to foster social support**

Conversely, it is equally important to mention that some students in the sample reported receiving social support from their work colleagues. An interesting juxtaposition can be explored between the preceding quotes and the experience of Participant 20, who experienced positive attitude toward her student identity:

*Participant 20 outlines how the acknowledgement of her studies at the workplace yields sympathy from her colleagues. Although, her colleagues are aware of her different status as a student that does not lead to experienced hostility or lack of empathy—rather, it leads to sympathy and understanding. Thus, even if intergroup boundaries in the workplace exist between older, full-time colleagues, and part-time employed students, the relationships between these groups do not have to be detrimental to the student’ adaptation in the workplace. Indeed, Participant 20 experiences positive attitude toward their student identity from non-student colleagues, which can help her to belong to the overarching working collective as opposed to being categorized as both different and inferior to her co-workers. Therefore, experiencing positive attitude toward one’s student identity is a condition that can help to foster a more inclusive and less fragmented workforce. Another similar condition can occur when students experience a sense of common fate (Campbell, 1958), which makes them feel like they belong to the overarching category of workers. This sense of connectedness between colleagues—built upon shared experiences at the workplace—allows the student to cope more easily with the negative aspects of their employment:*
We spend so much time together all in a very set, in a same environment like we are all very stressed together or we are all laughing together, whereas if a customer comes up towards us we can all laugh at it together so that makes it very easy to talk to people and everyone is quite open about their lives especially people who don’t go to university their job is their life almost and that’s what you do with your time so people you see at work they are your friends. (Participant 8, female, Psychology, 2nd year, bar staff and waiter)

Even though she makes an explicit reference to her non-student colleagues, the participant perceives them as part of one collective, and most importantly, her friends. In contrast to quotes in which participants felt excluded from their permanent colleagues, Participant 8 outlines a workforce in which openness and communication prompt students to discuss their perspectives. Through shared emotions and experiences, the student feels at ease with their colleagues, who she considers friends. This sense of common fate within the workforce means that any contrasts between employed students and their colleagues are only symbolic in nature and can help the student to receive social support from all of their colleagues. In fact, developing a sense of common fate can foster conditions for creating a meaningful superordinate category of a worker within the workplace (Brewer, 2000).

In summary, the quotes above show that not all intergroup relations—even if salient intergroup categorizations exist—have to be detrimental to the integration of employed students in the workplace. If work colleagues are sympathetic to and understanding of the student’s struggles, the intergroup categorizations become symbolic in nature and the student can receive social support from their colleagues. It is also likely that some features of work itself (shared stress and experiences) can bind the entire work collective through common fate. In cases where students feel as though they fully belong to the working collective, this can help them through receiving social support from all of their colleagues.

Relations between employed students and non-employed students

Differences in experience

In relation to non-employed students, our participants recognized salient differences in experiences and equality. In light of this, Participant 18 expressed envy toward the non-employed student group:

I guess like yeah [non-employed students] get more time to actually do uni and like for example, when it comes to exams I have to work, I only have 11 days holiday a year and I work on Saturdays and Sundays so if I have an exam for example on a Monday I don’t have the holiday to take off the Sunday so I have to work and then go to the exam the next day so I think in that respect I feel jealous that they don’t have to deal with that. (Participant 18, female, Psychology, 2nd year, retail assistant)

Whereas Participant 16 also felt frustration:

I just felt frustrated umm not only like do I see my friends a bit less and they saw each other, but also it just annoyed me that some people like can be at uni and not have a
job like that must be a lot easier for them and like they can put more time into their studying and then socialise when I would be at work so I guess you have to compensate a lot with work, like with social, sometimes with studying as well. (Participant 16, female, Psychology, 2nd year, disabilities worker)

These quotes help to elucidate the working student experience. Both participants reported that, due to their necessity to work, they must consider their working days within their academic calendar and make sacrifices when needed. This was explicitly compared to non-employed students’ experience, which elicited feelings of envy and frustration toward the non-employed student group. Akin to participants in previous studies outlined in the Introduction, our participants were explicitly aware that their experiences differ from those of non-employed students, which can make the differences between these groups salient and could be the cause for participants expressing envy and frustration toward non-employed students. Because these differences in experiences are described as aversive, the employed students also ascribe their non-employed friends a higher status within the overarching category of students.

For Participant 15, these intergroup categorizations become salient as her friends consider her isolated:

*I think it makes me feel better not to actually talk about [work] to them because I know that some of my friends have been actually complaining with me about the fact that I am not as like available anymore whereas say last year we used to hang out all the time, I mean not all the time but like much more often. Now, some of them have told me that they seem that I am getting like closed into a shell kind of a situation and that they don’t really see me anymore so like it’s kind of, I am not comfortable to just bring it up and talk about work.* (Participant 15, female, International Relations, 2nd year, waiter)

Participant 15’s new reality of having to work means that her experience at university is different from her friends’ experience—whereas they are able to meet and create common experiences, Participant 15 is not available to participate in these informal hangouts akin to Participant 16 above. As her friends remind her of her unavailability to “hang out,” Participant 15 understands that her work makes her different from her friends and shies away from discussing her new experiences as an employed student with her non-employed friends. The above quotes suggest that being an employed student can be experienced as a double negative, feeling frustration at having to work and missing out on social activities, while simultaneously being the subject of complaints from unsympathetic non-working students about not being involved in social activities.

**Differences in values**

For the students above, explicit differences in equality and experiences can lead them to categorize themselves as different from non-employed students. Similarly, other participants explicitly discussed some of the values of the non-employed group, which help to categorize students into these different groups (employed students; non-employed students). In Participant 13’s view, students who do not work are seen as lacking motivation:

*It depends on, I mean I don’t judge no one really for [not working] but it’s when like some of my friends come up to me and they have spent loads and loads of money on*
really unnecessary things like clothes and stuff and it’s their parents’ money and they are complaining about not having any money and ‘Oh, what should I do?’ and ‘Oh, I really want this new top that costs a £100.’ and it just baffles me that that’s what they are spending all of their money on and it’s not even theirs so I guess I do judge a bit in that sense, but if they are working hard at uni and they have just got no money because yeah they are not getting any income any other way than obviously no judgment, I think it completely just depends what your priorities are when you are spending. (Participant 13, male, Psychology, 1st year, shop assistant)

Through describing his friends’ spending habits, Participant 13 reveals how non-employed students spend money on what he deems “unnecessary things” yet are not motivated to work to win that money for themselves. By “judging” his friends, Participant 13 cognitively separates himself from them—whereas they are spending their parents’ money, he is working to support himself. As such, the quote above reveals how the perceived values of non-employed students are at odds with the values that employed students embody, and can serve as important differentiators between these two groups.

Participant 8 also shares why she thinks non-employed students lack awareness of the value of money and explains how her housemate does not understand her working experience:

I live with someone—my housemate—she lives her whole life with parents giving her money, like loads of things, so she’s never really worked, she doesn’t understand the value of money so at home she will open the tap, ha-ha like leave it running and go downstairs and I am going like ‘That’s £4 of water.’ Well like she wastes everything - everything is waste waste waste waste, and like she will throw her money around and she shows it off and if she’s worked for it or even like understood where it comes from and her parents have to work hard for that money I don’t think she would behave in that way, do you know what I mean, you realize there are consequences to certain actions. (Participant 8, female, Psychology, 2nd year, bar staff and waiter)

In Participant 8’s account, she differs from her housemate on an important criterion—the employed student is aware of the value of money, whereas her housemate is not. Most importantly, however, Participant 8 ascribes her housemate’s carefree behavior to her lack of working experience and her unawareness of the financial consequences of her behaviors. This difference in values—understanding the significance of money—then becomes the contrast that differentiates Participant 8 from her non-employed housemate.

Both of these quotes illustrate salient differences in values between employed students and their friends. They illustrate how the behaviors of the non-employed student group are inconsistent with employed students’ values of hard work and earning one’s own money. For these participants, the recognition of these salient differences was enough to differentiate themselves from the students they referred to and they ascribed these salient differences to their own experience of being in paid employment. Nonetheless, in contrast to when the comparison centered on differences in experiences, perceiving salient differences in values might serve to positively differentiate employed students from their non-employed friends as the values employed students hold (being motivated or aware of the value of money) are perceived as positive and beneficial. Thus, employed students might be motivated to differentiate themselves as employed students if differences in values are salient in order to achieve positive distinctiveness from non-employed students.
Behavioral manifestations of intergroup categorizations

Thus far, the students in our sample discussed some important differences in experiences and values between themselves and non-employed students. Most importantly, these differences can act as the basis for intergroup categorizations as well as make employed students feel envious of and frustrated with non-employed students. However, of similar importance are the consequences of those categorizations—what are the potential pitfalls for employed students of categorizing employed and non-employed students into different groups? To delve even deeper, what are the behavioral consequences to the employed student when categorizations between groups are salient and their friends are (predominantly) not employed?

For students in such positions, they can feel that they are not fitting in at university. Participant 11 elaborates on how having to work made the differences between employed and non-employed students salient for her, with implications for her self-concept:

*I guess, you know what I mean, people wouldn’t say like ‘Oh, you are so lame because you are working something’ but that’s just how I felt whenever I met up with my friends and they would be just saying about like ‘I had a nice day and I did this and that’ and the only thing I could talk about was my job because that was like the only thing that I was doing which is making sandwiches.* (Participant 11, female, Psychology, 3rd year, translator and shop assistant)

In this situation, the student experiences a conflict between who she currently is and who she can be. Not being able to join in non-work-related activities with fellow students yields a lack of shared experiences, which creates the perception of being different and inferior to one’s peers. Indeed, lacking common experiences with non-employed students can enhance the intergroup categorization into employed and non-employed students and make the student feel lonely. Indeed, Participant 11 felt that she did not fit in during her first year at university:

*I definitely felt very lonely and very isolated and I felt like I don’t really fit in because at that time I felt like none of my friends were working ‘cause that was 1st year, I don’t know if that’s a thing maybe that’s just my experience with the people I knew. They always went out, they were constantly partying and I was constantly working so I kind of felt, they never said it specifically, but I kind of felt like I am kind of lame for, you know, doing the responsible thing instead of just like brushing it and just going outside and having fun and maybe that was just like, you know, me telling myself that I am this kind of person.* (Participant 11, female, Psychology, 3rd year, translator and shop assistant)

In line with the earlier quotes, P11 reported feeling isolated from her non-employed student peers, but she goes beyond this to state how having to work made her feel lame, or of lower status in comparison to her peers. Participant 11 then alludes to the continued effect of the intergroup categorization—she tells herself she is a particular kind of person (lame) and alludes to her lack of shared experiences with her non-employed friends as the defining factor for that categorization. As such, the categorization is what drives Participant 11 to feel isolated from her friends even further.

As seen so far, the quotes from our participants reveal that they often do not fit in with their non-employed peers and that this is accompanied by feelings of lower status. Indeed, as the quote
by Participant 15 above showed, sometimes employed students even go as far as to not discuss their employment with their non-employed peers:

_Some of [participant's friends] have told me that they seem that I am getting like closed into a shell kind of a situation and that they don’t really see me anymore so like it's kind of I am not comfortable to just bring it up and talk about work._

The quotes above suggest that for some of the participants in our sample, the non-employed experience is idealized but is not attainable due to their own economic reality, which in turn drives them to feel different from their non-employed peers. Such categorization into distinct groups of employed and non-employed students then causes employed students to feel of lower status in comparison to non-employed students and/or to not discuss their employment with them. Furthermore, these consequences of intergroup categorizations are unlikely to help employed students' integration into university, as they do not facilitate the reception of social support from non-employed peers and likely extend the intergroup boundaries even further.

**Friends having a positive attitude toward work fosters positive distinctiveness**

Nonetheless, not every employed student in the present sample felt that being a worker confers lower status to them. In fact, some of the participants experienced pride that they were working. Participant 12 describes how having a positive opinion about oneself from non-employed students allowed her to feel pride from being an employed student:

_I mean my friends back in [participant's country] they haven’t worked, so they see me working as something like really, really nice and like something that’s extraordinary in a way that they find it quite interesting, but obviously here as everyone works it’s not something which you would consider as a big deal, but then people who haven’t worked find it really interesting and just like you know proud—that proudness sensation._ (Participant 12, female, Psychology, 3rd year, student mentor)

Because working is associated with a variety of inherent inequalities (lack of time, tiredness, etc.), it could be hard for employed students to achieve a sense of positive distinctiveness as compared to non-employed students. Yet, if non-employed students acknowledge the employed student’s hard work ethic (as in Participant 12’s experience), then being an employed student can in fact be a source of positive distinctiveness or a metaphorical badge of honor for the student and improve their wellbeing and self-concept. In such cases, even though intergroup comparisons might be salient, affirming the self through external recognition of one’s hard work can mean that the category of being an employed student can enhance how one feels about themselves.

**Other employed students as sources of social support**

Similarly, participants in our sample were able to escape any negative comparisons with non-employed students by spending time and discussing their employment with other students in paid employment. As Participant 12 describes, her employed friends offer the ability to corroborate their experiences and offer support:
I: And so with your friends can you talk to them about what it is like at your job?
P: Yes, because a lot of them have work as well, so they kind of sort of understand what my experience is as a working student, so they can sort of relate to it as well because they are in the same position as me.

I: And you mentioned that they can relate—are they supportive in that sense?
P: Yes, I guess if they know what I am doing, if I am talking to someone who has a sort of similar experiences I guess they are supportive in a way that they can understand me, but I guess if they haven’t been in the situation, if they haven’t worked while they are studying I don’t think they would sort of relate to it. (Participant 12, female, Psychology, 3rd year, student mentor)

Having friends who are workers (even if not at the same workplace) helps the student to bridge the gap between her friends and her employed experience. Similar to having positive relationships with colleagues, having friends who are workers enables employed students to share their experiences with others, in turn bonding through common fate (Campbell, 1958). Importantly, other employed students can offer targeted support for the employed student that non-employed students cannot. This shows that being an employed student is a meaningful social category for our participants as it offers social support from other ingroup members. Indeed, most of the participants in our sample preferred to discuss work with other employed students.

In sum, our participants expressed how the salient differences in possessing resources or different values prompted the creation of intergroup categorizations. These intergroup categorizations manifest in employed students ascribing the non-employed group a higher status and envying their resources. Finally, the salient categorizations can, in turn, make employed students feel like they do not fit in at university or hide their employed identity altogether. However, not all employed students associated their employed experience with a lower status than the experience of non-employed students. If participants felt that there was a positive attitude about their working identity from non-employed students, then employment served to positively differentiate the participant and they experienced pride in their employment. Similarly, employed students sought and received crucial social support from other employed friends.

DISCUSSION

In this sample of employed students, the two referent groups that were discussed by our participants were their work colleagues and non-employed students. In terms of the former group, the employed students discussed how older colleagues’ lack of empathy, hostility toward employed students, and differences in how the groups are treated in the workplace created categorizations between oneself as a student and others as workers. These categorizations were also created if management treats those groups differently. Yet, if students experienced a positive attitude toward their student identity from their colleagues, and/or felt connected to their colleagues through shared experiences and a sense of common fate, then they felt like they received social support from their colleagues. Showcasing one’s student identity in the workplace, then, could lead to either increased intergroup differentiation or to positive relations with and interest from colleagues (see Haslam & Ellemers, 2005 for discussion of this debate). This is likely to depend on the norms of the workplace, the history of students working at the particular workplace, and the stereotypes that exist surrounding student participation at the particular workplace. Future
research can adopt an ethnographic approach and consider what aspects of the relationships at a particular workplace serve to delineate students as a distinct group and whether they receive social support.

Regarding their relations with non-employed students, employed students discussed differences in values and resources between employed and non-employed students, which seem to form the basis for intergroup categorizations. In terms of differences in values, our participants noted that non-employed students exhibit a lack of motivation and a lack of awareness about the value of money, which they contrasted with their own experience. Indeed, employed students perceived that their non-employed friends did not fully comprehend the working experience. Akin to the relationships between employed students and their colleagues, this lack of understanding can harden the lines of categorization between employed and non-employed students. These results are in line with Sani’s (2008) work on schisms within groups as it is possible that these differences in values serve as the comparison point between employed and non-employed students, based on which employed students achieve positive distinctiveness while still maintaining their valuable membership in the larger student category.

The differences in experience and inequalities in treatment also facilitated intergroup categorizations into employed and non-employed students, which in turn evoked feelings of envy and frustration in employed students. For employed students such as Participants 11 and 15, whose friends were non-employed, these categorizations were particularly salient and led to feelings of not fitting in and them actively choosing not to discuss their employment with non-employed students. This acts as a double detriment for employed students—not only are they not physically able to participate in shared activities with non-employed students due to the necessity to work, they are also tacitly told that that is not what students do, which can form the basis for a sense of identity incompatibility between being employed and being a student. Altogether, intergroup categorizations stemming from lack of resources led to employed students feeling “isolated” and “lame,” and thus hindered their adaptation to university life.

Additionally, some participants in our sample felt that being an employed student could confer a lower status in comparison to non-employed students (associated with less free time and resources and strain on interpersonal relationships). Having a lower status due to being an employed student means that the non-employed student experience can serve as an upward goal-post for employed students’ idealized conception of university experience—an experience that is not within the bounds of their own economic reality. It has been suggested previously that groups with higher status can serve as the prototype for a combined, superordinate identity (Onu et al., 2016; Wenzel et al., 2008). In line with the Ingroup Projection Model (Wenzel et al., 2008), employed students may perceive non-employed students as the most prototypical members of the superordinate category of a student, and aspire to become a member of that group. In cases where that is not possible due to salient differences in experience (and perhaps norms), the boundaries of the non-employed group can become impermeable (Ellemers et al., 1990), which can then lead to employed students being treated as less prototypical members of the overarching student category. However, future research is needed to explore in more detail the extent to which the non-employed university experience is preferable and idealized, as this may not be the case for all employed students. Results from such research can aid in our understanding of how the working experience differs from the non-working one and provide practical strategies for employed students’ adaptation to university, all with respect to employed students’ economic situation.

Nonetheless, our results exist in a backdrop of increased student participation in the workforce in recent years (Quintini, 2015). As more students are employed, students might not perceive the working experience as abnormal for students at large. Indeed, newer UK higher education
institutions tend to have higher rates of employed students than older institutions, which could mean that the working experience is not as alien to students at these universities (Hanton, 2017). To this point, not all students in our sample felt that being employed indicated a lower status in comparison to non-employed students. In fact, some of our participants were proud of being employed and the work ethic it indicated and/or found social support and acceptance from other employed students. These positive feelings were facilitated if employed students interacted with non-employed students who had a positive opinion about their employment. Despite salient categorizations into different groups (employed students, non-employed students), interacting with non-employed students who had positive opinions about employment, laid the foundation for the students in our sample to receive social support from other students. Despite this, the majority of our employed students in our sample preferred to discuss employment-related issues with other employed students. By talking about similar or shared experiences, the students in our sample were able to openly discuss parts of their worker identity with other employed students and form identity-based connections that facilitate social support. In short, employed students tended to reap positive benefits and received social support only when their fellow students voiced positive opinions about their working identities, and/or when they received social support from other employed students. As more and more students combine employment with studying in the UK and worldwide, it is possible that the working experience becomes more normalized so that employed students receive more positive opinions about their working identities and/or more support from other employed students.

As employed students categorize themselves as a distinct group from the two aforementioned groups (non-employed students, non-student colleagues), the results also give preliminary evidence for the presence of a combined employed student identity. First, these intergroup categorizations have shown to not only have distinct affective consequences for employed students, but to also prompt changes in the employed student’s identity-related behavior (for example, not discussing employment with non-employed students). Second, this paper touches on different traits that are important to employed students (pride in work, conscientiousness, motivation, awareness of value of money, promoting student status as more desirable than working). All of the above traits or actions form the meta-contrast evaluative dimensions on which employed students are forging their own social identity (for a theoretical discussion see Turner et al., 1987). Finally, the participants in our sample discussed their experiences with other employed students in which they receive targeted social support, which as mentioned in the Introduction is given within strict ingroup lines (Levine et al., 2005). Thus, our results suggest that identifying strictly as an employed student could be beneficial for employed students so that they achieve positive distinctiveness from colleagues and/or non-employed students and receive targeted social support from other employed students.

However, we contend that the presence of and strength of identification with the employed student identity depends on the motivation and comparative context. If the particular workplace is populated mostly by fellow student employees, then the employed student identity might be cognitively overlapping with the student identity in that context, making the employed student category redundant. Similarly, if the workplace is mostly populated by non-student colleagues, and the student perceives positive attitudes toward their studies, then the category of being an employed student could overlap with the worker identity. If, in line with the Ingroup Projection model, the full-time employees at the workplace are treated as a higher status group, then it is likely that employed students could be treated as less prototypical members of the overarching category of workers, which could lead to the detrimental categorizations described in the Results section. Therefore, in comparison to full-time employees, the employed student identity could...
help fellow students offer support to each other through empathy and understanding, yet it could serve as a devalued identity at the workplace.

Identifying as an employed student in comparison to non-employed students may rather be a function of one’s motivation to do so. If the comparison is salient because of differences in values, then it is likely that employed students may identify as such in order to achieve positive distinctiveness from non-employed students. As Sani (2008) contends, leaving the overarching group of students may be detrimental to employed students, but reimagining the boundaries within this overarching category can help employed students to achieve positive distinctiveness through adopting some of the positive traits discussed above (i.e., conscientiousness, awareness of money). However, if the comparison is salient due to differences in experiences and inequality in treatment, then our results suggest that identifying as an employed student is linked to having a lower status within the overarching category of students and negative, isolating consequences.

Altogether, identifying as an employed student could have positive effects for the student, such as receiving social support from other employed students or achieving positive distinctiveness from non-employed students, if the context emphasizes differences in values between the comparator groups. In contrast, if the comparative context emphasizes differences in experiences and inequalities in treatment between the groups, then the employed student identity could be a devalued identity. Similarly, the value of identifying as an employed student at the workplace likely depends on the norms and attitude that their work colleagues hold toward employed students. It is, however, the work of future research to discuss empirically the extent to which the employed student category is an important feature of students’ self-concept, and subsequently, to investigate the correlates of this identity.

**Limitations and considerations**

One key limitation to this data is the lack of input from full-time workers and non-employed students. Including data from these groups can (1) enhance our understanding of their relations with employed students; (2) validate the intergroup perceptions which employed students depicted (West, 2016); and (3) allow us to discuss and explore additional perceptions of employed students. Specifically in terms of full-time workers, this omission meant that we were unable to corroborate the categorizations in the workplace suggested by employed students. If non-student colleagues do not perceive their workplace as divisive, it is possible that simply the perception of division at the workplace is detrimental to employed students’ adaptation there. Even if one’s colleagues are sympathetic and helpful, the perceived division, especially if reinforced by management, can alter how students perceive their colleagues and prevent the forging of shared experiences. Altogether, further research should consider collecting data from full-time workers and non-employed students to describe their relations with employed students in further detail.

Our dataset is also limited, as we did not seek to inform our understanding of the relations employed students have with other employed students. Although, the students in our sample discussed how they receive social support from other employed students, this was discussed in light of the inability of non-employed students to provide such support because they do not fully understand the working experience. As such, and because the relationships between employed students were outside the scope of this work, future research should investigate in more depth the relationships between employed students and whether they provide evidence for the presence of an employed student identity.
Finally, the participants in our sample were predominantly students who received lower amounts of government maintenance loans and international students. These students experienced higher need for employment and thus were subject to spending more time at work and less time with their friends. In turn, this could have made the intergroup categorizations more salient for the participants in our sample. Therefore, our results should be interpreted with caution if other employed students are not working out of necessity but to earn extra money alongside their studies.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this paper sought to discuss the relations between employed students and their referent groups (non-employed students, non-student colleagues). In turn, we found that differences in treatment led to self-categorization as an employed student, intergroup differentiation between employed students and work colleagues, and negative workplace consequences for employed students. Yet, shared experiences and a sense of common fate with work-colleagues could lay the foundations for a shared workplace identity and the receipt of social support. Similarly, the perceived differences in values and resources between employed and non-employed students led to intergroup categorizations, which manifested as differences in status and in feelings of envy and frustration toward non-employed students. For some, this led employed students to not discuss their employment and/or feel isolated and alone. Having pride in one’s working identity and the work ethic it symbolizes, and receiving social support from other employed students, offer avenues through which employed students can gain a sense of positive distinctiveness.

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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data is not currently available, but will be made available upon publication in a public repository.

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IDENTITY IMPLICATIONS


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