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## **“A Debt on your Heart”: Exploring the impact of student precarity on Education Studies students at a UK university**

Andrew Edgar, Birmingham Newman University, UK

Ben Johnson, Birmingham Newman University, UK

Stephen Dixon, Birmingham Newman University, UK

Corresponding author: Andrew Edgar - [a.edgar@staff.newman.ac.uk](mailto:a.edgar@staff.newman.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

Drawing on Guy Standing's theory of 'precarity' (2021), this article addresses a gap in the research around the experience of student precarity on UK Education Studies courses and how this precarity impacts their perceptions of the education system they aim to enter as professionals. Using an interpretivist methodology, 19 students from the lowest quintile on the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (Gov, 2019) took part in four focus groups in which they were asked open-ended questions about their experience of university in the cost-of-living crisis and life post-covid, and how they balance home, life, studies and work commitments. These were around areas such as their understanding of precarity and its impact on their studies and their perception of their place in the wider education system. Using thematic analysis, the main findings were: a feeling of foreboding towards the future; struggling to manage work and studies under the pressure caused by future debt and a resigned acceptance of precarity once entering the education workforce. Students felt a sense of vulnerability about the future resulting in heightened anxiety; furthermore, the ability to study without financial worries is denied to these non-traditional students leading to them having to take on more work which compromised time available for study. Finally, students felt disempowered to change the wider education system they aim to enter as professionals.

### **Key words**

Precarity, Pedagogy, Education Studies, Neoliberalism

## Link to article

<https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=30378>

## Introduction

Whilst neoliberal reforms to higher education have allowed an ever-increasing number of students to enter university from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, decades of neoliberal reform, characterised by defunding, deregulation, privatisation and marketisation (Powers and Wong, 2022) have contributed to the student experience of higher education being increasingly precarious impacting their studies, experience of university, and their wider lives. This article explores the lived experience of Education Studies students from the most deprived quintile on the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (Gov, 2019) in a small-sized university located in an area of high deprivation in the Midlands of the UK during a period of sustained economic hardship and uncertainty. Guy Standing's (2021) concept of 'precarity' is drawn upon to better understand student experience, and potential recommendations are made to better support these students. This study addresses a gap where there is a lack of research around the experience of student precarity on UK Education Studies courses and how this precarity impacts their perceptions of the education system they aim to enter as professionals. Throughout this article we use the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' to describe students but acknowledge that these terms are problematic (Holton, 2017) as they simplify and individualise how multiple structural factors and identity markers can render someone 'non-traditional' compared to 'traditional'. It is important, to clarify terminology here around 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students. Traditional students can be characterised as those with certain privilege, social and cultural capital (white, economically well-off, cis-heteronormative and able-bodied) who may know 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, they may have had other family members go through the university system and having grown up with the expectation that they will enter HE as compared to 'non-traditional' students who may not benefit from these features.

## **The experience of university in neoliberalism.**

Following the global financial crash of 2008, austerity policies enshrined neoliberal values at the heart of education (Rudd, 2017) leading to a system driven primarily by economic goals over those of social justice and the reduction of inequality (Reay, 2017). Universities have often had little choice but to cut costs in the face of capped student fees and diminishing state support (Staton, 2022). Therefore, the impact of neoliberalism has resulted in the experience of some students as being negative and widely felt, resulting in a form of economic Darwinism that promotes commodification, deregulation, privatisation and free trade whilst undermining opportunities for solidarity and community (Giroux, 2014). As Morgan (2022) states, people are living more and more insecure lives with wealth consolidated within a small group, and with students being encouraged to take on higher levels of debt to enter an ever more precarious and unpredictable job market (Davies *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, education has become progressively more commodified and any sense of its role as a public good has been sidelined (Davies *et al.*, 2018), with neoliberal ideals of education as investment rapidly becoming the norm within a highly competitive marketplace. This context shapes how students understand the education process and their place within it (Ball, 2021), resulting in the cultivation, reinforcement and nurturing of the values of the marketplace being reflected in schools.

For Education Studies students, who study the historical, cultural, social, political and economic contexts in which learning and teaching occur (Curtis *et al.*, 2014), these are important issues to understand and critique (Ward, 2008). However, in a discipline where students are encouraged to view themselves as “products of education systems” with unique perspectives (Bartlett and Burton, 2020: p.3), any such understanding of educational inequalities may also provide an uncomfortable mirror that reflects not just their past experience in schools, but also their current experience in higher education.

The current context renders it more difficult for all but the wealthiest students to thrive in higher education, leading to a situation whereby students are more focused on surviving their course rather than maximising their potential and broadening their horizons through a period of life dedicated to study and self-discovery. The profile of the traditional student as ‘young, white, middle-class, childless and full-time’ (Hart,

2019: 3) is no longer the norm with students more likely to be working part or full time (HEPI, 2023) and a third living on £50 or less a month after having paid rent and bills and 11% using food banks (NUS, 2022). This has led to an increase in students reporting a detrimental impact on their mental health (OFS, 2023). Additionally, it is expected that the average student will have £45,000 worth of debt once they complete their studies (Bolton, 2023). They have less time to focus on study as over half are now working (HEPI, 2023) reducing available study time. This precarity felt by students is mirrored by an increasingly casualised university staff workforce, with 46% of universities now using visiting, non-permanent staff on zero-hours contracts (UCU, 2023) and this situation has been exacerbated by the aftermath of COVID-19 (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023: 6). What then can be done by higher education institutions to mitigate some of the adverse impact of precarity on their students? What follows is a review of the literature around student experience of precarity followed by details of the methodology, findings, discussion, and a conclusion highlighting recommendations from this study and areas for future research.

## **The impact of precarity on students**

The term 'precariat' (Standing, 2021) is a combination of 'precarious' and 'proletariat' affecting a distinctive socio-economic group which lacks the social contract relationships of the traditional working class such as access to unions and communities of labour. With the rise of zero-hours contracts and inconsistent shift patterns, it is harder for people to form trusting relationships and to build communities and networks. Standing (2021) conceives of precarity as a lack of status and occupational identity. Coupled with an insecure job market and continuing cost of living crisis, this creates an insecure position which engenders frustration and alienation. Furthermore, During (2015) develops the concept of precarity as relating to access to adequate income streams, while Vij (2019:1) articulates the issue as a 'shared horizon of suffering'. Consequently, those impacted by precarity are placed in a position of uncertainty leading to a decline in upward mobility. Bourdieu (1998) discussed the importance of championing the rights of the individual in the face of neoliberal influences and it is through this lens that the impact on students' lives has been examined.

Precarity is gradually shaping the student experience of higher education. As the cost of attending university escalates (Gilber, 2018), paid work has now become the norm rather than the exception for the majority of students (Bhrainwala, 2020). Additionally, institutional precarity (cost-cutting measures, strikes, temporary teaching staff) compound the issue and impacts students' lives and disrupts their studies (Hart, 2019). Furthermore, post-pandemic, students continue to feel its far-reaching effects (Powers and Wong, 2021). These combined factors exacerbate student precarity which can be understood in terms of how socio-economic and wider structural factors (including neoliberalism, structural racism, patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity) impact the learning experience of 'traditional' students. This leads many students to feel less prepared for study and subsequent progress into the world of work (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023). Moreover, a preoccupation with ensuring that basic needs of food and shelter are met is a major stressor impacting how much students can focus on their studies (Payne-Sturges *et al.*, 2018). This preoccupation is more likely to impact 'non-traditional' students who Bhrainwala (2020: 2) defines as 'students who are older than 25 or enrolled part-time or work full time or live off campus and/or have families to support.'

These students are more at risk of housing and food insecurity (Wright *et al.*, 2020). Research by LaBelle (2020) highlights the correlation between food insecurity amongst students from low socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievement. Maher *et al.*, (2009) discuss the impact of educational experiences being affected by disruption, anxiety and time poverty; evidently, time-poor, hungry students existing in a state of precarity are denied the space and time necessary to read and engage with complex materials (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023). Moreover, it is not just the students experiencing precarity but the staff they work with, from temporary administrators to cleaners on zero-hours contracts to an increasing reliance on casual teaching staff which Kadmos and Taylor (2023) refer to as an 'academic precariat'. These cost-cutting measures have a clear impact on the quality of student experience (Connell, 2019). If students are to succeed in their university studies and in their subsequent careers, they will need to feel secure to arrive at a state of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943).

Bhrainwala (2020) explored how wage insecurity shapes the experience of college students in the US and how universities do not recognise their precarity. She argues that universities must reimagine campus towards the growing number of non-traditional students. If students must work to fund their studies, this further compounds the disadvantage felt in poor and marginalised students (Tran *et al.*, 2018). As previously discussed, many students have no choice but to work during their studies, with research by HEPI stating that 48% of UK universities promote part-time work opportunities (Freeman, 2023) and that 55% of students are working part time - an increase of 10% in the past 12 months. Furthermore, the Student Academic Experience Survey (2023) states that 76% of students reported that the cost of living was having a negative impact on their studies. The experience of the neoliberal university, coupled with the impact of Covid-19 on access and success in HE institutions (Maringe and Charamba, 2022) has had a destabilising impact on student experience (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023). This means that students face significant difficulties with the spectre of the 'school to debt journey' (Gilbert, 2018: 40) looming over their studies.

Additionally, precarity compounded by food and shelter insecurity, cost-of-living and the after-effects of the pandemic are impacting students' sense of identity, belonging and how they spend their time. On a fundamental level, having to work more alongside studies reduces time available for leisure and participation in public life (Standing, 2021; Butler, 2014). In her research, Bhrainwala (2020: 254) found that non-traditional students struggled to understand the idea of hobbies and leisure as 'utopic' luxuries. This has implications for students' sense of belonging to their course and the community of the university which have implications for their completion and wider experience (Bovill, 2020). Furthermore, space to access supportive networks and develop wider social and cultural capital is crowded out (Smyth and Wrigly, 2013; Bourdieu, 1977).

Over time, a lack of engagement with studies produced by a precarious existence has implications for civic disengagement (Bhrainwala, 2020) as there is less space to develop the criticality and critical thinking skills necessary to be a fully functioning member of a democratic society (Davis et al. 2018; Dewey, 2004). The university has historically been a space protected from many of the changes to the education system

associated with neoliberalism which favours tests taking, shallow learning and memorisation of knowledge (Giroux, 2014; Ball, 2021).

Consequently, students are disincentivised from deeper engagement with reading and critical thought and the development of individual agency (Kilner *et al.*, 2019) as success is more often defined as developing 'the skills required of the workplace' (Zepke, 2018: 442). This means that the 'banking' model of education (Freire, 2017), found in many primary and secondary settings, where students are passively loaded with knowledge to pass tests (Ball, 2021; Shor, 1992) finds its way into higher education as students lack space and time to develop critical thought through engagement with reading (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023). This results in students experiencing shallow learning and memorisation to get through their assessments. Ultimately, this current context reinforces education as an investment and renders democratic citizenship and transformation as luxuries (Shamash, 2018) available only to the most affluent students.

As students on teacher training and Education Studies programmes make up the next generation of educators and teachers, it is important to understand their own experiences of precarity, how it impacts their lives and their perceptions of their place within the wider education system they aim to enter as professionals.

## Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this work, an interpretivist methodology was adopted in alignment with the aims of the research to better understand the experience of a group of students as they reflect on and construct meaning (Freedman and Jones, 1980). The researchers recognise that our knowledge of the world can never be absolute but instead is composed of multiple interpretations and ontologies. In terms of positionality, as lecturers interviewing students who we have also taught, we had to negotiate certain power imbalances. Firstly, participation was voluntary and took place in the summer of the students' final year of study when assessments had all been completed. Secondly, in the discussion we shared our own experience of navigating the higher education system as students from state schools and lower socio-economic backgrounds (one of us also being the first in their family to attend university) this helped develop commonality with the students with the aim of fostering horizontal



relationships based on humility and empathy (Freire, 2017). Finally, we gave students the opportunity to decide when and where the focus groups should take place and participants were offered coffee and cake vouchers in return for giving up their time and to maximise participation (Oliver, 2003; Barbour, 2007). As researchers, we believe that knowledge of the world is grounded in experience (Hammersley, 2013) and that our aim is to identify the meaning(s) given to this experience by the participants. Evidently, each participant has a different perspective and consequently, from this small study, generalisations cannot be made (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Four focus groups of between four and six students were conducted, each lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Focus groups were chosen as they allow groups of students experiencing similar challenges to share their perspectives and deepen their understanding through engagement with others in a supportive environment (Barbour, 2008). With a small data set, this study aims not to make generalisations but rather to explore in greater depth the lived experience of precarity of these participants. The data from the group was triangulated with the lecturers' own field notes and observations of how the discussions unfolded. In terms of sampling, purposive sampling was used to select students who self-declared as being from the lower most deprived quintile on the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (Gov, 2019). Many students experienced intersections of lower socio-economic status with other protected characteristics, for example several participants were of Asian origin, female, or commuter students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The participants came from a range of full and part-time education courses and the majority were from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The University serves a diverse student body of students, many commuters, mature students and those with caring responsibilities as well as those who are first in family to go to university. Additionally, all of the students had full or part time jobs alongside their studies. In total, 19 students signed up for five focus groups, these taking place face-to-face on the university campus. 79% were female (n = 15), aged between 18 and 49 and 63% (n =12) were White which was slightly above the average for the programme which tends to recruit around 50% Black, Asian, Global Majority (BAGM) students.

The study used open-ended questions about their experience of university in the cost-of-living crisis and life post-covid and how they balance home, life, studies and work



commitments. The intention was to consider the challenges they face, the importance of relationships and their experiences of working alongside studying. Each lecturer, as facilitator, set the topic and ground rules for each focus group, including a commitment to respecting each other's perspectives, and calling 'in' rather than calling 'out' (Harvard, n.d); this helped to ensure that all views were respected and an ethos of education permeated the interactions as well as helping to mitigate any one person dominating the conversation and allowing space for all to share their experience.

Ethical approval was granted by the university and in alignment with BERA guidelines (2024). As we were working with potentially vulnerable populations, we employed an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) throughout the entire research process. We anticipated sensitive topics arising and students were briefed before the focus group that they could leave at any time. Likewise, a variety of supports were put in place for students if they needed them including access to local mental health and welfare charities which were made available as a form of debrief after the focus groups had ended. The recording from the focus groups was transcribed and coded with the aim of developing an analysis of the dataset (Flick, 2018). Once the data had been collected and coded, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was considered most appropriate for data analysis. Through this process, a consistent and comprehensive set of themes was developed (Buckler and Moore, 2023) as through a process of coding each line of data, and condensing them down into categories, three key themes emerged. The main themes were: experiencing precarity whilst studying at the university, taking on more work to be able to continue studying and feeling disempowered to challenge entrenched precarity in the wider education system. The next section presents the focus group findings, a discussion and finally a conclusion of the paper.

## **Findings**

### ***Fear and Precarity***

All of the students interviewed spoke of challenges they were facing brought on by the cost-of-living crisis and the experience of university in a post-pandemic landscape. This manifested in a sense of dread regarding the future, Anjum shared that:

*"Everything's changing and times are getting scarier. And at the end of the day, the cost of living is going to be more expensive. So how are we going to survive?"*

Being taught during the pandemic, with online teaching, students felt that the quality of their degrees had been impacted and consequently the poor economic landscape of post-pandemic Britain compounded a feeling of missing out on a traditional university experience. There was also a sense amongst participants that the world of work was increasingly uncertain and precarious and that the weight of student debt, "a debt on your heart" (Anjum), increased levels of stress and anxiety as students faced the start of their working lives. For students who had already studied a wide range of issues in Education Studies, including commodification, neoliberal education policy, and the imposition of functionalist views of education (Curtis *et al.*, 2014) these experiences provided an uncomfortable (if not painful) reflection, where their focus of study also mirrored their lived experience.

Increasingly, universities are forced to employ staff on temporary zero-hours contracts (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023) which impacted student experience of their studies. Shabina shared how:

*"We had one, and you don't have the same level of comfort we have with our normal lecturers. I think as well that they didn't know as much as they should have known... And I think especially if you're paying fees, just to save some money by doing that.. It's not helpful at all, if anything, it makes it way worse... and every question that we had went back down to our main lecturers."*

Students recognise thinly veiled cost-cutting measures which contradicts the vision and ethos they are sold upon application to university. This left them feeling a disconnect between what has been promised and the reality of their experience which includes less time available for quality time with increasingly stretched permanent staff who are also facing their own financial difficulties. Additionally, many students felt they were not receiving an authentic, personalised experience and instead described feeling "like a number". Furthermore, students expressed that the lack of communication between themselves and staff on temporary zero-hours contracts was

an issue. This causes stress for both the students and staff who are often juggling more than one academic contract across institutions.

However, some of the more mature students, perhaps with more accumulated cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) drawn from wider experience working and studying, knew how to access services and where to seek out information and support to help facilitate their journey through university. Sharon explained:

*“There's always space to challenge it. So, it's all around uni, You've got like the SU [Student's Union] that are really involved. You've got sort of societies and personally, I think it's quite easy to access the information as well. If I wanted to find out about something like I'm currently on the hunt for the Reduction Council tax form. Haven't got a clue. I just... I asked and I was pointed in the right direction. It's really easy to find out what you need to know.”*

These students knew the ‘rules of the game’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and this helped put into perspective the precarity they were experiencing as something temporary to be endured representing a more pragmatic approach towards the experience of precarity.

### ***Needful employment and the loss of agency***

A majority of students explained that they had missed taught sessions to attend work. This added to the already heavy workload of the small team of permanent staff who gave up their own time to hold tutorials in the evening to cover missed content. The need to make money alongside their studies was impacting their time allocated to them. Faye explained how:

*“It is stressful because I'll be planning time to write assignments. I have been called in during the lectures. We have a lecture that is scheduled to finish at 5 and I've been called into work at 5:00 o'clock.”*

As lecturers, we noticed the impact of precarity inscribed in tired student bodies, arriving at lectures after an evening shift or having worked all weekend. This meant many students were unable to concentrate which added to their frustration. Another

source of frustration centred around not having a choice in whether or not to work during university "[with fees] now you have to get a job and I think that takes away from what uni is" (Will). Consequently, the reality of student precarity does not align with the traditional view of university; many students grow up experiencing through media or through the experience of family members and friends who had attended university in the past. And increasingly, this meant that some students were unable to afford a social life (Dom, Shabina, Anjum) due to lack of funds and work to cover basics. For some mature students, work and university impacted upon time spent with their children and families: "I would like to see my children at some point" (Hayley). Evidently, this balancing act was hard to sustain and some felt the system was setting them up to fail "because you haven't got a full-time income which you need... but you can't grow without going to university" (Samantha). Students felt that the amount of money they were taking on in terms of loans was not clear to them due to a lack of financial education through their own schooling. In a reflective comment that mirrored discussions on educational inequalities during his Education Studies degree, Dom explained how:

*"I think another problem with paying for university fees is some people that, because it's never explained to you, taxes, nothing, none of that is explained to you in school. And I think for someone that may come from a poor background may feel that they cannot go to university, because they cannot afford the university fees, and they won't be able to support themselves, Because it's not a lot of money. But they make it that way. They make it complicated so you don't understand it."*

Other students found further problems regarding finance such as the impact that it would have on their receipt of benefits. For some this was indicative of a complex system that many found confusing having to navigate without proper financial education or counsel about the implication of taking on large amounts of debt before embarking on their studies. This debt is taken on by non-traditional students and not necessarily by more affluent 'traditional' students who may not share those same concerns.

## ***Disempowerment, Complacency and Responsibilisation***

The participants were impacted by their experience of precarity as a student and worker and these impacted their wider perceptions of the education system. Students noted the impact of austerity and a neoliberal approach to education in terms of how schools were run and their wider experience of the education system, Amira observed how:

*“And all of these, like schools, obviously want cheaper teachers. So, they’ll go for the ECTs [Early Career Teachers]. All that experience. It’s gone. Yeah. And it’s really sad.”*

Many of the students worked part time in schools to help fund their studies, some as teaching assistants and some via agency work. Their experiences highlighted the precarity of being a part time worker and student within the education system, without the position afforded by having qualified teacher status (QTS). This is allied with the precarity that comes with fulfilling some of the lower positions within the teaching profession, meaning students’ first impressions of working within the education system were one of precarity, uncertainty and exploitation. Lee detailed how:

*“In my school, we’ve got a teacher that’s off next door, but we’ve got to the point where we can’t afford a supply anymore. So, I’ve had to be there and be the only member of staff in that class. So, I’ve had to take a class of 30 children on my own... The head teacher, checked in on me and watched me and saw I was doing the register and didn’t say thank you for doing it. I only get paid £8.80 an hour. Otherwise, there would be no one else for those kids.”*

The concern then becomes that precarity, uncertainty and exploitation of those working within the education system becomes normalised for these students. Additionally, here Lee details a sense of *responsibilisation* (Peeters, 2019) where wider institutional responsibility is transferred onto the shoulders of the individual, compounding a sense of stress and guilt as their labour is exploited. For some of the students who had been working as teaching assistants before joining the course, many had already developed a sense of helplessness about the challenges facing the

education system. In a withering reflection of the impact of years of neoliberal educational policy, Tracey explained how:

*“Are we just going to become part of the problem because it's higher up. It's not the teachers. It's not the students. It's not even like the Headteachers, really, because I still don't think they have that power. It's the whole of the system.”*

Moreover, teachers are experiencing a deteriorating education system rundown by years of austerity leaving them more vulnerable to insecurity. There were also concerns regarding increased performativity and accountability. Tracy described:

*“The system is at breaking point. You look at the teachers going on strike and the day to day strain and the stress of the SATs.”*

The student's initial experience of working within the education system is one of uncertainty and duress rather than of hope, opportunity and potential. Through working within the system, they see how budget cuts are impacting teacher precarity leading to lower morale amongst staff. Faye detailed how:

*“Especially with schools now. They are very much more businesses like, you know, academies. Academies will try and hire newly qualified teachers. And only keep them for like 5-6 years. And then let go of them when they have to move up the pay scale.”*

The clear message here is that teaching can no longer be depended upon as a safe, secure profession – instead, your role has a “timer” attached whereby you become too expensive and disposable. Teachers are working under ‘regimes of performativity’ (Ball, 2021) with constant accountability at the forefront of their minds. This has led to an epidemic of mental health issues with 78% of teachers reporting feeling stressed and 36% describing feeling burnt-out (Teacher Wellbeing Index, 2021). This, in turn, leads to teacher attrition with one third of teachers leaving the profession within the last ten years (Walker, 2023).

## Discussion

Through the findings it became evident that student precarity was characterised by financial insecurity, depleted institutions and a strong sense of foreboding concerning future employment within a precarious education system. Evident in the participants' responses was a sense of vulnerability and anxiety around debt and an unpredictable job market (Davies *et al.*, 2018). These are key indicators of precarity (Standing, 2021) which permeate their experience of university and exacerbate fears for the future. Costs associated with the course (Wright *et al.*, 2020) and the quality of their degree were further sources of financial anxiety for the students. Counting costs and fretting over value for money and quality of provision encourages students to see themselves as consumers (Neary and Morris, 2013) who conceptualise education as a commodity, and a commodification which they feel turns them into 'numbers' within the operation of the wider institution (Standing, 2021; Giroux, 2014). As students are forced to focus on their immediate needs of financial security and securing a job in a precarious system, space is lost for an appreciation of education for its own sake or as part of a wider process of social transformation (Freire, 2017). These conceptualisations become luxuries for the dwindling number of 'traditional' students unencumbered by debt, work and precarity. Furthermore, the quality of the education students receive is compromised by cost-cutting measures such as the overuse of visiting lecturers employed on zero-hour contracts. Universities are more and more having to take these steps due to fee caps with fees remaining static since 2017 as well as navigating the reduction of state support (Giroux, 2014; Ball, 2021). For these students, this was most visible in an increasing reliance on temporary staff. This 'academic precarity' (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023) impacted their quality of provision and wider experience of university, often leaving them confused. Overall, students talked openly about their experience of precarity and did not demonstrate the stigmatisation that others have found with this topic (Wright *et al.*, 2020).

For many students, a sense of powerlessness pervaded their responses as they described negotiating work and study. All students worked alongside their studies having no choice but to do so for financial reasons. This highlights the normalisation of 'non-traditional' students having to work alongside studying (Bhainwala, 2020). On zero-hours contracts and working with agencies, students did not have the safety and benefits afforded by membership of unions and labour bodies. Many detailed missing lectures and compromising time spent studying in order to attend more and earn



money. This meant less time for family and less energy for play and leisure (Standing, 2021; Butler, 2014). Whilst this is not mentioned explicitly (perhaps due to the researchers also being the students' lecturers) this is likely to have impacted on time available for study and time to engage deeply with extensive and complex materials (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023). These are fundamental to an Education Studies degree where understanding of complex philosophical, sociological and psychological concepts is fundamental to becoming a well-rounded educator with an understanding of the purpose and nature of education. With university one of many priorities to juggle, studying becomes increasingly instrumentalised. Without the space to delve into reading and deepening understanding of complex theories we risk producing a generation of robotic, technocrats and trained workers (Giroux, 2014). This results in an ebbing away of space for radical transformative educational experience. Frequently, precarity and lack of time for deeper study means students display an apathy towards independent reading and research. Moreover, space for critical thinking and a collective raising of critical consciousness are squeezed out in return for banking methods of education (Freire, 2017) which allow students to cram information to pass assignments.

For those already working within the education system as teaching assistants or through part-time classroom cover, they experienced precarity within the education system they are training hard to join. They witness the erasure of ethical codes, professionalism and lack of respect afforded to them (Standing, 2021) all resulting from cost cutting measures and the progressive reliance on flexible labour. Experiences like Lee's normalise precarious, cost-cutting work practices so that when students join as teachers they are less shocked and are slowly conditioned not to expect an end to precarity once they leave the university system. Ultimately, this produces a sense of helplessness that the system is fixed and unable to change as decisions are made far away from the day-to-day experience of students and teachers. Interestingly, whilst Bhainwala (2020) documents less space for critical thinking due to a precariat student existence, these Education Studies students were able to critically articulate their experience and the challenges facing the education system. However, the need for civic engagement and a feeling of being able to effect positive change and agency was almost entirely absent, and instead was a feeling that the system was broken and unlikely to change.

Considering the many challenges ‘non-traditional’ students face, who then is responsible for mitigating the impact of student precarity? Wright et al. (2020) highlight the importance of university faculty destigmatising the processes around asking for help and making space for students to talk about the challenges they face as well as being clearer about the support available to help them meet their basic needs. Likewise, faculty can be mindful of the costs of the course in terms of printing, purchasing of books and other materials (Wright et al., 2020). Additionally, a wider ethics of care is advocated (Noddings, 2013; LaBelle, 2020) which prioritises learner-centred teaching, is grounded in compassion (hooks, 1994) and where faculty take time to get to know individual students, their lives and challenges. This makes it easier for students to be open about their struggles and seek the support they need. However, this can be psychologically and emotionally draining ‘whole person’ work as lecturers ‘teach against the grain’ (hooks, 1994: 26) and is more difficult for programmes with larger cohorts. Moreover, the responsibility of student precarity cannot be the sole responsibility of staff as this neglects the role of wider social structures which have given rise to increasing precarity amongst the student population. An individualisation of the problem erases space to fight collectively for structural change. LaBelle (2020) suggests that through sharing stories of precarity students can foster a sense of common belonging, relate to one another and begin to understand the wider systems which compound their precarity. Students can then work alongside faculty to identify how precarity has developed and what potential individual and collective remedies are needed to challenge it (Rudick and Dannels, 2020). A sense of collective solidarity can be achieved through the academic staff (who may themselves be part of the precariat) empathising with the precarious uncertainties faced by their students (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023).

## Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of ‘non-traditional’ students’ experience of precarity on an Education Studies course at a small higher education institution based in the UK. This study found that precarity impacted student experience at university, at work and within a wider education system increasingly at the mercy of funding cuts, staff shortages and austerity measures. Despite less time available for study, students were able to critically articulate the challenges they face

and were critical of the wider education system and a need for structural change. This included their experiences with academic precariat (Kadmos and Taylor, 2023), cost-cutting measures and attendance-monitoring initiatives. Education Studies as a discipline can continue these dialogues to further destigmatise the experience of precarity, foster solidarity and explore ways of challenging the injustices wrought by precarity. By students collectively sharing their experience of precarity a sense of commonality may develop (LaBelle, 2020) which could in time lead to collective remedies to challenge precarity (Rudick and Dannels, 2020). As Foucault (1978) reminds us, power is productive and comes from the grassroots not just from the top down. Alongside space for discussion, lecturers can listen to student experience and organise lectures in a way that supports work and family commitments: e.g. having lectures at the start of the week leaving space for work. Student experience of precarity within the education system can be used as generative themes (Freire, 2021; Shor, 1992) to explore how neoliberalism perpetuates inequalities throughout the education system. Collaborative discussion can make space for empathy and sharing of experience building solidarity and potentially supporting students in taking action to address some of the challenges faced as members of the precariat. This research is a small-scale study, so it is difficult to offer generalisations. The study was limited by the number of students who took part but yields important information about the experience of education studies students and their perceptions of study and the wider education system in which they seek to work. Further research could explore how Education Studies can help students develop agency and skills to challenge the inequalities of a precariat education system once out in practice. Ultimately, if the concerns of students are not addressed and acted upon there is a fear that fewer students will see education as a viable career option, impacting the quality of teaching and learning of generations of students, and exacerbating current crises.

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