

# The relationship between student work and academic success: a case study

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**Abstract.** Working during academic studies is very important because most students gain their first work experience during their academic education. Some students work occasionally while studying, most often during the summer period when they do not have any academic obligations, while others work continuously throughout their academic education. This research aims to investigate, using a practical example, whether students who work during their academic education achieve better academic success, measured by a higher number of earned ECTS credits and regular progression from year to year.

The research was conducted based on data collected from the employment agency database for the student population in the Republic of Croatia. As a result of the research conducted on a sample of 1,113 respondents, it was found that the positive aspects of student work on academic success are observed only at the graduate level of study. The research results imply that it is necessary to further investigate the impact of student work on academic success.

**Keywords.** students, student work, academic success

## 1 Introduction

Student work in the Republic of Croatia (RH) is regulated by the Law on Performing Student Jobs, which governs the relationships between the job provider, the intermediary, and the job performer (Zakon o izmjeni zakona o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2020; Zakon o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2018). This law equates part-time students with full-time students in terms of their right to work (Zakon o izmjeni zakona o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2020; Zakon o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2018) contributing to an increase in the number of students who can work while studying. According to the National Development Strategy 2030 in RH, four development directions are evident: sustainable economy and society, strengthening resilience to crises, green and digital transition, and balanced regional development. One of the strategic goals within the direction of a sustainable economy and

society is to educate and employ people (Hrvatski Sabor, 2021).

Future highly educated professionals in RH often gain their first work experience during their academic education by finding employment through student service intermediaries. Western Balkan countries, including the RH, have retained the concept of student work as a special employment status category. In Slovenia, this activity is handled by employment agencies, whereas in RH, the mediation of student work is under the jurisdiction of registered student centers. In RH, student services operate within 13 registered student centers, which are public institutions functioning as other components of universities (Zajednica studentskih centara, n.d.).

The Law on Performing Student Jobs defines the working conditions for students and other individuals (those in the process of enrolling in studies or those who have completed their studies) during their academic and post-academic education in RH (Zakon o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2018).

According to data from Eurostat (ICT Specialists' Workforce Growing in 2020 - Products Eurostat News - Eurostat, n.d.), the National Development Strategy 2030 in RH (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2021), and the student employment mediation data from the Student Center in Varaždin (Studentski centar Varaždin, n.d.), the potential demand for workers in information and communication technology (ICT) and ICT graduates shows continuous growth. There is an increasing need for student labor in all business segments.

The research aim was to determine whether students who work during their academic education achieve better academic success, measured by a higher number of earned ECTS credits and regular progression from year to year.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education conducted a study on the employability of graduates, which included individuals who completed higher education in the academic year 2021/2022. The employment rate one year after graduation was 84.3% (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2023). The question remains open as to how much paid student work during academic studies contributes to employability.

This research aims to answer the research question: How does paid work through authorized student employment agencies affect academic success?

## 2 Theoretical framework

Student work can be viewed from the perspectives of students, employers, and higher education institutions. This paper focuses on the student, examining the benefits and risks associated with working during studies in the context of academic education. There is a need to investigate how student work affects their academic obligations and whether appropriate policies and strategies should be implemented to adapt academic institutions to the new conditions of student self-financing.

For this research, student work refers to paid student employment mediated by authorized intermediaries in RH for the time of their academic studies. Numerous studies examine the relationship between student work and academic success, with some indicating that students enrolled with government funding achieve greater academic success and shorter average study times compared to self-financing students. Additionally, more students are working, and work has been shown to impact academic success positively (Išljamović et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2016; Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024).

### 2.1 Previous research

According to the results of the Eurograduate survey on the employability of graduate students, which involved eight European countries, including Croatia, personal drivers of early employability and the study of ICT, as well as prior employment and work experience related to studies, have the greatest impact on the labor markets of individual countries. The research highlights the growing importance of the connection between higher education institutions and labor markets and the necessity to balance traditional methods of academic education with the validation of theoretical knowledge through student work (The Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2000).

In Croatia, as well as at the European Union (EU) level, the issue of employability for young, highly educated individuals and their preparation for transitioning to the labor market is currently significant (European Commission, 2019; Hrvatski Sabor, 2021).

Working during academic education allows students to gain their first work experience. According to Eurostudent, an average of 17 % of all students have difficulties fulfilling their academic obligations due to student work commitments, with those working more than 20 hours per week being particularly affected. This is especially true for students in Estonia, Poland, Croatia, and Ireland (European Commission, 2019).

According to the Systematic Literature Review

(SLR), which encompasses 347 studies on the impact of student work on academic success, researchers have demonstrated both positive and negative aspects of this influence. However, the positive effects have been less studied. The positive relationship primarily involves the students' improved ability to connect theory with practice, while the negative impact on academic success is associated with the increased time dedicated to work. Early employment of young people results in better long-term work experiences, and combining education with work during studies positively affects employment and financial independence (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024).

Some researchers confirm that student work enriches students by expanding their network of social contacts and support. However, it does not contribute to student-parent bonding because work encourages student independence (Wang et al., 2010).

The increasing number of students who work while studying presents a challenge for higher education institutions. Students who work during their studies can transfer their theoretical knowledge to industry, creating mutual benefits from student work (Davies, 2012; Rochford et al., 2009). The most prevalent group of specific positive impacts of student part-time jobs on academic success relates to the connection between theory and practice that such jobs facilitate (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024).

The distinctiveness and diversity of different cultures, the psychosocial characteristics of students, and the financial capabilities of students are crucial factors when deciding whether to work while studying. The best strategy for successfully combining student work with satisfactory academic achievements is part-time work related to the fields of academic education (Mitchell, 2020; Schoffstall & Arendt, 2014).

The asymmetry between students' involvement and satisfaction in their university life and paid work can be altered through curricula designed to link theories and practices, ensuring that students' work experiences contribute to their academic success (Lingard, 2007).

According to the SLR, student work is influenced by market and economic factors of the economic system, the socio-demographic profile of students, the structure of financial support they receive, and the number of obligations they have at higher education institutions (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024).

Early employment of young people results in better long-term work experiences, and combining education with work during studies has a positive impact on employment and financial independence. Working during studies improves academic success, but only if paid work does not exceed the threshold of 22 hours per week (Adams, 1978; Applegate & Daly, 2006).

Research indicates that working during studies can have positive effects on academic success; it is not the work itself that negatively impacts learning outcomes, but the number of hours students spend working while managing academic obligations. Work experiences are significantly more beneficial when students are

employed in jobs related to their field of study (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024; Rochford et al., 2009; Smith & Schoffstall, 2020; Watts & Pickering, 2000).

The SLR was focused on indicators of academic success, the relationship between student part-time work and academic success, and the drivers of student work. The SLR established that researchers have confirmed better academic success and enhanced generic skills that contribute to improved academic performance as positive characteristics of student work, along with personal and professional development and better execution and mastery of academic obligations (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024).

### 3 Methodology

For this study, research was conducted on a random sample consisting of 10 % of all members of the Student Service of the Student Center in Varaždin who had active membership during the year 2020.

Members of student employment services can be full-time and part-time students, as well as other individuals in the process of enrolling in a study program or those who have completed their studies.

However, the latter can exercise their right to work through student employment services for up to three months after the end of the academic year in which they completed their secondary education, until the end of the academic year in which they completed their studies, or until the end of the three months after finishing their studies. An additional condition is that members of student employment services do not have an established employment relationship and/or do not engage in independent activities in trade, freelance professions, and/or agriculture and forestry (Zakon o obavljanju studentskih poslova, 2018).

The initial random sample consisted of 1,113 individuals and members of the Student service. The secondary data were collected from various sources, including databases of the Student Service in Varaždin and the Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth of the Republic of Croatia. Data was collected from student employment service databases, which included: anonymized demographic information, employment status, type of job performed, number of hours worked, and duration of employment for each student contract, university, and study program. Data was collected from the Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth databases about an earned number of ECTS credits, academic year of first enrollment, current academic year of study, and level of study.

During the research process, it was necessary to aggregate all input data by academic year (data was collected in such a way that the information from the student employment service databases was taken for the academic year rather than the calendar year), because student status and academic indicators are tracked on an academic year basis, while financial

indicators and student employment status are tracked on a calendar year basis.

Incomplete and outlier data from the initial sample were discarded based on predefined criteria because they were found to be the result of administrative errors and significantly skewed the initial sample. Incomplete and outlier data, such as students with 270 earned ECTS credits, students enrolled in double-major programs (e.g., Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb; Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka; Croatian studies, University of Zagreb), changes in university names during the same academic year (e.g., University of Slavonski Brod), students who study at two different universities, students studying outside Croatia, and older non-traditional students, had to be excluded from the statistical analysis.

For this case study, a hypothesis was formulated.

H: Student work during academic education is positively associated with academic success.

Academic success in this study is observed through the regular progression of students and the number of earned ECTS credits. Regular progress in this work is considered if a student enrolls in the next year of study each academic year, meaning they do not repeat the same year multiple times.

An important assumption of scientific work is obtaining all necessary consent from data owners for data processing, analysis, and interpretation for scientific purposes, as well as ensuring that the data are fully anonymized.

Consent has been obtained from the Croatian Personal Data Protection Agency regarding the method of data collection and processing. Students represented the observations, while academic success was defined as the dependent variable.

### 4 Research results

The collected data were processed using the SPSS software interface.

The normality of the distribution was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, and it was found that the empirical results do not significantly deviate from a normal distribution. Therefore, means were calculated as measures of central tendency, and standard deviations were used as measures of dispersion for student work.

**Table 1.** The number of total and valid cases, the number of students who worked and who did not work

|              | Did the student work? | Primary Case | Total |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|-------|
| VALID        | NO                    | 117          | 201   |
|              | YES                   | 996          | 1,949 |
| <b>Total</b> |                       | <b>1,113</b> | 2,150 |

Table 1 shows the total number of cases and the valid number of observations of students who entered the random sample of the research subject (of students who did and did not work yes/no in Table 1).

The initial sample of 2,150 records from the Student Employment Service in Varaždin was reduced to 1,113 members. This reduction occurred because some users had a higher number of completed student contracts or a greater number of jobs performed during the observed period. The sample of 1,113 students was additionally reduced to 912 students because only students with registered or at least 1 ECTS credit or a rolled academic year were considered (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The number of students by the number of years of study

| Year of study | Number of students | Percentage  |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------|
| 1             | 236                | 25,88%      |
| 2             | 251                | 27,52%      |
| 3             | 203                | 22,26%      |
| 4             | 116                | 12,72%      |
| 5             | 58                 | 6,36%       |
| 6             | 22                 | 2,41%       |
| 7             | 14                 | 1,54%       |
| 8             | 3                  | 0,33%       |
| 9             | 4                  | 0,44%       |
| 10            | 1                  | 0,11%       |
| 11            | 2                  | 0,22%       |
| 12            | 2                  | 0,22%       |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>912</b>         | <b>100%</b> |

Table 2 provides an overview of the obtained results according to the number of years of study. It presents the number of students for each observed calendar year at the time of sampling from the student database. The initial sample of 1,113 students was

reduced to 912 students because only students with registered or at least 1 ECTS credit or a rolled academic year were considered.

**Table 3.** The number of students in the current year of study

| Currently enrolled year of study | Number of students | Percentage  |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| 1                                | 261                | 28,62%      |
| 2                                | 301                | 33,00%      |
| 3                                | 281                | 30,81%      |
| 4                                | 39                 | 4,28%       |
| 5                                | 27                 | 2,96%       |
| 6                                | 3                  | 0,33%       |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>912</b>         | <b>100%</b> |

Table 3 presents an overview of the obtained results, including the number and percentage of students in the currently enrolled year of study at the time of data collection from the student database.

**Table 4.** The number of students by level of study

| Level of study                                | Number of students | Percentage     |
|---|--------------------|----------------|
| Professional study                            | 11                 | 1,21%          |
| Undergraduate studies                         | 547                | 59,98%         |
| Integrated undergraduate and graduate studies | 115                | 12,61%         |
| Specialist graduate study                     | 28                 | 3,07%          |
| Graduate study                                | 211                | 23,14%         |
| <b>Total</b>                                  | <b>912</b>         | <b>100,00%</b> |

Table 4 provides an overview of the number of enrolled students and their percentage by level of study. In the first phase of testing students at the undergraduate level, a sample of 553 students of professional and undergraduate studies studying for up to 7 years is taken (Table 4, first two lines).

Students studying for more than 7 years at the undergraduate level (in this case, 5 of them) were excluded from the sample. In this way, from a sample of 558 students, we reached 553 students. Necessary

tests were conducted for the obtained sample as prerequisites for further analysis, i.e., measures of central tendency.

**Table 5.** Mean, standard deviation, and standard error mean

|  | St. contract | N   | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--|--------------|-----|-------|----------------|-----------------|
| Number of achieved ECTS                      | yes          | 285 | 96,31 | 53,862         | 3,19            |
|  | no           | 228 | 99,44 | 54,62          | 3,617           |
| Regular transition to the next year of study | yes          | 302 | 2,54  | 1,303          | 0,075           |
|  | no           | 243 | 2,75  | 1,504          | 0,097           |

Table 5 displays measures of central tendency for the academic success of students observed through the number of earned ECTS credits and regular progression, i.e., enrollment in the next year of study. Students who had achieved ECTS and students who had a regular transition to the next year of study were observed separately.

**Table 6.** Testing the difference depending on the number of earned ECTS credits and regular enrollment in the next year of study for all undergraduate students

|  |                             | T-test |         |       |
|--|-----------------------------|--------|---------|-------|
|  |                             | t      | df      | p     |
| Number of achieved ECTS                      | Equal variances assumed     | 0,650  | 511     | 0,516 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed | 0,649  | 483,621 | 0,517 |
| Regular transition to the next year of study | Equal variances assumed     | 1,766  | 543     | 0,078 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed | 1,739  | 481,346 | 0,083 |

According to Table 6, there is no significant statistical difference when considering all undergraduate students in the sample collectively.

**Table 7.** The number of achieved ECTS and the regular transition to the next academic year for first, second, and third-year undergraduate students

|                    |                             | Undergraduate level |         |       |             |         |       |            |         |       |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------|-------|-------------|---------|-------|------------|---------|-------|
|                    |                             | First year          |         |       | Second year |         |       | Third year |         |       |
|                    |                             | t                   | df      | p     | t           | df      | p     | t          | df      | p     |
| number of achieved | equal variances assumed     | 1,672               | 124     | 0,097 | 1,151       | 134     | 0,252 | 0,665      | 249     | 0,507 |
|                    | equal variances not assumed | 1,569               | 83,929  | 0,120 | 1,141       | 120,519 | 0,256 | 0,653      | 215,395 | 0,515 |
| regular transition | equal variances assumed     | 1,317               | 143     | 0,190 | 0,267       | 138     | 0,790 | 0,149      | 258     | 0,252 |
|                    | equal variances not assumed | 1,255               | 104,067 | 0,212 | 0,261       | 115,619 | 0,795 | 1,135      | 232,284 | 0,258 |

The data analysis shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of ECTS credits earned and regular enrollment in the next academic year between first-year, second-year, and third-year undergraduate students who worked through student services during their studies and those who did not, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 8.** The number of achieved ECTS and the regular transition to the next academic year for first-year and second-year graduate students

|  |                             | Graduate level |        |       |             |         |       |
|--|-----------------------------|----------------|--------|-------|-------------|---------|-------|
|  |                             | First year     |        |       | Second year |         |       |
|  |                             | t              | df     | p     | t           | df      | p     |
| Number of achieved ECTS                      | equal variances assumed     | 0,137          | 89     | 0,892 | 0,318       | 131     | 0,751 |
|  | equal variances not assumed | 0,145          | 86,952 | 0,885 | 0,328       | 119,352 | 0,744 |
| Regular transition to the next year of study | equal variances assumed     | 3,172          | 97     | 0,002 | 1,913       | 135     | 0,058 |
|  | equal variances not assumed | 3,668          | 60,345 | 0,001 | 2,060       | 134,342 | 0,041 |

The data analysis shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the regular transition to the next academic year between first-year graduate students who were employed during their studies and those who were not ( $t = 3,172$ ,  $df = 97$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, no statistically significant difference was found in the regular transition to the next academic year between second-year graduate students who worked and those who did not work, and overall, there is no significant difference in the number of ECTS credits earned between students who worked and those who did not work during their graduate studies.

## 5 Discussion

Based on this case study, whose objective was to determine whether students who work during their academic education achieve better academic performance as observed through a higher number of earned ECTS credits and regular progression, it can be confirmed that there are no differences in study success (ECTS, regular progression) between those of students who have and those who have not worked at the undergraduate level of studies.

On the other hand, regarding graduate-level students, a statistically significant difference was found in the regular transition to the next academic year between first-year graduate students who worked through the student service during their studies and those who did not work. As for the earned ECTS credits, no significant difference was found between first and second-year graduate students. Therefore, we can say that the initial hypothesis was only partially confirmed.

The research results show that students who worked during the observed period did not earn a higher number of ECTS credits compared to students who did not work during the same period, regardless of whether all undergraduate students are considered collectively or individually by academic years. A trend can also be observed that the regular transition to the next year of study and the higher number of achieved ECTS are slightly higher for students who worked for graduate-level students.

The results of the study provide insight into the proportion of variance in student work engagement, as a criterion for academic success, and it has been concluded that predictions for more extensive research can be obtained by examining the variance.

It is noticeable that the smaller sample of respondents by the observed years of study leads to a smaller difference according to the observed groups and that the coefficient of asymmetry is high in the protruding data. These findings are by (Logan et al., 2016; Rochford et al., 2009) that student work has no negative consequences on academic success. The results of this case study confirm the conclusions of the SLR (Nidogon Višnjic et al., 2024) that student work conditionally contributes to better academic success and that this is a positive characteristic of student work.

The limitation of this work is the fact that the number of working hours of students in the research sample was not observed. Additionally, the social background of the participants was not considered in this case study.

The case study has also confirmed that for more precise research, a larger statistical sample and historical data should be taken into account due to the specific circumstances of the pandemic in 2020 (COVID-19).

According to the results obtained in this case study, the hypothesis that student work during academic education is positively related to academic success can

only be partially confirmed, and this is evident at the graduate level. However, there remains a need for more comprehensive research in this area.

## 6 Conclusion

Working during academic education has both positive and negative aspects and can impact students' academic achievements. It is necessary to investigate whether the positive or negative effects of work prevail.

This case study on a sample of 1,113 students aimed to prove the positive impact of student work during academic education on academic success. The positive impact is visible only in the first year of graduate studies if it is observed through regular progression. However, there is no negative impact of student work on academic success at the undergraduate level. It is obvious that students have enough time for occasional work in addition to regular academic duties, but graduate-level students probably balance academic and work duties better.

The limitation of this research is it a too small a random sample that cannot be considered representative, and there remains a need to repeat the research on a representative sample of students and include additional variations, i.e. the number of working hours, historical data and the social background of the participants. The contribution of this work lies in the fact that it lays the foundation for a comprehensive study that needs to consider all factors influencing student work during academic education.

Given that an increasing number of students are forced to work during their academic studies, it is assumed that academic obligations in certain areas need to be adjusted to students' work commitments. It remains for students to balance their academic and work obligations and try to align them in the best possible way, with support from higher education institutions and employers themselves.

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