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Balancing work and tertiary study is harder now than in 2012: study

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Many students reported regularly going without necessities including food, medications, fuel and prescribed textbooks. Shutterstock

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Students know completing a university degree gives them a better chance of landing a high-paying job, often after surviving financial hardship while studying. But striking a balance between life, work and study appears to be getting tougher.

Financial stress puts students at greater risk for mental illness

Australia has experienced progressive higher education policies, a social inclusion agenda and widened tertiary access. This has resulted in a rise in working-class, mature-aged, first-in-family and Indigenous students attending university. But government income support has not been quite so progressive.

Read more: Has the push to get more disadvantaged students into universities been a success?

In fact, in recent decades, Australian governments have overseen an ongoing reduction in student financial support. Consequences may include increased student dropouts and precarious student mental health, particularly for non-traditional cohorts.

A report on university students' mental health found "high risk" groups for mental health issues included:

- students from rural/regional areas and low socioeconomic backgrounds
- first-in-family students
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- international students
- and students with a disability.

Another study found female students under 34 with financial stresses and in a subsequent year of their degree were at higher risk than other students. Without support, these students were at risk of severe mental illness. Changes to university funding announced in December may add further pressures, including fewer available university places, and graduates needing to repay student loans sooner.

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Evidence of students' hardship is reflected in findings of a recent survey of tertiary social work students.

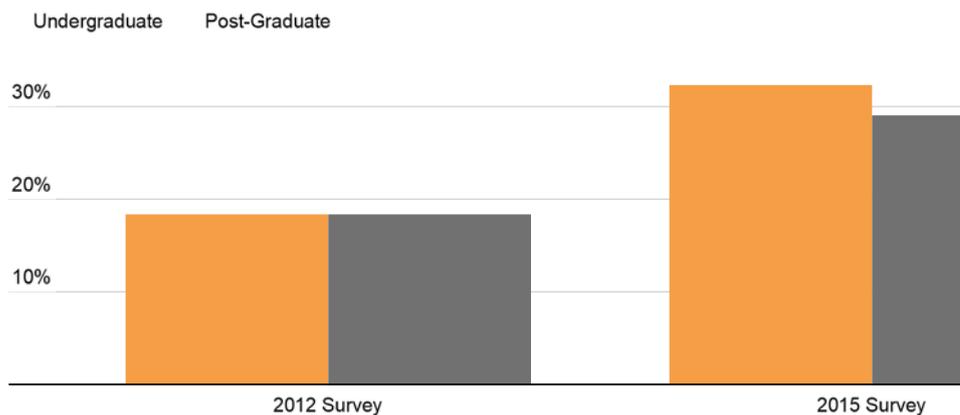
Students are having a harder time juggling

Findings from a research partnership between the Australian Association of Social Workers and James Cook University help illuminate the difficulties for some students. Through an online survey in late 2015, a sample of 2,320 students from 29 Australian social work programs reported their experiences of juggling life, study and work.

Many questions were replicated from a 2012 study of Australian tertiary students.

Analysis of both studies showed these more recent respondents were doing it tougher. Many students reported regularly going without necessities including food, medications, fuel and prescribed textbooks.

Increase in students regularly going without food or other necessities

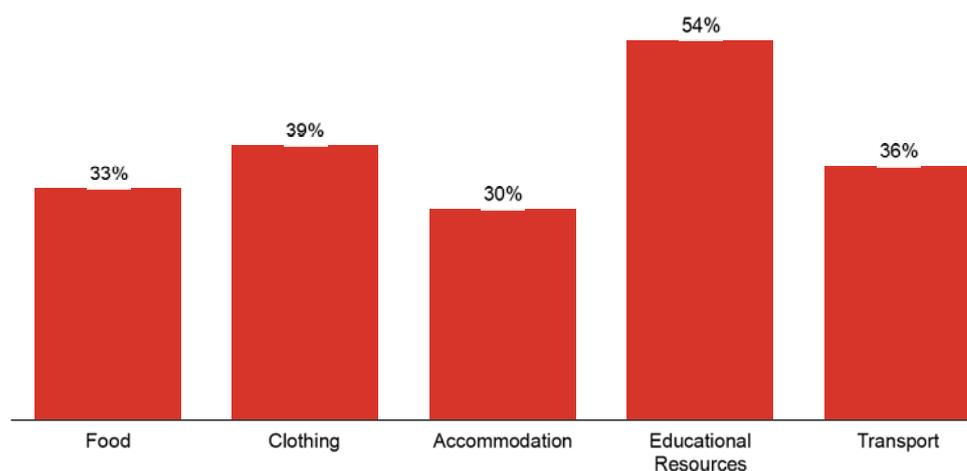


Specific data compared: full time undergraduate and postgraduate domestic students in 2012 Universities Australia study "University student finances in 2012" and "Australian Social Work Students Balancing Study, Work, and Field Placement: Seeing it Like it Is" survey of social work cohort in 2015.

Overall, students identified a precarious balancing act of study, family, financial hardship and paid work that was impacting their daily lives, study success and mental health.

Students were asked: as a student, have you at any time had insufficient money for any of the following?

Percentage of students who indicated they could not afford key living expenses during study



Q: As a student have you at any time had insufficient money for any of the following?

Source: Author provided

High numbers of students identified difficulties affording food. Over 50% of students could not afford important textbooks, and more than a quarter of the sample reported having insufficient finances for medications during their studies.

Personal responses from the 2015 survey confirmed students' struggles. This student found a lack of stable accommodation, clothes, fuel or money for prescription medications was impacting their mental health:

I...had to get medication...and owe pharmacies for scripts, eat toast for days, borrow money for petrol etc, postpone specialist appointments..., trawl through op shops for clothes appropriate for work, go...without textbooks...whilst studying, and my mental health and grades have suffered as a result. For the first three months of semester one this year I was couch-surfing until I could find affordable, stable accommodation.

Similarly, another student had to choose between petrol and food:

Budgeting to afford petrol to travel to another campus which is a two hour round trip impacts on the ability to afford food for the day.

Stresses increased while students were completing lengthy field placements:

Working part-time as well as family commitments while on placement nearly killed me. Even doing a part-time placement was hellish...and I was totally burnt out at the end of each one.

One student and their partner scarcely survived:

My partner and I were studying full time via distance education...no support from parents...we're on Centrelink benefits. We barely survived. After those 6 years, we could no longer cope with living in poverty as it had a significant impact on our health, mental health and general wellbeing.



Balancing work, study and family can have serious negative impacts on mental health and well-being. Shutterstock

The above themes were frequently repeated across all survey data collected.

Only 50% of students said they were receiving any government assistance. Many identified that financial hardship was seriously impacting their daily lives. Some said they were burnt out, while others were dropping out. Interestingly, a 2017 study showed student burnout can be a predictor of burnout in the workplace.

Financial and mental health support needs to change

One conclusion is that the eligibility for government financial assistance for students is set unfairly high, while the amount paid to students is unsustainably low. Advocacy by the university sector and professional associations, together with students, seems urgently needed for increased government financial support for students who meet an equitable eligibility criteria.

Enhanced support for students' mental health also is needed. This includes within their professional programs of study. Alongside this, strong university and community mental health networks for students can contribute to a healthier student body and, consequently, a healthier graduate workforce.

The author acknowledges the significant work of Len Baglow in the conceptualisation and completion of all aspects of the 2015 research reported here. Len Baglow, formerly of AASW, is Policy Advisor with St Vincent De Paul, ACT.

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