SUPPORTING WORKING STUDENTS: NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC INTERVENTION

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Abstract *This study aims to explore the need for and possibilities of developing a methodology to support students who work or face personal difficulties. A survey was conducted across Bulgarian universities, analyzing responses from 440 participants. Results: 37.7% of students do not work; 26.6% work in jobs related to their field of study. Most students believe that their educational institution does not have a structured framework to support working students. When asked about the necessity of such a framework, 90% responded with a categorical "Yes". The study also evaluated the importance of specific academic interventions, such as additional study hours, consultations, flexible exam dates, and other supportive measures. Conclusion: The demands of modern socio-economic lifestyles increasingly require students to work while pursuing higher education. To maintain and enhance the quality of education, academic institutions should establish support mechanisms tailored to the needs of working students.*

Key words: *Quality of education, academic support, working students.*

1. Introduction

The increasing number of students working while pursuing higher education has prompted a critical examination of how institutions support this growing demographic. A review of recent literature reveals both significant challenges and promising opportunities for academic intervention aimed at improving outcomes for working students [8].

Several studies highlight a disconnect between institutional services and the needs of working students. One study on quality of service in higher education institutions revealed that many students were dissatisfied with the support provided, particularly by administrative departments. This gap in service delivery poses a heightened challenge for working students, whose limited availability necessitates efficient and responsive academic support [5].

Another study critiques the traditional academic expectation that students prioritize study over employment. It argues that institutions must adapt by offering flexible support, acknowledging the educational value of work experience, and expanding on-campus job

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opportunities. These adjustments could bridge the gap between institutional norms and students lived realities, fostering more inclusive academic environments [1].

Cultural factors also play a role. Research on working-class students in the UK shows that many grapple with identity conflicts, caught between their working-class backgrounds and middle-class academic settings. These students often experience feelings of alienation, which can affect their academic engagement. This points to a need for institutions to recognize and validate diverse student identities through culturally sensitive support systems [6].

An Estonian study examined support satisfaction among working students and found mixed results. While resources like libraries and computer centers were rated positively, students expressed dissatisfaction with services designed to help balance work, study, and family life. Satisfaction levels varied based on factors like age, work hours, job alignment with studies, and field of study. The findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate; tailored interventions are necessary to meet the specific needs of different student subgroups [8].

Despite the abundance of empirical research, the field lacks a coherent theoretical framework to explain how employment impacts student outcomes. A review of existing literature notes contradictions across studies, attributing these inconsistencies to methodological differences and the absence of theoretical clarity. Without a strong conceptual model, institutional efforts to support working students may remain fragmented and ineffective [7].

Across these studies, common recommendations emerge institutions should implement flexible learning structures, integrate employment into the academic experience, and develop targeted support services. Emotional and social support systems are also essential for fostering a sense of belonging among working students [1], [8].

Ultimately, supporting working students requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach. Institutions must align their structures with student realities, develop evidence-based interventions, and commit to cultural inclusivity. Only then can higher education environments truly serve the needs of today's diverse and dynamic student population [2], [3], [4], [7].

2. Material and Methods

An online survey was conducted that contained questions related to academic interventions to support working students.

The study aims to explore the need for, and the possibilities of, developing a methodology to support students who are working or facing personal challenges.

In total, 440 students from a range of universities across the country participated in the study. Responses were collected from a total of 27 universities, many of which were represented by only a small number of participants, often just one. Notably, five institutions accounted for 64% of all responses: Veliko Tarnovo University "St. Cyril and St. Methodius" – 126 responses; Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – 52 responses; Medical University – Pleven – 49 responses; University of National and World Economy – 41 responses; Plovdiv University "Paisii

Hilendarski" – 33 responses; Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" – Varna – 31 responses.

3. Results

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents (72.8%) are studying at the bachelor's level, with just over a quarter (27.2%) enrolled in master's degree programs.

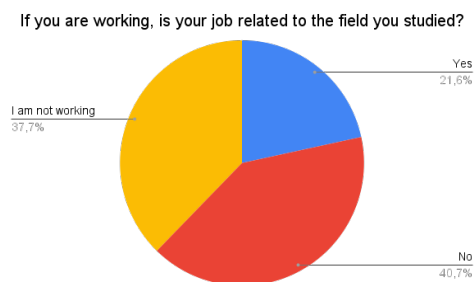### 3.1. A breakdown of responses on the alignment between education and employment

Fig 1. *Relationship Between Current Employment and Field of Study Among Working Respondents*

Most respondents (62.3%) believe their work is either fully or somewhat related to what they studied. However, a significant portion (37.7%) are working in areas that are not closely aligned with their education. Only 21.6% are in jobs directly related to their field of study, indicating potential mismatches between education and employment.

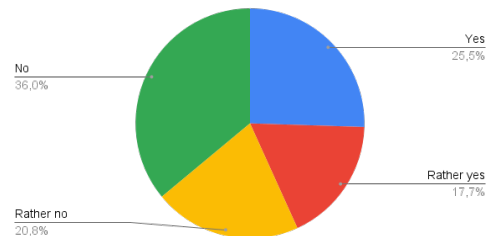### 3.2. Difficulty Attending Classes Due to Work Schedule

Fig 2. I*mpact of Work Schedule on Class Attendance*

Over 60% (Yes + Rather yes) of students report some level of difficulty balancing work and class attendance. This suggests that work obligations negatively impact academic engagement for a majority of the working students. The data highlights a need for greater flexibility in class scheduling or support systems for working students (Figure 2).
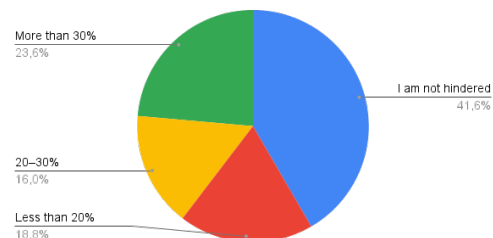

Fig. 3. *Percentage of Classes Students Struggle to Attend Due to Work Schedule*

Over 80% of respondents report some level of difficulty attending classes due to work. However, the majority (41.6%) are only mildly affected, suggesting that while the issue is widespread, it's not always severe. Still, about 40% (20–30% + more than 30%) miss a substantial portion of their coursework, highlighting the need for flexible academic accommodations for working students.
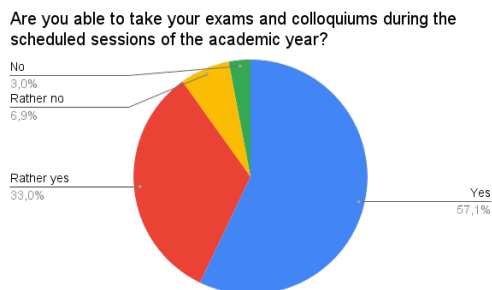
Fig. 4. *Ability to take exams and colloquiums during the scheduled sessions of the academic yea*r

A combined 90.1% of respondents (Yes + Rather yes) are mostly able to take the exam in sessions, suggesting the system works well for the majority. However, nearly 1 in 10 students face significant obstacles, which may reflect work commitments, personal responsibilities, or other barriers. These insights could be useful for exploring more flexible exam policies or offering alternative exam dates for working students.

3.3. Support for Working Students: Evaluating the Framework Within Your Educational Institution
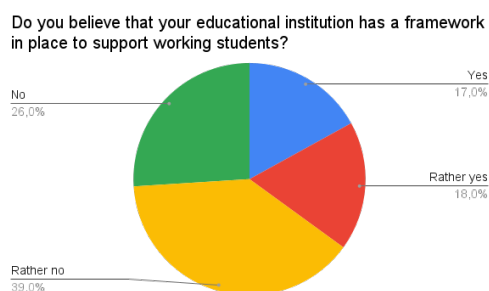

Fig. 5. *Perceived Availability of Institutional Support Framework for Working Students*

A strong majority (65%) either explicitly or somewhat doubt the existence or adequacy of institutional support for working students. The low "Yes" and "Rather Yes" percentages indicate a lack of awareness or actual lack of supportive frameworks in educational institutions. There's a clear opportunity and need for institutions to evaluate, communicate, and improve their policies and support structures for students who work alongside their studies.
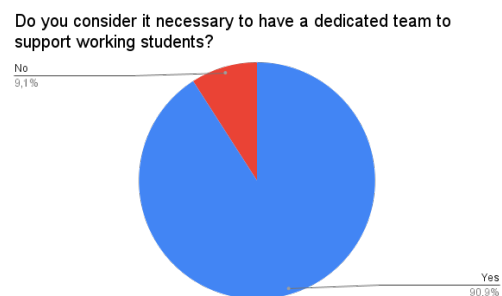

Fig. 6. *Perceived Necessity of a Dedicated Support Team for Working Students*

The nearly unanimous support (over 90%) underscores a clear student demand for specialized resources and assistance tailored to the needs of working students.
Educational institutions could significantly improve student satisfaction and retention by responding to this widely expressed need with targeted programs or staff.

In comparison to the previous chart, which revealed widespread doubt about the existence of a support framework, this result underscores a significant gap between student expectations and the support currently provided by institutions.
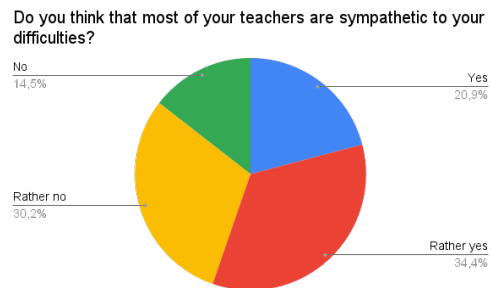
Fig. 7. *Perceived for teachers' sympathy for students' difficulties*

The data reveals that **only a minority of students** feel strongly supported by their teachers, with **a combined 64.6% (Rather Yes + Yes)** either dissatisfied or uncertain about the level of teacher sympathy.

This points to a significant need for better **teacher-student communication, empathy training for faculty, and institution-wide efforts** to recognize and accommodate student challenges — particularly for working students or those facing personal hardships.
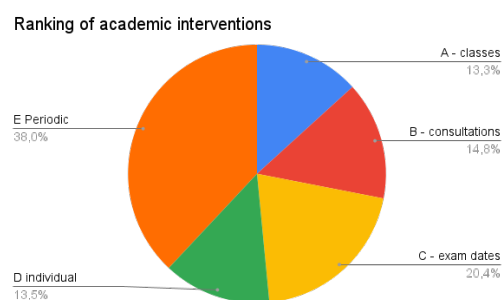

Fig. 8. *Ranking of academic interventions*

Figure 8 presents the answers to the question: Rank the listed support measures in order of importance: A: additional classes; B: additional consultations; C: additional exam dates; D: individual approach; E: the opportunity to ease the exam material by taking colloquia during the semester (for example, B; D; A; C; E).

The diagram presents the percentage ratio for the intervention indicated by the students as the first (most significant).

The Periodic evaluation during the semester is the largest, making up 38.0%, indicating that this intervention is considered the most impactful or important among the ranked options. The additional exam dates come next with 20.4%, suggesting moderate significance. The Additional consultations (14.8%), individual approach (13.5%), and additional classes (13.3%) sections are relatively close in size and together make up less than half of the total, suggesting they are considered less critical individually.

Figure 8 reflects a clear preference or effectiveness for one intervention (Periodic evaluation during the semester), possibly suggesting that stakeholders or data support a standout strategy in academic interventions. The relatively even distribution among the bottom three may indicate that while they are used, none are significantly more effective than the others.

4. Discussion

The research we conducted suggests that work significantly impacts academic engagement, and institutions need to adapt to evolving student demographics. The preference for periodic assessment, desire for flexibility, and perceived lack of institutional support all suggest that higher education models must become more inclusive and responsive to student realities.

Below are two quotes from students' feedback regarding the potential for assisting working students, along with a brief discussion of each.

"*More frequent councils attended by students and teachers. The students' problems will be debated and there will be an opportunity to get to know the personality. The student in high school is a bigger student at school, and when he communicates more with the teacher, he becomes more interested in what he is learning. He becomes more responsible and over time begins to realize that he is learning what will work*.

Implementing a more individualized approach to student support can significantly enhance academic engagement and motivation. One suggestion—holding more frequent councils or meetings between students and teachers—highlights the importance of open communication.

These forums would not only provide a space to discuss academic or personal challenges but also foster mutual understanding. When teachers have the opportunity to better understand students' personalities, and students feel heard and supported, a more meaningful educational relationship can develop.

„*More hours of practice in the field of the specialty that each of us has chosen. To have the opportunity for everyone to work without missing or being absent from the obligations they have at university. And to have implementation and projects in which students can participate and gain experience.*"

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To support students in successfully balancing work and academic responsibilities, the following options are available:

Provide flexible learning schedules. This would allow students to engage with course materials at times that fit around their work commitments, reducing stress and improving retention. Institutions should invest in digital platforms and ensure all materials are accessible remotely, including recorded lectures and interactive online activities.

Provide multiple exam sessions or on-demand testing opportunities where feasible. Flexibility in exam scheduling can significantly reduce academic pressure on students juggling work responsibilities. Institutions could explore evening or weekend exam options.

Create dedicated support teams for working students, focused on advising, accommodation, and time management. These teams could offer personalized academic planning, assist with navigating institutional policies, and connect students to relevant campus resources. Regular check-ins and workshops on balancing work and study could further boost student success.

Develop clear policies for teachers to accommodate work-related absences or difficulties.

Guidelines should encourage empathy and consistency, ensuring that all students receive equitable support when work interferes with their academic obligations. Training for faculty on supporting non-traditional students would reinforce a culture of understanding and inclusion.

Increase the availability of periodic assessments to reduce reliance on high-stakes final exams.

Regular low-stakes assessments throughout the semester can improve learning outcomes and reduce performance anxiety. This approach allows students to demonstrate progress consistently, making academic success more attainable for those balancing multiple responsibilities.

4.1. Study limitations

The majority of responses came from a few universities, indicating that the data may be more reflective of student experiences at those institutions rather than being fully representative nationwide.

5. Conclusions

A significant portion of students (37.7%) work in jobs unrelated to their field of study, with only 21.6% in roles directly aligned with their academic background. This suggests a notable disconnect between higher education and labor market demands.

Over 60% of working students report difficulty attending classes due to their work schedules. While many are only mildly affected, a substantial group misses 20–30% or more of their classes, underlining the need for more flexible academic policies.

Among academic interventions, periodic assessment throughout the semester is considered the most impactful (38%), followed by additional exam dates (20.4%). Other options such as extra consultations and individual approaches are seen as helpful but less essential.

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