

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Juggling many balls”: Working and studying among first-year nursing students

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Abstract

Aims and objectives: To explore the experiences of first-year nursing students, their motivations for working and how they juggled study and other commitments while engaging in paid work.

Background: There has been a global rise in the number of students balancing full-time study, paid work and other commitments, with the main antecedent financial reasons.

Design: Qualitative exploratory study.

Methods: Drawn from a larger Australasian sequential exploratory mixed-method study, this qualitative study was conducted with fifty first-year undergraduate nursing and midwifery students who commenced their nursing studies in 2017. Telephone or face-to-face interviews were conducted with purposively selected students engaged in either nursing or non-nursing fields of work. Interviews were conducted from April–July 2017. Interviews lasted from 15–40 min. Results were thematically analysed. EQUATOR guidelines for qualitative research (COREQ) applied.

Findings: Two main themes and accompanying subthemes were identified. The first theme explored students' motivation behind combining work and study and identified the need for financial security and “me time”. The second theme “Juggling many balls” provided insights into the benefits students perceived, how they kept the “balls” in the air and at times dropped “balls” while balancing work, study and other commitments.

Conclusions: The motivation behind paid work was mainly financial; however, students also reported work allowed an escape and time for self which had social and health benefits. Working provided a range of positive benefits, including a sense of achievement, improved self-esteem and financial independence.

Relevance to clinical practice: Being able to juggle and multi-task improved skills such as organisation and the ability to prioritise, all skills that have applicability for the role as registered nurse.

KEYWORDS

nursing, paid work, study, undergraduate students

1 | INTRODUCTION

Internationally, there has been a consistent upward trend in the number of tertiary students engaging in paid work while studying (Creed, French, & Hood, 2015; Owen, Kavanagh, & Dollard, 2017). In Australia, it is estimated that over two-thirds of first-year students undertake paid work in term time, with this number increasing as students progress through their studies (Coates, 2015). Of concern is the increasing amount of time students are spending in paid work. An Australian study reported that university students worked an average of 6–20 hr per week in the first year of studies and 11–15 hr per week in ensuing years, with nursing students among those who worked the most (Coates, 2015). Similarly, a study by Salamonson, Everett, Koch, Andrew, and Davidson (2012) reported that 84% of third-year nursing students were in paid employment, working an average of 21.1 hr per week during the semester.

Previous studies have explored the impact of paid work and study on academic outcomes (Callender, 2008; Reyes, Hartin, Loftin, Davenport, & Carter, 2012; Robotham, 2012; Rochford, Connolly, & Drennan, 2009; Salamonson et al., 2012), and there are, however, few studies that explore nursing students' experiences. Hence, this paper will explore the experiences of first-year nursing students, and how they juggled study and other commitments, and at the same time, engaged in paid work.

2 | BACKGROUND

The prevalence of students undertaking paid work while studying in tertiary education (i.e., an education level beyond high school) is increasing due to a range of factors. Globally, policy changes to tertiary education funding have placed an increasing financial burden on students (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008; Robotham, 2012). Concomitantly, the student demographic profile is diversifying in response to widening participation initiatives, with increasing numbers of "first-in-family" and mature-aged students (Heaslip, Board, Duckworth, & Thomas, 2017; Robotham, 2012). In Australia, over half of all students enrolled in nursing degrees are nonschool leavers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013) with a similar picture in the UK, where a quarter of all commencing students are over 30 years of age (Keogh, 2014). Such students are more likely to have family responsibilities, increased financial commitments and a heightened need to undertake paid work (Keogh, 2014; Young, 2016).

What does this paper contribute to the wider clinical community?

- Little is known about the perceived benefits for first-year nursing students who engage in paid work while studying.
- This paper provides evidence that paid work enhances financial independence, supports the development of a range of interpersonal skills and personal strategies, that have transferability to study practices and the clinical workplace.

Previous studies have sought to identify the relationship of working while studying in terms of educational outcomes, including student engagement, academic achievement and attrition from nursing courses (Owen et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2012; Rochford et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2012). Consistently, it has been demonstrated that an inverse relationship exists between the numbers of hours worked each week and nursing students' grade point average (GPA), with 16 hr acting as a tipping point towards negative outcomes. Working in excess of 16 weekly hours during term time has been linked to high attrition, student disengagement and academic under-achievement (Owen et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2012; Rochford et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2012).

The underlying premise is that time spent in paid work is at the expense of time studying, or engaging with academic life. Indeed, Devlin et al. (2008) reporting on a National Study, *Australian University Student Finances 2006*, found that one-quarter of students regularly missed classes because of work responsibilities, leading them to conclude that as students struggle to fund themselves through paid work, the quality of student engagement with university is compromised. Studies that focus on nursing students report similar challenges with the additional difficulty of obtaining time off paid work to attend clinical placements (Dowswell, Hewison, & Millar, 1998; Melrose & Gordon, 2011; Rapley, Nathan, & Davidson, 2006).

While previous studies have focused on the negative consequences of combining work and study on attrition and student grades within a single university, there is a paucity of research exploring the consequences of working while studying more broadly. This study sought to contribute to this important topic through the exploration of the experiences and perceptions of first-year nursing students working while studying across Australia and New Zealand.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Study design and aim

The study explored first-year nursing students' experiences of studying and working and sought to understand students' motivations for working and how they juggled work, study and other commitments. Drawn from a larger sequential exploratory mixed-method study, this study used a qualitative exploratory design, drawing from diverse student groups across tertiary educational institutions in Australasia (the islands of the southern Pacific Ocean). The study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007; See Appendix S1).

3.2 | Participants and setting

First-year undergraduate nursing and midwifery students who commenced their nursing studies in 2017, at four tertiary institutions (three in Australia and one in New Zealand), were included in this large multi-institutional study.

3.3 | Data collection

All undergraduate nursing and midwifery students were invited to complete a brief survey during their Orientation sessions at each of the participating tertiary institutions. During these sessions, participants were provided with an overview of the research project, a participant information sheet and consent form. As part of the data collection process, permission was sought to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

The qualitative phase of the study involved one-on-one telephone or face-to-face interviews with a purposively selected sample of students who had completed the surveys and consented to be interviewed. Purposive sampling was used to obtain a range of experiences from students of different ages and backgrounds engaged in either nursing or non-nursing fields of work. Interviews were conducted by six researchers in Australia and four researchers in New Zealand from April–July 2017. Researchers conducting the interviews either held PhD qualifications or were trained in interviewing techniques. Researchers held various positions within the four tertiary institutions but did not have prior relationships with the interviewees. Twelve questions guided the interviews (see Table 1), which lasted from 15–40 min. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. It was not necessary to repeat any interviews, and transcripts were not returned to participants. Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants were assured of anonymity through de-identification of study data. In total, 50 students were interviewed across Australasia, and data saturation was reached.

3.4 | Data analysis

Five researchers independently read the transcripts and familiarised themselves with the data, using the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, generating

TABLE 1 Interview schedule

Studying and working among nursing students—The SWAN-ANSAC study

Interview schedule

1. Can you tell me a little about what sort of work you are currently doing while studying (i.e., Paid work/Unpaid work—voluntary work, carer responsibilities etc)?
2. Can you tell me the main reasons for why you need to work?
3. Thinking about your current work, what do you value most about this job?
4. Reflecting on the work you've described earlier (paid/unpaid), can you see any connection between this work and a career in nursing? Can you please explain the connection (if any)?
5. Can you tell me about any skills/attributes that you have gained/learnt through work (paid/unpaid) that you may use as a future nurse? Can you please give me some examples?
6. For those working in a nursing related field—How similar is your current nursing work to what you do on clinical placement?
7. Do you think that your current paid work you do, could potentially be a substitution for the clinical placement experience at Uni? Why or why not?
8. How do you manage to "juggle" your paid work and/or unpaid work responsibilities and your university studies?
9. What sort of effect do you think working has had on your grades at University?
10. Do you feel that your current work (paid or unpaid) will in some way prepare you for practice as a Registered Nurse?
11. What do you think have been some of the benefits for you of being able to work and study at the same time?
12. What are your final thoughts and advice to other students on working whilst studying Nursing?

initial codes and developing a coding sheet, identifying and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final analysis. Inductive thematic analysis meant that the themes were strongly linked and grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All authors confirmed findings, and thus, consensus was reached.

3.5 | Rigour

Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through the use of paraphrase and iterative questioning, with interviewers summarising key responses to confirm accuracy of the interpretation (credibility). In addition, five members of the research team checked the representativeness of themes and subthemes and all team members were involved in the confirmation of final themes (credibility). Further to this, an audit trail was maintained that traces the thinking processes and decisions made during the conduct of the study (dependability and confirmability) (Shenton, 2004).

3.6 | Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from the four tertiary institutions prior to any data being collected (H10338; H17192; 2016/206; RP140-2016). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. All information collected was treated confidentially. Names reported in this manuscript are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

4 | FINDINGS

A total of 50 first-year nursing students from four tertiary institutions consented to take part in face-to-face or telephone semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences of undertaking paid work while studying. Of these, 43 (86%) participants were women and 7 (14%) were men, with ages ranging from 17–61 years. Thirty-seven (74%) participants were born in Australasia. Participants spent an average of 19 hr in paid work each week. Two main themes and accompanying subthemes emerged from inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes and subthemes are outlined, and further supporting quotes are presented in Table 2.

5 | THEME 1: MOTIVATION BEHIND COMBINING WORK AND STUDY

The overarching motivation for first-year nursing students to combine paid work and study, not unexpectedly, related to “making ends meet”. One student summed it up for many: “in order to survive and have a life, I have to work”. For some, engaging in paid work assisted in supporting other family members, including spouses and partners, parents, children and “family back home”. All in all, being able to secure an income, regardless of the amount, gave many “a bit of a sense of independence”. While financial reasons were the dominant motivational factor, there was an underlying sense that engaging in paid work while studying also provided many with the opportunity to enjoy social and health benefits; stimulating their minds with new learning or just “to keep busy”.

5.1 | Subtheme 1: Financial security

Financial reasons were the main driver for working and included being able to support themselves and other family members. Income was required to pay for rent or mortgage, food, petrol, bills, tuition fees, books and other living and travel expenses. For those who did engage in paid nursing work, the experience and new knowledge gained were an added bonus, which they considered “invaluable”. Zelda (20 h/week) who worked in nursing explained: “I felt like I needed to continue with my learning and keeping fresh...It also helps that it's paid work and that goes towards the mortgage”:

Well, not to be political but living in [large urban city] is quite expensive and it's not so much working for the sake of earning money, it's more so working, just to survive. Keep your head above water, paying for transport, food. I have a car, so it pays for my car, and also, help my parents. Things are quite costly, financially living here in [large urban city], so yeah. Not so much just that, also getting that valuable experience

I think is crucial when studying a nursing degree and yeah, I quite enjoy it. No complaints.

(Matthew, 20 h/week)

The engagement in paid work for many emanated from a need to be financially independent and to “develop a sense of responsibility” which was strong regardless of whether participants were single, living at home or had families or dependents to support:

I kind of like to have some independence myself. I still live at home with my parents and I'm 21 so I kind of want to be able to earn my own money and not rely on them. So I feel like being able to balance studying and work is important for anyone around my age.

(Ximena, 15 h/week)

The extra money also allowed for some personal indulgences outside work and study: “I feel like it just gives me more ability to go out and do things” (Ximena, 15 h/week):

I guess it's the money I'm able to do more things. I'm not restricted. I do get to have a social life because I do have the money. So I do get to actually have some time to myself and see friends and everything. That's outside of work and study.

(Olivia, 12 h/week)

5.2 | Subtheme 2: Me time

Many participants explained that being able to work and having the financial security that paid work provided enabled them to have what they called “me time”; an opportunity to enjoy the social benefits of working. It reduced financial pressure, provided a sense of “freedom”, “a bit of an escape” and a distraction from their nursing studies or home responsibilities that had social benefits, all important for good mental health:

I think because I enjoy what I do work-wise, it's almost like a bit of an escape, I don't know, a therapy. I get to yell at children and get paid for it [tennis coach], so it's pretty good. [laughs]

(Wendy, 20h/week)

The space for “me time” that working provided was seen to have significant mental health benefits. It provided an opportunity to keep mentally active and provided distraction from the pressures of study:

...it takes my mind off like my stress. So - you know I might be going to work and like have like an assignment to do when I get home but when I'm at work I'm at work. I can sort of block out what I've got to do. Do you know what I mean?

(Veronica, 15 h/week)

TABLE 2 Themes and accompanying subthemes

Themes/ subthemes	Supporting quote(s)
Motivation behind combining work and study	
Financial security	<p>...probably like most people - um - I have a mortgage. I have two children at private school. And day-to-day running. It enables me to not have to dip into savings previously earned. So that's the major reason. (Sonia, 18 h/week)</p> <p>...I have a family and I've got a house, I'm renting at the moment so I need to be financial so I can put food on the table and pay bills and that sort of stuff. It would be easier to move home with mum and dad but we sort of want to have our independence. (Ethan, 36 h/week)</p> <p>I like to be independent. I still live at home but I pay for all my stuff. (Ursula, 12 h/week)</p>
Me time	<p>I see like when I go to work I kind of see as an escape route from study. Cos I like the people that I am working with, I enjoy talking and interacting with people so I just see it as more of a social thing, relaxing but still working... (Liana, 35 h/week)</p> <p>it's just keeping me busy and knowing that with me being busy it's a good thing because at times when I'm bored I get very - a bit sad...that's something I don't want to go through and so if I just keep myself busy... (Pamela, 16 h/week)</p>
Juggling many balls	
The benefits of juggling	<p>...the Registered Nurses still share a bit of their knowledge - of their practice so that way we kind of understand ... - why they give this medication, why they change the wounds and yeah. (Pamela, 16 h/week)</p> <p>If you think about skills like dealing with people, which is a big one, you have to have the ability to build a rapport with someone as well. That's definitely a skill that you could say, yes to, because it's not necessarily built into you to do that. So when you speak about customer service and that sort of thing and managing people ... That's another part that you do have to do... (Zara, 16 h/week)</p> <p>In a way, because I work in a hospitality job and I've always thought that nursing and hospitality are ... well they're obviously very different but there's a lot of similarities, you're on your feet a lot you interact with people a lot. It's one of the reasons I looked into nursing ... (Noah, 15 h/week)</p>
Keeping the balls in the air	<p>I mean it's taught me that I have to manage my time and that I can't just leave things to the last day (Isabella, 22 h/week)</p> <p>I think if I maintain a good routine throughout the three years, then it's going to really benefit me in the future. I mean all my assessments have always been handed in on time, the week before even because it's making sure that everything's done, all the criteria's right. I think it's a lot about balance. That's the same in the workplace. You've got to balance your work life with your social life. (Cindy, 22 h/week)</p> <p>...so working and studying is very hard, it's not easy and I don't work many hours. But I definitely think you can do it, you just have to make the time to go to the things that you want to do, so working has to be a priority two, study, priority one, to pass. But it's doable. (Yasmine, 24 h/week)</p> <p>Yeah definitely prioritise obviously study, over work, over money, regardless yeah (Killarney, 26 h/week)</p> <p>...well I did choose part time study primarily, because I wanted my studies to be my main priority, usually I just work two days a week and I can fit heaps of study in around that so I can mainly focus on that (Jenny, 12 h/week)</p>
Dropping balls	<p>I was really stressed - I was having like chest pains from the stress because I was doing up to 35 h while trying to study and was just not coping (Grace, 20 h/week)</p> <p>It stresses me out. I get anxious about having to juggle the two... I would love to solely focus on my study, because that's where I want to - that's where I'm headed, so... (Penny, 40 h/week)</p>

6 | THEME 2: JUGGLING MANY BALLS

It was very apparent that these nursing students were metaphorically “juggling” many different and sometimes competing balls in the air simultaneously and trying to strike the right balance. While participants suggested juggling had its rewards and they “liked being busy”, they also acknowledged that “it's

not really an easy balance to strike”. For some, it was easier to manage work and study, particularly those who found working “under pressure” helped them to prioritise and organise tasks and responsibilities:

I'm good at prioritising... I'm good with that. I'm better under pressure...So I feel like it'll be easier for me than

other people I'd say to study with all of that going on at the same time.

(Ursula, 12 h/week)

6.1 | Subtheme 1: The benefits of juggling

Others described it as "a very fine juggle", often three balls or more in the air at the same time (work, study, family, other). However, many found work to be "very rewarding", in terms of building self-esteem, confidence and learning practical skills from others while providing a sense of achievement:

... essentially it has made me more confident and believe that I didn't actually have any confidence, I didn't like talking to people didn't want to... I can do things I never thought I could do...

(Liana, 35 h/week)

For instance, one participant described how she cared for her children, studied nursing during the day and worked night shifts at a nursing home. Zelda exclaimed: "I have no spare time...but I feel like I'm benefiting from the situation". (Zelda, 20 h/week):

Working was also seen to be valuable in the development of a repertoire of skills that could be transferred to nursing work and this included communication, team work, interpersonal, leadership and management skills:

I've got a lot of roles that I do ... I am in charge of ... you don't realise actually how much it benefits you in other life circumstances as well. It's not only the communication, but the leadership, the teamwork, especially working with a big team on our busy periods. I know a lot of nursing is very team based approaches as well ...

(Cindy, 22 h/week)

The majority of participants described how they employed different personal strategies to try and keep all the "balls in the air". These mainly included time management and getting into a routine however they admitted that while juggling had its obvious benefits, it was a difficult task "keeping all the balls in the air" and sometimes "balls were being dropped":

It's definitely hard to juggle, which is why I have to be so on the ball with my schedule...

(Caitlin, 14 h/week)

6.2 | Subtheme 2: Keeping the balls in the air

Personal strategies participants employed to "keep the balls in the air" included time management and getting into a routine but to always prioritise studies. Time management was an important skill

that participants learnt to do well as a result of having to juggle work and study around other commitments. Regardless of whether participants worked in a nursing or non-nursing field, time management was an important skill that they could see transferred to future clinical nursing practice:

...time management would be a big thing, because in nursing they always emphasise time management and in this job I have just learnt how to do things my way and part of that is to have a list of things which say, have that done by 4 o'clock, have this done by... I just, I kind of always do it, not just at work I always did it before at home as well and kind of just took that into work and going into nursing I think that will kind of help me out a lot.

(Noah, 15 h/week)

Many identified that "it's been tough" with some needing "a timetable to stick to" to maintain a sense of organisation, with tertiary studies and assignments being prioritised over work commitments and if need be further negotiation with employers around rosters:

At the moment, it's hectic. It's crazy. But I fit all of my classes in to Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, so I've got those three days set. I spoke to my work - because I'm on a casual roster, I can say yes or no to things...My daughter goes to preschool when I'm at uni. Then I can go home, if I'm not working, and study and find time before I pick her up. When I'm working she goes to her dad's. At the moment, it's very scheduled and busy and it's crazy. I have a massive plan that's got everything written into the hour... But it's working so far...

(Winnie, 20 h/week)

Developing time management skills meant that many of the participants settled into a routine after a few weeks of study, making adjustments as needed along the way to maintain that balance. In general, study took priority over work commitments; "wake up really early... to do my study before I have work" (Yasmine, 24 h/week):

...essentially I work two days a week, I'm in uni two days a week, so that left me with three full days off, because I do 3 units, my idea was each day I work on all the stuff for one unit and you know if I'm working, in the morning I'll get a couple of hours study in and after uni I'll get a couple of hours study in, I kind of just work around it, if I get a day off I dedicate it all to study, I kind of just got into a routine after a few weeks, I kind of got the hang of it, although like when it came time that the assessments were due I kind of had to get myself up early, force myself to do more study that kind of thing, so I kind of just juggle around with it.

(Noah, 15 h/week)

I've been working full time juggling children and full time work in [name of workplace] for a very long time. And as a planner you become quite militant in your – in how things go together. My kids call it OCD... and being older you can prioritise study.

(Sonia, 18 h/week)

What was evident was that the majority of participants demonstrated a steadfast tenacity and resilience to succeed, prioritising education. Their advice to others juggling paid work, study and other commitments was to find a balance but try and focus on study. While there was a need to engage in paid work, many tried to prioritise their nursing studies and had determined a set amount of time (as a minimum) for study each week. They provided advice to others that if grades are suffering, then a decision to cut back work hours may need to be considered:

...well I always put university first. So if - um - there is something that I'm struggling with time wise or I do need extra time then work understands that I can't come... but I try stick to at least my minimum 12 hours a week and I know that I'm capable of doing that and getting my work done at the same time...if you find that you're working too much and you're - you're stressed out about it then you need to cut back your hours. It's not worth working, getting the money but letting your grades suffer.

(Raelyn, 23 h/week)

6.3 | Subtheme 3: Dropping balls

Despite the best intentions by participants to manage their time well and get themselves into a routine with juggling their work, study and other commitments, some conceded that it was a struggle to maintain the balance and sometimes they “dropped balls” and had to learn what works and does not work well. Mandatory attendance for some classes made it difficult for some to organise paid work around study: “it's very tight... getting everything together” (Verity, 15 h/week). Needing financial security created competing priorities as illustrated by the following:

So this is what I'm using as finding my rhythm and finding what works and what doesn't. Agreeing to 140 hours when you have assessments due, next year I probably won't... But I thought while I've got the chance, 140 hours is a lot of money to pass up when you need it.

(Winnie, 20 h/week)

While some students thrived on the pressure, it seemed that for others there were definite negative outcomes, which affected home life, their relationships and health. For some, the toll of trying to “keep all balls in the air” meant that family relationships were

starting to feel the strain under the pressure of trying to get assessments in on time and doing well academically. In turn their physical health was suffering:

Yeah, I do, I have a lot of screaming matches with the wife sometimes, because they want more but you sit down to study and they say can you just do this ... and you are like, you are shitting me right ... you are trying to get in the zone and study right ...I will go right, that's it, this is what I'm doing, go away, come and see me in two or three hours and then we can talk. That is pretty much my coping strategy ... [because]... I learnt my lesson that I will never ever let it get to the point when you are writing and editing on the last day...

(Ethan, 36 h/week)

7 | DISCUSSION

While previous international research has demonstrated the detrimental effect of excessive working on students' academic performance (Reyes et al., 2012; Rochford et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2012), few studies have sought to understand nursing students' motivation for and experiences of engaging in paid work while studying. Our findings illuminate how first-year nursing students try to negotiate a balance between working, studying and living. The metaphor “juggling many balls” is used to represent how students manage the demands placed upon them and the strategies they develop in their efforts to successfully complete their studies.

Consistent with previous studies, the overarching motivation for nursing students combining work and study was financial necessity (Devlin et al., 2008; Reyes et al., 2012; Salamonson et al., 2012). Owen et al. (2017) suggest that students work and study to provide funds to purchase textbooks and other necessities, thereby alleviating some financial stress. Our findings concur that students worked to “survive” and meet basic everyday expenses such as rent, food, bills, travel expenses, as well as fund their studies including tuition fees, books and other incidental costs.

However, our findings also indicated that the relationship between working and studying was complex and varied across individual students, regardless of the nursing programme or tertiary organisation. While alleviating financial problems was a key motivation for working, participants described other impetuses including the benefits of working to prepare for graduate nursing practice. Nursing students predominantly sought work in health- or service-related settings, which they perceived provided opportunities for skill development relevant to graduate nursing practice (Phillips, Kenny, Smith, & Esterman, 2012; Rochford et al., 2009). Many participants perceived the workplace as an enabler to the development of skills relevant to their current studies and future employment. These transferable skills included time management, the ability to work well in a team and enhanced communication and interpersonal skills.

Furthermore, for some participants, paid work was associated with potential social and psychological health benefits. Many students in our study conceptualised work as a form of “therapy”, “an escape” and “me time” and many enjoyed the social aspects of working with colleagues. Work was described as a necessary distraction from everyday challenges and stresses, with the successful balancing of multiple demands enhancing students’ sense of achievement, self-esteem and confidence. While we cannot speculate from our findings, why some participants described working while studying as a positive influence on well-being, this issue has previously been explored. Ryan (2011) suggests that the consequences for students of combining paid work with study are largely dependent on job characteristics of employment and the negotiations that students make when juggling the competing demands of work, study and family.

Indeed, research by others (Creed et al., 2015; Owen et al., 2017) indicates that working and studying are not necessarily negative for all students, as aspects of the working environment can either conflict with or facilitate students’ health and engagement with their studies. Creed et al. (2015) explored the relationship between working while studying, student well-being and academic engagement among 185 university students and reported that positive outcomes increase when paid work relates to students’ course of study and when paid work is seen as rewarding and status enhancing. The perception of work as rewarding and a place for the development of abilities relevant to students’ studies was associated with enhanced student well-being and a greater determination to complete their studies. The implication is that students’ perceptions of paid work and the level of support available can influence students’ well-being and academic engagement.

While many participants highlighted the positive benefit of working while studying including improved well-being and skill development, others suggested that the constant toll of managing competing demands and trying to “keep all balls in the air” eventually caused personal relationship problems. The stress of trying to do well in assessment tasks was particularly acute and some participants described how this compromised their physical and mental well-being with consequences for their work and study. These tensions were exacerbated by mandatory inflexible tertiary attendance requirements, common in nurse education.

Despite these challenges, a key finding to emerge from our study is the range of personal strategies and resources students developed as they negotiated a successful balance between working and studying. Many participants made efforts to prioritise their nursing studies and had determined a set amount of time (as a minimum) for study each week. In common with Goodall and Keyworth (2016), participants described ways in which they effectively managed their time, structuring their week to create protected time and spaces for study. The importance of establishing a routine while at the same time remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances was also highlighted. Participants described ways in which they cut back work hours if they determined their grades were suffering. Many participants demonstrated tenacity and resilience, as they

steadfastly remained committed to successfully completing their nursing degree.

Despite the large sample size of this qualitative study across four tertiary institutions in Australasia, students self-selected for interview and the participant numbers varied across the institutions. Furthermore, the skills and training of interviewers across these four settings varied. Although all team members used the same semi-structured interview schedule as a guide, progressive review and audit trail of the interviewing process were not undertaken to ensure each interview was conducted in a similar manner, using the same level of probing of participants on each of the questions. Finally, it should also be noted that the participants were first-year nursing students and their experiences may differ from those in later years.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our findings suggest that paid work is a reality for many nursing students with both positive and negative implications for their studies. While working excessively is associated with lower engagement and poor academic performance, our study reveals a complex picture of motivations and experiences. Working while studying can increase students’ sense of financial independence from family and can improve self-esteem and create a sense of achievement.

9 | RELEVANCE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE

Paid work necessitates students to juggle competing demands and to do this successfully requires students to be well organised, to learn to prioritise and to look for ways to provide a balance between work and study, all useful skills for the beginning registered nurse. These findings have implications for nurse education. A key challenge is the development of programmes and support mechanisms that acknowledge students’ engagement in paid work and effectively support, retain and engage students as they strive for successful completion of their studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the participants for their generous time to contribute to this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

How to cite this article: Christiansen A, Salamonson Y, Crawford R, et al. "Juggling many balls": Working and studying among first-year nursing students. *J Clin Nurs*. 2019;00:1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.14999>