

Working while studying: how can I get my social life back?

University is supposed to be the time of your life, but at 20 years old I had forgotten what it was like to have a decent night out

Everyone thinks students spend their time partying and getting drunk. Not me: last semester, I spent every weekend stacking shelves.

It wasn't really by choice. I was working weekend shifts in a supermarket to make ends meet. Before uni, I'd spent my A-levels trying to study in between shifts, at the same time as dealing with the distractions of being 18 and discovering alcohol.

Week after week, I was in the aisles, knowing my friends were out in bars or clubs while I was cleaning and closing up the shop. The lowest point was my best friend's birthday: I'd spent a week trying to find cover for my Friday night shift (I was unsuccessful), and by the time I got out of work and into town I couldn't find them. Just try phoning your friends to meet up after they've had a few – it's impossible.

I thought it would get easier when I left school. But after starting as a journalism student last September, I found I was balancing even more commitments. My only time to do assignments was during the week, after a long day at college. I'd studied hard to get on to the course, and worked hard to keep my job. My main source of social interaction was the elderly regulars coming in to get their milk and bread.

Figures show I wasn't the only one. A 2015 survey by NUS Services on behalf of Endsleigh found that 77% of students work to fund their studies, with 63% having a part-time job and a third working during the term. It also found that 14% of students held a full-time job during term, holidays or both. It's a vicious cycle: student debt is piling up, yet many students aren't attending classes because they have to work just to get by at university.

I started to worry that my job was affecting my personal life – never mind my studies – and even my mental health.

Systemic psychotherapist Prof Gerry Cunningham of Ulster University points out that working inevitably puts extra pressure on students. "People extend themselves – they pick up a full-time course, try to aim for a good grade, meet deadlines, seek employment, maybe even start a family. They work to their limit," he says.

"Zero-hour contracts can be difficult for a student as they have less time to plan around. One night, they plan to sit for three hours doing an assignment but they get a call from work asking them to come in. Then, when the pressure of a course increases, it does get difficult for a student to balance things out."

So how can students balance these pressures – and get a bit of their social life back?

"Get to know yourself," Cunningham suggests. "Know what you can manage, know your situation and what you can take on. When you are experiencing high levels of stress, alert someone. The earlier, the better."

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I had to make a decision: study, work or play? I wasn't able to do all three.

I took the difficult decision to quit my job. Not everyone has this option, which makes me relatively lucky. But my lack of income means it still isn't easy. I have to be more careful than ever with what I spend without my wages to fall back on. That said, I'm definitely happier now – and I think it's because I'm less stressed.

I don't have to worry about getting to work on time and I no longer have to panic over whether I'll finish my assignments. My weekends are my own: I can socialise on the cheap, look for work experience, or just be lazy and stay in watching Friends.

But for some students, this simply isn't an option. Michaela McCallion, who studies computer science and has a part-time job in a restaurant, says: "I just try to manage my time. I aim to get most of my university work done throughout the week and between shifts at work so I can have at least two days to socialise – although there are a lot of late nights due to assignment work and my job.

"My advice would be to not forget to take a break from both studying and working. You cannot focus on anything if you too are stressed out. Leave the room to relax, chat with friends, or even take a whole day off."

The realities of student life have changed over recent years. Your time at university is meant to be the best of your life, we're often told, and I'm doing my best to keep it that way. But financial pressures mean it's far from carefree.

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