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Students as Non-Standard Employees. Exploring Work Related Issues in Students' Perceptions on their Term-time Job**

The article presents the results of an explorative study that aimed at exploring work related issues in students' perceptions of their job as atypical employees. An individual picture of the experienced work reality of students is drawn according to work task, flexible working hours, instructions and training opportunities, students' relations to other employees, and social integration. By adopting a qualitative design, I was able to emphasize the subjective perspective of students describing their very own experiences as flexible workers. The study revealed various perceptions of students working as flexible employees and related this picture to current empirical and theoretical research in the field of non-standard employment.

Key words: **Term-time employment, students' work experiences, non-standard employment, flexible employment**

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Introduction

A while ago I had an informal conversation with one of my students who worked at the cash register in a large supermarket. During our chat he referred to his various experiences as student-employee working in a part-time arrangement. His perceptions of the job centred on typical HRM-issues related to flexible employment, like for example the low-end work task, missing training opportunities, or problems concerning social integration. In contrast, he was not simply stressing payment and flexibility issues or complaining about difficulties to balance work and academic life. Instead, he yet presented a subjective interpretation of his work experiences, touching various work related issues. The emerging individual picture differs from both previous studies on the rather negative experiences students make as employees (e.g., Tannock/Flocks 2003) and commonly held assumptions about workers on flexible employment contracts, portrayed as marginal and disadvantaged employees (e.g., Guest 2004a).

The working conditions of students in term-time employment and their perceptions of their employment as part-timers or temporaries have been widely disregarded by previous studies. As a consequence, the aim of the article is to present students work experiences as atypical workers. It is based on the results of an explorative study on term-time employment of students enrolled at Chemnitz University of Technology (CUT), a regional university located in the south-east of Germany. The study focused on students' perceptions of HRM-aspects typically raised in research on non-standard employment, such as work task, training opportunities, students' relations to the supervisor and co-workers, and social integration. Atypical workers are commonly ascribed to experience various disadvantages concerning these aspects, like poor payment, a low-skilled job, or problems of social exclusion. The present study, however, was interested in the subjective view of students working as part-time or temporary employees during the term. Hence, their individual experiences and interpretations of their work reality are explored in order to elaborate on the specific characteristics of this group of flexible employees and to address their very perspective of the flexible employment they are engaged in.

The paper proceeds as follows. A brief outline of the reason and nature of students' term-time employment constitutes the starting point of this article. In the following term-time employment is defined in terms of non-standard employment pointing out that students are generally employed in atypical employment relations. Referring to previous studies on students' work experiences it can be concluded that they often face the various disadvantages of flexible labour. Subsequently, the methodology of the study is presented in detail, by addressing the qualitative research design. Describing the sample and data collection methods together with explaining the approach adopted to analyse the interviews provides the background which is necessary for understanding the results of the qualitative study. The following main part of the article presents the results of the interview analysis. Here, the basic aspects associated with non-standard employment are addressed and the specific perceptions of the students are presented. In the final paragraph the findings of the study are summarized and discussed. The main results are recapitulated followed by an empirical and theoretical discussion. Afterwards the qualitative validity of the study is elaborated and some conclusions for further research on atypical employment are drawn.

Term-time employment as non-standard employment

Literature regarding the nature and pattern of students' term-time employment reveals that students tend to work in the services sector (Broadbridge/Swanson 2006). Regarding Germany, statistics for the period from 1995 to 1999 indicate that 8% were employed in retailing, 9% in services for firms, 11% in health and social services, 15% in education and teaching and, 57% in other branches (Voss-Dahm 2002). Increasing demand of flexible labour in the service sectors makes it interesting for students' employment, mainly in retailing, catering, tourism and other consumer service industries (Krahn/Lowe, 1999). Regarding the latest statistics (Isserstedt et al. 2007), in Germany working during the term is perceived as a natural part of student life nowadays and for me as an academic it is by no means unusual to meet my students at the cash-register in the supermarket or at the counter in a fast food restaurant. To earn money students seek for flexible employment as such an employment enables them to balance work as well as their academic and private life.

Employers nowadays have capitalised on students' need for flexible work (Broadbridge/Swanson 2006). Students constitute a preferred workforce as they bring particular attributes to the job, such as intelligence, personality, communication skills, as well as flexibility (Lucas/Ralston 1997). The majority of student employment, however, is considered unskilled work with almost no connection to the students' field of study (Ford/Bosworth 1995). They usually are employed in low-wage jobs (Tannock/Flocks 2003) working as part-timer or temporary, what reflects the general trend that part-time work is particularly concentrated in the lower paid areas of employment (Corral/Isusi 2003).

Two studies focus on students' experiences at work and hence provide an insight into the realities as non-standard employees. Lucas and Ralston (1997) in their UK study on youth, gender, and part-time employment address issues of satisfaction and dissatisfaction perceived by students in their job. Only a few students cited financial reasons as motivation aspect. Rather, most satisfaction in their term-time job is derived from so called broader social issues. So, factors like meeting people, experiencing people as friendly, becoming integrated in the team, as well as working in a relaxed working climate are considered to contribute to students' satisfaction. Dissatisfaction results from poor working conditions, such as long working hours, no breaks, an early start of work or unsocial working hours. Beyond, monotone work, a negative management attitude and low payment cause dissatisfaction as well.

Tannock and Flocks (2003) in their study of the working lives of young students in an US urban community college present a rather negative picture of students' paid employment. According to their observations, student workers (often temporaries) are frequently treated as being a replaceable workforce by employers. Employers tend to commit and invest only little in their student workers, whom they see as being basically unskilled, non-essential, and easy to replace. Students complain about the fundamental lack of respect they are shown at work. Moreover, they feel as set apart from the permanent employees, in terms of differences in payment, benefits, work status, or working conditions. As employers often post schedules a couple of days ahead of time and reserve the right to make last minute changes, students find it difficult to organise

the rest of their lives around the work. Students do yet identify themselves as students and not as low-end service sector workers and, thus, tolerate many disadvantages of low-wage work.

The results of both studies, especially the Tannock and Flocks' research, almost perfectly reproduce the disadvantages often ascribed to non-standard employees, in particular part-timers and temporaries. The picture of the flexible worker drawn by numerous studies proposes a lack of training opportunities (e.g. Martin/Nienhüser 2002; Corral/Isusi 2003), low payment (e.g. Nienhüser/Baumhus 2002) and less access to supplementary payments (e.g. Corral/Isusi 2003), low trust and respect (e.g. Brewster et al. 1994; Nienhüser/Baumhus 2002), social exclusion (e.g. Sparrow 2001, Wächter 2002, Dörre 2005), and no opportunities of non-standard employees to influence working conditions or to participate (e.g. Becker/Jörges-Süß 2002; Kalleberg 2003).

Tannock and Flocks yet also highlight an important point, i.e. the perception of students as students but not as non-standard employees. This finding refers to an aspect research on flexible employment relations only recently began to fully incorporate, in particular with reference to the psychological contract of the non-standard employee (e.g. McLean Parks et al. 1998; Marler et al. 2002; Guest 2004a; Wilkens 2004). In short, the subjective perspective of non-standard employees plays the decisive part in terms of evaluating perceived advantages and disadvantages. Atypical employees must not be regarded as homogeneous group in this respect. For example, whether a part-time employee perceives the lack of participating in decision processes as a negative outcome of the employment or not depends on his/her subjective interpretation influenced by various aspects.

Summarising, term-time employment can be considered as being flexible employment. When students take paid work they normally end up as part-time or temporary employee doing unskilled, sometimes poorly paid work and according to existing research on term-time employment, facing the characteristic disadvantages of atypical employees. Hence, previous studies draw a picture of the student as a typical non-standard employee, which is according to Guest (2004a) portrayed as marginal and disadvantaged. Furthermore, term-time employment sometimes takes on the form of precarious employment, as initially defined by Dörre et al. (2004). Students have to use several sources to ensure an adequate amount of financial income in order to cover all expenditures incurred whilst at university. Additionally, as part-time and temporary employees they face less social security benefits than their full-time counterparts.

However, relating term-time employment to non-standard employment and portraying students as atypical employees also has clarified the fact that students have to be considered as specific group of non-standard employees. Taking into account both previous studies on students' perception of their term-time work and latest developments in research on non-standard employment the question arises of how students experience their work reality as atypical employee. How do they perceive the often poor work task? In what way do they experience the relation to other employees, like their direct supervisor or full-time staff? Are they generally unsatisfied understanding the job as burden one has to bear in order to finance student life? These questions

and, hence, the individual perspective of students' work experiences will be explored in the empirical study.

The study

Sample outline

Instead of selecting students by explicit criteria, such as age, course of study, or number of terms studied, the opportunity to gain access to interview partners was emphasised using existing contacts with students and placing announcements in newsgroups. During the study the sample was constantly enlarged. Hereby, I set value on the fact that additional students should enrich the existing sample in terms of nature of job, duration of employment and company. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Eleven of the students worked in commercial enterprises (e.g. supermarket, food-discount shop, fashion shop), followed by restaurants (four students), industrial enterprises (four students) and theatre or cinema (two students). The remaining six students were employed in various service companies operating as call centre, real estate company, or market research company. Most of the students had to fulfil simple and unskilled tasks, like cashing, working as waiter/waitress, or refilling shelves in a supermarket. This was not the case with all of them, though. In contrast, some of the students had more ambitious work tasks, like private tutoring for students or internet researches. The students interviewed held their current job between one and 72 months. Here, students that held their job for a longer period were able to present a more detailed picture of their work experiences and were able to specify processes of change that developed over time regarding for example their relations to full-time employees. The differences in the sample are considered in the analysis as they are influencing the results. For example, students' perceptions regarding the relation to the direct supervisor or to other employees are only relevant with students that work in a team. Additionally, perceptions of the low-end work task are only analysed with students actually having such jobs.

Data Collection

The main instrument of the survey was the problem-focused, semi-structured interview. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) such interviews are useful for obtaining chains of arguments about thoughts, behaviour, perceptions, meanings, attitudes, expectations, and other aspects of human consciousness. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for question adjustments during the interview, depending on the particular situation (Chirban 1996). Relevant statements made by the interviewees are directly addressed in detail. The interview guideline served as a clue for relevant problems and aspects, to be focused on.

During the interview I raised a set of issues related to students' employment as atypical workers in order to stimulate and guide their descriptions. Particularly, the interviews centred on issues of the motivation for the particular job, application, training opportunities, payment and financial rewards, social events organized by the company, relations to other employees, such as other part-timers or temporaries, full-time staff and supervisors, as well as general positive and negative experiences perceived at work. For example, the students were asked to describe their relation to the direct supervisor.

Table 1: Sample overview

No.	Gender	Company	Job title	Duration of employment	Tasks
1	male	Supermarket	Cashier	12 months	Cashing, cleaning the cash desk, filling in shelves at the cash desk
2	male	Second hand shop (Computer games)	Sales assistant	6 months	Selling, purchasing, cashing, customer service
3	male	Do it yourself shop	Stock assistant	24 months	Filling in shelves, rebuilding store facilities
4	male	Supermarket	Trolley collector	1 month	Collecting shopping trolleys a the parking lot
5	female	Market research company	Interview coder	18 months	Analysing of market research-interviews
6	female	IT and telecommunication company	Call centre agent	6 months	Taking customer calls, advising customers what to do with broken cell phones
7	male	Supermarket	Shop assistant	12 months	Filling in shelves, customer service, selling
8	male	Theatre	Employee	15 months	Checking tickets, cloakroom attendance, assigning places
9	male	Cinema	Employee at the entrance desk	9 months	Selling tickets and snacks, cleaning
10	female	Natural Gas Maintenance	Office employee	21 months	Handling documents for preparing funnels for gas pipes
11	male	Manufacturer of plastic parts	Machine operator	30 months	Operating machines for manufacturing plastic parts
12	male	IT and telecommunication company	Employees at warehouse logistics	36 months	Commissioning
13	female	Automotive supplier	Assistant in logistics department	12 months	Stock taking, calculating transport costs
14	female	Supermarket	Cashier	60 months	Cashing, cleaning the cash desk, filling in shelves at the cash desk
15	female	Company offering private lessons for pupils	Lecturer	60 months	Providing private lessons, assisting with home work
16	male	Real estate office	Back-office assistant	28 months	Making internet inquiries, statistical analysis
17	female	Supermarket	Cashier	8 months	Cashing
18	female	Fashion shop	Shop assistant	12 months	Selling, customer service, dealing with customer complaints, decorating showcase
19	female	Restaurant	Waitress	72 months	Serving customers, cleaning, doing the bar
20	female	Fashion and jewellery shop	Shop assistant	38 months	Selling, customer service, filling in shelves
21	female	Fast food restaurant	Waitress	6 months	Working at the desk, cleaning
22	female	Restaurant	Waitress	20 months	Serving customers
23	male	Fast food restaurant	Sandwich artist	15 months	Preparing and selling sandwiches, cleaning
24	female	Food discounter	Cashier	43 months	Cashing, cleaning
25	female	Mail service company	Service employees	40 months	Analysing undeliverable letters, finding out correct addresses
26	male	Sports outfitter	Shop assistant	60 months	Selling, customer service, filling in shelves

How they address this question, i.e. whether they simply answer "yes" or "no" or engage in elaborations of this relation was not prescribed. In any cases, however, their answers were explored more detailed by the interviewer. The issues raised in the interviews firstly originate from former research on term-time employment (e.g. payment, flexibility, social issues). Previous studies on students' work experiences demonstrated that payment and flexibility are important motivators to take on a particular job. Additionally, broader social issues seem to influence students' satisfaction at work. Secondly, relevant HRM-issues from research on non-standard employment were included as students taking paid employment find themselves in flexible employment relations. In particular I was interested in exploring students' experiences regarding training opportunities, relations to other employees, as well as social integration. Atypical employees are frequently perceived to face disadvantages with these aspects, for example no training provided or social exclusion. Thirdly, at the end of each interview session I asked for general perceptions of positive and negative experiences in order to explore aspects going beyond work related issues addressed earlier in the interview.

The intention of this study was to acquire data on students' subjective perceptions and opinions. Therefore, the interviewees played an active role in the research process, as I further explored their answers in terms of inquiring details, elaborating attitudes, or asking for examples. I continued interviewing until additional interviews produced no new information. That means analysing additional interviews only led to aspects already found in past interviews but did not result in extra findings. Hence, it was concluded that a saturation point for the research question explored in this study had been reached (Eisenhardt 1989; Fendt/Sachs 2008). Overall, 26 students were interviewed with interview sessions lasting up to 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed.

Data analysis

In the first step of data analysis, relevant passages of the text were highlighted. These passages were associated with certain codes or categories (Rubin/Rubin 1995; Kvale 1996). The method of cutting and sorting was used in order to identify relevant themes (Lincoln/Guba 1985); an approach very similar to the procedure of open coding by Strauss and Corbin (1990), as data, i.e. the interview texts, are segmented and classified in order to better understand how students saw the world (Locke 2001). First codes were derived from the interview guide and thus from the researcher's theoretical pre-understanding (Ryan/Bernard 2003). These codes followed the topics spoken about in the interview, for example 'motivation for the job', 'briefing and training issues', or 'relations to the supervisor'. Additionally, codes were created directly out of the texts (Ryan/Bernard 2003), for instance the codes 'flexibility issues' or 'social integration'. Hence, the first step of data analysis resulted in a set of codes and related lines, sentences or paragraphs of the interviews.

The second step concentrated on the codes and the related interview passages, aiming at obtaining a more detailed description of each code. The pool of text passages for each code was crosschecked in order to reconsider whether a text passage was related to the code or not. In the end, not matching passages were either related

to other codes or cancelled. The remaining passages were further analyzed regarding the topics highlighted when students talk about that issue. For example, the text passages related to the code 'flexibility issues' were further analysed according to the issues students bring about related to their perceptions of flexibility in the job, for example planning work schedules and short-term changes or tensions between employer's demands of working times and students' needs.

In the third step concepts and categories were rearranged drawing a more comprehensive picture of relevant issues that arise when students talk about their termtime job. Here, different perceptions regarding each work related issue (or code) were elaborated and related to differences in the sample.

Results

The results of the study are presented in the following paragraphs. I concentrate on students' perceptions of the work task, perceptions of flexibility, perceptions of instruction and training, as well as perceptions of social integration and relations with other employees. Each section starts with outlining the basic ideas of research on non-standard employees regarding the topic. Afterwards the results of this study are presented. Here, the presentation begins with a table highlighting the most relevant aspects, indicating the number of students that have addressed these aspects in the interview, and providing examples from the interview texts. Thereafter the aspects are described in more detail. This approach of presenting the results allows for both, focusing on the variance in the data and, hence, different perceptions as well as supporting the prevalence of the results with various citations from the interviews (Pratt 2008).

Satisfied doing the low-skilled job

Most of the interviewees report that they are employed in low-skilled work. Only six students indicate that they had rather skilled tasks, like for example tutoring students, coding of interviews, or doing internet research. In contrast, 20 students told that they had for example to fill in the shelves in the supermarket, to work at the cash register, to work at the counter of a fast-food restaurant, or to sell tickets and snacks in the cinema. Clearly these tasks do not meet their intellectual capabilities. Here, the students are confronted with the reality of non-standard employees as they usually are employed doing unskilled work (e.g. Nienhüser/Baumhus 2002). Interestingly, only three of them raise the low-skilled task as a negative aspect when evaluating their current job. Instead most of them state that they enjoy doing the work and that they find their job interesting. For example, a student working part time as machine operator described his work as low-end and stupefying but at the same time he reported to have fun at work and to find the job interesting.

There seems to be an apparent discrepancy between being employed in a low-skilled job and having fun doing the work. Turning to the interviews several reasons for this contradiction could be provided. Here, different students provide different accounts (see table 2).

Firstly, several students consider their job as something that contributes to their personal and work experience and enables them to acquire work related knowledge

and abilities. Students often enter the university directly after graduating from secondary school. They usually do not have much work experience as the few internships or trainings during their course of studies are not sufficient to gain a comprehensive insight into today's companies. Hence, term-time employment is perceived as providing students the chance to experience work reality and to learn about actual companies, all aspects interpreted as an advantage by them. Additionally, learning for example how to deal with customers, how to discuss difficult topics with the supervisor, or how to become more independent are aspects contributing to students' positive evaluation of their low-skilled job.

Table 2: Satisfied doing the low-skilled job – perceptions of the work task

Perceptions of the Work Task	Number of students	Interview citations (examples)
The job as contribution to personal and work experience	9	"Simply to do something, to get some practical experience and to see what is happening in the work life…" (interview 21) "What I took along in the past one and a half years, in terms of knowledge of human nature and self-discipline is remarkable" (interview 22)
"Easy to do"-job	7	"At work I have the possibility to get away from all the stress with examinations. I do my job and then go home. And I have not to bear any responsibility." (interview 24) "Well, it is rather easy. Especially in the morning, then I have time to do things for my study… that is no problem." (interview 02)
Experienced job variation	4	"Because there are all sorts of people and … I always tried to joke with them as this is also more interesting for me. And this was always nice." (interview 01) "Well, it is not monotonous, because there is always something else. It is like in every job. You have also bad times, but … actually there is always variety." (interview 03)
Social relations	14	"Everyone knows anybody and there is a real feeling of belonging together or fun that you actually join in the firm." (interview 11) "We like to work as we see ourselves as a family." (interview 22) "And you know everybody there. Everyone knows what the other is doing and it is a good relationship." (interview 23)

Secondly, being employed in an "easy to do"-job for some of the students seems to be more important than a challenging or interesting work task. For example, four students highlight the relation between efforts and benefits as particularly important. For them earning money in a job that is neither physically nor mentally exhausting and, hence, balancing the effort and payment ratio is more relevant than the tasks they have to do. Another three students appreciate their job as a welcomed change to their academic life. They are responsible for organizing their course of study self-dependent, in terms of putting together the university timetable, meeting deadlines for term papers, or registering for exams. Having a term-time job that requires low mental ability and includes a rather limited amount of responsibility for them could mean not to be affected too much by work issues outside their job, for example in terms of thinking about unresolved problems or doing extra work at home.

Thirdly, students usually are not only doing one single (stupid) task but are assigned to a variety of tasks. That means they either have to do several tasks at the same level of ability or responsibility (e.g. as employee in the theatre: to check tickets, to be assigned to the cloakroom, or to assign places) or they are able to adopt more

skilful tasks when working in the company for some time. Students having customer contact (e.g. at the cash register or a shop assistant) additionally raise the point that customer diversity contributes to their positive job interpretation. Each customer is different and for students this circumstance means to have a welcomed change compared to the low-end and repetitive work task.

Fourthly, although presented in the last row of table 2 for more than a half of the students in this sample the experienced social relations seem to be the main reason for having fun at work despite being employed in a low-skilled job. When evaluating the job most of the students are not addressing the work task itself but raise the social climate, the feeling of belonging together, or their good relations to fellow employees as reasons for job satisfaction. This finding supports the earlier study by Lucas and Ralston (1997) who found that most satisfaction derives from broader social aspects (e.g. friendly people, relaxed atmosphere).

Negotiated work schedules

Companies employ non-standard employees to become more flexible what is interpreted to be one of the main factors of success in today's business world (e.g. Allan 2000, Dörre 2005). Atypical employees, like part-timers, temporaries or contingent workers, are employed following the demands of the firm for numerical and financial flexibility. That means the management defines the number of working hours as well as the beginning and end of shifts to a large extent with atypical workers being expected to conform to company's demands.

Turning to the interviews, students raise issues of flexibility when they evaluate their employment. However, in contrast to the demanded flexibility by the firm the students have a different understanding of flexibility. For them flexibility is related to the possibility to define the work schedule according to their needs. That means students understanding of flexibility points to the agreed balance between company needs and their own need to flexibly arrange university life and term-time job. Here, students report various experiences ranging from getting accepted their needs for a flexible work schedule to an imposed schedule by the employer (see table 3).

Table 3: Negotiated work schedules – perceptions of flexibility

Perceptions of Flexibility	Number of students	Interview citations (examples)
Employers consider students' needs for flexibility	11	"We have some kind of a wish list. There we fill in days and times we cannot come to work, shortly before the manager makes the time schedule. The time schedule is planned according to our wishes." (interview 20) "The manager also accepts that there are changes. … We have a list with the telephone numbers of all temporaries in case someone needs to change shift. ... So, we call each other and ask whether anyone could fill in or whether anyone is interested in changing the shift. This is working perfectly." (interview 08)
Employer imposes working schedule to a certain extent or reserves the right to make short-term changes	7	"Well, that sometimes the shop opens until 10 p.m. and one has to be there until nine or ten in the evening. It is not ideal if this is the case on Thursday or Friday." (interview 07) "It is sometime annoying when you have a shift until 8 p.m. on Saturday, because you are not at home before nine." (interview 21)

Firstly, most of the companies arrange work schedules on a weekly or monthly basis. Eleven of the students explicitly highlighted that they had the opportunity to propose individual working times. They are able to suggest their preferred times to the employer in advance. Some of them are also allowed to change shift with fellow student workers. In case the schedule is fixed already but some necessary rearrangements have to be made most employers allow for short-term changes. Students usually appreciate it when employers schedule working hours with regard to students' requirements. As they face the necessity to flexibly arrange academic responsibilities, private life and term-time work, students positively rate the employer's cooperation to take into account their needs when scheduling working hours.

Secondly, in contrast to that employee-friendly behaviour students' needs are sometimes contradicting with the demands of the employer for numerical flexibility. Here two aspects are stressed by some of the interviewees; firstly the need to follow working schedules made by the employer and secondly short-time changes by the employer. Regarding the first point, students are not always successful in arranging their working times but rather have to accept working schedules set by the employer. This is particularly the case with working in the supermarket or other retail shops as well as restaurants. Here the nature of the business requires employees to work in the evening or on weekends. Regarding the second point, i.e. short-time changes made by the employer, unscheduled overtime usually occurs in connection with unexpected work load of the department or the whole company. In these cases students are asked to work longer what is usually done by them. However, as they rely on the appointed schedules unexpected overtime is not appreciated.

Getting instructions but hardly any training

According to the literature on non-standard employment, atypical workers are normally offered fewer training opportunities than full-time employees (e.g. Brewster et al. 1994; Corral/Isusi 2003). This result is traced back to the fact that non-standard employees – in particular part-time and temporary workers – are frequently working in low-skilled jobs where training is not regarded as being necessary. Additionally, they are often treated as second-class staff by the company with training opportunities only provided for full-time employees.

Answering the question whether they got any training opportunities the students differentiated between briefing, defined as getting initial instructions at the beginning of the employment on how to do the job, and training, defined as recurrent activities to enhance knowledge on product or work related processes. The subsequent presentation will follow this distinction (see table 4).

Firstly, approximately half of the students interviewed mentioned that they got some kind of briefing at the beginning of their employment. These initial instructions take on various forms, with two extreme cases provided in table 4. For example, in small local stores the introduction into elementary work tasks is usually done by full-time employees and sometimes the store-manager. Relevant tasks are introduced to the students and instructions are given how to perform the tasks. This kind of orientation phase takes place on a rather informal basis. More formal introductions, which sometimes take on the form of an initial in-house training, could be found with na-

tional or international companies, such as fast-food chains, do-it-yourself-stores, or supermarkets. The most intensive kind of initial instruction in the sample could be found with the local stores of a supermarket-chain. In particular students assigned to work at the cash-point got a four hour computer training, including instructions on product numbers, prices, and terms of guarantee with different products.

Table 4: Getting instructions but hardly any training – perceptions of instruction and training

Perceptions of Instruction and Training	Number of students	Interview citations (examples)
Briefing provided	12	"…I got a bit of an introduction. At the beginning I had some kind of tutor, i.e. someone working there for some time, and this person showed me how to do it and afterwards I had to do it by myself. This was the situation in the first month." (interview 02) "I had to obtain some kind of license for the cash register before I started to work there. This was a four hour computer test followed by a short introductory training in environmental issues – disposal of cardboard and paper… and how to identify false money." (interview 17)
No briefing/ Complains about missing briefing	6/2	"They did not show or explain anything to us. You got it after a while by asking and observing the other employees." (interview 19) "Well, that no break-in training was provided. We just had the opportunity to listen to another call centre agent for some time but than had to deal with calls by ourselves and had to be as self-confident as someone who's got a one week training. I think when people are employed then they also have to be trained." (interview 06)
Regular instructions / training opportunities	7/2	"At the beginning we got a training every four months but now every two months just for recapitulation. In January we got a new devise and there was an introduction on how it operates and what issues should be paid attention to." (interview 23) "You get an introduction from time to time because we run a new system at the moment. I got a two hour introduction but actually this is no training but only some change in the work process." (interview 13)

Secondly, when expressing attitudes towards instruction and training, those students in general appreciate it to get any introduction and are not to be thrown in at the deep end, in particular when the job requires for example technical or other specific knowledge. Those interviewees without any introduction provided by the employer do only seldom complain. They usually cope with this situation by adopting the strategy of learning by doing. That means they for example ask other employees what to do, they learn by observing the behaviour of others, or they acquire relevant knowledge by themselves.

Thirdly, only some of the students got the chance to take part in training, whereas the training activities ranged from the introduction of relevant modifications to regular trainings for shop assistants and periodical knowledge tests. One could argue, however, if knowledge tests and the introduction of relevant modifications could be defined as training activities. Instead, as the student from interview 13 highlights, such actions are more or less instructions due to relevant changes of technical equipment or work processes but hardly could be characterised as training in order to advance abilities and skills of the work force. As a rule, such training was for the most part provided for full-time employees. Yet, again students seem to accept that situation. At

least they rarely raise any negative feelings with not-provided training opportunities. Instead, most of the students who did not get any training did not talk about their view on that.

Feeling integrated and mostly accepted

One hidden cost of non-standard employment outlined by Allen (2000) is the sometimes problematic relation between full-time employees and atypical workers. So, atypical employees may be perceived as a threat to the employment by full-time employees, what might result in hostile behaviour. Beyond, full-timers may become dissatisfied as the use of atypical workers may increase their own workload (see also Horning et al. 1995). Regarding the relation to direct supervisors it is often stated that atypical workers have less opportunities to participate and are sometimes treated less respectful. Accordingly, research on non-standard employment reveals that one of the disadvantages part-time or temporary workers face, is the social exclusion from the so called core staff, consisting of permanent and full-time employees (e.g., Brewster et al. 1994; Corral/Isusi 2003; Byong-Hoon/Frenkel 2004). They often feel as peripheral employees and find it hard to get in close contact with the full-time staff or being integrated in the work team.

Exploring the issues raised when students are asked to talk about their relation to the direct supervisor and other employees as well as their social integration in the work team a more or less positive image could be drawn. Table 5 highlights the results regarding these issues.

Table 5: Feeling integrated and mostly accepted – perceptions of relations with other employees and social integration

Perceptions of Relation to other Employees and Social Integration	Number of students	Interview citations (examples)
Good and respectful relation to the supervisor	21	"The relation is always at best… also with the big boss. Here we are on a first-name basis by now… This is really amicable, we can have fun together." (interview 19) "I get along with him right from the start. He behaves correct towards me; not like a buddy but with a certain distance. The boss is fair and we have a good working atmosphere." (interview 17)
Good relation to full-time employees / Perceiving an informal hierarchy	16 / 2	"Well it is rather loyal, that means on the first name basis and yes … we are on good terms." (interview 09) "Well within one week I got fully integrated in the group and this is the case today. You can talk with the people that works…" (interview 03) "But by now it works. Once they have noticed what you are doing all day being at work and that you show good performance then you get respected." (interview 13) "They worked there for a long time and they knew about the firm and, consequently, they perceived themselves as if they were in a more prestigious position. You have to accept that and if they gave you an advice you better followed it." (interview 01) "As I see it the temporaries are one level below the full-time employees, not according to formal hierarchy but it is more a feeling that temporaries are not equal." (interview 14)

Firstly, most of the students in this study state to get along well with the direct supervisor, although in most cases the relation has developed over time. When expressing negative experiences with supervisors students usually point to individual traits of the supervisor. For example, two students assess their supervisor as being moody although they generally evaluate the relation as rather positive. Yet, they neither raised the issue of being treated disrespectfully by the supervisor, nor did they get the feeling of being a second-class employee, what is sometimes the case in line with other studies on term-time employment. Most of the students have the impression that they are of importance for their supervisor and that this results in corresponding behaviour, i.e. treating students fair and respectfully. Good personal relations yet do not displace the formal supervisor-subordinate structure. However, getting along with the supervisor together with being treated as someone who is needed by the company and whose work is valued significantly contributes to students' positive ratings of their job.

Secondly, like with the direct supervisor students report that they get on with full-time employees. Although there are also some tensions, like this is probably always the case between employees, the students are not experiencing any hostile behaviour from full-time staff. Some of them told that at the beginning full-time employees kept a certain distance but over time the relation became more cooperative and colleague-like and in some cases even amicable. Two of the students highlighted the fact that they perceived a difference between the formal and informal hierarchy. Regarding the relation to full-time employees students are at the same level of the formal hierarchy. So, if for example students work at the cash-point in a supermarket they have the same formal position like their full-time counterparts. Turning to the informal relations, students sometimes feel like being at the low end of the informal hierarchy. Full-time staff in these cases demands some kind of subordination from the students. Here, students are not excluded but treated as group that has to show respect towards full-time employees due it's somewhat lower status.

Summary and discussion

Summarizing the findings

Presenting the results provided evidence for the differences between the common picture of non-standard employees experiencing a lot of disadvantages at work and the perceptions students make when working as part-time or temporary employee during the term. Referring to the picture of the flexible worker drawn by numerous studies we can summarize the specific characteristics of students' perception of their atypical job.

Like other part-time or temporary employees most of the students in the sample are employed in low-skilled jobs. This circumstance, however, is usually not perceived in a negative way or leads to expressing dislikes. Instead, students provide various reasons contributing to their rather positive evaluation of the job. As a consequence, students often see their term-time employment not as a stupid job but as an interesting experience and as something new contributing to their often limited work experiences and as chance for personal development.

Overall, the interviews indicated that the students as flexible employees do not perceive to be fully dependent on the flexibility demands of the company. Although

working hours are scheduled to a large extent by the management, students often are able to negotiate their own schedule that fits within their academic and private life. However, in cases of disagreement students usually follow the demands of the company, probably because the employer is seen as being in a powerful position to enforce his requirements. So, students are more likely to change their study courses as well as to adapt their private life as they rely on the financial income from the employment and they want to reduce the risk of being dismissed.

In line with existing research on non-standard employment also most of the students in this sample reported to get no training. There are of course briefings and introductions with relevant changes but any training activities that contribute to developing sustainable abilities and skills are more likely to be offered to full-time and permanent staff. In contrast to complaints about not-provided break-ins, students seldom raise missing training opportunities as a negative issue. Here, one can speculate whether they – as low-skilled workers – accept getting no training and whether they, as individuals with a certain level of education, for the most part are able to acquire the appropriate knowledge required for fulfilling their work tasks by themselves. To state it differently, students realise that part-timers have fewer changes to get training but due to their intellectual capability they often are able to acquire relevant knowledge by themselves.

Turning to social integration and the work climate, students perceive no significant disadvantages in the relation to other employees. They are treated in a respectful and often fair manner by both direct supervisors and fellow employees. Hence, they do not feel excluded by the company or the work team. Instead, they experience a working atmosphere that they like what results in expressions of having fun at work or of liking the job, an aspect already discussed earlier in this paper. In some cases, however, the vague feeling exists that they are regarded as second-class employees, in particular by the full-time staff.

Empirical discussion

Students working during the term belong to the increasing group of part-time and temporary employees but consciously search for non-standard employment relations and are not interested in being permanently employed in this job. As outlined this circumstance stands in some contrast to other non-standard employees often regarded as being forced to work as atypical workers since this is the only option for them to earn money; for example unemployed persons take on part-time work in order to re-enter regular employment. Additionally, research on non-standard employment sometimes proposes that these employees are interested in being accepted on a permanent and full-time base even if they have to work in a low-skilled job. Related to that non-standard employees are often regarded as being the underdogs in the context of the flexibility efforts in today's companies. Their individual perspective is often neglected, however. Why they enter such employment relationships together with their prospective career options significantly influences the way of how they define themselves as part-timer or temporary. For example, the students in the present study are not interested in being employed in a nine to five job but search for a job that enables them to flexibly arrange work, course of study and private life. Hence, they accept part-time

and temporary jobs associated with low-skilled work as these kinds of employment offer the flexibility they are looking for. Related to that, it could be further argued that students are not interested in taking high-skilled work during the term as this would drain too many resources and hence negatively affect their academic performance. In other words, being unemployed and having to work part-time since full-time employment is not an option, together with seeing no chance to get a permanent job in the future results in interpretations of being different from students working part-time for a fixed period and expecting to get a well paid full-time employment after finishing university. Consequently, the present study emphasises the need for considering the type of worker and why they are on a flexible employment contract. It supports previous studies pointing out that the reality of atypical employment is more complex and that flexible workers are not just to be considered as being less committed, less satisfied, less likely to perform extra-role behaviour (see McLean Parks 1998).

Theoretical discussion

Although this study is not following a particular theory but origins from an empirical question, the results should be related to a theoretical concept commonly applied to the field of flexible work. In order to theoretically frame the impact of flexible employment contracts on employees' attitudes and behaviour research often refers to the concept of the psychological contract. Such a contract is defined as "an individual belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party such as and employer" (Rousseau/Tijoriwala 1998: 679). I will refer to this concept in three ways: firstly, I will highlight proposed changes in the contents of the psychological contracts and describe whether the result of the present study supports current theoretical ideas, secondly, I will position students in a conceptual framework indicating that there are different categories of flexible workers, and thirdly I will focus on the concept of the contract of choice arguing that students in their very special situation are in their contract of choice.

According to Anderson and Schalk (1998) there is general agreement that the psychological contract of the employee has changed in recent years due to the various and deeply rooted changes in the relationship between employers and employees in the past years. In particular, the loss of job security accompanied by increasing demands from employers towards employees to become more flexible, innovative and committed resulted in a change of employees' perceptions of the balance of the reciprocal relation between workers and employers (Anderson/Schalk 1998). As a consequence a shift from more relational psychological contracts, for example featured by continuity, job security, loyalty, career prospects as well as social justice and fairness, to a transactional psychological contract takes place (see also Hiltrop 1995; Wilkens 2004). This type of contracts implies for example a focus on exchange and future employability as well as a more short-term orientation with the individual responsibility to acquire relevant abilities and skills (Anderson/Schalk, 1998). More recently, yet, this proposed general shift is questioned (Guest 2004a). As a person's psychological contract with the employer is influenced by individual (e.g. age, education, tenure, income) and organizational (e.g. HR policy and practises, union recognition, employment relations) aspects (Guest 2004b) it could hardly be assumed that perceived recip-

rocal promises and obligations are not different between individuals and organizational contexts. Additionally, the state of the psychological contract, i.e. the perceived balance between employees' and employer's obligations and promises (Guest/Conway 2002), varies with context factors.

Referring to previous studies on students' term-time employment it could be assumed that they – as part-time and temporary employees – develop a transactional psychological contract towards their employer. That means they should develop a clear exchange oriented attitude with a low level of organisational commitment, low work satisfaction and motivation as well as a tendency to minimize the effort to earn money in order to have more time for their academic and private life. Additionally, it could be expected that students show a kind of behaviour where performance is linked to the provided monetary rewards and the exit-option is used as soon as they are able to get a job that is better paid. The results of the present study, however, disclosed that most of them seem to be satisfied with the job and that they care about the company and their colleagues. Moreover, compared to their often low hourly rate they intend to perform fairly well and they tend to stay within the current job even if there are alternatives for earning more money. So, regarding the shift towards a transactional psychological contract with flexible employment the present study supports actual developments of the concept as it demonstrates that individual believes in mutual obligations between atypical workers and their employer show also elements of relational psychological contracts.

Marler et al. (2002) propose that there are different categories of atypical workers based on their preference for temporary work and their skill/knowledge level. The boundaryless worker has high skills/knowledge and a high preference for temporary work, the transitional worker is characterised by high skills/knowledge but a low preference for temporary work, the traditional worker has low skills/knowledge together with a low preference for temporary work, and the permanent temporary is marked by low skills/knowledge and a high preference for temporary work (Marler et al. 2002). It is important to consider each of these groups as distinctive regarding attitudes and behaviour. When positioning students within this model they could be located close to the permanent temporary. They have a high preference for temporary or flexible employment as this is often the only option for them to balance work, study and private life. Taking into account their lack of practical experience they could also be labelled as having low skills and knowledge regarding the particular work task. This changes over time, however. If students have their term-time job for one or two years they achieve a rather high skill and knowledge level what shifts them more towards the boundaryless worker. Consequently, this study indicates that students fit into the framework of temporary workers provided by Marler at al. (2002). At the same time it contributes to the main idea that flexible workers are not a homogeneous group. It is also shown, yet, that flexible workers over time could be re-located to a different category, for example due to the acquired level of work experience.

According to Guest (2004a) the contract of choice plays an important role when evaluating an employee's perceptions and reactions. In particular, whether or not the employee is in his or her preferred type of employment contract is a key issue influencing reactions to any kind of flexible work. Referring to the results of the present study it could be assumed that students are in their preferred type of

study it could be assumed that students are in their preferred type of employment contract. Flexible employment for students means that they are able to engage in paid work in addition to their academic duties. A full-time contract in their current situation would hardly be an option as this would prevent them to finish their course of study. Additionally, having a low-skilled job for students with a certain level of intellectual capacity mean to have an easy to do job that is not draining to much mental resources. The assumption that students are in their contract of choice is supported by the findings that they are motivated and that tensions at work lead to a certain level of stress with the individual. They do care about their job and are interested in getting accepted and treated in a fair and respectful manner. Hence, if an individual perceives to be employed in his/her contract of choice or not, leads to certain attitudinal and behavioural consequences. This idea supports the general claim that research on non-standard employment should more closely focus on the individual worker and his/her perceptions.

Qualitative validity of the study

Discussing the quality of the present study one could refer to various criteria (e.g. Lincoln/Guba 1985; Miles/Huberman 1994), although there is yet no catalog that received common agreement (Pratt 2008). I decided to use the criteria for qualitative validity provided by Trochim (2006). These criteria appear well elaborated and they are developed in translating the criteria used to assess quantitative studies (Trochim 2006).

According to Trochim's (2006) criteria for qualitative validity, the results of the present study could be examined for their credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility signifies whether the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the participant's perspective (Trochim 2006). In order to gain credibility one should look for feedback by the participants on the results. Since I was not able to get direct feedback the results were discussed with colleagues and various students. They were asked whether they could confirm the findings from their experiences. During these discussions it turned out that the picture drawn in this study mirrors their experiences with students' engaging in term-time employment. Additionally, as an academic working at a German university for ten years now, I am still in close relation to the life worlds of students (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

The criterion of transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (Stake 2000; Trochim 2006). The present study highlights the perceptions of students about their term-time employment and renders students as a specific group of non-standard employees. Taking into account that in 2006 60% of German students had a term-time job (Isserstedt et al. 2007) and probably most of them are employed as flexible workers the results of this study could be indicative for students throughout Germany. Generalization of the results is supported as the institutional context that frames students' employment during the term is similar in all Federal states.

The results of the present study, however, also depend on the specific context, like demonstrated while comparing my results to previous studies conducted in the US and UK. Hence, the criterion of dependability emphasizing the researcher's need to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs (Trochim 2006)

has to be addressed here. Societal and economical contexts differ between countries as well as cultural differences exist. Studying German students' perceptions about their term-time job implies to consider for example the specific regulations of the German law of higher education and the employment law, the various sources available to students in order to finance their course of study, which influences their dependability on paid work, and the particular German system of industrial relations influencing the use of and relations to non-standard employees in German companies. According to the latter, it is still emphasised that the relations between employees and management in Germany are characterised by consensus, confidence, and trust (Palazzo 2002; Geppert et al. 2003). It could be expected that this kind of relationship also influences the use of flexible work and the treatment of atypical employees.

To reach a certain degree of conformability, i.e. the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others (Trochim 2006), the results were presented at workshops and discussed with various colleagues. This procedure, however, could not avoid biases and detractions within the answers. In particular topics perceived as critical by the students, e.g. individual poor performance, are not stressed but concealed. Beyond, the students were a bit reluctant in talking about negative work experiences. Although they report such experiences in the interview they had some difficulties to express themselves when directly asked for negative aspects or to describe negative feeling more thoroughly. The existence of more than such biases in the interviews has to be acknowledged. As people tend to establish and preserve a positive identity as they avoid admitting mistakes and negative experiences. Thus, performance statements made by the interviewees should be assessed critically, as they might be biased.

Future research directions

The results of this study support other scholars highlighting that atypical workers should not be treated as homogeneous group. Recently research takes into account that aspect and begins to address the differences between for example part-time employees, temporaries, or contingent workers. Furthermore, the results of the present study call for considering the individual perspective of atypical employees but not just repeating general disadvantages reinforcing our stereotype of this group. Referring for example to Nienhüser and Martin (2002) in the German context or to Guest (2004a) and Guest et al. (2006) in the international context, exploring the individual perspective of non standard employees and drawing a picture of their subjective experiences leads to acquiring a much more detailed image of the perceived work reality of atypical workers. Here, research on non-standard employment has to continue addressing the different groups of non-standard employees in more detail as atypical employees are a diverse group having different motivations, developing various perceptions of their employment and interpreting experiences from their very own perspective.

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