

ASSESSING STUDENT WORKLOAD – TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

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Abstract:

In this paper, we are discussing a question how to assess students' workload, which is an important variable in the curriculum and of utmost importance in quality of teaching and learning process in higher education. However, student workload can be influenced by many different factors and at the same time, the measurement of workload faces several methodological challenges. This paper could be considered as a preliminary study, a case study at one higher education institution. Our research question arose when we were evaluating the method that has been used for measuring student workload for a long time; online questionnaire. The need for the evaluation was raised when the gap between the graduate students' perception of workload and expected workload according to the number of course credits (for specific study subjects) was observed. After preliminary review of the literature, we decided for complementary usage of quantitative method (survey – on line questionnaire) and qualitative method (focus group). The qualitative method helped us to understand "student workload" from different points of view. Findings show that discrepancy was a consequence of students' previous knowledge and work experiences and also the fact that many students didn't know how to "count" their workload, since they didn't know which time to count. Overall, we can conclude that the gap is not as big as we thought, and although, prevailing method for assessing students' workload is survey, we suggest using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in accordance to get data that are more reliable.

Keywords: student's workload, higher education, focus group, questionnaire, quality

1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 1999, Bologna Declaration was signed among European states¹. That was a key step towards a common European higher education area (here and after EHEA), and from that time on series of reforms have been enacted to make a European higher education harmonized, competitive and attractive. In accordance to achieve that main objective of the Bologna Declaration, it is very essential to introduce the tools for promotion of students and staff mobility, programme mobility as well as recognition of academic qualifications (EACEA, 2012). Nevertheless, how can we compare study programs, exams, qualifications etc.? One of the fundamental pillars of the EHEA is the establishment of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (here and after ECTS), which “is a tool that helps to design, describe, and deliver study programmes and award higher education qualifications” (European Commission, n.d.). This system is being used in the EHEA among all the countries included in the Bologna Process (European Communities, 2009, p. 9). ECTS credits are defined as; “the workload students need in order to achieve expected learning outcomes². In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work” (European Communities, 2009, p. 11).

Student workload is and has always been an important variable in the curriculum and it is one of its major components (Kember, 2004). In Slovenia modernised study programmes according to the Bologna Declaration, started in the academic year 2005/2006. From this time, onwards students' workload in Slovenian higher education system has been defined in these documents:

- Higher Education Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, no. 100/2004),
- Criteria for Accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, no. 119/06),
- Criteria for credit assignment to study programmes according to ECTS (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, no. 124/2004).

Slovenian higher education institutions are obliged to measure students' workload every academic year³. The main purpose is to evaluate the individual course in study programme whether students' workload still corresponds to the number of credits determined in accreditation process (Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education, 2004, article. 5). Hence, evaluation method and procedure are not regulated on the national level, since they are in domain of the higher education institutions themselves and must be defined on institutional level in statute or other documents (Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education, 2004, article. 5).

However, how should we assess how many hours' students really spent learning, to carry out their obligations and at the end to pass the study exam? Preliminary literature reviews suggest that students work can be affected by many factors that have impact on further measurements (Ruiz-Gallardo and others, 2011; Bowyer, 2012; Kember 2004). Even though “the majority of authors survey students on their opinion of workload” (Ruiz-Gallardo, Castaño, Gómez-Alday and Valdés, 2011, p.620), we are wondering, whether the usage of this single quantitative method is appropriate approach to evaluate students' workload. In this paper, we present our results with dealing with this question at the International School for Social and Business Studies (here and after ISSBS).

2. STUDENT WORKLOAD, HOW TO ASSESS IT?

Each course of a study program has a certain number of credit points. In EHEA one credit point is the unit of measurement for the evaluation of student work, where one credit equals 25 to 30 hours of student workload (European Communities, 2009; Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education, 2004, article. 3). According to the Criteria for credit assignment to study programmes

¹ Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, among 29 countries: Austria, Belgium (French Community), Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Swiss Confederation, United Kingdom. Today, the declaration has been signed by 47 countries (EACEA, 2012).

² “Learning Outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning. They relate to level descriptors in national and European qualifications frameworks” (European Communities 2009, p. 11).

³ Student's workload must be evaluated each academic year until first generation of the study programme graduates, and after at least every two years (Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education, 2004, article. 5).

according to ECTS (Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education, 2004, article. 3) the student workload includes; lectures, seminars, tutorials and other forms of organized academic work, individual study, preparations for exams or other forms of verifications and also the thesis.

ECTS system is not an easy tool to evaluate, since course hours are based on the theoretical hours in the classroom and self-study hours out of the class. Tampakis and Vitoratos (2009, p. 2) argue that the students workload can be affected by many factors such as the learning environment and the expected academic performance, while in addition to that students approach to learning, teaching methods, student perceptions of workload etc., have as well to be taken into the account. Workload can also be influenced by factors like design of curriculum, teaching resources, relationship between students and teachers, students' motivation, previous knowledge, personal situations and ways of measuring the students' workload (Ruiz-Gallardo and others, 2011, p. 620). This all can be the cause for a gap between the number of credits and students' perception about their workload. For example, students enrolled in the course specified with 9 credit points, can gain good grades, even studying less than students enrolled in the course specified with 3 credit points. Similar discrepancies in students' workload were observed in research carried by Stepišnik, Kolar, Trunk Širca and Lesjak, (2007, p.175), where they find out that "the employed students study a little bit less in comparison with the unemployed students" (Stepišnik and others, 2007, p.175).

Those factors can cause a significant methodological challenge. Therefore, measuring the students' workload, evaluation and updating of curricula is of utmost importance for high-quality education and good student performance (Tuncay, Karaagaç, Emeklic, 2009, p. 136). We can choose between several quantitative and qualitative methods such as; questionnaires, reports, writing diaries, interviews, focus groups etc. Each method has certain advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of selection, it is very difficult to measure student workload with the complete accuracy, due to:

- various factors we had mentioned before,
- because students have difficulties to remember hours that have devoted to the study (Ruiz-Gallardo and others, 2011, p. 620) and
- methodological issues, which are related to the subjective students perception about their own study work (Pogačnik and others, 2004, p. 255).

Pervailing method for authors to assess students' workload is a survey (Ruiz-Gallardo and others, 2011, p. 620), which is quantitative method. "Combining qualitative and quantitative methods is becoming increasingly utilised in the research of social sciences" (Lobe, 2006, p. 55). This can improve workload measurement, analysis, and interpretation, since the core stone of combining the methods is to study research problem from different points of view (Lobe, 2006, p. 55). In our opinion, regarding our case described below, it is very important to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods when assessing students' workload.

2.1. Case of ISSBS

At the ISSBS, we assess students' workload from teacher and student perspective with two different online surveys. Students and teachers fulfil the online survey after each trimester. The objective of the students' survey is to examine the following categories: attendance at lectures and tutorials, study of literature, preparation for short assignments, and discussions with colleagues on the subject, as well as direct preparation for the exam. The purpose of teachers' survey is to observe; how they are satisfied with classes, with the achievements of students, etc. After the last trimester of the academic year, we analyse the collected data and prepare a final report on student workload.

Previous two final reports (academic years 2010/2011 and 2011/2012) indicated the existence of a gap between the graduate students' perception of workload and the actual workload (number of curse credits) in certain study subjects. Therefore, we didn't know if this is the case of actual differences, measurement error, misunderstanding etc. In the academic year 2012/2013, we began to investigate how we could evaluate the questionnaire. After preliminary review of the literature, we decided that we would perform complementary qualitative method, as this can improve workload measurement, analysis, and interpretation. We chose the method focus group as the main aim was to encourage a communication between students and as well to understand their perception of the workload. The main purpose of the focus groups was to explore the different views, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions (regardless of a particular problem) which could not be collected by using other methods, such as observation, individual interview or questionnaire (Gibbs, 1997).

2.2. Implementation and results of focus groups

As mentioned before the purpose of the focus groups was to understand students' perception of workload. We wanted to understand how much time students spend studying, in which educational activities they are involved in, what factors influence on students study time and what instruments for assessing their workload would be the most appropriate for obtaining reliable data. In accordance to that, we prepared the following research questions:

1. How much time you dedicate for the study and for different types of study activities?
2. What are the factors associated with knowledge that have contributed to the fact that you did not have to study 25 hours for one credit point?
3. What are the factors that have contributed to the fact that you need to study more than 25 hours for one credit point?
4. What are the other factors that affect the time taken for your study time?
5. Assess the adequacy of the method for collecting the data of student workload by focusing on two aspects :
 - quantitative (as surveys) / Qualitative (as focus group)
 - data collection before exams / data collection after the exams.

The focus group was held in one of ISSBS classrooms and carried on April 2013. The method focus group was conducted among ISSBS undergraduate (first study level, with ten students) and graduate students (second study level, with eighth students). Due to the relaxed atmosphere, the conversation was very fruitful. Among participants there was thoughtful and critically discussion about their own perception on the workload in terms of study time, quality of courses and lecturers, solutions and constructive suggestions about assessment of workload. We present the main findings from the transcript synthesis of the data from the focus groups with certain emphasis given by specific group members:

- Students (undergraduate and graduate) highlighted that they do not spend equal time to study for all subjects, since some subjects and exams seems to be more demanding than others. This is expected, as all the subjects are defined with different number of ECTS and not all are equally extensive and demanding.
- Through focus groups, we first observed that not all students were aware what is considered as their workload. They didn't know how to "count" their workload, since they didn't know which time to count. Those students didn't have an exact perception how many hours they had spent on studying. Subject B highlighted; "I believe that some students spend more time on studying than they have recorded in surveys, because most students forgot the real workload".
- Very interesting and relevant were also the results from the questions about the factors associated with the knowledge that have an impact on study time. We had identified that on the amount of the study time have previous knowledge about the subject and previous work experiences on the subject, is a major impact. This was much emphasized among graduate students, for example, person A stated: "My work experiences on certain subjects saved me 70% of the study time". Students also explained that the study of subjects, which they were not familiar with, took them much more time to study.

Among different factors that have an effect on the time spent to study, participant students' (undergraduate and graduate) highlighted these ones:

- If you have previous knowledge about a particular topic (e.g. knowledge from secondary school, informal knowledge etc.), you spend less time to study for your exams.
- Work experiences on the subject have a significant effect on your knowledge, since they can help you to understand the theory. This has an indirect effect on how many hours you actually study.
- Work and family have an important implication on who much time you actually have for your studying. Employed students and students with families have less time available for study⁴.

⁴ Otherwise, in Slovenia there is no difference between full-time and part-time modes of study, which would be linked to the number of ECTS per academic year. The definition of full-time / part-time study in Slovenia is understood in connection with the financing. For the full time students (first and second Bologna cycle) there is no

- Students also emphasized the importance of informal learning (reading professional journals, articles, books etc.), since you gain more knowledge that is general.
- Students exposed positive impact of learning in groups. That can be very useful as they can share different viewpoints, dilemmas and ideas. This way of learning saves them a lot of time compared with the individual learning.
- Students also pointed out usefulness of online classroom, since the materials are always available and they know exactly where to look for the most relevant authors and literature. This saves them much time.

Results of the question "assess the adequacy of the method for collecting the data of students' workload" showed that participant students estimate survey as appropriate method however, they suggest that the survey should be carried out before the exams period, since grades can effect on the student judgement about the subject and study time. Students consider focus groups appropriate and state that it would be good to conduct this method after each trimester. On the one hand, they were glad to have a chance to express themselves about their interests, visions, perception on study requirements, workload, working practices while on the other hand, they were satisfied in getting the opportunity to participate in improving the study process. In the end, they also stated that the combination of both methods (questioner and focus group) seems to be the most adequate combination for students' workload assessment.

3. CONCLUSION

Through our focus groups we found out that, there is no gap between the graduate students' perception of workload and actual workload (number of curse credits). Majority of our graduate students are employed. The discrepancy (in particular courses) was a consequence of students' previous knowledge and work experiences. However, we also examined the other reason, which was a lack of students understanding which time to count as workload. Many students when they were answering the questioner about the actual workload didn't know how to evaluate their study work. These two reasons were the main factors for the perceived gap between the numbers of credits and students' perception on their workload. Although the prevailing method for assessing the students' workload is survey, we suggest that in accordance to get the "whole view" on the subject and to prevent different gaps, which can occur, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods should be used. Overall, we can conclude that the students are studying just the right amount of time in accordance with the credit system. Furthermore, how much time students spend on learning is affected by many factors. Through preliminary study, a case study at our higher education institution we point out that it is very important, how we assess students' workload, therefore a new question arose - whether it would be better to set the regulation for measurement of students' workload on the national level, or to leave it in the domain of the higher education institutions.

tuition fee for public higher education institution or to institutions with state concession (Higher Education Act, 2006).

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