

Time for Studying – A Question of Quantity or Quality?

Concerns about time in education are not new (Lingard & Thompson, 2017). How much time university students spend on their studies and what they do when spending it is interesting because the time, effort and interest students invest on study-related activities are related to their learning outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Trowler, 2010).

This paper presents results from a study of study practices at a Danish research-intensive university. The overall research question was: How much time do second-year students spend on their study activities? What do they engage in, and what reasons do the students have for spending this amount of time on these activities?

The first question aimed at scrutinising the results of surveys carried out by the universities or other institutions, e.g. the Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves & Hillman, 2018) or Eurostudent (Hauschildt, Gwosc, Netz, & Mishra, 2015). In this paper we focus on the students' responses to how much time they spend studying.

Methodology

The project was a mixed-methods study, including four study programmes at a research-intensive university: one in the humanities, one in social sciences and two in science. At each programme, a second-year course was selected during spring semester.

Here we analyse students' responses to two different ways of measuring the students' time use:

- (1) Registration of time in two separate weeks during the semester using a mobile application. (N=76)
- (2) Construction of a schedule for an ordinary week during semi-structured, qualitative interviews (N=20).

For the data from the mobile-application registration, the average numbers of study hours were calculated. The qualitative data consisted of drawings of week schedules and concomitant conversations that were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the present paper, the students' verbal explanations are used at a descriptive level related to their drawings.

Results

The mobile-application registration showed an average number of weekly hours spent on studying similar to those found in university surveys. Further, we found a variation between the four study programmes similar to findings in, e.g., Eurostudent: Students in sciences spend more hours than social-science students and students in the humanities.

At two programmes, we found variations in the number of hours spent between the first and in the second week (cf. figure 1). Hence, the question of how many hours students spend studying may depend on which week in question.

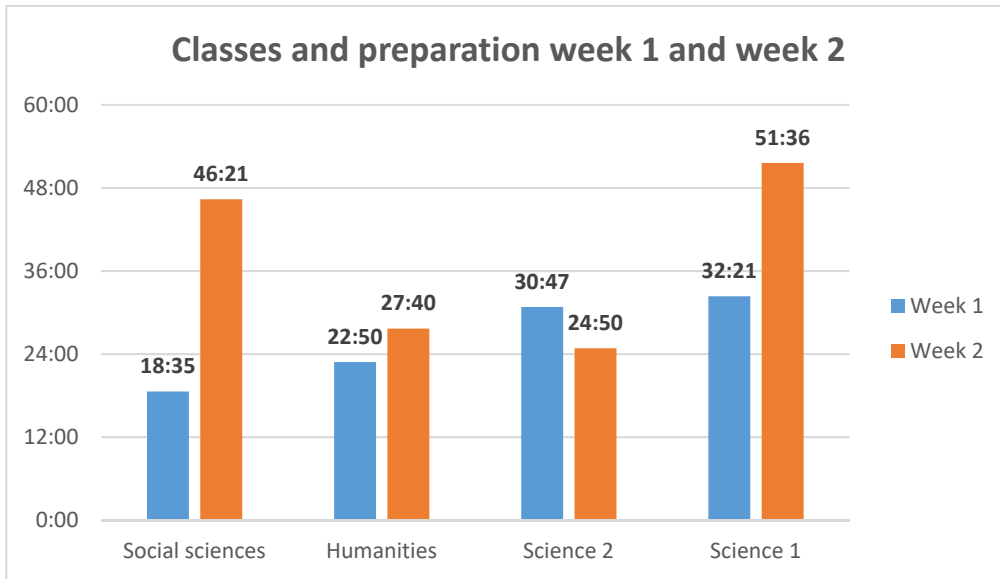


Figure 1 Number of hours spent on classes and preparation, week 1 and 2

Further, we found variations between students attending the same study programme (figure 2). For students at the Science 1 programme the number of hours spent on teaching and preparation in the first week ranged from 16:50 hrs to 55:15 hrs. Consequently, using the average numbers is questionable because they obscure possible variations in the student experiences underpinning the study practices.

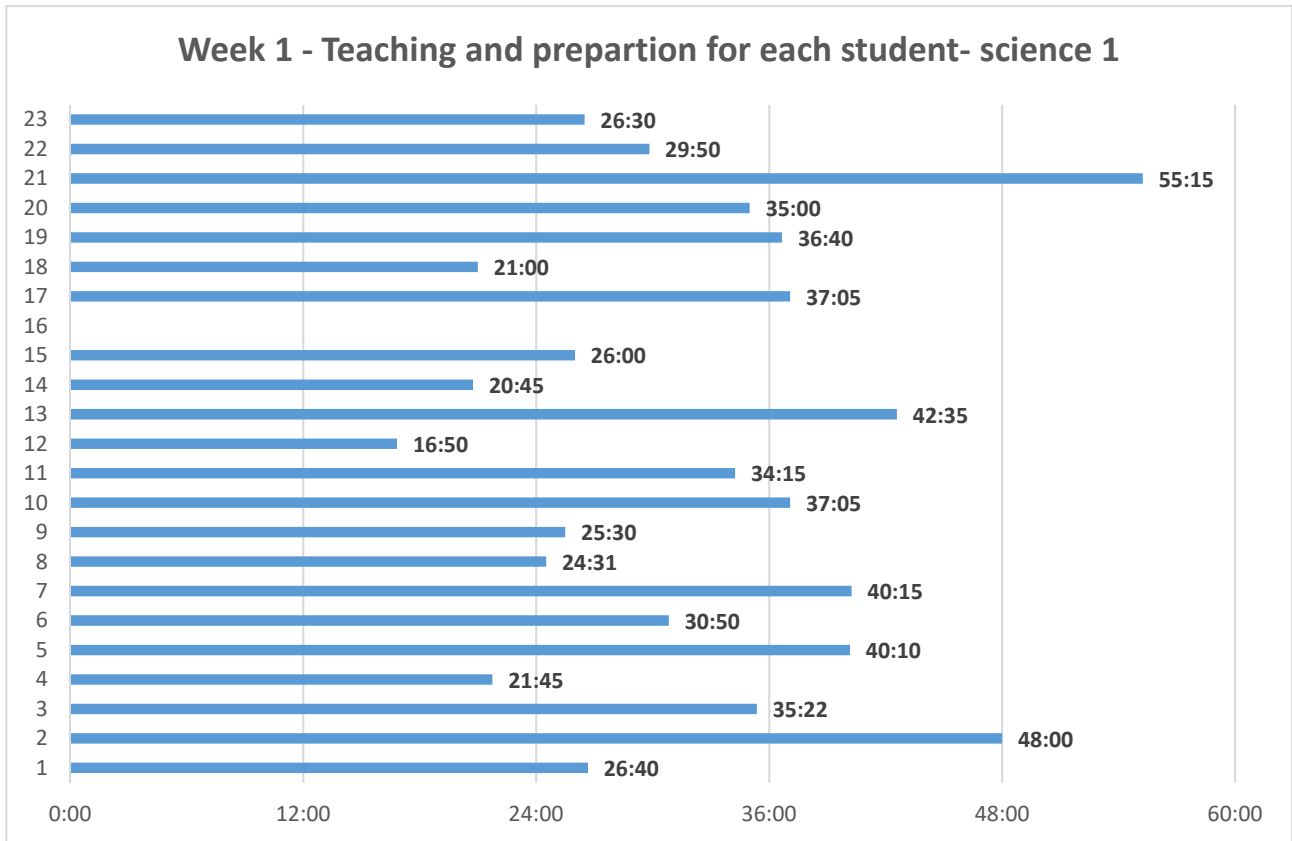


Figure 2 Number of hours spent on classes and preparation. Each bar represents one student

During the interviews, some of the students made traditional week schedules containing various activities with the total number of study hours ranging from around 20 to around 60. However, even when complying with the classic week schedule, the students frequently remarked that what they did during a week depended on class activities, assignments and events outside university.

Other students did not make a time schedule, but drew a rhythm over the week or a wave movement containing various activities. One student used the schedule to illustrate the intensity of her work. The parts of the day not indicated in grey means that the student is 'off' from studying.

Intensity	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Intense				Very intense. Making assignments. 10 am – 03 am			
		Pretty intense Lecture and exercise classes	Pretty intense Lecture and exercise classes				
	Medium effort. Week getting started. Lectures and exercise classes				Lecture Stopping to hang out		
						Looks a little on assignments but not working	Looks a little on assignments but not working
Slow							

Figure 3 Week schedule for student at Science 2. Grey marks the level of intensity in study activities (from slow to intense)

These ways of perceiving study efforts reflect a qualitative approach where the amount of time is less important than how the time is spent. This differs from the quantitative perception of the week divided in time slots. The latter can be counted and the average number of hours calculated, but that is impossible if time is about intensity because then one hour is not the same as the next.

Discussion

The present analysis questions the assumptions behind discussing students' time budgets on a quantitative basis focusing on average. Firstly, they ignore the variations between different students and during a semester. This obscures what might be a significant diversity. Secondly, they assume that all hours are equal and that study effort is about amount rather than intensity, about how much rather than what and how. However, the student experiences conveyed through the analysis suggest that for them study time varies qualitatively.

The quantitative approach may be reasonable to a policy where students and studies are compared, like, e.g., the surveys of student experiences or the ECTS system where studies are compared based on the number of study hours rather than on content. In the interviews, the students did not in the same way focus on quantities, but it was clear that their practices were affected by the teaching and content of the programme. This raises two concerns: If teachers and university management focus mainly on the average amount of the time students spent studying, they fail to see the variations just as they may not grasp the qualitative aspects of the student experience. Pedagogical or teaching measures therefore run the risk of not addressing what affects students' experiences and eventual learning outcomes. Further, if the measures focus on increasing the amount of hours it may be detrimental by pushing the students to react to measures focusing on quantity rather than qualities.

There are reasons to explore students' practices and experiences further. Counting hours, however, does not seem like the right way to do it.

References

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