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The ‘studiability’ of degree programmes

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

A crucial aspect of the quality of a degree programme is whether it is feasible for students to graduate within the estimated timeframe. In Dutch and German-speaking countries the concept of ‘studiability’ concerns the structural programme characteristics related to study progress. However, there is limited literature available on what exactly constitutes ‘studiability’. Based on the literature, four aspects that could either form a barrier or promote the ‘studiability’ of a degree program will be discussed: study load, ratio between contact time and self-study, competition between courses and the scheduling of examinations. Finally, to illustrate how the concept of ‘studiability’ might be employed, a case study will show how a public university in a middle-income country uses this concept to review and (re)design their degree programmes. Attendees will be encouraged to reflect on their own degree programmes in light of the various aspects of ‘studiability’.

Full paper

Introduction

Each degree programme has structural characteristics that might either promote or hinder study progress. In Dutch and German-speaking countries this concept is called ‘studiability’ and is included in the accreditation standards. However, there is limited literature available on what constitutes ‘studiability’. A recent study by Buss (2019) defined it as follows: “institutionally anchored study

programme structures that influence the behaviour of students – in particular attendance of courses, self-learning time and taking examinations. The study structures take into account the time restrictions of students and (…) enable students to study successfully within their time resources." This contribution aims to explore the concept of 'studiability' based on the literature. The central question is: "Which aspects of 'studiability' can be employed in designing a degree programme to support study progress?"

Buss (2019) identified 5 aspects of 'studiability'. For this study, we focus on the aspects that are directly related to the design of a degree programme. We categorised them as follows: study load, contact hours/self-study ratio, competition between courses, and scheduling of examinations. Relevant keywords in English and Dutch were established to search for and review the available literature. Publications in German were also reviewed.

Findings

Study load

Students' time is limited. Next to studying, students have other responsibilities. Full-time study in many countries would consist of about 40 hours of study a week (Cecilio-Fernandes et al., 2018). Based on the European Credit Transfer System 60 credits a year equals 1680 hours of study, i.e., 42 weeks of 40 hours of study. A shorter number of weeks will lead to a higher study load. When designing a programme, it is, therefore, paramount to correctly calculate the expected study hours for each course, including the scheduled contact hours and required self-study hours. In addition, the total number of credits per term should be proportional to the number of study weeks available. The literature (Au et al., 2016; Gortner & Zulauf, 2000) shows that students do not spend the same amount of time on self-study, so 'mid-pack' students are to be considered the norm when calculating expected self-study time.

Contact hours / self-study ratio

A basic requirement for student learning, is students spending time in activities that lead to learning. Schmidt and colleagues (2010) indicated that self-study was the deciding factor that increased graduation rate and reduced study duration. Nonetheless, without contact hours, students will not be prone to do self-study. The type of classes also needs to be considered (Torenbeek et al., 2013; Van den Berg & Hofman, 2005). Initially, self-study increases with an increase in the number of scheduled classes, however, this plateaus around 10-12 contact hours (Gijselaers & Schmidt, 1995). Choi-Lundberg and colleagues (2019) confirmed that a reduction in scheduled lectures did not impact student results but improved students' perception of the workload being more reasonable.

Competition between courses

The larger the number of concurrent courses, the more students need to divide their time and attention. Students show a preference for more intensive studying with fewer courses as it contributes to a better study-life balance (Mims, 1983). Shorter study periods also require a more pro-active attitude towards studying (Khattak et al., 2011). An objection against reducing the duration of a course might be that spacing learning will lead to better memory retention, Tatum (2010), however, reports that intensive courses showed the same or better performance than comparable courses taken with a longer duration along other courses.

Scheduling of examinations

Another potential 'competing' issue is the scheduling of the examinations within and between courses. Most students will adapt their study behaviour to best meet the perceived requirements to pass an exam/course with the least amount of work required, resulting in an increase in study activity in the 2-3 weeks leading up to a test (Cohen-Schotanus, 1999; Cecilio-Fernandes et al., 2018). A higher number of exams divided over the term not only leads to a

more valid assessment, from a studiability perspective it could also reduce peak load if the assessments are well-spaced. It reduces students postponing self-study to the final weeks (Kerdijk et al, 2015). In the same vein, re-examinations need to be scheduled carefully.

Discussion

Based on the aspects discussed above a case study will be presented reviewing how each of these are considered in the design or redesign of degree programmes within in a public university in a middle-income country. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on degree programmes within their own institution to identify strengths and weaknesses in terms of ‘studiability’.

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