Students' time budget practices: This was the time of our lives (0115)

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Recently, a Eurostudent survey found that in Denmark and seven other countries 'more than one in five full-time students spend no more than 20 hours per week on study-related activities, and are thus studying as de-facto part-time students' (Hauschildt et al., 2015: 86). A Danish report concluded that Danish students on average spend less hours on their studies than should be expected based on the ECTS points they earn (Udvalg for Kvalitet og Relevans i de Videregående Uddannelser, 2014). Results like these are often met by a moral outcry in the Danish public about students not appreciating the privilege of attending university where they pay no tuition fees and receive a monthly study grant to cover their living expenses.

This paper reports from an explorative study of how Danish university students spend their time and why they do so. The purpose was to move beyond the moral approach and to explore how students manage their time budgets, how they perceive the issue of time and studying and if we could identify elements in the study environment that affect the students' time management.

Methods

The study included qualitative as well as quantitative data, but the present paper focuses on the qualitative data produced using anthropological fieldwork. Four bachelor study programmes at a research intensive university were selected as cases to display a variety in terms of the average number of hours spent by students at the programme and the nature of the programmes. All four programmes had an annual intake of more than 100 students. One programme was in the humanities, one aimed at a profession, one was a dry science programme (i.e., without lab work) and one was a wet science programme (including lab work).

At each programme a mandatory course at second year was selected as the entry point of the fieldwork. The fieldwork was carried out by the second author combining participant observation methods with semistructured, individual qualitative interviews and one workshop at each programme. 25 students were interviewed at the beginning of the semester and five of them again and at the end. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The observations were documented in a field log.

The data was analysed to generate themes and to identify patterns in a vein similar to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

Most of the students expressed the intention of spending a full work week on studying, but eventually adopted different practices. There were differences between the different study programmes, but also patterns that crossed programme borders.

Students based their decision of attending classes or not on their assessment of whether it would be worthwhile showing up. If they did not experience the teaching as relevant for their study or if they experienced a lack of coherence between the teaching and other parts of the programme they might decide to skip class. Some of the students also considered whether the teaching would offer them anything

they could not as well get from reading the books. At the same time, their study activities were to some extent focused on what was required at the exam. Consequently, they did some reading during the semester, but the bulk of their work was when preparing for the exam. This was particularly the case in the humanities and at the professional programme.

Students also emphasised the relation to the teacher as important for their inclination to putting in effort into a course. Referring to the way the students perceived the approach of the teacher, one student at the humanities said: *'Maybe it shouldn't be like that, but the teacher is decisive in terms of the level [of involvement] in the teaching'*. The student had the impression that while some teachers *'believe us to be utterly unengaged'* this particular teacher *'tells us almost every class that she likes teaching us'*. There appeared to be a vicious circle in some classes where the students and the teacher mutually drained the teaching situation of involvement and attention.

We found some differences between programmes related to the students' sense of relevance that had to do with the perspective of the programme and the nature of the competences developed there. Students at three of the four programmes were unconvinced that the most important competences for their future career would be developed by attending courses. Students at the humanities programme were unsure about the career prospects which made it difficult to link the teaching to a practice. The students at the professional programme were sure that they should acquire some of the most important competences through their paid study jobs in private businesses rather than in class. The students at the dry science programme were not certain the programme taught what they really needed for the jobs they felt confident to get and therefore they sought to develop these competences in other contexts.

Discussion

The students' experience of the teaching as relevant is crucial when balancing their time budget priorities. However, the results point to a more fundamental challenge, namely which student identity that is presupposed by the programme. The implied student of the programmes (Ulriksen, 2009), that is, the kind of student practice, interest, aspiration, motivation and learning strategies that is implied by the curriculum and the teaching activities may be at odds with the way the students relate to their studies. This involve how they perceive the relation between their studying and their lives outside university. Drawing on the concept of 'the forgotten people' (Højrup, 1983) we suggest that the university students differ in how they perceive the role and importance of their university studies vis-à-vis other fields of practices. The universities, however, appear to assume that students have one particular student identity and that they therefore, a priori, consider the teaching to be the most important. However, for some of the students this is not so obvious. In order to understand the students' time budgets we therefore need to understand the different kinds of balances that make sense to the different students.

References

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