

Investigating the notion that more hours spent studying guarantees higher educational quality

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Since 2018, Danish university students have had to report the annual number of hours they spend in lectures, at study and preparing for exams to the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science.

When determining whether a university should receive its entire subsidy or whether to shave up to five percent off of its appropriation, the weekly number of study hours is one of the parameters weighed.

The reporting of study hours stems from the Ministry of Higher Education and Science's aim to ensure for high quality education.

However, according to the researchers behind a new study at the University of Copenhagen, an increased number of hours is no guarantee for higher educational quality.

"Universities have a financial incentive to get students to spend large amounts of time at study. However, this does not necessarily provide an authentic or fair view of educational quality. Instead, we should be interested in what students actually get out of the time that they spend," asserts Lars Ulriksen, a professor at the University of Copenhagen's Department of Science Education.

Together with department colleague Christoffer Nejrup, Professor Ulriksen observed second-year students in four different programs at a Danish university, as well as conducting interviews and a series of workshops with 31 students.

Work hours and learning are not inextricably linked

In their results, the researchers found numerous students describing how they can easily spend a substantial amount of time and effort on a task or exam without feeling as if they retained anything.

"Students report that they often spend considerable time preparing for an exam, without necessarily being particularly engaged or immersed in their preparations. At other times, they spend a short amount of time on something that leaves a deeper impression upon them," explains

Professor Ulriksen.

Moreover, being a [student](#) is a way of life during which lectures and assignments marinate within students as they engage with friends, exercise and so on.

As such, Ulriksen believes that it makes no sense to measure quality and engagement by way of a single time parameter:

"If we are curious about understanding how students learn, we ought to look at more than just the amount of time they spend studying. Instead, we need to find out what keeps the academic fire within them burning—and what inspires them. We know that interest and immersion are fertile grounds for deep learning."

Swap out targets for qualitative surveys

Lars Ulriksen suggests that qualitative surveys could be implemented to allow for students to verbalize and elaborate upon their experiences with the educational quality of their programs.

"For now, we have a metric that probably satisfies the economists who use these results to generate statistics. In the meantime, we are left only a shade wiser about what study engagement and quality are all about. Obviously, qualitative surveys would require more resources. But perhaps more should be left up to the individual university, while dropping the measurements for a while."

More information: Lars Ulriksen et al, Balancing Time – University Students' Study Practices and Policy Perceptions of Time, *Sociological Research Online* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1360780420957036](https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420957036)

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