

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Learning takes effort

One of the most important of the evidence-based 'Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education' is 'Good practice emphasises time on task'. The assumption here is that if students don't spend much time trying to learn then they won't learn much, and that one of the primary responsibilities of teachers is to arrange things in such a way that student spend enough time on the right things. Without student effort, not much of significance is going to happen.

The research evidence on this issue is complicated by the fact that very able and knowledgeable students can learn new things much more quickly than less able students who have little relevant knowledge background. In a cohort of students with a wide range of ability and background knowledge the students who study least might actually perform best – because they are the best students and can learn so quickly, while the weaker students may put lots of effort in, sometimes unproductive effort, and still not learn as much. But if the better students studied more, then they would learn more. If the weaker student studied more they would learn more. And if the entire cohort, strong and weak, and average, were to study more, then the entire cohort would learn more and perform better.

If most students were already studying as many hours as possible this might not be a very important idea – but they are not, and as a consequence it is an extremely important idea. Comparative European surveys have found that UK students put fewer hours per week into their studying than elsewhere in Europe, and Higher Education Policy Institute surveys – large scale surveys conducted several times in recent years with consistent findings - have detailed just how little UK students study. The average number of hours a week in some disciplines nationally, and across all disciplines in some institutions, is about half what it should be and in no institutions or disciplines is it as much as it should be. As even the planned number of hours in UK degree programmes is substantially less than in the rest of Europe (who have longer semesters and are less tolerant of poor performance) there are whole disciplines in the UK where the average student would need to study for nine years to make up the number of hours the Bologna Agreement specifies for a Bachelor's programme. The UK has signed up to the Bologna Agreement though you would never guess it from the QAA's position on this issue, which is that they don't care about hours, only about learning outcomes.

The causes of low student effort are many and varied. Some of the causes are to do with

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students themselves. Today they are more 'time poor' than they used to be due to competing demands - such as the need to undertake paid work even though they are supposed to be full time students. Some institutions have rules about paid work, even banning it altogether during term time, and these institutions tend to have students who study longer hours. In the USA, many students 'work their way through College' but they do not pretend that they can be full time students while they do this, and they take more years to graduate as a consequence. Students are also more strategic than they used to be in terms of doing the least possible to pass or get the maximum marks, rather than learning the maximum possible whatever it takes.

But pass rates and degree classifications have not suffered while students have studied so few hours in the UK, so it seems highly likely that demands and standards have dropped, allowing students to graduate in three years despite not putting in anything like full time study effort. The shift to coursework assessment means that students no longer need to study the whole curriculum in depth, but only the topics they tackle assignments on. The UK's high pass rates and low drop-out rates, compared with most of the rest of Europe where students study for more hours,

also suggest that the demands are lower – and the perceptions of students who have studied in both the UK and mainland Europe support that interpretation.

Students may be strategic, but the pedagogic system usually allows them to be.

Students have been very vocal politically in demanding more class contact hours. Their silence on the issue of more challenging courses that would require them to work harder (rather than teachers working harder) is telling.

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Higher Education Policy Institute (2013) [Student Academic Experience Survey](#). HEPI/Which? Report 6

<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2013/05/15/2013-student-academic-experience-survey-produced-jointly-by-hepi-and-which/>

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