

General standards for course workloads and required coursework

1. Introduction

On 13 February 2017, the Pedagogical Board appointed a working group to prepare a proposal on general standards for course workloads and required coursework. The working group consisted of:

Per Manne, Department of Business and Management Science (chair)
Linda Orvedal, Department of Economics
Kenneth Fjell, Department of Accounting, Auditing and Law
Lasse Lien, Department of Strategy and Management
Frid Helén Hop, Academic Committee

Frank Mortensen has provided administrative support to the group. The board has held four meetings.

Background and mandate

A clear need emerged during work on the pedagogical action plan to review what can be required and expected of students in relation to their workload and effort in a course. This is, among other things, due to the emergence of alternative and more varied teaching methods and forms of assessment. After the Quality Reform was implemented, there has been a clear desire to employ alternative teaching methods and it is pleasing to see that this has produced results. It has among other things led to more student-active learning in many courses, but also most likely to a greater workload for the students in certain courses and more variation in the workload between different courses.

In connection with the evaluation of the Quality Reform, the dean for bachelor's degree programmes Linda Orvedal prepared a memo in 2007 about the workload for students taking a typical course worth 7.5 credits. The memo was based on courses that employ traditional teaching methods (lectures, group work etc.) and an academic year corresponding to 1,800 working hours for the students. The memo was discussed by the Bachelor Programme Board and distributed among the academic community.

Significant developments in the use of different teaching methods and forms of assessment have taken place at NHH since then, and the Pedagogical Board therefore believes that a new review of general standards for course workloads and required coursework is necessary. This is mainly based on the following grounds:

- Signals from students concerning differing workloads in their courses
- Changes in teaching methods and forms of assessment
- Increase in workload for students (cf. the national student survey Studiebarometeret 2015 and 2016)
- Requests for more information on the topic from the academic community

In light of this, the working group is requested to prepare a proposal for general standards for course workloads and required coursework. The working group has been requested to assess how such standards can be applied in relation to different teaching methods and forms of assessment at both bachelor's and master's degree levels.

The Pedagogical Board requests that the proposals for general standards be presented to the board by

Friday 5 May, with a view to considering the proposal at its board meeting on 23 May.

The national student survey Studiebarometeret

Studiebarometeret is the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education's (NOKUT) survey carried out among Norwegian students about their experience of the quality of the study programmes they are taking. It has collected data about the students' workload since 2013. The time they report to have spent on their studies in the course of a typical week in autumn 2015 and 2016 is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Average time spent by NHH students on studies in the semester, 2015 and 2016.

Studiebarometeret

	BSc EBA 2015	BSc EBA 2016	MSc EBA 2015	MSc EBA 2016	MSc AA 2015	MSc AA 2016
<i>Learning activities organised by NHH</i>	15.9	15.5	15.5	15.5	13.5	14.5
<i>Non-organised study effort</i>	28.9	23.8	26.2	27.6	27.2	29.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>44.8</i>	<i>39.3</i>	<i>41.7</i>	<i>43.1</i>	<i>40.7</i>	<i>44.4</i>

We can see that the students' own work effort comes to just over 40 hours a week.

Course evaluations

Up until 2014, bachelor's programme course evaluations at NHH included questions about how much time the students spent on the individual courses.

Figure 1: Questions from the bachelor's programme course evaluation, spring 2014.

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About your own contribution

On average pr week, how many hours did you spend on this course?
(including all activities; lectures, group work, self study, and so on)

0 1-3 4-6 7-8 9-10 11-12 13-14 15+

Hours: ☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

The evaluations were carried out when teaching activities had been concluded, so that much of the exam preparation is not included in the students' evaluations. The average value in autumn 2013 was 3.7, where the eight alternatives are numbered from 1 to 8. This can be interpreted to mean that the bachelor's students used an average of 7 hours a week on each course in autumn 2013¹. The corresponding figure for spring 2014 was 4.0. With four courses per semester, this may suggest that the average reported workload was close to 30 hours a week. There is considerable variation here both within individual courses and between different courses.

The figures from the course evaluation show a lower estimate for the bachelor's students' workload than in the Studiebarometeret survey, but it is difficult to compare these results since both the questions posed and manner in which answers are provided are different, as well as the questionnaire contexts being very different. The answers may, for example, be influenced by whether the total time spent is divided into several categories, whether the questions concern

¹ Interpreting the average value is somewhat problematic when the different time intervals vary in length.

individual courses or total workload, and whether the questions are asked by NHH or an external party.

In-depth learning and workload

In-depth learning is about the students developing an understanding of concepts, methods and contexts in a given subject. Learning a topic thoroughly requires student-active learning methods, but also enough time to be able to work on the subject matter. If the students feel that the time pressure is too great, many will instead use more surface learning strategies. Time pressure can be perceived as too great in relation to individual courses or overall. If the discrepancies between the workload for different courses is too great, the students may choose to prioritise certain courses above others.

2. General standards and average estimates

The Act relating to Universities and University Colleges Section 3-8 states that the academic year normally lasts 10 months², and that a full academic year normally corresponds to 60 credits.

Section 2-2 of NOKUT's Regulations relating to programme quality states that the programme's total workload should correspond to 1,500–1,800 hours per year for full-time programmes. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) recommends the same and this is used in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The normal scope of 60 credits per year corresponds to an average workload of 25–30 hours per credit. A course worth 7.5 credits will therefore entail 187.5–225 working hours in total. This includes all activities in the course, such as organised teaching activities, self-study and assessment activities (exams etc.).

It is also possible to calculate the weekly workload. If 10 months is taken to correspond to approx. 43 weeks, the total workload per week will be 35–42 hours throughout the whole semester.

Table 2. Standard for the total number of working hours in different sized courses

Credits	1	2.5	3.8	7.5
Hours	25–30	62.5–75	95–114	187.5–225

We do not think that students should aim to be in the upper end of these intervals, but that the expected workload should be close to that of a normal working week in Norway. We find it reasonable that a course worth 7.5 credits should have a workload of approx. 200 hours. This corresponds to a workload of about 9 hours a week for such a course, if teaching and assessment activities in a course can be carried out at the same level throughout the semester. In practice, there are several reasons why there may be significant variations over the course of a semester and that students can therefore expect a greater workload in certain periods.

Semester length

The spring semester at NHH normally starts in week 2 and ends in week 24 (mid-June). It consists of a teaching period of 12 weeks and an exam period of 10 weeks. If public holidays are taken into account, the spring semester has 21–22 weeks available for teaching and assessment activities.

² The Storting has adopted an escalation plan for study funding, with a view to funding 11 months of study per year from 2020. This does not extend the length of the academic year but is due, among other things, to the fact that the spring semester is normally longer than the autumn semester.

The autumn semester normally starts with the matriculation and freshers' week in week 33³ (mid-August), while normal teaching starts in week 34. The autumn semester in addition to freshers' week comprises a teaching period of 12 weeks and an exam period of 6 weeks, and normally lasts until week 51. This constitutes a total of 18 weeks' teaching and assessment activities in the autumn semester.

The effective academic year at NHH is therefore approx. 40 weeks plus the freshers' week, or approx. 9.5 months. The length of the spring and autumn semesters is also different, although the teaching periods are equally long, and the students take the same number of credits in both semesters. We do not wish to propose different standards for courses that run in the spring and autumn, however, and would rather show discretion and take this into account when proposing common standards for the spring and autumn semesters.

The distinction between 'teaching period' and 'exam period' mentioned above is not clear cut. Many assessment activities are carried out in the first 12 weeks of the semester during the teaching period. This includes assignments with long submission deadlines, which one does not want to overlap with other exam dates. It is also possible to schedule teaching activities in the exam period if one so wishes and if there are no practical obstacles to doing so. We expect that increased use of other forms of assessment alongside traditional exams will mean that the distinction between the teaching and exam periods will be even less clear in the future.

Uneven workload throughout the semester

Several courses have uneven workloads during the course of the semester. It may well be that a course's total workload is reasonable, but that the course requires extra attention from students during certain periods. This may be related to required coursework or home exams that need to be completed by a given deadline.

Some courses have intensive teaching activities. This may be the case when the course has an external lecturer and the lectures are given in one or more intensive bulks. The course should then include different activities between the teaching sessions so that the students' activity in the course is evenly distributed across the semester.

Courses with an uneven workload during the semester should be coordinated so that, where possible, the intensive periods do not take place at the same time as that of other courses often taken simultaneously. The deans have the overall responsibility for facilitating such coordination. Course responsible for such courses must at an early stage report when the intensive periods are expected to be scheduled. It is also important that the students are kept informed of this.

Some courses may have final exams so early on in the exam period that all teaching and assessment activities must be completed long before the end of the semester. It will then be the students' responsibility to divide their time between the different courses as expediently as possible, and for the deans and course responsible to ensure this is possible.

³ The preparatory mathematics course for new BSc EBA students is scheduled for week 32.

3. Assessment of total workload in a course

The introduction of new teaching methods and forms of assessment has resulted in courses with a more varied structure than previously. They vary in relation to both what type of activities they include and the scope of the different activities. There is a need for tools that enable the course responsible and the profile and programme coordinators to assess the workload of the various courses.

We do not believe it is possible or desirable to develop a point system where standardised points are allocated to different types of teaching and assessment in order to define a workload. There is too much variation in how demanding an activity can be, for example a student may spend an hour or a week on learning the content of a book chapter.

Overview of a course's workload

We believe that the course responsible should evaluate the workload of the various activities it contains. To be used as a tool, this must be described in writing and follow certain standards, as described below. The method largely follows the findings from the project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe*⁴. This is a method⁵ used to determine the workload of courses in higher education. The project is a result of the Bologna process and is part of the work on introducing a common credit system for European study programmes. We find the method to be well considered, but that it is too detailed for our purpose, and that it should therefore be adjusted in relation to this point. A too-detailed description of the various activities and workload will have a short lifespan and will have to be regularly updated.

We propose that each course should have an overview showing how the students are expected to spend 25–30 hours of work effort per credit. The overview will be submitted with the course description and be considered by the programme committee. This should be done for all courses at bachelor's and master's degree level. It will subsequently only be necessary to repeat this work if substantial changes are made to the course, or if it is necessary to further review the course's workload.

The overview should not be published online or be available to the students taking the course, but is intended to be a tool for those responsible for the course (the course responsible, teaching coordinators, the head of department, profile coordinator and programme coordinator/dean). The students' evaluation of the course's workload is obtained in connection with course evaluations, which will provide feedback on whether the estimated workload is considered reasonable or not.

Methods

Teaching in a course consists of different types of activities, chosen on the basis of what will enable the students to achieve the learning outcomes in the course. The activities can be described as organised teaching methods and other learning and assessment activities, for example lectures, maths exercises, group work, assignments, oral presentations, discussion, self-study etc.

The course responsible chooses an estimated 4–7 types of teaching activities which together cover the students' various work methods during the course of the semester. We cannot at this stage see any reason to standardise the descriptions of the various activities, but believe it will be more beneficial to choose descriptions that suit the nature of the individual courses. It is, however, important that both organised and non-organised activities are covered and that required coursework is included, so that it is possible to assess the students' overall workload in the course.

⁴ <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

⁵ <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/workload-a-ects.html>

The course responsible will consider how much time it is reasonable for the students to spend on each type of activity listed above. In practice, there will be great variation between different students, in relation to both their background and how they prioritise the course in question. However, the evaluations should be based on an 'average student'⁶ who normally participates in all organised activities in the course. It should include all the time students spend on the course including self-study and work on all pertaining forms of assessment. The total workload for an 'average student' should be in the lower part of the interval 25–30 hours per credit, so that the total workload for a course worth 7.5 credits constitutes approx. 200 hours. Table 2 above shows the number of hours per course for different sized courses.

The workload overview can also include comments showing what assumptions the assessment is based on. This could be expectations in relation to preparation for lectures or other activities.

The departments are responsible for quality assuring the workload overviews in the courses in the same way as they are responsible for quality assuring course descriptions. The workload overviews are forwarded together with the course descriptions to the academic affairs department to be considered by the programme committee.

The students' course evaluations are used to assess whether the course workload overviews are reasonable. The evaluation can either contain questions about the overall workload in the course or about the workload for individual activities. The results are considered by the programme committees and followed up by the dean as necessary, in the same way as other matters concerning the course evaluations.

We stress that the workload should not be published on NHH's website, either together with the course description or on the website for the course in question, but should be available to those responsible for the course or profile/programme the course is affiliated with. Most students differ from the 'average student' and the figures may therefore provide an incorrect impression of how much each student should work on the course. It would in any case not be as meaningful to ask about workload in course evaluations if the 'right' answer was already common knowledge.

4. Examples of descriptions of expected workload

Some examples of how the expected course workload can be described are listed below. These are based on an 'average student' who participates in all organised teaching activities. The overview can also be supplemented with a short description of how some of the figures have been obtained.

⁶ An 'average student' is placed in the middle of their year group or class so that half of the other students are better and half are weaker than him or her.

Example 1

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	39
Submissions (course paper with presentation)	15
Self-study of the course material	90
Exam preparation	60
<i>Total</i>	<i>204</i>

Example 2

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	36
Submissions (2)	40
Self-study of the course material	34
Exam preparation	90
<i>Total</i>	<i>200</i>

Example 3

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	38
Group exercises	20
Submissions (2)	14
Self-study of the course material	49*
Exam preparation	85
<i>Total</i>	<i>206</i>

Comments: *1 hour's follow-up work after each lecture (2 hours)
 2 hours' preparatory work for each group exercise (2 hours)

Example 4

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	22
Group exercises	18
Teaching videos	6
Assignment to be submitted, individual	15
Self-study of the course material	70
Exam preparation	70
<i>Total</i>	<i>201</i>

Example 5

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	4
Organised group work under supervision	36
Group work organised by the students	36
Self-study of the course material	70
Exam preparation	50
Concluding presentation including preparation	12
<i>Total</i>	<i>208</i>

Example 6

<i>Student activity</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Lectures	24
Exercises and case presentations in a big group	11
Reflection assignments (3) (in teams outside teaching sessions)	12
Case assignments (in teams outside teaching sessions)	30
Individual assignments (2)	30
Self-study	92
Exam preparation	0*
<i>Total</i>	<i>199</i>

Comments: * No final written exam