

Guideline on calculating student workload

The purpose of this guideline is to provide course leaders at UNIS with tools to better comprehend and calculate student workload when revising or planning new courses.

1. Defining workload

The time a student needs to efficiently learn a curriculum and complete course activities, constitutes the *workload* of a course. The workload includes both the scheduled activities and study time outside class (reading, preparation, writing reports, reflection, exam etc.).

2. Defining ECTS

Workload is measured in ECTS credits and the European countries (EHEA) have defined 60 ECTS as a fulltime year of studies¹. The full time student in Norway is expected to complete 60 ECTS credits in an academic year of app. 1600h, which gives *40h of student learning per week* (1 ECTS = 26-27h workload). Thus a 5 ECTS credit course equals 133h, a 10 ECTS credit course 266h and a 15 ECTS credit course 400h.

3. Calculating workload

To ensure students have enough time to learn it is important to list up all activities involved in the course. Course responsible should have an idea of the time required to complete each of the learning activities. In addition, time for reading the curriculum, preparing for exam and preparation time for lectures, seminars, labs etc. should be taken into account when calculating workload. Each activity should therefore include enough time for deep and effective learning where students have time to understand the underlying principles, to integrate the learning with previously acquired knowledge and to get a holistic view on the subject. Insufficient time for the activities, however, may lead to *surface* learning where students only have time to memorize facts and data, and reproduces the bare minimum needed for an assessment.

¹ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015

Example

The table below shows the workload calculation for Course A which is a 15 ECTS credit course. The calculation method used in this table is partly based on Karjalainen et al., 2006. The workload is divided into a series of learning activities, each involving an estimated number of hours of work (time factor). The total workload should match the learning hours indicated by the credit value of the course.

| Activity | # | Time factor | Workload |
|--|----------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Lectures | 20 | 2 | 40 |
| Seminars | 15 | 2 | 30 |
| Lab work | 7 | 2 | 14 |
| Curriculum, articles (3,3 pages per hour) | 200 | 0,3 | 60 |
| Curriculum, book chapters (5 pages per hour) | 100 | 0,2 | 20 |
| Term paper | 1 | 40 | 40 |
| Presentation of term paper (including preparation for the presentation) | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| Project work | 1 | 60 | 60 |
| Preparation for exam (One fifth of the time frame given in the curriculum) | 1 | 80 | 80 |
| Written exam | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| In total | | | 421 |
| Conversion to ECTS credits (hours/1600x60) | | | 15,7 |

As seen in the table the total hours slightly exceeds the fixed credit value (15 ECTS) and a small adjustment of the course workload could easily be made to align the course workload with the fixed credit value (adjustment of the amount of reading curriculum and/or type of learning and assessment activities).

A model for calculating workload can be seen as a tool for teachers to evaluate and aim for an appropriate workload, but must be used in the context of the specific course. However, adjusting factors and workload calculation to a course, must be done in the perspective of effective deep learning, and not to “fit the form”.

Please see the Excel document “Student workload calculation sheet 2019” on this page: <https://www.unis.no/resources/educational-quality-teaching-learning/quality-assurance-system-education-unis/>

4. How to improve students perceptions' of workload?

Students come with a variety of backgrounds, experience and expectations and will most likely perceive workload differently. This can be challenging when running a course. So how to improve students perceptions of workload?

- **Communicate learning outcomes and workload to your students**

In addition to giving students the time to learn, course responsible should help students use their time right. In the beginning of the course clearly communicating to students the expectations and learning goals, how they should prepare and how much effort should be put into different activities, will help students understand the nature of the learning experience and control and balance their available time and avoid unnecessary stress. Students may also tend to use too much time on project work and course responsible may during the course need to remind the students of the workload associated with each component of the course.

- **Coordination of workload within and between courses**

Coordination within and between courses to distribute workload appropriately is also important and can have a significant positive impact on students' experience. Especially timing of larger projects and assessments should be distributed over the semester within and between courses.

- **Monitoring students actual workload**

Monitoring students' actual workload should be carried out on regular basis to get feedback if students' actual workload is too high or too low compared to the course workload. This can be done easily by regularly asking students to fill out questionnaires after a learning process and gives the course responsible an opportunity to adjust the workload and the course content. It also shows if students are using the time resources in a proper way.

Literature resources:

Damsgård, B., Strømseng, E. & Varpe, Ø. (2017). Are learning outcomes affected by course intensity and workload? Conference paper, 2nd EuroSoTL conference, June 8-9 2017, Lund, Sweden

Karjalainen, A., Jutila, S. & Alhe, K. (2006). Give me time to think. Determining student workload in higher education, Oulu: Oulu University Press

Raaheim, A. (2013), Råd og tips til deg som underviser, Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS

Soulé, J, Førland, O. & Dahl. T. (2017). Sense and sensibility in workload calculation. Conference paper, MNT conference, 30-31 March 2017, Oslo

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/bologna/ESG_2015.pdf. (2015). Brussels, Belgium