

## MANAGING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF APPROPRIATE WORKLOAD<sup>1</sup>

### What is the student workload at USQ?

Workload within any USQ course is clearly defined on the course specification. It includes the time students spend on directed and private study, assessment and lectures and tutorials for on-campus students. At USQ, it is usually 165 hours per semester.

### Why ask students questions about workload?

- Workload is a useful proxy for measuring the amount of learning required to achieve course learning objectives. It is the responsibility of the course examiner and moderator to ensure that tasks required within a course are appropriate for the times allocated in the student workload.
- Students' perceptions of workload are monitored within courses through the USQ standard evaluation surveys and at the end of a program through the *Course Experience Questionnaire*<sup>2</sup>.

### What is the relationship between students' perceptions of workload and the quality of learning?

Students' perception of workload has an effect on the way they approach their learning and, hence, the quality of their learning (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Kember & Leung, 1998; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). Research over a number of years shows the following:

- Students who apply a surface or reproductive approach to learning usually rely only on rote-learning and memory for assessments and worry about the time the task is taking.
- Perceptions of workload are also exacerbated by conflicting or confusing course content and poor student to student and/or teacher to student relationships.
- Ultimately, students with perceptions of a heavy or inappropriate workload tend to experience *pressure* or *stress*.

Therefore, managing students' perceptions of workload can assist students to develop effective learning and study practices, and indirectly may improve student learning outcomes.

### How to manage students' perceptions of workload

1. Explicitly clarify the learning objectives and related assessment tasks early in the course. Ensure students understand what, why and how they are assessed.
2. Ensure assessment tasks and associated workload are clear to students by including the following:
  - instructions on what is required e.g. model assignments.
  - marking criteria and standards.
  - pointers as to how one assessment feeds into subsequent assessments.
  - pathways through which students can get assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is obtained from the Appropriate Workload scale of a national student survey, called the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ).

<sup>2</sup> CEQ, a national survey conducted in USQ on behalf of the Graduate Careers Australia.

- produce an assessment design that will optimise student work effort across a course or program.
  - integrate course assessment tasks into a coherent whole, with the first assignment providing a foundation for completing the next: for example, students submit a literature review in preparation for a final essay.
  - integrate assessment tasks across parts of a program. For example an assessment task on reflecting on math skills in one course, can contribute to a student e-portfolio assessment task in another course.
  - communicate all information, particularly assessment instructions, to students consistently across all study modes.
3. Some degree of coordination of student workload for courses in a program may be possible. For example, some first year coordinators attempt to stagger submission times and plan difficulty level to distribute workload across the semester in any given semester.
  4. Devise and encourage use of a weekly study schedule that students can adopt to help them keep up with assignments, required readings, general coursework and to keep each week as stress-free as possible.
  5. Asking for student feedback on the course design (learning objectives and assessment tasks) early in the course allows you to provide clarification on issues of concern and prepare for change in a later offering.
  6. Create an environment where:
    - students have the appropriate academic skills for success in your course [See academic skills topic on the Learning and Teaching website: [http://www.usq.edu.au/learntech/](http://www.usq.edu.au/learnteach/)].
    - student-student relationships and group coherence are developed, for example, through group activities within Wimba classroom, online discussions, blogs, assignments and projects.
    - you are available for students' consultations and respond to questions as soon as you can, preferably within 48 business hours if the contact is electronic.

## References

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