6. Improving student perceptions of workload

The sixth item in eVALUate asks students their level of agreement with this statement:

*The workload in this unit is appropriate to the achievement of the learning outcomes.*

Workload includes class attendance, reading, researching, group activities and assessment tasks.

This document aims to assist teachers to ensure that the amount of work involved in their unit is reasonable and manageable.

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1. What do students understand by workload?

Students’ understanding of workload is complex: it might mean class attendance, amount of required reading, researching, group activities and assessment tasks, or a combination of them all.

2. Why are students so sensitive about workload?

Student expectations of university are changing: recent studies of first year Australian students show that fulltime students are working longer hours in paid employment, and few students come to university campuses for five days of the working week (McInnis, 2001; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). In addition, universities like Curtin have a high proportion (over 50%) of students who are mature-age, and who have significant commitments outside academia.

The following table shows the average number of hours students in Australia work and their associated contact hours at University according to their Field of Education (McInnis and Hartley, 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Study</th>
<th>Hours Employment</th>
<th>Contact Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce/ business</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts / humanities</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering / surveying</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Contact hours vary according to discipline and field of study and academics should agree as a course team as to the expected student workload for each semester and unit.

3. How can teachers improve students’ perceptions of workload?

3.1 Communicate learning outcomes and unit design to your students

Make sure you explain to your students what the learning outcomes are, why they need to achieve them, and how they will be assessed. Students usually respond positively when they see what they have to do, and why. Ask them for feedback on your plans (and whether they think the unit requirements are unreasonable)—be prepared to negotiate if you can, or reiterate professional standards and competency levels if you cannot change them.

3.2 Focus less on content and more on achieving the graduate attributes

Living in the ‘information age’ means that more and more information is constantly available, and that information also dates quickly (Markwell, 2002). Some teachers react by having their students learn more and more information so that they will be prepared for the life after graduation. In fact, while new graduates undoubtedly need to “know their stuff”, they have greater need for skills to be able to deal with increased and changing information. It is also difficult to predict even a year or two ahead the specific knowledge that students will require in any given discipline. This means that
we need to respond with curricula which focus on those skills highlighted in Curtin’s graduate attributes, particularly critical thinking, information skills and learning how to learn. Cramming more content into units, even when the teaching semester is shorter, adds to student load without making students more productive or better equipped. Again, explain to your students why they need to be able to apply concepts or perform particular tasks as graduates.

3.3 Avoid over-assessing or assessing the wrong things

Assessment tasks are opportunities for students to demonstrate their achievement of the unit learning outcomes. They are not intended as punishment for students, or traps to catch them out. It is also questionable to use assessment to “keep them working” although this is a common strategy for less mature, self-directed students. Assessment must focus on what it is that we want students to learn (the learning outcomes). The assessment tasks should give students a reasonable chance of demonstrating their achievement of specific learning goals, and not their memorisation of everything associated with a subject area. Consider carefully how many times a students must demonstrate a skill in a course—giving a presentation, for example—so that you know they can do it.

3.4 Avoid using too much group assessment

One of the graduate attributes is professional skills which includes team work. Students may need to be taught and assessed on how to work in a team during their course. Group work can also be an excellent opportunity to collaborate, learn from peers and engage in problem-solving. However, group work is also very time-consuming, and students have to synchronise complex timetable constraints to engage with each other. If you do decide to use group work, be very clear that it is productive and useful for both you and the students. For further information on assessing the individual in group work see [http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/learn_online/assess/group/](http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/learn_online/assess/group/)

3.5 Integrate assessments tasks into a coherent whole

Instead of setting numerous, time-consuming and unrelated assessment tasks, build them into a coherent whole. Overloading students with unrelated assessment tasks leads them to adopt surface approaches to learning: they clutch at facts and memorise them as best they can in order to “pass” (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 1992). Instead, try connecting all the tasks so that they form a coherent whole, and mirror the sort of tasks that students will do as graduates. For example, set the students the task of producing a report (third and final assignment) which draws on preliminary information search strategies (first assignment: a literature search) and subsequent analysis and evaluation of those findings (second assignment: justification for using certain sources). In this way, students have a project to work on, and need to build their resources from the beginning of the unit. If you assign them problems in different and specific contexts (geographical location or historical period) they are also less likely to plagiarise.

3.6 Use flexible student-centred approaches

A student-centred approach means you make students’ achievement of learning outcomes the priority in your teaching. Do whatever is reasonable and manageable to assist students. If you are not already using the Web to make unit information available, consider doing so. Some students travel long distances at great expense to come to a campus: don’t make them do that just to hand in an assignment or get another copy of a reading or unit outline. Use a space on WebCT or Blackboard to make information available; use e-Reserve to make study resources available electronically. If class times are changed or cancelled, inform students by email or mobile to save them travelling for no reason.
3.7 Use face to face classes to promote interaction and give new information

Lectures and large classes were originally intended to supply information to a large number of people at once. However, electronic delivery has made this function less compelling. Using a lecture to deliver information already available (or even reading the textbook to students during the lecture) is very annoying to students. Make the key information available prior to the event, tell students to read it, then use the class to get them working—interacting in pairs or small groups, problem-solving, working on case studies or scenarios. Your presence at the lecture or large class is better used to lead, guide and enable student learning—not just to deliver information.

3.8 Use other techniques to prompt students to read

Anecdotal evidence suggests that today’s students are less interested in reading university texts. If true, this may be due to their orientation to screen image rather than text (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Snyder, 1997) or (as many academics believe) students find reading complex materials too challenging (McInnis & James, 1995). Whatever the reasons, there are several ways of having students acquire the information they need. For example, set pairs of students to read a different text each, and report the findings to the group (and so they practice summarising and evaluating information, and presenting as well). Set one essential reading, and set the students the task of finding another of equal worth, then have them justify their choice to the group. Take one essential reading and do a guided reading in class—working through the text, pointing out strengths and weaknesses. Have students work on other readings individually or in pairs, and present their findings to the group.

3.9 Determine student workload across their units

Course and unit coordinators should work together to spread student workload by:

- coordinating assessments with other units so not all assignments are due at the same time; and
- looking at the overall difficulty of the combination of units that students are doing in any given semester and determine any changes.

3.10 Have students use time management tools

It is essential that students (particularly first years) organise a semester calendar of work so that they can identify and plan around high workload periods. Advise students to look at the Curtin Calendar which gives details of important university dates, exam times and holidays.

The Online Timetable Planner (http://timetable.student.curtin.edu.au) is available to Bentley students and enables students to plan their Semester classes online. They can see when lectures, tutorials and other activities are available and plan their schedule accordingly.

In the first week of semester students receive the unit outline and study guide for each of their units. Encourage them to mark on their timetable dates when lectures and tutorial are held, tests are set, assignments are due, and any other significant events. Students can then consider the study preparation time required for all these activities. If they have a serious clash of unit commitments, this will show up on their timetable and they can then prepare for a study overload during part of the semester.

If students feel that they cannot overcome the problems associated with this clash, you may be able to negotiate assignment dates with them.
4. For further assistance

Teaching development staff are available for help with individuals or teams.

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Resources to help you

A range of resources to help you to develop strategies to improve items which have been identified as needing improvement, are available from the eVALUate website, or alternatively a hard copy can be forwarded to you by Terri Crowe (x2305 or T.Crowe@curtin.edu.au). Resources are available for each of the following items of the eVALUate questionnaire.

1. Communicating clear learning outcomes
2. Creating engaging learning experiences
3. Creating effective learning resources
4. Assessing student achievement of learning outcomes
5. Providing feedback for student learning
6. Improving student perceptions of workload
7. Improving student perceptions of teaching quality

List of References


