



Study of Stress and Exhaustion in Part-Time Students

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Abstract

This study presents and discusses the first results of a longitudinal study on stress and exhaustion in part-time college students. Study, in addition to full-time or part-time employment, gives students a triple burden consisting of work, study and leisure or family. This stress situation often leads to discontinuation or substantial interruption of studies or even health effects on students. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that can affect academic success systemically over the course of the semester, in order to incorporate preventive measurements in teaching as well as in the central university organization from an early stage.

1. Introduction

Austrian universities currently offer (in the academic year 2010/11) over 90 courses in part-time form [1]. This part-time version of study implies for students, in many cases, a triple burden: they must balance work, study and private or family life [2]. The effects of this stress situation show in students, who interrupt studying, do not finish the course (drop out) or suffer from health impairment [3]. Previous studies [2, 3] mostly concern the living conditions of students and relate mainly to students at universities; they cover only parts of this problem. In particular, referring to part-time students at technical colleges, there is no comprehensive empirical insight. Existing studies do not allow drawing a clear picture of the triple burden situation for these students.

Since the proportion of full-time or part-time students will increase with regards to the increasing implementation of Master programs in the future, the need for systematic knowledge about the burden situation of this group of students increases as well. Only the creation of a new information base allows identifying the factors that affect academic success and enables universities to establish prevention measures from an early stage. The aim is to prevent the drop out of students, and accordingly, to increase the rate of students who successfully complete university.

The aim of the present study is to capture the subjective burden of part-time students of the FHWien courses of the WKW over time in all aspects. In a three-year qualitative and quantitative longitudinal study, the students are regularly surveyed about their stressful situations with regards to their studies or organizational aspects of their studies, as well as to their work and private life. From the results of this study, measures will be developed regarding the lectures as well as the central university organization. The implementation of these measures will then be evaluated in further surveys. This project is part of the 9th Invitation of the Vienna University School-Funding Program in 2005 by the City of Vienna, Municipal Department 27, with EU-strategy and business development support.

2. Procedure

The study has been conducted by the Institute of Personnel and Knowledge Management and the Institute for Marketing and Sales Management, FHWien courses of WKW, during the period from 2009 to 2011. Students of Bachelor and Master degree programs in the FHWien courses of WKW, both actively employed and full-time students, have been polled in order to additionally conduct a systematic comparison of their experiences.

The focus of the survey is on the load pressures of each past semester. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed which surveys the subjective strain of students. The questionnaire consists of items concerning the burden of study, profession and private/family life.



Another aspect which the study considers is the exposure of students due to particular courses of the semester. Therefore, the burden of attending the course, the burden of examinations and the burden of additional work for the course are separately evaluated.

In addition, students are asked about measures which they take to enable them to cope better with stress from the course of study. The questionnaire ends with an open question which allows students to propose organizational measures on the part of the college organization that may reduce the perceived stress situation.

The survey has been started in 2009, using an online questionnaire for each existing preceding semester. Thus, data are available for each semester since winter semester 2008/09.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS uni-and multivariate analysis.

3. Selected Results

Only fully-answered questionnaires were evaluated. The return rate for the first survey was 35% over all degree programs ($n = 462$), for the second survey 23% ($n = 392$), for the third survey 17% ($n = 392$) and for the fourth survey 23% ($n = 511$). The distribution of the participants over the study forms (full-time and part-time) is approximately 50%. The proportion of female students (average of 60%) participating in the survey outweighs the proportion of male students (average of 40%). However, this is representative for the overall distribution of gender (60% female; 40% male) at the FHWien courses of the WKW. The results of the students participating in Master programs could not be considered separately due to the small number of such cases.

In the following, some selected results of the study are presented.

3.1 Extent of employment comparing part-time / full-time students

- More than 74.8% of part-time students worked 40 hours or more per week, of which approximately 30.6% worked 40-50 hours per week.
- The proportion of part-time students working up to 20 hours per week was low (10%).
- About 30% of the full-time students were not working.
- More than half of the full-time students (about 59.2%) worked up to 10 hours (39.7%) or up to 20 hours (19.4%) per week.

3.2 General stress situation comparing part-time / full-time on selected factors

- The overall mean of the perceived burden by students due to studying, measured on a scale from "1 = not at all burdened" to "10 = very heavy burdened," is 6.97 for part-time and full-time students (SS 10).
- Part-time students felt slightly more burdened by studying (average of 7.24 SS 10) (6.96) than did full-time students.
- Female students and male students did not differ significantly in terms of the subjective impact of the study.
- The perceived stress caused by work for part-time students increased with studying (the mean of the exposure through the profession on a scale from "1 = not at all" to "10 = very burdened" before the study was 5.46 and after the beginning of the study was 6.37).
- The perceived impact of private life for part-time students increased significantly with entry into the study programs (the mean of the burden due to private life on a scale from "1 = not burdened at all" to "10 = very heavy burdened" rose from 3.41 before the study to 5.22 after the start of the study).

3.3 Handling of the study load

The survey participants were asked about their personal handling of burden imposed on them by the study during the semester. To this end, students had to rate the following statements on a scale from "1= applies not at all" to "10 = I agree very strongly":



Most striking is the result in terms of the reduction of private activities, indicating that the part-time students reduce their private activities to a large extent (the average is 7.91). This result was confirmed in the second survey, as shown in Table 1.

Study form	Part-time (WS 09)	Part-time (SS 10)	Full-time (WS 09)	Full-time (SS 10)
I have spread my workload in an well-timed manner	5.68	6.13	6.21	5.68
Collaboration with colleagues reduces my workload	5.03	4.62	5.67	5.50
I have reduced my level of ambition	5.05	4.81	4.48	4.58
I have decreased private activities (family, friends, hobbies....)	8.17	7.91	6.37	6.57
I have decreased professional activities	4.21	4.22	4.57	4.87

Table 1: Handling of the study load (mean values)

4. Discussion

With the initial results of the study, empirically-based insights on the level of stress and exhaustion in students are delivered. As already presumed, it was found that the burden of study has a higher impact on part-time students than on full-time students. The burden of part-time students is higher overall, since with the beginning of the study, the subjectively-felt burden due to the job as well as to private life increases. Any additional burden on how to care for children or on financial management also adds to the perceived exhaustion of part-time students.

The results provide useful data for teaching as well as for the central university organization. In particular, the curriculum and the curriculum design should consider factors which were identified as a burden, in order to avoid stress concentrations. Study results concentrating on rating every single course of the different study programs offered by the FHWien courses of the WKW may be used for this cause as well. For all courses (and accordingly, the central areas of the FHWien courses of WKW) tangible measures could be derived without the loss of quality of the curriculum or the services offered. These measures concern, for example, the distribution of courses and exams as well as additional tasks in the curriculum throughout the semester. Furthermore, the issue was taken up by students in stressful situations who sought discussions with lecturers in order to raise awareness of the specific exposure, in particular the part-time students.

At the end of 2011, a complete evaluation of the outcomes of this long-term study will be possible. Therefore, it will be examined if the results can be generalized on the basis of the organization of the study and if age groups have crucial effects on the results. In order to achieve the objectives, it is necessary to determine specific student types who feel particularly burdened and to analyze these types further so that individual measurements for this target group may be developed.

References

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