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DEAN'S DIGEST

How can we smooth out the ITU workloads?

"The course is fine I think, but with the high workload on multiple courses at once it's hard to be able to learn and deliver as I want for each course. I find myself just trying to get the mandatory done in all courses but don't have time for anything else including enjoying the learning process."

Anonymous student, S2021 evaluation

*As you may know, an ITU student raised concerns publicly about the study environment and the workload at ITU. Two days later, the Student Council arranged an "ask me about anything" event in the Atrium. It became apparent that though everyone's study experience is different, many students at ITU struggle with high workloads. The Student Council runs a workload survey, so to increase student voice and fact-base this theme, **Viktor Shamal Andersen, the President of the ITU Student Council** is co-author on this issue.*

Working hard is good but working harder is not necessarily better. ITU's high level of ambition to develop and deliver exceptionally good IT-candidates in short time, may lead to the assumption that studying here is no walk in the park and shouldn't be. Such expectations put a lot of pressure on faculty to deliver high-level academic contents and teaching to ensure the educational quality. But it also puts a huge pressure on students to constantly deliver constantly at a high pace. Teachers, The Student Council, Study and Career guidance, SAP, and DOE Support meet students daily complaining about a high pressure and meaningless prioritizations, such as sacrificing reading and preparing for the lectures to do exercises. This exemplifies that high quantity does not lead to high quality.

Alignment of expectations happens during the study rather than prior to the study

At the student meeting Oct. 27 in the Atrium, students mentioned an "elite culture" where only the best students can follow the pace. When I read the welcoming notes from Heads of Study Programme, they all warn about the

intensity of ITU study life, e.g., “*Our programme is intense and demands a lot of work during and a concentrated effort all three years*” (GBI and BDDIT) or “*Please notice that a full-time study requires technical skills, high-level academic reflection, and a continuous work effort.*” (SWU). Oftentimes, it takes personal experience rather than external communication to make students understand fully the actual demands of studying at ITU. One explanation is bias: *Wishful thinking* makes us judge our own abilities optimistically especially when we face unknown land. *Selective attention* and *causation* examples are “I was the best at math in high school, so I will be at ITU as well” or “no prior experience required so this is doable”. When non-experienced students meet experienced fellow-students, who may even consider for instance programming a lifestyle, they may feel devaluated and lower their perception of self-efficacy.

According to our pedagogical student-centered principles, “ITU should focus on the **individual student's** learning process, including extensive use of feedback. ITU principles also state “*teaching and learning activities are co-created in intense collaboration between faculty, students and administrative staff in order to create an excellent and motivating learning environment for our students.*” Thus, we acknowledge that the peaks and valleys of study life are usually experienced differently by students even though they attend the same class at the same programme. Study life can be turbulent and can change gears rapidly: students can go from being happy to extremely stressed, just because an unexpected event or exam note in their email box. At the same time, students may struggle with private issues like finances, personal relationships or other challenges that come with an adult life. It is not sufficient to acknowledge the hard work that students do. If the learning curve is too steep, students fall back and that affect completion rates and increase dropouts, which fires back on ITU.

Unfortunately, Student Council’s workload questionnaire hints at many students needing to deviate from the requirement of a full semester due to stress, depression, or anxiety. These are serious conditions that ITU of course in no way is interested in exacerbating. The learning curve seems too steep in some places, so we need to act now to identify where a better balance is needed.

We therefore ask how can ITU and students connect and collaborate to avoid personal crises caused by work-overload?

We know that faculty work hard to meet the students where they are as well as include and support them to ensure that they can manage high work pressures, but it may take an extra effort to meet them all. It is therefore important that students use their voice to *help* their teachers, not just criticize them, to be more responsive to student feedback daily, align expectations more frequently, and understand our co-responsibilities. In the education portfolio report we address issues like this.

It is, however, important to notice, that though everyone is expected to speak up about the issues they’re facing, overloaded students may not have the energy to try to change the situation, especially if they do not know where to go, it becomes an even harder task. Therefore, ITU must do what we can to smooth out hurdles preventing feedback, and in turn the students have a responsibility to participate actively when approached for feedback.

The Student Council is the collective voice of ITU students, enabling faculty, staff, and management to actively checking in periodically on the issues that students are facing in their day-to-day studies at campus, in class or personally.

In the coming semester everyone will be able to participate in multiple organized in-class discussions about how they are experiencing their studies at those times. Hopefully this direct way of gathering feedback allows us to discover any pressing issues much faster, so we can take action.

What are we already considering?

Balanced learning, Empowerment, Wellbeing, Inclusion, Support, and Engagement (BEWISE) define student measures for a thriving learning environment. BEWISE defines why a balanced workload is necessary and provides a common frame of reference for this effort, where questions could be:

- Does the workload reflect the ECTS score and is it relatively comparable across courses and programmes? Does the percentage-based calculation system work or will time-based systems work better? Should the ETCS (7.5 or 15) be more flexible so that they reflect the actual workload?
- How can fulfill the ambitions of both teachers and students?
- Can collective planning, prioritization, and measuring the aggregated workload "unsilo" the courses and reduce the workload?
- Can less mandatory tasks and more volunteer tasks meet differentiated needs while reducing workloads from those who struggle most?
- What other supportive activities, such as BootIT (SWU) or Primer sessions (Bsc in Data science) or Summer University will help the student catch up?
- Can self-assessment tests help students better align ITU expectations with own abilities?
- Can we be long-term oriented by providing more flexibility? Dropping a course or taking more time can be necessary, but it requires that the 30 ECTS rule is abandoned. It is still better to prolong a study than to give it up.
- How can we help students assess their state of mind and stress level so they can reach out and ask for help in good time? I found this poster developed in a firefighter context, but it may be useful for categorizing the levels of pressure and identifying the no-go zones (orange and red).



Adapted from: Watson, P., Gist, R., Taylor, V., Evlender, E., Loto, F., Martin, R., Vaught, D., Nash, W.P., Westphal, R., & Litz, B. (2013). Stress First Aid for Firefighters and Emergency Services Personnel. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

To be inclusive, we cannot accept a study environment that may break some people while empowering others. On the other hand, we cannot guarantee that no students fail. Students who struggle too hard for too long may face severe consequences for their future personal as well as professional life. A step towards a thriving study environment for all students is therefore to know the peaks and valleys of student life and help our students balance ITU workloads better.

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