

# **The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities**

## **2009 Report**

**Bahram Bekhradnia**

### **Background**

1. This report follows two previous surveys of the academic experience of students in English universities, in 2006 and 2007. Those reports covered a wide range of issues, including the amount of contact students had with their staff, the amount of private study they undertook, the number of other students in their lectures and seminars and the extent of their use of facilities, as well as more qualitative issues like their satisfaction with the value for money of what they received. Because the sample sizes were so large – 15,000 students each time – those reports were also able to go some way towards differentiating between subjects and universities, as well as providing a snapshot of provision across the sector as a whole.
2. The previous surveys, conducted in consecutive years, revealed little apparent change between the two years, but that was to be expected, and was reassuring since it confirmed the validity of the surveys – indeed it would have been of concern if there had been substantial shifts from one year to the next. However, we expressed the intention that those surveys would provide a baseline against which we could conduct surveys in the future to see if there was any change in those aspects of the student experience that were measured, in particular the amount of contact received by students, the sizes of the groups in which they were taught and how much private study they undertook.
3. This present report revisits a number of the questions that arose from those earlier surveys, and reports on a more recent survey<sup>1</sup>, carried out in March 2009, that was more modest in its size – and therefore its scope – but which nevertheless enables us to monitor whether there has been an overall change in patterns of study and provision.
4. The main conclusion to be drawn from the 2009 survey is that there has been little change since the previous surveys. As far as the total amount of contact (lectures, seminars, supervised laboratory sessions, etc) that students receive is concerned, there has been no statistically significant change. However, there does appear to have been a small but statistically

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Opinionpanel who again agreed to conduct the survey at a discounted price. The analysis itself was conducted by Chris Martin of Opinionpanel.

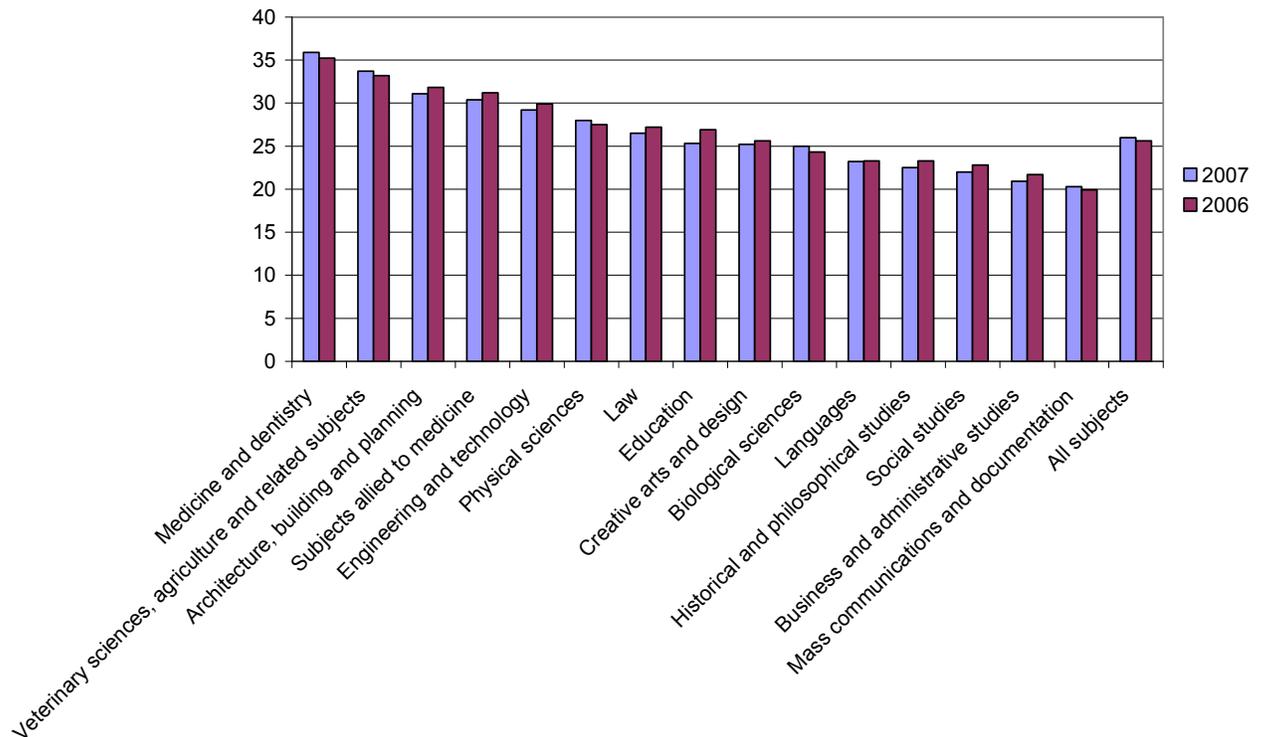
significant increase in the amount of private study that students undertake. The results are discussed in greater detail later in this report, and are preceded by some discussion of the findings and implications of the earlier results and subsequent developments.

### **The 2006 and 2007 surveys**

5. In 2006 and 2007 we surveyed 15,000 students about various aspects of their university experience, including how many contact sessions (lectures, seminars, etc) they attended each week and how many hours of private study they undertook. The students were also asked about things like the proportion of seminar and laboratory sessions led by non-academics (graduate students, etc), the use of facilities, how much paid work they did and how satisfied they were with their experiences. There were some surprising findings.

6. First, there are significant differences between subjects. Many know from their own experience what differences there are between courses at university. It is well known from anecdote, for example, that scientists, engineers and medical students are required to spend long periods in the laboratory. And so it turns out. A student of historical or philosophical studies, for example, on average has less than half the number of taught hours than an engineer – with medical and veterinary students studying most of all. What might have been assumed though is that humanities students would make up for that with time in the library and doing private study more generally. That proves not to be the case – certainly not in all subjects and not in all universities – as is revealed in Figure 1 below, that shows the differences between the average number of hours of study in different subjects.

Figure 1: Workload by subject (2006 and 2007)



7. By and large, taking into account both teaching and private study, the 2006 and 2007 surveys showed that humanities and social sciences require less effort<sup>2</sup> than other subjects. Those surveys revealed an average of just 20 hours of total study per week in mass communications, and not much more in business studies. This is just two thirds of the amount required on average in, say, engineering.

8. Even more surprising, even within a subject there were found to be large differences between institutions. In historical and philosophical studies, for example, the loads ranged from 39.5 hours in the most demanding institutions to just 14 hours in the least. The ranges are shown in Table 1 below.

<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere "Effort" is taken to mean the amount of study undertaken.

Table 1: Student workload by subject – highest and lowest institutional mean hours per week (average of 2006 and 2007 results combined)

Subject	Highest institutional mean	Lowest institutional mean	Median of institutional means
Medicine and dentistry	46.3	26.3	35.5
Subjects allied to medicine	38.3	24.6	31.2
Biological Sciences	39.9	15.0	24.5
Veterinary agriculture and related	41.6	23.5	37.0
Physical Sciences	45.3	19.8	27.6
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	36.4	17.1	26.2
Engineering & technology	41.2	20.8	28.7
Architecture, Building & Planning	41.5	26.3	28.5
Social studies	35.8	14.0	21.6
Law	44.8	18.7	26.2
Business & Administrative studies	28.3	15.5	20.8
Mass Communications & Documentation	26.8	14.7	19.4
Linguistics, Classics & related subjects	39.3	14.8	22.3
Historical & Philosophical studies	39.5	14.0	21.5
Creative Arts & Design	34.5	17.2	25.6
Education	33.7	14.4	25.5

9. Students were asked not only how many hours were scheduled, but how many they attended. On the basis of their replies, students attended on average 92 per cent of scheduled lessons, though again there were discernible subject patterns: in computer science 13 per cent of lessons were missed, compared to just 2 per cent in education. Unsurprisingly there were institutional differences too, with students in some institutions far more likely to miss classes than in others. These differences more or less matched the subject profiles of the institutions concerned.

10. One finding that many found surprising was that there were few differences between the old and the new universities, with the new universities if anything making more provision and in smaller classes than the old, and less likely to use graduate students as teachers (students were also asked about the size of groups, and who taught them).

11. The reports touched on, but did not develop, the implications of all this. In particular, they were explicit that the quality of teaching cannot be deduced simply by measuring the number of contact hours: in fact the optimal balance between teaching and private study is complex and depends on a number of factors not explored in those reports, including teaching styles, course aims and so on. But those reports did not look only at the hours of teaching. They looked also at the total teaching and learning effort

– total time spent studying. We concluded that these findings raised questions about what it means to have a degree from a UK university, if degrees can be obtained with such different amounts of effort (even within the same university between subjects, or the same subject between universities). The reports did not draw conclusions about these matters – that was beyond their scope and competence – but they did raise questions that deserve investigation.

12. An indication that these questions might matter a little more as students begin to pay more towards the cost of their degrees is given by the responses students gave to the question of whether their course represented value for money. UK and EU students – who were at that time paying only £1,000 or so per year – were fairly positive. But 30 per cent of overseas students – who were paying many times more – were dissatisfied with the value for money of their course. That is worrying in itself, given the extent to which some universities depend on overseas students for their financial health. Unless universities can satisfy their overseas students, those golden eggs will not continue to be laid indefinitely. It is also a worrying indication that home and EU students may increasingly question the value they get as they pay more for their courses.

13. Among the questions raised by the previous surveys was the relationship between contact time and other learning modes. The fact that a student on one programme might receive more contact from their teachers than a student on another programme does not in itself say anything about the quality of the learning achieved by that student, because a different pedagogic approach might require a different balance between inputs from lectures, seminars etc and private study. Much of the response to the surveys focused on the different amounts of staff contact, and the response from many in the universities was simply to assert that a discussion of contact was meaningless, without providing any evidence as to why. As the earlier reports pointed out, there may be perfectly justifiable and acceptable reasons why a student in history in one university should have so much less contact with staff than students in the same subject in another university, but simply asserting that that was the case did nothing to reassure those who were concerned by the findings.

14. Moreover, until recently universities only rarely provided information to students about what they could expect by way of contact with their teachers, and the amount of formal teaching. So those who are interested in these questions – and it is known that students are interested in these questions, particularly as they are making decisions about university application – have had to rely on indirect and quite unsatisfactory sources of information, like

newspaper league table analyses of staff:student ratios, which are a completely misleading proxy for teaching contact.

15. Of even greater concern was the response to the findings about total study time. Whereas the answer to the question about contact time – that the differences in contact time might be attributable to differences in pedagogic approach, with less contact in some cases being compensated by more time spent in the library or laboratory – provided a plausible if undemonstrated justification, no such comfort was provided in respect of the findings about the very different amounts of overall effort that students devoted to their studies in different subjects, but also in different universities in the same subject. The reaction to this finding has, broadly, been to ignore it. And when it has arisen (for example when the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee, in the course of their Inquiry into Students and Universities, raised this question with a group of the leaders of the mission groups) the response has been to avoid answering the question but to answer instead about the differing amounts of contact required by different pedagogic styles – the answer to a different question<sup>3</sup>. Yet this question raises very serious issues - about the possible variation in standards between subjects and universities, and about what it means to have a degree from an English university.

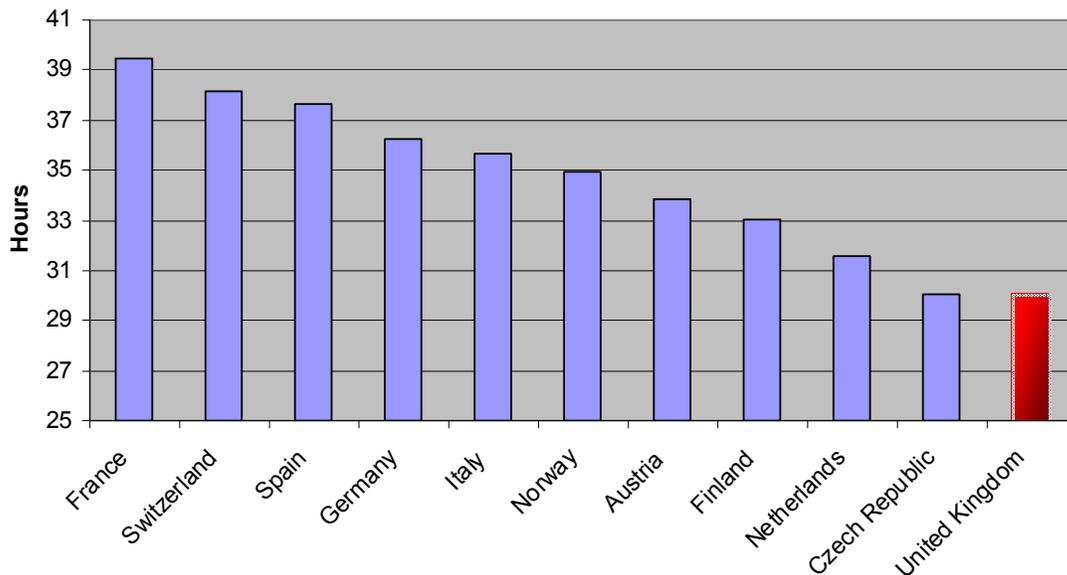
16. If it is possible to earn a degree in, say, history in one university after studying for just 20 hours a week whereas a student in a different university studying history is required to put in 30 hours each week, then it is reasonable to assume that the student in the latter will, all other things being equal, achieve a higher standard. That is not of course necessarily so. It could be that the former university has found a magic bullet that enables students to achieve the same high standards as a student at the latter – or it could be that the latter is more inefficient than the former. That at least is a matter for investigation and explanation, and so far there has been no apparent inclination on the part of those concerned to investigate whether that is so, and if not, what the implications are for standards in our universities. At the extreme, of course, this may simply be an indication that what students study, and how much they learn, is not the most important thing while they are at university and that the three or four years they spend there are more important for other reasons. If that is the case too, that is something that is worth investigating and concluding on the basis of evidence. What is not acceptable is simply to ignore the issue.

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/uc170-i/uc17002.htm>

17. Similarly, the reaction to the finding in the 2007 report that students in this country appeared to put in considerably less effort than those elsewhere in Europe was fended off on the (correct) grounds that simply comparing the number of hours of effort revealed nothing about the quality of the effort nor about the quality of learning that was achieved. As a broad statement that is, of course, absolutely correct. But the question has been raised, and on the face of it, unless there is evidence to the contrary, matters of concern arise. The 2007 report itself said that differences in effort said nothing in themselves about differences in quality, and we also warned that different survey instruments were used for the European countries (Eurostudent 2005) and for England (the HEPI survey). However, there is another, slightly older, survey, carried out by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) and other European institutions, which found that students in other European countries undertook on average 15 per cent more study each week than English students. These findings are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Time spent studying per week, UK vs selected European countries



Source: CHERI EC Framework project – The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society

18. The HEPI conclusion that students in England appear to devote less time to their studies than students elsewhere in Europe – and that therefore a degree in England can apparently be obtained with less effort than elsewhere

– has recently been supported in a report published by HEFCE in April 2009<sup>4</sup> that contained the results of some further research they commissioned from CHERI. This looked at a number of other studies, and concluded “The results of these studies support the conclusions of the HEPI report and add to the body of evidence that UK students commit fewer hours to study than students in other European countries.”

19. Indeed the HEFCE study reported the extraordinary finding that students at English universities – despite putting in fewer hours of study than students elsewhere in Europe – were more likely than their counterparts elsewhere to be putting in more effort than was strictly required by their universities. On the face of it, it does appear that some universities here are not very demanding of their students. But we also know from the earlier HEPI surveys that this varies greatly between universities.

20. It needs to be repeated, these findings do not concern contact hours, nor do they say anything about the quality of provision – all the indications are that the quality of teaching in universities in this country is good, and that students are very satisfied with this. What they reveal is that on average – by no means in all cases, but on average – students here are required to put in less effort to obtain a degree than students elsewhere. The UK has argued in the context of the Bologna process that our shorter degrees lead to outcomes similar to those elsewhere in Europe because of the prior knowledge of our students and also because of our more intensive and different pedagogic approaches.

21. It is inconvenient for us now also to have to demonstrate how students in this country achieve outcomes equivalent to those in other countries with very different amounts of effort, even within their shorter degree courses. It is quite plausible that they might do so, but if the issue is simply ignored, as it has been so far, the presumption will be that degrees in this country are more easily available in some universities and in some subjects than elsewhere in Europe, and that on average our degree standards are lower. That is a reasonable conclusion until it has been demonstrated that this is not so, and in the two years since the original surveys the issue has not been addressed by those competent and with a remit to do so. In fact, there is a proposal to extend the OECD-wide PISA tests, that have previously been applied only to school-aged pupils, to higher education students. When that occurs, it will enable us to say confidently whether the less onerous higher education demands made by the UK system do indeed achieve results similar to those elsewhere.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence”

22. So the previous surveys showed substantial variation both in contact hours and effort between subjects and within subjects between universities, but those reports were not judgmental about whether such differences are necessarily a cause for concern. However, they do suggest that on the face of it these findings raise issues that need to be pursued, and if the differences have benign explanations, then these should be provided.

23. Responses to those reports have varied considerably between institutions, but more particularly between bodies with national level responsibility and individual universities. At the individual university level there has been substantial take-up of the offer that HEPI made to share the raw data with universities who wished to investigate further the findings for their own institution. It is clear that many universities have taken the findings seriously, have sought to identify where they are out of step with other institutions and why, and in several cases have adjusted what they offer accordingly. Whether in response to the HEPI survey directly or because the issue has arisen in other ways, there are well-publicised examples of universities that have shown how seriously they now take the issue of what they provide students on the one hand and what they demand of students on the other.

24. The University of Lancaster, for example, since 2008 has made a commitment to students about matters like the minimum contact hours that they may expect, and the maximum number of other students they can expect in seminars. And the London School of Economics now makes a similar commitment, and in addition has stated that it aims to limit the number of seminars led by graduate students. The University of Manchester too has stated that it intends to review what it provides to students by way of contact with their staff. Others have stated that they intend to enter into quasi-contractual relations with students, covering the university's commitment to them and their commitment to the university.

25. But the response of the national bodies and those that represent universities collectively has been disappointingly defensive. Instead of acknowledging that on the face of it the findings of these surveys raised pedagogic questions, as well as questions about relative standards, that need to be explored and reassurance provided – or where reassurance is unavailable then lessons drawn and corrective action taken – the issues appear to have been avoided. Where they have been confronted, as stated above, they have been mistakenly characterised as concerning only different pedagogic approaches. Even if that were so, there is an issue to explore about the circumstances in which low levels of contact are acceptable and how this balances against requirements for private study; but of course the

issue of lower levels of total study effort is not primarily a pedagogic issue, but raises questions about relative standards. If these issues are not faced then damage will be done to the national interest. If it becomes widely believed that there is significant inconsistency in the effort required by different universities in this country for the award of a degree, and that there is no explanation of the variations in approach, then this will damage the reputation of higher education in this country.

### **The 2009 survey**

26. The survey conducted in March 2009 was on a smaller scale than those conducted in 2006 and 2007, with a sample of 2,000 students compared to 15,000 in each previous survey<sup>5</sup>. This means that analysis has not been possible at subject or institutional level. However, the 2009 sample was matched to the 2007 sample, and because 2,000 respondents is sufficient to enable analysis at sector level we have been able to draw some statistically robust conclusions about the changes between 2006 and the present. One of the motives for conducting the survey in 2006, and the intention to repeat the survey at intervals subsequently, was to establish whether following the introduction of variable fees universities have used some of the additional income that they receive to improve the provision that they make for students. It does not appear so far that this has occurred.

27. The 2009 survey asked just three questions, covering:

- The amount of formal teaching students received (lectures, seminars, laboratory instruction, etc);
- The amount of private study undertaken by students;
- The size of groups in which they were taught.

28. The total number of timetabled (contact) hours in 2009, on average across all subjects and institutions, was 14.5 hours compared to 14.3 in 2007<sup>6</sup> – a difference that is not statistically significant. There was, however, a statistically significant increase in the amount of private study, where students averaged 14.4 hours compared to 12.6 in 2007. This meant that their average total study hours also showed a statistically significant increase from 26.8 to 29.0 hours. So students appear to be working longer, despite receiving no more by way of hours of formal teaching. However, care should

---

<sup>5</sup> The technical annexes on the HEPI website ([www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)) describe the survey method and the results in detail.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the 2007 findings have been recalculated, with weightings applied to make the sample comparable to the 2009 survey.

be taken not to draw firm conclusions from one year's results. Future surveys should show if this year's results are the beginning of a trend, or an aberration.

29. This wave of the survey also looked at the group sizes in which students received their teaching – whether lectures, seminars or other forms of provision. Here, the only statistically significant difference was in the amount of formal teaching received in very small groups – of five other students or fewer – where the proportion of lessons received in such groups has increased from 6.4 per cent in 2007 to 10.3 per cent in 2009. Again, care should be taken not to deduce too much from a single year's results, but it is encouraging that to the extent that there have been changes in group sizes, they appear to have reduced.

## **Conclusions**

30. Since the 2006 and 2007 surveys there has been no statistically significant increase in the amount of formal contact that students have with academic staff (lectures, seminars and formal laboratory sessions), but there may have been a small increase in the amount of private study that they undertake. And there has been an increase in the number of lessons taught in the smallest groups (six students or fewer).

31. Whether as a result of the interest raised by our previous surveys, or as a result of student pressure following the higher fees they now pay, or for other reasons, there are indications that universities are addressing the question of their commitment to students about how much teaching they receive, who will teach them and how much will be expected of them.

32. It is also excellent that universities are beginning to be explicit about these things in their prospectuses and in the other information they provide to students and prospective students. If a particular course has a pedagogic approach that offers less formal teaching and requires more private study – or vice versa – then that is precisely the sort of thing that students need to take into account in selecting a course. And if it is possible for some universities to provide this information then there is no reason why all should not – that is a matter of good practice.

33. What is far less satisfactory is that there has been no apparent attempt to address the question of the circumstances in which different levels of contact are acceptable, and the relationship between formal contact and private study. Nor has there been any attempt to address the implications – not least for relative standards – of the large differences in the time devoted to their studies by students in different subjects, and more particularly in

different universities. There is also further evidence that students in universities in this country commit fewer hours to study than students elsewhere in Europe. These are matters to which the responsible bodies should address themselves as a matter of urgency.

34. In particular, it is important that better surveys are conducted than has been possible with the resources at HEPI's disposal. As a result of the work done so far, questions have been raised, and prima facie evidence produced that there are issues that need investigating. If these issues are important – and they are – then they need to be investigated properly, on the basis of robust and convincing evidence. That at least will ensure that the substantive issues are not clouded by methodological objections.