EDITORIAL SUMMARY: FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY ON THE DANISH STUDY PROGRESS REFORM

STUDENTS’ VIEWS, PRIORITIES AND DILEMMAS BASED ON SURVEY DATA FROM 4500 STUDENT RESPONDENTS IN APRIL 2015
EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY ON THE DANISH STUDY PROGRESS REFORM

Students’ views, priorities and dilemmas based on survey data from 4500 student respondents in April 2015

BY LAURA LOUISE SARAUW AND SIMON RYBERG MADSEN

Table of content

INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................................... 3
ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................................. 4
MAIN CONCLUSIONS.............................................................................................................................. 5
KEY ISSUES AND TRENDS ....................................................................................................................... 8
  Delays and dropouts .......................................................................................................................... 9
  Employability .................................................................................................................................. 10
  Learning quality and student life ....................................................................................................... 10
  Context and conditions for learning .............................................................................................. 10
SURVEY METHOD AND DATA ............................................................................................................... 12
Introduction

The summary presents the key findings from the first comprehensive survey of what students expect of the Danish Study Progress Reform. The summarised report is based on a survey conducted among 4,354 university students, who were asked to assess how they expect to manage their time and prioritise their activities in light of the Study Progress Reform’s requirements for faster completion.

The survey was distributed in April 2015 as part of a politically independent research project funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research/Humanities (FKK).

The report comprises an in-depth analysis of students’ prioritizations and choices, and reveals new insights into the behavioural patterns emerging in the wake of the Study Progress Reform in 2014. While relating to a number of other changes in the conditions for the students’ everyday lives and learning strategies, the report offers a solid outlook on effects introduced by a series of recent reforms in the Danish higher education system, such as adapting to the European Bologna Process and the introduction of outcome-based strategies for teaching and learning for employability.
Abstract

The survey shows that, in the eyes of the students, the Study Progress Reform is predominantly seen as a demand to revise their former study strategies and prioritize their time and resources differently than they did before the reform. Extracurricular activities in particular, such as student jobs, internships or studies abroad, are likely to be reconsidered and deprioritized by the students. Hence, the survey gives rise to a number of questions about the long-term effects of the reform – not only on the quality of the students’ learning and the desirability of the current situation, but also about the role and contribution of university education to the development of society.

Moreover, the survey indicates that the overall objective of the Danish Study Progress Reform, i.e. to increase the intensity of study activities, has resulted in a – possibly undesirable – conflict between different institutional and individual agendas, as the reform appears to:

- Address the wrong issues in relation to the aim of decreasing completion times.
- Reduce the students’ employability and international outlook
- Increase stress and ‘studying for the test’ at the expense of genuine learning
- Cause delays and increased dropout rates, and to give rise to a growing market for private tuition
Main conclusions

The Danish Study Progress Reform addresses the wrong issues in relation to its purpose of reducing completion times

By the time the data was collected in April-May 2015, 36% of the respondents were behind schedule in their studies. The responses from those who were behind schedule show a significant misalignment between the Study Progress Reform’s measures to decrease completion times (mandatory registration for exams, easier credit transfer, economic incentives to the faster students), and the actual causes for delays:

- 28% were or had been delayed due to signs of stress
- 27% were or had been delayed due to one or more purposely delayed exams
- 26% were or had been delayed due to a deliberate decision to favour extracurricular jobs
- 17% were or had been delayed due to illness
- 6% were or had been delayed due to transfer to another education
- 3% were or had been delayed due to problems with internship credit transfer(s)
- 3% were or had been delayed due to problems with credit transfer from studies abroad
- 1% were or had been delayed due to problems with credit transfer from studies in Denmark

The Danish Study Progress Reform has given rise to a conflict between different political, institutional and individual agendas

A significant majority of the respondents find that the demand for faster completion conflicts with their notion of a good student life as well as their current job strategies and the values they hear espoused by their teachers:

- 67% find that the reform will reduce their opportunities to develop a useful CV
- 67% that the reform will reduce their opportunities to find time for non-credit-related study activities
- 66% find that the reform will reduce their opportunities to take internships or take part in extracurricular project work
• 50% find that the reform will reduce their opportunities to fulfil their obligations to their study job

The Danish Study Progress Reform increases study intensity, but reduces learning

10% of the respondents expect to complete their studies faster than they would have without the reform. However, the price of that time reduction is that a number of students find that they have to cut back on educational activities. Many expect that they will actively try to avoid challenging classes or programmes, and about one quarter expect to learn less than they would have without the reform:

• 43% expect to skip non-mandatory courses that they would otherwise have signed up for
• 51% expect to study ahead or catch up in their holidays
• 33% expect to cut down on preparation time for all classes
• 24% expect to learn less
• 13% will consider enrolling at a less demanding university
• 16% will consider enrolling at a less demanding study programme

The Danish Study Progress Reform reduces student employability and international outlook

More than one quarter of respondents expect to either cut short, or not apply for, a planned internship or study abroad. It also seems that the reform blocks a variety of other pathways to strengthening students’ employability:

• 36% expect to reduce the amount of study relevant work
• 35% expect to engage less in voluntary work
• 29% expect to cut down on study irrelevant work
• 25% expect to cancel a planned internship
• 23% expect to cancel a planned period of study abroad

The Danish Study Progress Reform causes stress and makes students study for the test

As a consequence of the reform, more than half the respondents expect that it will be necessary to study more ‘to-the-test’. Likewise, they expect increased levels of stress to
go hand in hand with less commitment to both study-related and social activities with their fellow students. Moreover, the survey confirms a current and already known trend among students to deliberately select classes they feel they can easily pass – a strategy that may possibly be reinforced by the demand for faster completion:

- 60% expect to study ‘to-the-test’ i.e. to focus more on exam-related material
- 58% expect to experience an increased level of stress
- 43% expect a reduced pleasure/interest in their studies
- 42% expect to engage less in social activities on the university campus
- 20% had already, at the time of data-collection, intentionally adapted their choice of subject to the interests of teachers or censors
- 16% had already, at the time of data-collection, intentionally selected courses they felt they could easily pass

The Danish Study Progress Reform increases dropout and sparks a growing market for private tuition

Many respondents expect to become more dependent on assistance from either teachers in their classes and/or family and friends. About one in five consider it likely that they may need to pay for private training or coaching in order to pass on time. Lastly, more than one in ten expect the reform to increase the risk of drop-out. Combined, this raises the question whether the Danish Study Progress Reform will lead to unequal access to learning and completion in higher education:

- 35% expect to require more assistance from teachers
- 33% expect to require more help from family and/or friends
- 19% expect they may need to pay for private training or coaching
- 16% expect that the reform will increase the chance that they will drop out
Key issues and trends

By the time of publication of this summary, the Danish Study Progress Reform will have been in effect for more than eighteen months. Adjustments have been made to the reform, but the adjustments do not change the fact that a large number of students will have to complete their studies faster than before the reform. The present survey thus presents a reasonably accurate picture of the reform’s potential impact on the students’ choices of education in relation to such issues as delays and dropping out, employability, the quality of the education and student life, and the overall conditions for learning that they encounter in their particular courses or study programmes.
EDITORIAL SUMMARY: FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY ON THE DANISH STUDY PROGRESS REFORM

Figure 1.1. “The Study Progress Reform means that I...”

No. of respondents: 2,992 of 4,354. Note: The respondents were asked to indicate the most important statements from a list.

The survey shows how the students in Denmark experience Study Progress Reform as a clear-cut demand to change the way they have prioritized their time and resources. However, as evident in Fig. 1.1 above, the students’ expectations of the consequences differ widely. Below, we present four overall themes that serve as the basis for the further analyses in the four chapters of the full report. Please note that the full report is only available in Danish.

**Delays and dropouts**

In relation to the Study Progress Reforms’ overall objective to reduce average completion times, the figure shows that a mere 10% expect to complete faster after the reform.
Furthermore, 16% report an increased risk of dropping out, while 5% expect to be expelled within the next year. In the first theme, on delays and dropouts, we therefore question how much, and with what unforeseen losses along the way, e.g. due to dropouts, the reform can be said to reduce the overall completion time. The chapter also includes an analysis of the new measures to reduce completion time (mandatory registration for exams, easier credit transfer, economical incentives for faster completion) compared to the reasons that the respondents report as being the actual causes for delays and dropping out (e.g. stress and decreasing motivation).

**Employability**

The second theme chapter concerns with student employability. It comprises an overview of the respondents’ changed behaviour in relation to study jobs, internships, entrepreneurship and voluntary work. A key finding is that 67% of the respondents expect that the reform will make it more difficult for them to collect experiences for a CV that will be relevant in the labour market. Explicitly, 25% are considering to drop a planned internship, 35% expect to cut down on their voluntary work, while 60% assume that it will be a problem for student entrepreneurs to run their own business while they are still enrolled at the university.

**Learning quality and student life**

In the third theme, we discuss the students’ learning strategies and the lived lives of the students, i.e. revolving around the micro-level that surrounds and motivates their daily priorities. An increased level of stress is the dominant factor (58%) in the students’ assessment of the reform’s impact on their lives, whereas a little less than half (43%) respond that the reform will reduce their pleasure and/or interest in their studies. The respondents’ expectations to experience increased levels of stress may indicate that they suspect that they will be unable to meet the requirements of the reform. For instance 43% expect to have to opt out of non-mandatory courses and classes, which they would otherwise have attended, while 33% expect to have to cut down on preparation time for all their classes.

**Context and conditions for learning**

In the fourth theme, we discuss how the students’ opportunities to organize their own daily activities relate to the overall context and conditions for learning, as offered by their local institutions. Hence, we examine the importance that the respondents ascribe
to the use of various teaching formats (e.g. lectures vs. teaching in class or group work) in relation to their learning outcome. Furthermore, we identify who – or what – the respondents consider responsible for their eventual success or failure to complete the education they have enrolled in. Finally, we explore the respondents’ views on the grading system and the Study Progress Reform’s impact on their need to pursue extra help from teachers, supervisors, family and/or private tutors, which may go hand in hand with an increased social bias.

Download the full report in Danish:
Survey method and data

The present survey is based on replies from 4,354 university students in Denmark. The survey is not fully representative, but the data covers a sufficient number of respondents to identify any major trends, as the respondents do spread well in high numbers across most demographic areas (such as gender, level of study, subject area) and across all eight universities in Denmark. Against this background, the survey represents the best available data we have to form any conclusions about the students’ experience of the Danish Study Progress Reform.

The survey was conducted in April 2015, i.e. a little more than six months after the Study Progress Reform came into effect for newly enrolled students. At the time when we began to distribute the questionnaire, only freshmen therefore had first-hand experience with the reform. Accordingly, the findings from the survey represent both these students’ actual assessment of the reform, and older students’ expectations to its effects, students, who would only begin to see the actual effects when it was rolled out for them later in the autumn of 2015.

The survey was sent to 30,862 students. The 4,354 responses equate a response rate of 14%. Not all respondents completed the full survey. However, we decided to include partial responses in the analyses to make the most of the data that we had. The data collection was carried out in collaboration with a number of academic unions using different coding principles, which led to a set of particular challenges such as comparing, choosing and recoding. This process also determined the choice of descriptive analysis, which was designed to reflect a relatively uncomplicated relationship, i.e. what the reform means to the students who responded to the survey.

The questions in the survey were formulated on the basis of a co-creative research design, including questions raised by other surveys of student life, focus group interviews among students and interviews with select heads of studies and university staff. Moreover, the survey development process included a number of network meetings and workshops. In these meetings, students, teachers and a number of other stakeholders have provided input and discussed which questions should go into the final version of the survey.