

Survey of recent literature on time management: current practice and trends in research

“Time management is the skill which above all others can make the difference between graduating and drop out.” - Pickford & Brown, 2006, 47.

“Time management is arguably one of two of the most basic study skills, the other one being reading.” - Fry, 1997, 2.

These quotes exemplify the widespread recognition amongst teaching and learning professionals of the fundamental role this learning area plays in successful study. Despite this, there is little published work dedicated to time management for students in UK Higher Education Institutions. Besides a very few books providing specific guidance, advice is found in books on general study practices for various student communities (including research, mature and part-time students) and business manuals for those in employment. In terms of research, there is a considerable body of work on procrastination, mostly from a psychological stance. In addition there is unpublished educational research in doctoral theses and dissertations (mostly conducted with US students), including studies of the effects of interventions, impact of poor time management on cheating, and time management issues for at risk students.

This paper offers a brief survey of both current practice in advice on time management and trends in research. Its scope is restricted to works published after 1990. Titles were obtained through database searches including OCLC WorldCat and ArticleFirst, and the British Library’s Integrated Catalogue. Publications aimed at both students and instructors, and in monograph and journal article formats are reviewed. Full details of both the texts mentioned and other useful texts can be found in the annotated bibliographies linked to on the Time Management Resources for Staff webpage at <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Staff/Time-management.html>. This section will also include publications aimed at those in employment, which feature useful strategies that might be adapted for students.

Guides and advice for students and teachers

Advice for students on time management is found in two types of literature: guides to study practices generally, and more specific guides to time management practices.

There are few single topic guides on time management for students, and (surprisingly considering increases in non-traditional student entrants and student employment) none published in recent years. Fry’s *Manage Your Time* (1997) is typical of those that do exist, offering a targeted guide to organisation, planning and motivation for students. The book uses case studies to illustrate the kind of time management problems that students may face. It takes a self-reflective approach with self-assessment questionnaires throughout, and provides tools like examples and proforma for planning. Underwood’s *Study Time Management* (1997) imports ideas from business into HE-level study. Although framed as a guide to time management, the book in fact includes tips for a comprehensive list of effective study practices including working in groups, note-making, writing assignments and exam preparation. Bowes’ *Time Management For Students: How To Survive In A World Where There Never Seems To Be Enough Time* (1996) is apt for use directly by students, or

as a mediated resource for teaching staff, as a photocopiable text with exercises and resources for students to take a self-reflexive approach to time management.

In an article directed at geography students, Kneale (1997) points out that if study time is used effectively, time is freed up for leisure. 'Maximising play time: time management for Geography students' illustrates how to adapt generic time management advice to the specific situation of students in particular disciplines, building in sections on the difference between managing time during field work, normal study time, and dissertations.

Basic advice on time management is found in most general guides to study practices. Especially useful is Race's *How to Study* (2003), which has relevant chapters on 'Managing your time' and 'Getting started'. Practical advice is given in the form of tips which place particular emphasis on the need to focus on active learning practices (in Race's term, "high learning pay-off" (20)). Each tip could be easily used as the basis for a learning activity. Northedge's *The Good Study Guide* (2005) has a chapter on 'Taking control of your studies' which includes advice on taking responsibility and keeping motivated, as well as the more obvious planning time and getting organised.

Guides which are aimed at particular student groups have more targeted suggestions for managing time. For instance, students undertaking lengthy research projects may have particular issues with project management and maintaining motivation over a long period of single subject study. Hunt's *Your Research Project* (2005) is aimed at Final Year undergraduates and Masters level postgraduates and includes advice on project management and personal time management. Wisker's *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2001) has advice specific to postgraduates on achieving a balance, managing time and tasks and getting organised.

Guides for mature students like Rickards's *How to Win as a Mature Student* (1992) include (along with the usual advice on managing time and organisation) sections on stress and managing crises. Part-time students are often also mature and share many of the same concerns. Gatrell's *Managing Part-Time Study* (2006) has advice on managing studies, sustaining motivation, prioritising competing demands on available time and anticipating challenges.

There are a number of books which focus on specific aspects of time management, or offer particular types of strategy for managing time; the former frequently provide psychological approaches while the latter often offer 'life-coaching' advice. Most of these are aimed at a general readership rather than just students. Two books aimed at students are Fry's *Get Organized* (2004) which focuses on organisation and includes a chapter on dealing with crises. Sapadin et al's *Beat Procrastination and Make the Grade* (1999) identifies six styles of procrastination and offers strategies for each, specifically aimed at students.

Texts aimed at teaching staff which include information on student time management include Pickford & Brown (2006), aimed particularly at new lecturers. They make the point that students sometimes regard time management as an ontological property of some students, rather than a practice which can be learned, and note that because of this attitude, expecting students to learn good time management behaviour by modelling (like expecting them to model their academic writing on the academic texts they read) is not effective: rather assessed tasks may be needed to overcome such preconceptions. Advice on working with procrastinators is covered in a comprehensive volume edited by Schouwenburg et al, *Counselling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings* (2004). Emerging from an academic conference with the same title, the book includes a variety of papers

concerning approaches to working with procrastinators in educational settings including universities.

Research

[Full details of articles mentioned in this section are in the annotated bibliographies linked to from the Time Management Resources for Staff webpage at <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Staff/Time-management.html>.]

Procrastination dominates trends for research conducted on time management for university students. There is a large and well-established corpus of research into this topic, mostly taking a psychological approach. There will be a separate review of works on this topic (to follow).

Other research has examined behaviours and considered the effectiveness of strategies in relation to outcomes. Kearns & Gardiner (2007), for instance, examine time management behaviours in University staff and students in relation to stress and effectiveness. They conclude that “a clear sense of career purpose” is the most important factor in a hierarchy of behaviours. Trueman & Hartley (1996) conducted an analysis of time management behaviours in a large cohort of first year Psychology students. They conclude that, while female students report better time management than males, and mature students better than younger students, there is no significant co-relation with academic results.

A common behavioural issue is that students typically claim that they know about time management strategies (such as planning and organisation), but then fail to use them. In two key papers, König & Kleinmann use behavioural decision theory to explain this phenomenon. In a 2005 paper, they examine the phenomenon of ‘deadline rush’, using a mathematical model to show that while decisions about time planning are based on economically logical models, consequent inconsistency of action demonstrates that students fail to internalise the predicted outcomes of the models they use. In a 2007 paper, they examine the ‘discounted utility’ decisions taken by students, showing through two experimental studies that work on tasks with smaller but sooner outcomes is typically prioritised over tasks with larger but later outcomes.

It has been shown in a number of studies that students are more open to skills training which is embedded in subject modules. This propensity has to be balanced against resistance to any significant increase in teaching workloads. A study by Adamson et al (2004) considered the effectiveness of time management instruction using a minimal teaching intervention. First year health science students were surveyed to discover their attitudes towards and practices in time management. They were then given access to a self-directed training package, and surveyed again five weeks later. No significant progress was found, and reasons for this are discussed along with the implications for training interventions. The authors conclude that although all students would probably benefit from time management training, it may be more economical to focus interventions on identifying and supporting those who are most in need of help. An example of this in practice is provided by McFadden (1992). A study was conducted of time management skills among 143 undergraduate business students. The results were used to develop monitoring tools to assess students’ effective use of time and the variables that affected this process.

Papers also report on the development and effectiveness of particular teaching strategies. For instance, Sweidel (1996) considers the use of study portfolios to record and reflect upon study practices generally including time management, while Finn & Crook (2003) report on an online project (STARS) to provide advice on research skills including time management. Ho (2003) looks more closely at individual relationships between supervisor

and supervise in final year undergraduate English projects and how these affect the student's response to the supervisor's presentation of time management training.

Specific student groups have their own needs and issues when managing their time. For instance, mature students may be used to managing their time independently (unlike younger students) but may also have more commitments to manage. Blaxter (1994) looks at the time management practices of mature students studying part-time, and balancing study with other commitments. Edwards' study of *Mature Women Students* (2003) collates experiences from this group in HE. The discussion examines the impact on family life of trying to balance home and study commitments.

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