

Contact hours: a guide for students

August 2011



What are 'contact hours'?

In higher education, the term 'contact hours' is used very broadly, to refer to the amount of time that you spend learning **in contact with teaching or associated staff**, when studying for a particular course. This time provides you with support in developing your subject knowledge and skills, and opportunities to develop and reflect on your own, independent learning.

Contact time can take a wide variety of forms depending on your subject, as well as where and how you are studying. Some of the most common examples are:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- project supervisions
- demonstrations
- practical classes and workshops
- supervised time in a studio/workshop
- fieldwork
- external visits
- work-based learning (including placements).

Other less obvious, but still significant, examples might include:

- office hours (where staff are available for consultation, one-to-one discussion, and so on)
- interaction by email, and other electronic or virtual media
- situations where feedback on assessed work is given (one-to-one or in a group).

Who is contact time with?

Depending on what and how you are studying, contact time can take place with academic (teaching and research) staff, teaching assistants, technical and specialist support staff, employers, and others.

What role do contact hours play in my studies?

In UK higher education, you as the student take primary responsibility for your own learning. In this context, contact time with teaching and associated staff is there to help **shape and guide** your studies. It may be used to introduce new ideas and equip you with certain knowledge or skills, demonstrate practical skills for you to practise independently, offer guidance on project work, or to provide personalised feedback.

Alongside contact time, **private or independent study** is therefore very significant. This is the time that you spend learning without direct supervision from, or contact with, a member of staff. It might include background reading, preparation for seminars or tutorials, follow-up work, wider practice, the completion of assignments, revision, and so on.

A number of other forms of support will usually also be available to you, such as study or language skills training and access to libraries.

So how many contact hours should I have?

The number of contact hours on a course will depend on:

- **The subject you are studying and the design of your particular course.**
Courses are designed and delivered in the way that best suits the subject, and the knowledge and skills that they are intended to help students achieve. On some courses, it might be appropriate for there to be high levels of independent study and relatively few contact hours - for example, if you are required to develop your knowledge through background reading. On other courses, perhaps those for which you are expected to learn through demonstrations or practise skills under supervision, a higher level of contact time relative to independent study may be more likely.
- **Whether you are studying full-time, part-time, via distance learning, in the workplace, and so on.**
Each of these ways of studying for a course is likely to involve different amounts and types of contact time with teaching and associated staff.
- **Where you are studying.**
Different institutions can favour different approaches to learning and teaching, again, depending upon the kinds of knowledge and skills that they aim to help students to achieve and the experiences and opportunities that they aim to provide.

How can I find out about contact hours on my course?

Universities and colleges provide information for students in various forms, including via programme specifications, UCAS Entry Profiles, websites, prospectuses, course handbooks, and open days. You may be able to find out about contact hours on a particular course through any of these sources.

From the start of the academic year 2012-13, all institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that subscribe to QAA will be required to produce a **Key Information Set (KIS)** for each of their courses. This will include information on the proportion of time students spend in various learning and teaching activities, as well as on the mix of assessment methods used to determine your final result.

Do more contact hours mean better value for money?

Not necessarily. Because the number of contact hours on a course is influenced by the subject, as well as how and where you are studying, a relatively low number might just as likely be associated with a good quality experience as a high number.

QAA believes that a good quality experience for students is one where they are given the best **opportunities to succeed** in their studies. QAA refers to these factors as 'learning opportunities' and discusses in its reports how well a given institution manages them.

Quality can therefore be linked to a wide range of factors, including teaching, support services, access to learning spaces and resources, and assessment and feedback processes. There is no evidence to suggest that quality, understood in this sense, can be measured solely by contact hours.

Further information

QAA has recently published a guide for institutions on explaining contact hours, at www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/contact-hours.aspx.

The National Student Survey (NSS) is a large-scale questionnaire of final year students' academic experiences. It asks students to rate how satisfied they are with the teaching, learning and assessment arrangements on their course. The results are available via the UNISTATS website, at <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>.

NUS currently conducts an annual survey to measure the expectations and satisfaction of undergraduate students across all years of study. The surveys ask students specifically for their views on contact time. Reports on the results are available on the NUS website, at www.nus.org.uk.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2011
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

ISBN 978 1 84979 352 0

All QAA publications are available from our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

QAA 396 08/2011