Research-based development of the pedagogical practices of Helsinki Summer School: Past, present and future

Evaluation report 3: Summary of the feedback from HSS 2017 courses

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1. Introduction

This study is a continuation in a project initiated in the spring 2014 to investigate the pedagogical quality and participant experiences in the Helsinki Summer School courses. Previous studies reported the results of year 2014 courses (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2014) and year 2015 courses (Ilomäki, Lakkala & Mikkonen, 2016). Also a journal article based on the study of year 2014 courses is published (Lakkala, Ilomäki, Mikkonen, Muukkonen & Toom, 2018).

The present report summarizes the feedback collected from the students and teachers of the HSS 2017 courses especially concerning the pedagogical aspects and the participants' experiences of them. In addition, in 2017 there were many new courses that had not been offered before, and some of the courses were organized as short courses, lasting two weeks instead of three weeks.

The feedback questionnaire statements were somewhat changed after the 2014 study; the statements in 2017 were the same as were used for the first time in 2015.

1.1. Aims of the study

The aim of the present study is to provide information for the HSS organizers about the quality of HSS 2017 courses based on the participant feedback, both because of many new courses and two types of courses, short and long ones.

2. Methods

2.1. Courses and participants

In summer 2017, Helsinki Summer School offered 19 courses. Of the courses, 8 were short courses (almost 2 weeks) and 11 were long courses (almost 3 weeks). In all, 268 students participated in the courses, in the smallest course there were only 6 students, in the biggest course 32 students. On average, there were 14.1 students per course. Of those, 168 answered the feedback form, which was 62.7% of all participants. The percentage of answers / course varied from 100 % (two courses of 9 and 6 participants) to 11.1%.

Each HSS course had a course coordinator and the number of the teachers and lecturers varies according to the course. In all, 13 coordinators and teachers answered the form from 12 courses. One of the respondent did not inform the status, one of the respondent was a teacher, and all others were either co-ordinators, or co-ordinators and teachers.

2.2. Data collection

For the HSS courses in August 2017 the data was collected at the end of the Summer School using the eForm service of the university. In the present study, the data were as follows:

- Students' answered to 11 mainly pedagogy-oriented statements of the HSS online feedback form. (The overall feedback form included also other statements that focused on HSS services for students in general; they were not included in the present study.) The statements used Likert-scale (1=disagree - 5=fully agree) about the quality of the course. The statements were the following:
    - Course literature and other material were of high quality
    - Overall level of lectures was of high quality
    - The title of the course corresponded to the course content
    - The academic content of the course was of high quality
    - Structure and organization of the course was good
    - Quality of English spoken by teachers was good
    - The workload of the course was appropriate
    - Course assignments supported students' interaction and collaboration
    - Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account
    - Digital technology was utilized in a meaningful way
    - Facilities provided by the university were good

- Students' answers to two open questions in the feedback form: *What has been positive or impressive in the course? What has been disturbing or needs improving in the course?* In all, 142 students answered the first question, 128 answered the second question.
- Teachers' answers to three open questions in the feedback form: *What has been positive or impressive in the course / Helsinki Summer School? What needs improving in the course / Helsinki Summer School? Other comments about your course / Helsinki*

Summer School. In all, 11 coordinators and teachers answered the first question, 10 answered the second question, and 5 answered the third question.

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. Pedagogy-oriented statements

The data was analyzed with IBM SPSS statistical software. The analysis was first conducted on the general level. After that, a preliminary analysis of the differences was conducted, but the amount of respondents of some courses was too small for statistical analysis (as the lowest, 11.1 % of the course participants). For the final analysis only those courses were accepted in which the response rate was at least 50%; in all, 13 courses were included in the analysis. For the course-level comparisons Kruskal-Wallis -test was used.

2.3.2. Qualitative analysis of the open questions

Students' and teachers' open-ended responses about the positive or disturbing aspects of the course were categorized by applying data-driven thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The same categories in analysis were used as in the previous studies (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2014; Ilomäki et al., 2016; Lakkala et al., 2018), with some data-driven additions. The categories and their frequencies are presented in the results section.

3. Results

3.1. Students' perspectives of the HSS 2017 courses

3.1.1. Results of the pedagogy-oriented statements

In general, students were satisfied with the courses, based on the statements of the feedback questionnaire, presented in Table 1. None of the means is below 4.0. The statement "The workload of the course was appropriate" had the lowest score; however, even the mean of this statement was 4.0.

Table 1. Lowest and highest scores, means and SDs of the statement answers

Statement	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
The academic content of the course was of high quality	2,0	5,0	4,4	0,76
Structure and organization of the course was good	1,0	5,0	4,2	0,86
Overall level of lectures was of high quality	2,0	5,0	4,3	0,76
Quality of English spoken by teachers was good	2,0	5,0	4,6	0,66
Course literature and other material were of high quality	2,0	5,0	4,4	0,70
The workload of the course was appropriate	1,0	5,0	4,0	1,07
Course assignments supported students' interaction and collaboration	1,0	5,0	4,3	0,90
Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account	2,0	5,0	4,4	0,76
Digital technology was utilized in a meaningful way	2,00	5,00	4,3	0,78
Facilities provided by the university were good	1,00	5,00	4,4	0,88

Short vs. long courses

We compared the scores of the short and long courses. The only statistically significant difference was in the statement "The workload of the course was appropriate" (0=.001). In short courses the mean was 3.8 (N=88) and in long courses 4.3 (N=80).

Course level comparisons

The preliminary statistical analysis of all courses showed that there were statistically significant differences between courses in the statements; the only statement in which there were no differences was "Facilities provided by the university were good". To find out the differences between courses, we compared the means of those courses in which more than 50 % answered the questionnaire (13 courses, N=155).

Among this selected group of courses, the statistically significant differences were in the following statements:
- Overall level of lectures was of high quality, p=.002
- The title of the course corresponded to the course content, p=.003
- The workload of the course was appropriate, p=.000
- Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account, p=.009

Although the aim is not to present good or less good courses, we list here the five courses of the highest means (see Table 2). In general, these courses had high scores in all statements. Two of these courses were short courses, three were long ones.

Table 2. Courses of the highest means

Course	Mean
Humour and Power in Media Society	4.54
Introduction to Modern Atmospheric Science I: A Look into Air Quality in China	4.50
Populism in Europe and Beyond	4.45
Heavy Metal Music in Contemporary History and Society	4.43
The Welfare City	4.36

Course comparisons of 2017 and 2015

The figure below shows the means of the statements 2017 and 2015 (2016 no HSS). The data of 2017 consists of all respondents.
The differences between the statements are small, and based on this data the status or level of the issues has been similar.
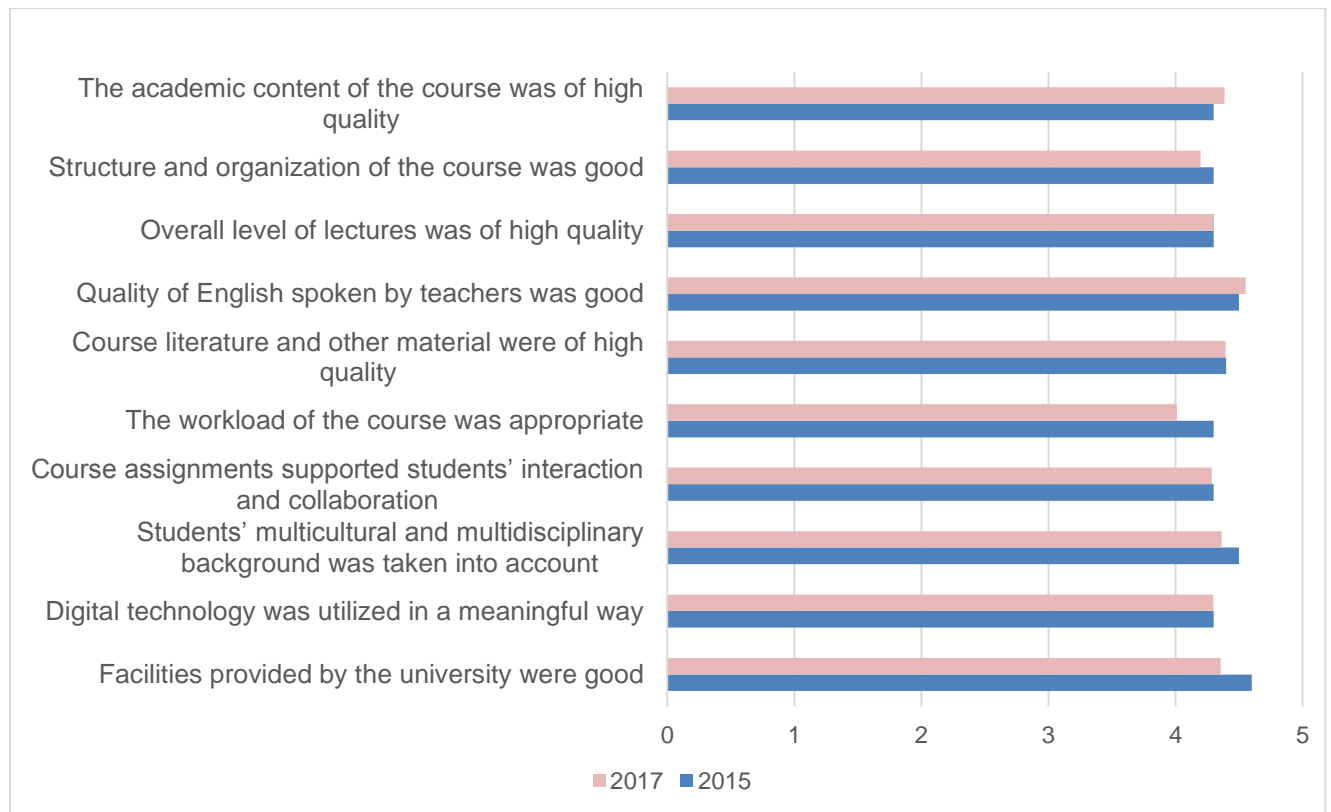

Figure 1. Means of the statements in 2017 and 2015.

3.1.2. Results of the content analysis of the open-ended questions

In all, 245 excerpts from the students' free-text answers were encoded to address positive or impressive issues. The following list presents the main categories and subcategories that

were used to describe the positive or impressive issues mentioned by the students (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the factors in the students' answers):

- *Satisfactory teaching arrangements (90/37%):* Good teachers and lecturers (19), High-quality of teaching (14), Lecturers' attitude and commitment (14), Well-organized and designed (10), Combination of methods (8), Good course (6), Good atmosphere (6), Quality of facilities (4), Good materials (4), Activating methods (3), Taking into account participant backgrounds (2).
- *Expert knowledge and practices (70/29%)*: Authentic practices & field work (17), Excursions and field trips (12), Content expertise of lecturers (12), Variety of contents and viewpoints (12), Many expert lecturers from various fields (9), Academic content (6), Practical content (2).
- *Satisfactory course content (44/18%)*: Interesting and useful content (24), Learnt new content and thinking (8), Effective coverage of content (4), Content of materials (4), Benefited own academic studies (4).
- *Intercultural social interaction (41/17%):* Multicultural and multidisciplinary assembly (14), Interaction & discussions between participants (13), Nice participants (9), Group work (4), Proper group size (1).

Like in previous years, most comments addressed the high-level of teaching and course organization in general, as well as teachers' positive attitude; for example: *"teachers ability to explain difficult topics giving good examples"* or *"The instructors and coordinators of the course were also very helpful and always tried to take our personal time and workload needs into account."* The students also valued the high-level expertise of lecturers and versatile activities that introduced them to authentic and real-life methods and practices in addition to theoretical knowledge, such as project work, workshops, excursions and field work. For example:

"We had many really professional lecturers who gave interesting talks on the topics they know most about, and that's how it should be!"

"We could visit some places related to our study",

In all, 171 excerpts from the students' free-text answers addressed issues that had been disturbing or needed improvement in the courses. The issues were divided into the following categories and subcategories (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the issue in the students' answers):

- *Unsatisfactory teaching arrangements (73/43%)*: Poor time management (17), Poor quality of teaching (12), Not well-organized (11), Misleading course name or description (7), Distribution of course materials (7), Poor integration of topics (5), Poor or noisy lecture room (6), Unclear assignments (2), Overlap between lectures (1), Size of the group (1).
- *Uninspiring knowledge and activities (48/28.1%)*: Too superficial content (9), Irrelevant tasks (7), Narrow content focus (6), Low academic level (5), Too little interaction between participants (3), Too little excursions (2), Too little practical work (2), Too much lecturing (2), No experts from the field as lecturers (2).

- *Heavy workload and time constraints (28/16.4%)*: Heavy workload (17), Balancing studying and free time (5), Not enough time for tasks (5), Too short course (1).
- *Challenges with content learning (15/8.8%)*: Not enough teaching of basics (8), Own background knowledge of the topic (2), Participant backgrounds not taken into account (3), Challenging content (1), Difficult readings (1).
- *Challenges with intercultural social interaction (7/4.0%)*: English skills of students/teachers (3), Group work (2), Diverse participant backgrounds and motivations (1), English language (1).

Students' critical comments addressed many issues related to the quality of practical teaching arrangements in general. Poor time management was most often mentioned individual issue; the following excerpts are examples of comments about it:

"Disturbing was the time. Our course was so fully packed with the daily course topic, workshops, presentations from other researchers."

"usually lectures lasted longer than they were supposed to :("

Also the issue of workload is noteworthy; the 28 comments about it addressed 6 different courses indicating that the problem is especially in some courses. The following are examples of the complaints:

"too much reading material and assignments to be done within the summer school period. Impossible to do everything on time within a normal working week."

"The everyday learning diaries (2 for each day) made it very difficult: in many cases it was a choice of either do the diaries on time or go to social/explore the city."

Altogether, it is noteworthy that the number of positive aspects found in the students' open-ended answers was higher (245) than the number of negative aspects (171).

We also compared whether the feedback given by students in their free-text answers was different for short and long courses. Figures 2 and 3 present the results of the comparison. Although there are some differences in the profiles related to both positive and disturbing aspects of the short and long courses, the differences are not statistically significant. It indicates that the success of the pedagogical designs and practices of the courses does not relate to the length of the course.
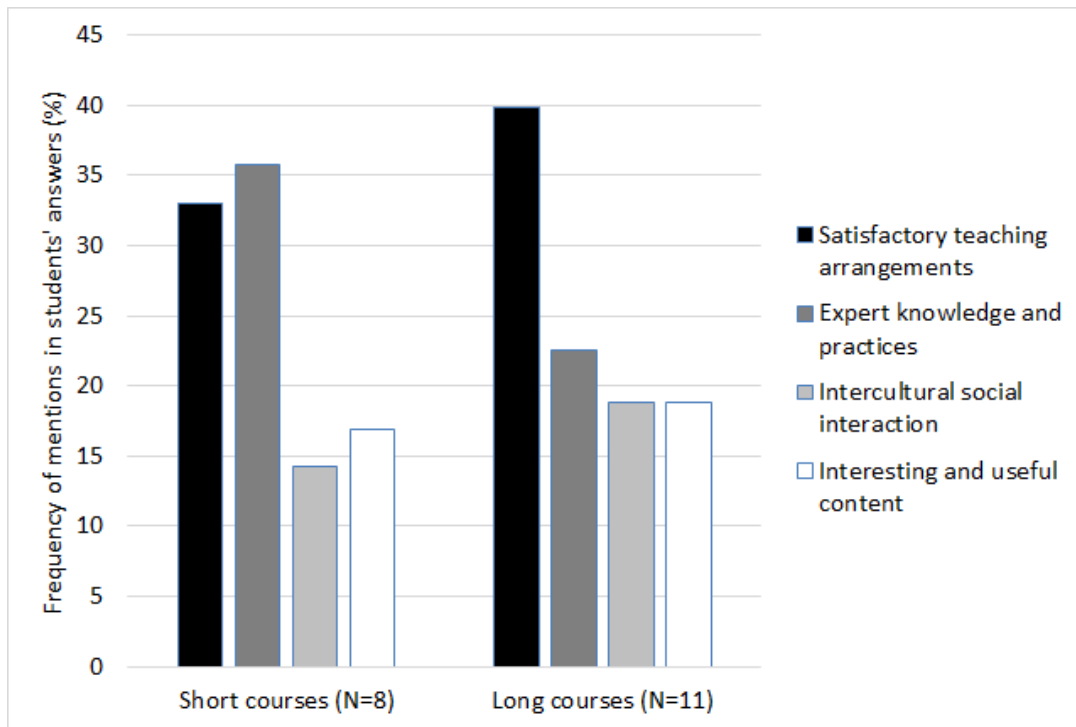
Figure 2. Positive and impressive aspects mentioned by students in the free-text feedback separately for short and long courses.
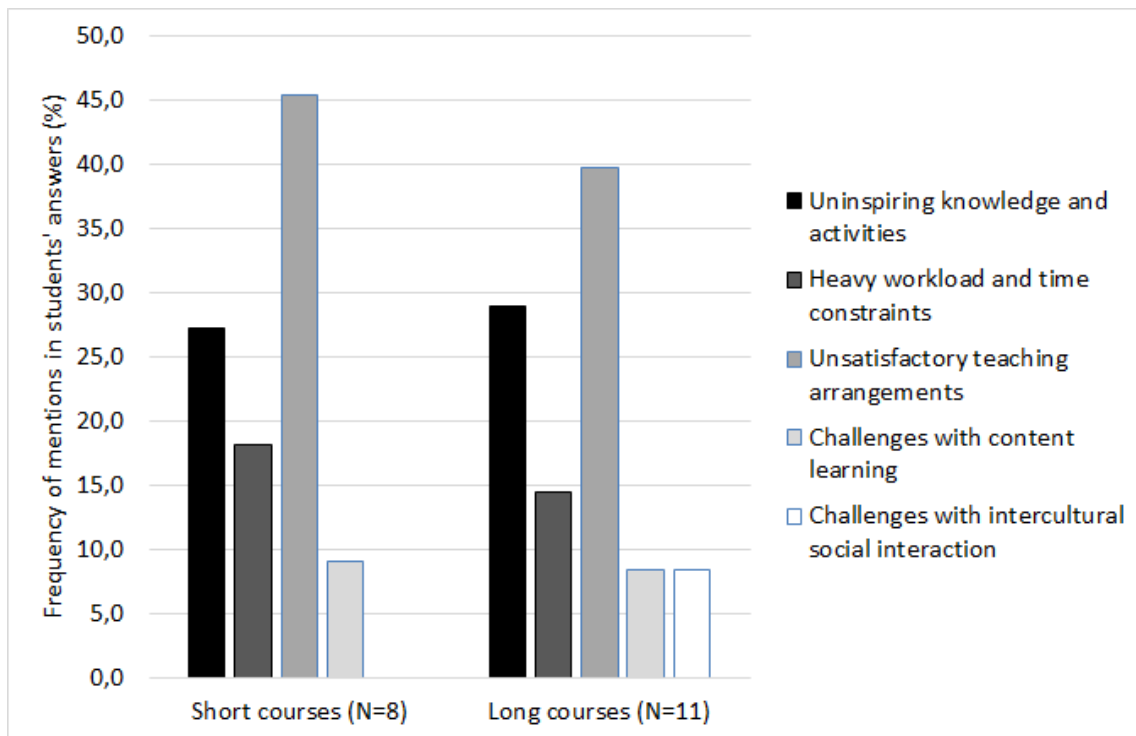

Figure 3. Disturbing aspects mentioned by students in the free-text feedback separately for short and long courses.

Students were also asked about their thoughts about the length of the courses. In all, 110 students answered to the free-text question "Do you have any comments on the length of the course?" Table 3 presents the result of the analysis of their answers.

Table 3. Students' opinions about the length of the course in the free-text answers.

	Too short	Appropriate	Too long
Short courses (N=8)	19 / 40% (related to 4 courses; 13 mentions concerned one course)	29 / 60%	0 / 0%
Long courses (N=11)	16 / 26% (related to 8 courses, 5 mentions about one course)	40 / 66%	5/8% (related to 2 courses)

There was no statistically significant difference between short and long courses concerning the opinions of the appropriate length of the course. Mostly only individual students mentioned some course, and two long courses were mentioned both to be too short and too long. One short course received many mentions as being too short; the same course had earlier been implemented as a long course. In the following are some examples of students' comments about the length of courses:

"As I am working, the length overall was fine and I doubt, that my employer would have given me more time off - however, it has meant that we have not had time for as much practical work, as would have been of interest - so it would also make sense to have this course in a longer version."

"I think the length was too short for the amount of material."

"I think this course would have worked better as a short course by having 2 lectures per day instead of the afternoons dedicated to group work only."

3.2. Teachers' perspectives on their courses

In all 35 excerpts were analysed, and the main categories were based on the two questions of the teacher feedback questionnaire about positive or challenging issues. The third question about other comments consisted only of five answers and these were also related to positive or challenging issues so they are analysed to these two categories. Because the categorization was data-driven, the categories were somewhat different from the previous report (Ilomäki et al., 2016).

The categories, the number of the excerpts and examples of the positive issues were the following:
- Active and positive students (6 excerpts); students were described also as curious, keen to know [about the topic], motivated and enthusiastic. The active students also worked "*in an impressive way.*"
- The HSS Office collaboration and support (6 excerpts); this was valued and commented, e.g., in the following way: *"From a coordinator point of view everything*

on behalf of HSS was carried out brilliantly." and "*Also, working with HSS team was excellent! Their work was inclusive, creative & supportive! Amazing team.*"

- International students (2 excerpts); "*The fact that all the participants were indeed international, coming to Helsinki specifically for this course.*" (This category includes also an issue of motivated students.)
- University facilities (2 excerpts); such issues were the premises (rooms, facilities, the building), or university staff.
- A learning process also for the co-ordinator, (2 excerpts), as one co-ordinator wrote: "*Coordinating the course was a great experience & linking all these diverse perspectives was both challenging and rewarding.*
- Single comments:
  - Possibility to network with people of same interest: "*The possibility to gather people with same scholarly interests for the future.*"
  - A successful teaching event: "*Field trip was a success and students gave good feedback for the event.*"
  - Ideas for improving the course: "*This is the first time that the course was implemented and I can see already ways to improve the curriculum, e.g. by introducing a more concrete description (e.g., what kind of devices we will be using, what kind of stories we will be making, how the groups will be functioning, what theoretical fields we will be drawing up).*"

The categories, the number of the excerpts and examples of the challenging issues were the following:
- Heterogeneity of students, either in their motivation, background understanding or English language (3 excerpts).
- Bureaucracy (2 excerpts), as an example about the classroom payments: "*Classrooms should be arranged and financed by the HSS. It makes no sense to offer a lump-sum budget and expect coordinator to jump through the hoops to make the "home unit" pay for the rooms that belong to the university anyways.*" Another comment was: "*More flexible, overall. People are coming from all over the world and we are here for students not vica versa.*"
- Financial issues (3 excerpts), meaning that 4000 € is not enough for organising a course and paying the lecturers etc. One respondent suggested more international marketing.
- Single comments
  - Different length of the courses: especially the short courses suffered, and they, e.g., had no farewell party.
  - The online platform was not easy to use.
  - Too few participants on the course.
  - Too much social programme: "*Having programs every single day severely limits the time students are expected to dedicate to course work. They should have a few hours a day to read at least one article.*"

4. Discussion and conclusions

The general conclusion of the year 2017 HSS courses, based on the participant feedback, is that the courses were, again, on good level. Some minor justifications are needed but the overall status is acceptable as such.

Similarly as in the previous evaluations of the HSS courses, there were differences between courses in the students' answers to the pedagogical statements. "Facilities provided by the university were good" was evaluated similarly high among all respondents. However, comparing only courses with at least 50 % respondent rate shows that the main differences are in the item of too heavy workload. In the five courses of highest means also this statement had high scores (4.7 as highest) indicating that the respondents did not regard these courses as too heavy. The other statements, in which the courses differ from each other, were 1) Overall level of lectures was of high quality; 2) The title of the course corresponded to the course content, and 3) Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account. The two first statements might illustrate something about the overall experience of the course quality, the third one something about the course organizers being sensitive for students' participation and international context. It is interesting that in many of the pedagogy-related statements there were no statistical differences between those courses which were included in the analysis. Differences between courses become clearer in students' open answers. HSS should continue improving the pedagogical practices. Too much lecturing without interaction with students should be replaced with more student-centered and active learning.

The lowest means in the statement answers were received by those courses in which the respondent rate was below 50% – probably those students did not answer the feedback form who were not so satisfied with their course experience?

The length of the course seems not to matter in the results otherwise, but the workload might become too heavy during the short courses. Probably the lecturers and organisers have too optimistic expectations about how much students manage to do during the summer course period? However, in free-text answers also some long courses received complaints about having too heavy workload. Summer school is not only for academic studying; social program and exploring the city of Helsinki is important also. Students should not be given homework assignments in the same way as in normal semester courses. If a certain workload is needed for the appropriate course credits, perhaps some of the tasks could be designed as pre- or post-tasks, to be completed before or after the course. Course organizers should also critically evaluate the workload of the course tasks and the balance between the tasks during the course.

Helsinki Summer School organizers have collected feedback from the participants every year. In order to get valid information from the feedback for further development work, it would be important to get answers from the teachers and coordinators of all courses; it may be considered whether answering the feedback from could be made compulsory at least for the coordinators. Efforts should also be made to increase the respondent rate of student feedback. Perhaps answering should not be compulsory but some methods to motivate students to answer could be considered.

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