

“2 LONG 2 READ”: STUDENT PERCEPTION OF READING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

With the rise of digital technology, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were initially reticent to replace traditional teaching modes with digital tools. Nonetheless, they adapted to the reality of our increasingly digitalized society where the learning environment is characterized by a complete infusion of technology in the life and learning of our today's students. They live in a digital age with high rapidity and ongoing stimulation, which often translates into multitasking and a desire to 'speed-date' through information, hopping from one source to another and rapidly choosing the one that interests them most. Paper-based tools are replaced by digital devices. Thus, learning takes place in a space of rapid resources and quick fixes, reducing the time spent on traditionally 'tedious' academic tasks like reading full textbooks or writing 5,000-word essays. What are the consequences of this major change? The effort and pride in truly assimilating what has been read, the 'a-ha' moments of yore, seem to be outdated. Research has proven that authentic learning needs time. Digital tools tout their time-saving features. Ideally, these two concepts would join together, i.e., using technology to save time on superficial tasks, thus leaving more time for engrossed and concentrated reading. To investigate this topic, we posit three questions: RQ1: How much time do our students spend on reading?; RQ2: Which "tool" do they use for their reading?; RQ3: What motivations do they need to read?. To gather data, surveys were sent to 500 students in one HEI in Switzerland. In accordance with the literature, today's students are less motivated to read academic texts, spend less time reading, and, when they finally read, do so in a fragmented and answer-driven manner, skimming for the answer to the prompt over reading a text in its entirety, helped by the emergence of a new tool: The introduction of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) that supplies easy summaries of any complex text. The emphasis on saving time seems to supersede that of deep learning and authentic engagement. As our project continues, we will expand the sample to include other HEIs in Switzerland to define an inclusive learning framework that includes foundational skills for the future. The utility of technology must be questioned as young graduates need digital tools to complete certain tasks, but not at the expense of learning. Students must be prepared for a workplace that includes the *best* use of traditional and digital tools.

Keywords: *Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), students, reading, technology, literacy.*

1. Introduction

Previous research has defined learning as a process that “comprises knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Schneckenberg, Ehlers, & Adelsberger, 2010, p. 749) or “knowledge, skills and experience” (Bachmann, 2018, p. 21), or being “an integrated set of capabilities” – based on knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Grammens et al., 2022, p. 3), necessary for the process of learning. However, as a basic skill, learners need literacy or the ability to read and write (UNESCO, 2025). Yet, this first description of reading and writing can be complemented by more complex concepts to incorporate “not only a discrete set of skills but a situated, social, and ideological practice that is embedded in networks of power, agency, and technological mediation (...) interwoven within social life, history, and cultural practices” (Rapanta et al., 2025, p. 7). As educators in the 21st century in Higher Education Institution (HEI) we teach in classrooms that are filled with technology and tools, and our concern is the loss of one of the foundational bases of literacy: reading. Between supposed short-cuts and time-savings in using tools such as generative Artificial Intelligence, we question where reading fits in. After all, reading is the very basis of learning. While Vendler (2024) stated “without reading, there can be no learning”, we insist that simply speaking reading *is* learning.

We acquiesce that our students are privy to technology and do not dispute its utility neither in today's classrooms nor in their daily life. To do so would be to refute any tool that could be harnessed to improve the teaching and learning environment. We accept that mobile technology is infused into today's student's lifestyle (Cain et al., 2022) – a logical consequence of the proliferation of technology being introduced into the educational realm. This follows previous technology such as calculator, word processor, home computer, or the Internet we have seen in the preceding decades. With each innovation, HEIs were concerned that it was the end of education as we know it. In fact, HEIs found that they could use the technology to increase student motivation to learn. Nonetheless, we sought to understand the price of implementing technology to replace the **base** of learning, that of reading. Their extensive use of technology is considered to have conditioned today's students (Choudhary & Pandita, 2023) into impatient consumers who prefer engaging in microlearning for its instant gratification and frequent rewards (Prensky, 2001) than making the efforts to attain deep, authentic learning.

To investigate this topic, we posit three questions:

RQ1: How often do our students spend time reading?

RQ2: Which “tool” do they use for their reading?

RQ3: What motivations do they need to read?

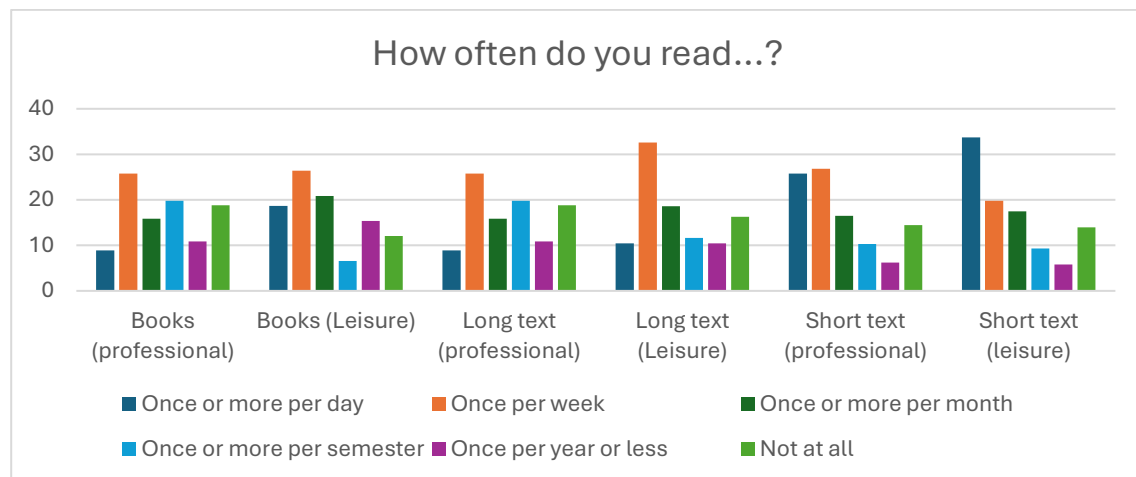
2. Methodology

To gather data, surveys were sent to 500 students in one HEI in Switzerland where they study to obtain their bachelor's in business administration, resulting in 126 usable results. For demographics, 51.5% were male and the students derived from all semesters combined. The survey was sent the 20th of October 2025 using Lime Survey, a tool that guarantees anonymity and is thus a secure tool for scientific research. The use of the data for scientific use was declared according to scientific standards. The questionnaire included 4 questions about the persons (age, sex, profession); 16 closed questions with 8 offering the possibility to make comments and 5 open questions.

3. Results

3.1. Time spent reading

Figure 1. Frequency of Reading.

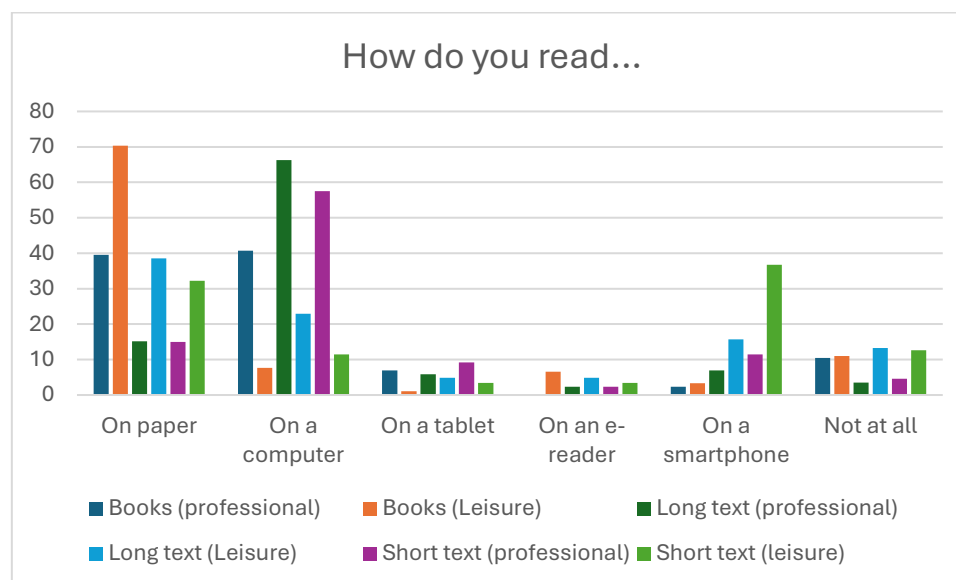


As seen in Figure 1, short texts, particularly for leisure, are read once or more a day. The question did not specify for learning purposes only, thus, this result could include text messages, SMS, or social media prompts. Books (for professional learning purposes) are read on a weekly or monthly basis, yet almost 20% do not read books at all. In fact, in each of the reading categories, over 10% do not read anything. Where, or more importantly, *how* do they get their information? Further, if they are doing group projects, does the work fall in their classmates? This is a disconcerting statistic which suggests loafers in the classrooms. This aligns with previous research from the Allensbach-Institute which found that in 2024, only 17% of the students read daily, in 2002 the number was 43%. Further, one-fifth do not even look at a book once a month (Agarwala & Spiewak, 2025). Thus, reading habits are diminishing – together with the reading skills, as reading is a competence that needs to be practiced regularly: “A skilled reader needs to

read.” (S. Sawchuk, 2024). Learners who fail in this competence, may fail further, as according to Andrianatos (2019), “many learners who pass through the education system exit without being able to comprehend what they read” (p. 1), leading later to academic failure.

3.2. Reading medium

Figure 2. Reading Medium.



Overall, paper and computer score high for our respondents. We were surprised by the result for the book for leisure: it scored highest on paper (70%) but lowest of all for ‘on a tablet’ (2%). As the tablet has a larger screen than a smartphone, it seemed logical that it would be preferred, yet it was not. For both short and long professional texts, the computer is the preferred medium. However, smartphones recorded the highest score for short texts for leisure. From these results, we reckon that paper and computer will remain steadfast choices moving forward. Nonetheless, this choice has consequences, as reading digitally or on paper are characterized by different forms of processing (FAZ, 2019). According to this study, reading on paper is better for comprehension and memorizing and especially reading long texts is necessary “for a range of cognitive skills such as concentration, vocabulary building, and memory” (Ibid.) Comprehension and concentration are indeed hampered when reading on screens, as this type of reading is typically done by browsing or scanning the text, by looking out for keywords without turning back to passages already read – thus it’s a very selective form of reading (Liu, 2005). Reading texts on the internet can be characterized as a constant distractedness (Carr, 2020) via pop-up messages or hyperlinks that push us to make choices whether to use the link or not and thus interrupting the process of reading which “impede(s) comprehension and retention” (Carr, 2020, p. 122). The mental stimulation is much more important when reading on screen, compared to the private lecture for leisure done on a paper script, that allows us to immerse ourselves into the story. This sort of “under-stimulation” compared to the reading on the net helps to filter out distractions and so “deep reading becomes a form of deep thinking” (Carr, 2020, p. 123).

3.3. Motivation/demotivation for reading

When we asked our students what motivates them and what demotivates them to read, we collected 58 answers to this non-obligatory question for the motivational aspects and 62 answers for demotivation. We translated these answers into categories and created the following word-clouds:

Figure 3. What motivates (left) and demotivates (right) students from reading?



From Figure 3, we confirm that reading is still present (and appreciated) in today's HEI students. They are motivated to read for recreation, to learn new things, and expand their knowledge. Nonetheless, the lack of time and effort that it entails, together with boredom are cited as demotivating factors. The format seems to be problematic as it suggests that students would be willing to read if they were offered a choice in the reading medium. For most of them, time is needed. Reading long, professional text seems difficult for students, since this activity takes much time and they often lack the vocabulary for an easy understanding. According to Andrianatos (2019, p. 5), students “run a ‘cost-benefit analysis’ before they start to read a long and complicated text and will accomplish the task only if there's a clear link between text, task and learning objectives”.

With the rising speed of the net, its system of rapid responses and rewards, its stimuli and distractions, it is becoming harder to build endurance and stamina, and resilience. Sawchuk (2024) stated that reading is an exercise in attention, and, as attention is increasingly fragmented, stamina-building is needed. Moving forward, HEIs will need to consider what they are asking students to read, when, how and why and to clearly explain these demands to the students, as reading long, professional texts on paper is an activity apparently outside their comfort zone.

4. Conclusions

As seen in our study, HEI students are not completely averse to reading which suggests that there is still time to react. We need to find engaging and innovative reading opportunities that immerse students in other worlds and help them to disconnect from the world and, subsequently, the technology that goes with it. Thus, with the potential for reading opportunities at our fingertips, our overarching question changes to “Who adapts to whom?” Typically, students have been expected to adapt to the HEIs carefully planned and implemented teaching and learning environment (Rue, 2018), but what if we were at the cusp of change? What if HEIs analyzed the changed learning environment in our digital world to adapt to the needs of our 21st century students (Hayles, 2007)? They might not read entire libraries of books but perhaps feel happy to delve into a new world of scientific texts where they can find food for thought.

While many experts are (again) questioning the necessity of traditional HEI education now that Gen AI is here to stay, we are calling for improvements of the **basic skills**, i.e., analytical and critical thinking, as well as reflection to be (re)introduced into today's classrooms.

We offer three recommendations to encourage reading in HEIs today:

1. Make reading meaningful with perhaps fewer, but deeper texts.
2. Offer mediums that students are not necessarily comfortable with.
3. Co-create reading lists with the students. Inspire them to share their best reads with others.

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