

REPORT: STUDY-RELATED STRAIN

SEMESTER COUNCIL VERSO, MARCH 2026

On 12th of March 2026, during the Semester Council meeting of VERSO, a workshop on the topic of «Study-Related Strain» was held. Student representatives from all five departments of ZHdK took part. The workshop was organised and run by the Co-Chair of the Semester Council.

With around 30 members, the Semester Council is the largest body within VERSO. This report contributes to ZHdK's institutional practice of quality control, as well as to ongoing processes on the successful implementation of the Major-Minor study model.

1 MAJOR_MINOR

Each department has its own structures, schedules and requirements; the Major-Minor model operates across departments and makes these differences visible. These observations suggest that the system has different effects across departments. Several students describe a lack of compatibility between major and minor programmes as the central source of strain: certain courses overlap, timetables collide, and the combined workload exceeds what students consider reasonable. They ask for clearer rules and communication regarding workload expectations, attendance requirements and schedules. At the same time, students note positively that many chose to study at ZHdK precisely because of the Major-Minor model and therefore want the system to work well. Students therefore ask for structural evaluation and further development, not abolition. They chose ZHdK because of the Major-Minor model and want it to function as it was intended.

Some students report that their minor programmes work well and fit alongside their major. Representatives gave concrete examples of challenges in various departments — incompatibility of specific course combinations, full-day courses that leave no time to practise on the instrument, conflicting ideas about workload (specific to each department). The same system produces different frictions in each department. Students describe overload from administrative tasks, full-day teaching sessions, and overlapping deadlines (for both major and minor). They also report that performance is often expected even during semester breaks. The minor courses are split into two intensive blocks in January and February. The two-week pause between the blocks is not experienced as recovery time: some lecturers expect students to complete assignments during this period. Minor weeks and submission deadlines often coincide, which students experience as parallel pressure.

Scheduling is closely linked to the Major-Minor system. For many students, the two issues cannot be separated. Students describe unpredictable timing, late publication of timetables, and conflicts between the requirements of different programmes. A second concern is the gap between what is formally communicated and what is actually expected. Students described informal requirements — work that is not published in any timetable but is nevertheless expected. Communication at the level of teaching staff is part of this picture too: students ask that expectations regarding courses and workload be set realistically and communicated clearly in advance.

At this point, we as VERSO would like to add a reminder of the two position papers from 2017 and 2020. In both papers, VERSO submitted three central demands to the Hochschulleitung (HSL) regarding the implementation of Major_Minor. These demands have lost none of their relevance, and nine / six years respectively after they were set down, they remain central from our perspective:

1. Flexibilisation of the system:

"The Major_minor model expands students' flexibility in their studies at ZHdK. However, there should be no compulsion to flexibility, so that it remains possible to study within a single subject area. For a meaningful expansion of flexibility, every major programme must be combinable with open minors from all departments. To achieve this, a university-wide time slot for minors must be found that allows students to attend minor classes without missing major classes at the same time. From VERSO's perspective, this is a minimum requirement of the Major_minor model, because without such a solution the promised flexibilisation has not been achieved." (Excerpt from VERSO Position Paper, February 2020)

2. The option to take minor programmes at other universities:

"Furthermore, Major_minor should make it possible for students to take minors and subsidiary subjects at other universities and have them recognised; cooperation with universities in the university sector should particularly be pursued. Study programmes must enable students to study a subsidiary subject at other universities, and prevent temporal, curricular or financial barriers." (Excerpt from VERSO Position Paper, February 2020)

3. Enabling part-time study

"As part of ZHdK's Strategy 19-23, and given strong student interest as well as the results of the Student Survey 2018, the option of part-time study is to be developed in all programmes within the framework of Major_minor. This means that 1-2 fixed days per week are kept free from study to allow for paid work or family responsibilities. The maximum duration of study is also to be extended accordingly." (Excerpt from VERSO Position Paper, February 2020)

2 PART-TIME STUDY

Growing financial pressure and the wish for a part-time option are two sides of the same problem. Students describe full-time studying at ZHdK as effectively dependent on financial support from family, and report holding several jobs alongside their studies. The option to extend the duration of study (see §5, [Rahmenordnung](#)) is often perceived as more difficult. Yet it is precisely this option — extending the duration of study — that is the only way many students can study at ZHdK at all.

A part-time study option would directly address the financial pressure students describe. As part of the stabilisation initiative (December 2024), partial tuition fee waivers were reduced and effectively abolished. Further decisions affecting student budgets, project funding or study conditions should be based on an understanding of how financially burdened students already are.

3 ATTENDANCE AND SICK DAYS

Students report that the climate that has been created around sick days and absences often produces feelings of guilt. What is meant here is not primarily the existing attendance requirement (80%, per §17 [Rahmenordnung](#)), but the differing ways it is handled. Students also asked for tolerance towards absences for work-related reasons, which is connected to the financial pressure described above: students who depend on paid work cannot always freely choose when they are available. Students would see the possibility of crediting work experience (in study-relevant areas) here as a major opportunity — not only to facilitate students' transition into the labour market, but also to make studying at ZHdK more accessible.

4 SPACES

Students described overcrowded workspaces as a barrier to concentration and asked for designated quiet rooms for focus and recovery. A suggestion came up to use unused rooms during the Diploma phase (April to June) as quiet study zones, or to set up «niches» at specific locations in the Toni-Areal (similar to the «Booths» in the MIZ).

5 COMMUNICATION

Students describe the volume of emails as barely manageable and report that it is difficult to identify which messages are important. The same concern was raised both in group discussion and in independent contributions. Students articulated two specific asks: a lower overall volume of institutional messages, and an «Unsubscribe» option for topics that are not relevant to individual students. A clearer distinction between organisational/programme-specific messages and informational ones (e.g. events, exhibitions) would also be helpful.

6 PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAIN IN STUDY

The mental health of students at Swiss universities is increasingly being addressed in the media. [Figures published by the Federal Statistical Office](#) from surveys of students (20. November 2025) show, among other things, that psychological strain among students has risen significantly in recent years. 29% suffer from symptoms of moderate to severe depression (compared with 23% in 2020). Student representatives in the Semester Council describe the same patterns. Financial difficulties, political uncertainty, and study-related pressure intensify the situation. The recent reduction of available psychological counselling sessions from five to three per student makes it especially important to assess the actual state of student well-being. From our perspective, it is part of the university's duty of care to take such data (such as that of the federal government) — and also the warnings from its own student body — seriously, and to act accordingly.

POSSIBLE MEASURES

The structural evaluation of the Major-Minor system named in the first paragraph is the most important concern. VERSO is in dialogue with the university on this and hopes for prompt and comprehensive implementation. Further measures that could be taken include:

- ◆ a regular survey of student well-being to create a quantitative basis that connects to ZHdK's existing quality control system;
- ◆ early publication of all workload expectations (especially for minor programmes) and the setting of a maximum limit on required attendance hours;
- ◆ regular updates on the status of the part-time study pilot project, as well as its timely expansion;
- ◆ examining the possibility of quiet rooms or «Niches» at ZHdK;
- ◆ an «Unsubscribe» option for emails.

Adopted by the Semester Council of VERSO, 21 May 2026