



Timetabling Survey 25/26

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Background

To review how timetables are structured, Hallam Students' Union designed a survey in collaboration with the University to gather student feedback and better understand what matters most to students in relation timetabling. The survey was distributed to all students and hosted on SurveyMonkey; 994 students started the survey, with 704 completing it in full.

The findings show that students are balancing commuting, work and personal responsibilities alongside their studies. As a result, they are seeking timetables that are compact, predictable, and confirmed early, as these factors collectively determine whether university can fit into their wider lives.

Key insights

1. Students value efficient campus time more than anything else.

Across all priorities, the strongest message is that students want timetables that minimise wasted time on campus. Two thirds of respondents prioritised having no more than a three-hour gap between classes, and over half prioritised avoiding long stretches of teaching without breaks or travelling in for a single one-hour session. Together this shows that students are not simply asking for lighter timetables but for schedules that make being on campus worthwhile and manageable, especially for commuters who cannot easily go home between sessions. This falls consistent with comments from the NSS, where students have stated 4 hours of teaching is too much in one go and only 1 hour scheduled teaching a day is not time efficient.

2. Current timetables only partially support students' wider lives, particularly work and caring responsibilities.

While learning and study are the area's best supported by timetables, even here only 57% feel their schedule works well. Support drops further when looking at part-time work and caring responsibilities, with just 41% agreeing their timetable helps. This links directly back to the efficiency issue: fragmented days, long gaps, or single-hour sessions make it harder to plan paid work or care, which is increasingly important in the context of cost-of-living pressures.

3. Late timetable confirmation compounds these pressures rather than easing them.

The desire for efficiency and balance is reinforced by students' need for certainty. Nearly 9 in 10 students want their timetable confirmed at least two to three weeks before the semester starts, with most preferring a full month's notice. Without early confirmation, students cannot plan work shifts, caring arrangements, or travel exacerbating the very problems caused by inefficient scheduling. In other words, even a "better" timetable loses value if students

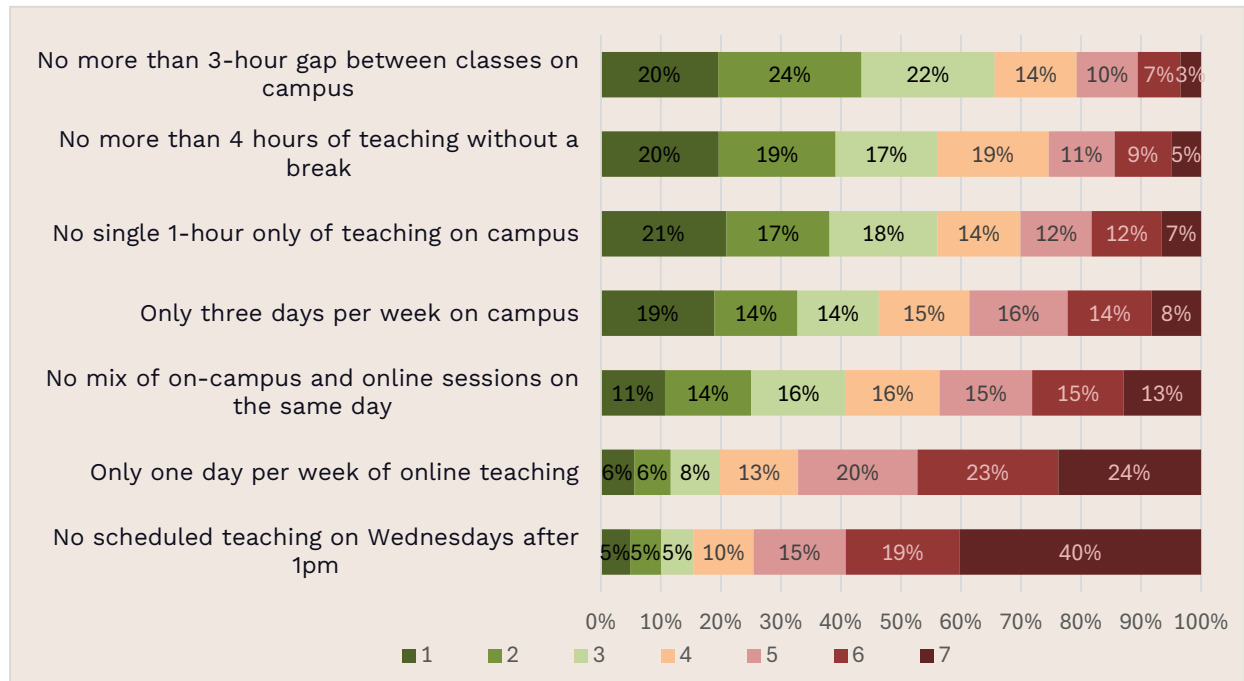
receive it too late to organise their lives around it. NSS comments have highlighted students' issues with late cancellations, which has also come through HSUs Course Reps, where students have discussed their frustration with late cancellations and how they are notified about these (often via blackboard).

4. No clear differences between student groups and timetabling preferences:

The survey results indicate no clear or significant differences in timetabling preferences across various student groups, suggesting a unified student voice regarding their needs. Whilst minor variations exist, such as incremental differences between level of study or slight preferences within colleges, these are not distinct enough to inform separate timetabling design strategies. If this level of detail is needed, further research with a larger sample size may need to be conducted. However, from the data there is an opportunity to focus on universal improvements that benefit the entire student body. This includes prioritising time efficient, compact schedules that minimise wasted time on campus, as well as enhancing communication around timetabling.

Timetable priorities

The figure below shows student preferences across a range of timetabling principles, measured on a seven-point scale from low to high importance (1 being of high importance and 7 being low).



Overall, students place strongest importance on having compact and continuous on-campus schedules. In particular, limiting gaps between classes to no more than three hours (66%), avoiding long teaching stretches without breaks (56%), and preventing single one-hour sessions on campus (56%) receive high levels of agreement, with most responses concentrated at the higher importance end of the scale.

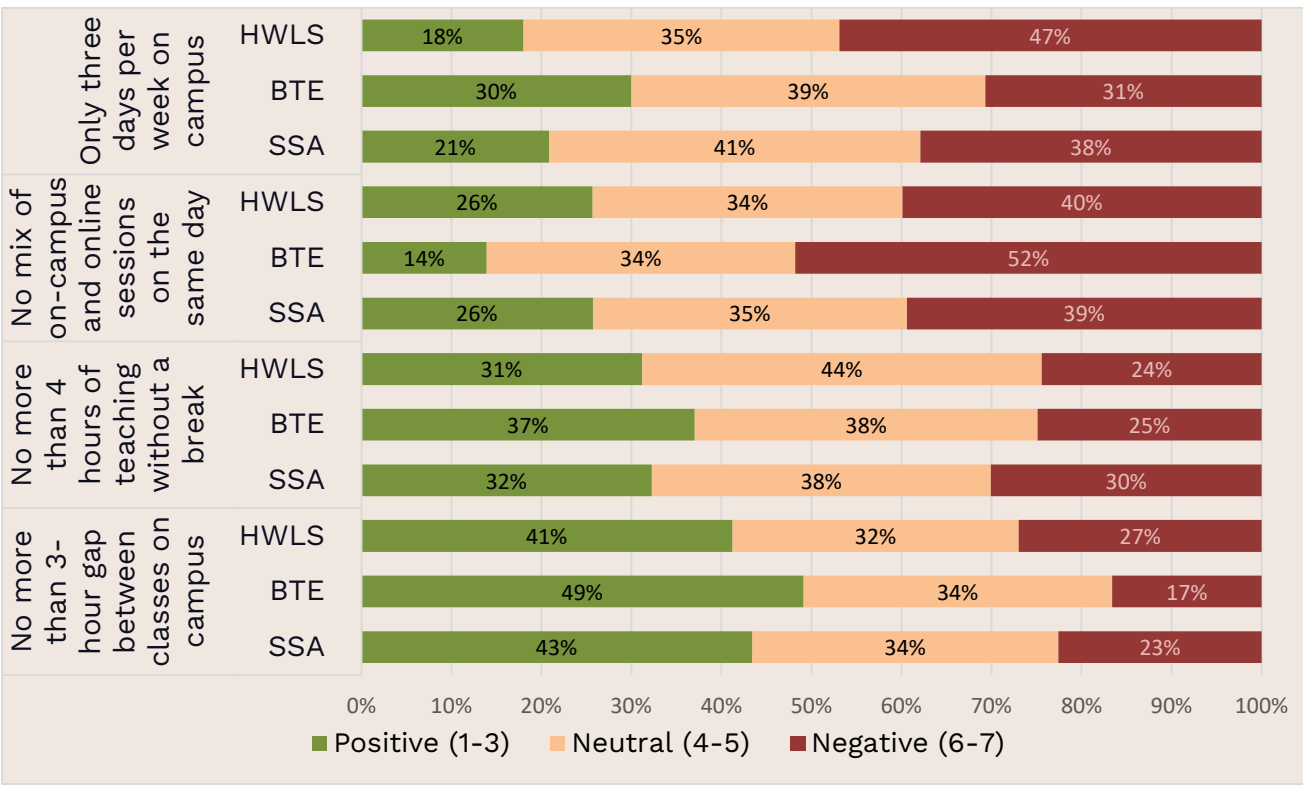
There is more mixed sentiment around reducing the number of days on campus (47%) and avoiding mixed online and on-campus teaching on the same day (41%), suggesting these are desirable for some students but less critical overall.

Preferences for online-only arrangements (20%) and having no scheduled teaching on Wednesday afternoons are notably weaker (15%). These options attract the highest proportion of low-importance ratings, indicating that while they may benefit certain students, they are not widely prioritised across the student body.

Taken together, the results highlight that students value timetables that minimise wasted time on campus and support predictable, well-structured teaching days, rather than substantial reductions in teaching days or specific online-only patterns. The lack of prioritisation of Wednesday afternoons for students may need to be explored further, this could be due to students not

fully understanding what is meant by this, or low sample size numbers from School of Sport and Physical Activity.

College differences

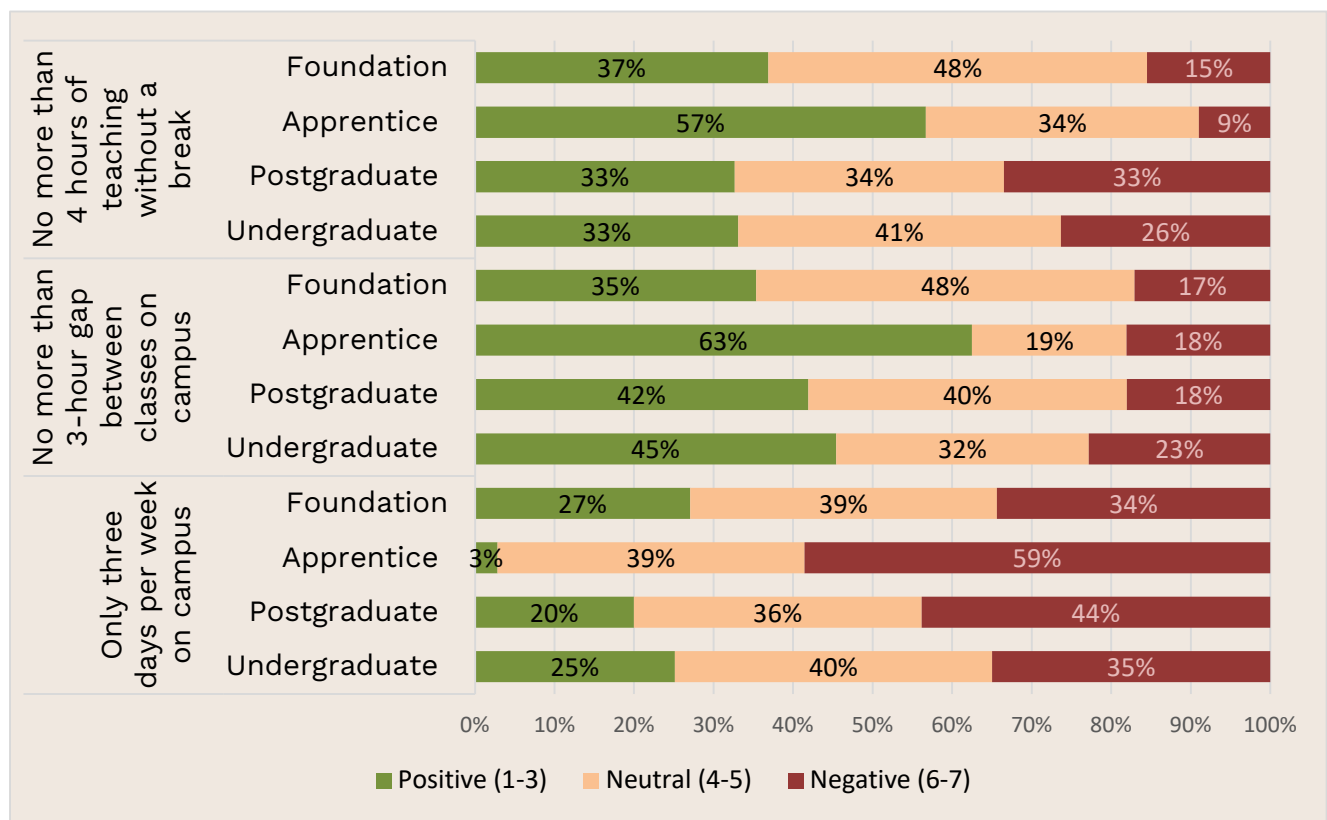


The only priorities where slight differences were established are detailed in the figure above, for clarity scores have been group into positive, neutral and negative.

As shown, BTE prioritise efficiency and flexibility slightly more than the other Colleges, with more of a preference for less days on campus. They are less receptive to a mix of campus and online sessions on the same day in comparison to the other Colleges.

Overall, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions for each College, this may be due to the smaller sample size when breaking down the data.

Level of study differences



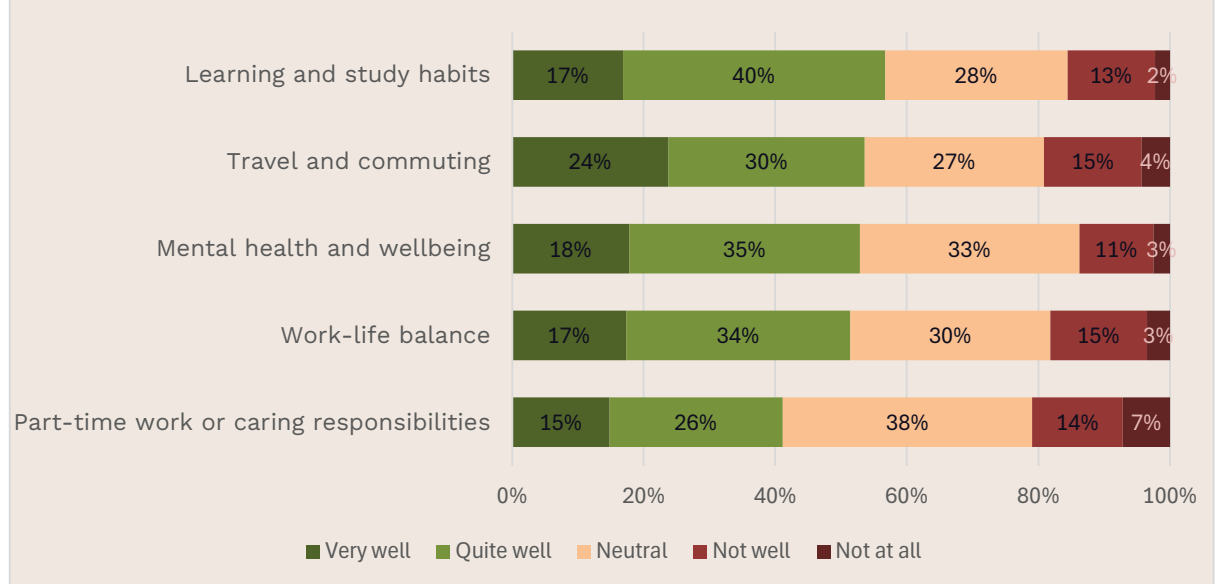
As shown, apprentices have the strongest views overall in relation to what they prioritise. Only those with differences shown between each group have been included in the figure.

Undergraduates have been group together (1st, 2nd and 3rd year) as there were no clear differences between each, suggesting a unified timetable approach for all undergraduates could work.

However, differences are only incremental, and it may be difficult to design timetable based on the insights shown. Further research into the needs of each level of study may be needed if this is the level of information needed to inform design.

Timetable and wider life

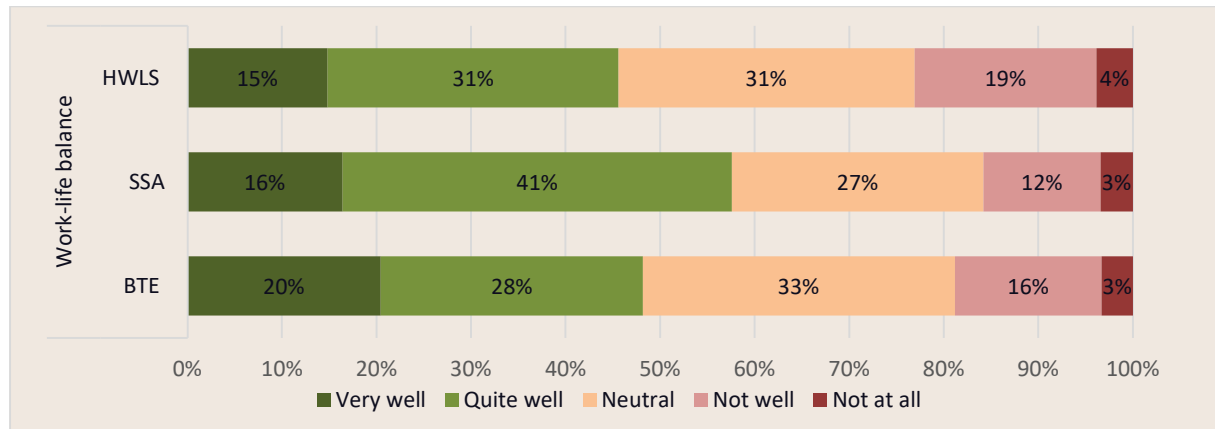
To understand the impact timetables may be having on students' wider lives and other commitments, respondents were asked to state how well their schedule supported the listed elements.



Overall, timetables are seen as supporting learning and study habits (57%), travel and commuting (54%), mental health and wellbeing (53%), and work-life balance (51%) reasonably well, with most students rating these areas as “very well” or “quite well.”

Support is weakest for part-time work or caring responsibilities (41%), where neutral and negative responses are more prominent. This suggests that while timetables work adequately for most academic and personal needs, they are less effective in accommodating students with significant external commitments.

College differences



The only clear differences shown between colleges were for work-life balance. Students from SSA find their timetables support this element better in comparison to the other colleges.

What matters most when planning timetable?

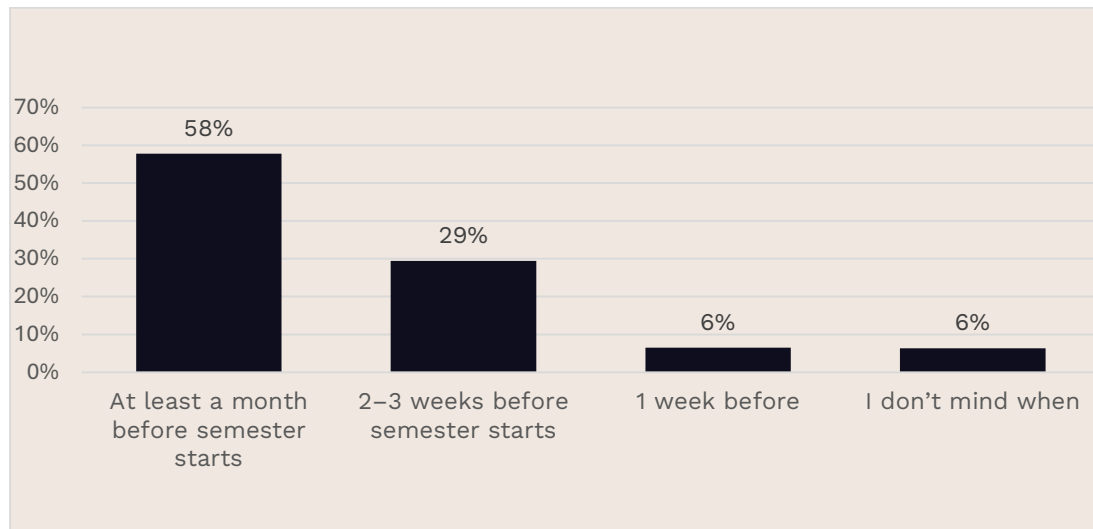
Students were asked to comment on what matters most to them when planning their timetable, comments have been thematically analysed and are shown below.

Theme	Count	Comment
Consistency (Highly positive)	424	<p>This is the most important factor for students. Students link Consistency to their ability to build a routine, when timetables fluctuate it causes stress makes external planning difficult.</p> <p><i>"Consistency to tell work which days I can work... I like having the same days on campus so I can plan time accordingly."</i></p>
Flexibility (Positive)	155	<p>Students value a system that respects their varied lifestyles, flexibility is often requested alongside accessibility. Students with disabilities or long-term conditions require a schedule that doesn't burn them out.</p>
Communication (mixed positive and negative)	146	<p>Students mostly commented on how last-minute changes were the biggest grievance in this category. Students felt frustrated when schedules change without adequate notice, as it ripples through their work and travel arrangements.</p>
Work-life balance	116	<p>Many students rely on part time work to support them whilst studying. Gaps in the middle of the day are viewed negatively because they prevent students from working in a morning or afternoon and are disrupting the whole days earning potential.</p>
Condensed schedule (mixed positive and negative)	89	<p>Comments show a clear divide on how teaching should be grouped.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Condensed (positive): many prefer 2 or 3 long, back-to-back days to keep the rest of their week free. - Intensity (negative): whereas others find long days exhausting and feel their learning suffers when they are 'crammed' with information. - Common ground: Almost all students agree that big gaps (e.g. 3 hours between

		teaching) are negative and impede their ability to use their time effectively.
Online vs in-person (mixed)	80	This is again a polarising topic with a mix of opinions. Students who feel negatively towards online learning state this is due to the sessions being 'ineffective' and not learning as much from them. There were also comments around mixed modes of teaching on the same day, students often found it difficult to find a quiet place on campus to join an online session after an in person one.
Travel and commuting (negative)	74	There is a strong negative sentiment towards short days, for example, coming in for a single 1 hour session. The cost of train tickets and parking makes 'inefficient' days a major point. "It's difficult as a commuter only going in for an hour or two multiple days due to travel costs and time"

Timetable confirmation

To assist with timetable confirmation timings, students were asked how far in advance they need their timetable confirmed to plan effectively.



Most students would like their timetable at least a month before the semester starts (58%) or at least 2-3 weeks before the start of the semester (29%). Only a small number would be happy with it a week before (6%), or they don't mind (6%).

Changing one thing about timetables

Students were asked to comment on what the one thing is they would change about their current timetable. Comments have been thematically analysed and are detailed in the table below.

Theme	Count	Comment
Reducing gaps (negative/frustrated)	105	<p>The most common issue is the split timetable, students find long gaps between classes highly inefficient. Gaps are seen as wasted time particularly by those who can't go home in between sessions.</p> <p>'The gaps in between seminars or lectures not too long... not more than 2 hr.'</p> <p>'Get rid of 2-3 hour gaps in between lessons. Preferably no gap at all. Efficiency is number one.'</p>
Online vs in-person (negative)	87	<p>Whilst some want more online flexibility to save on travel, some online sessions are a poor substitute for tuition. Online sessions are often viewed as unproductive and not as beneficial as face to face teaching.</p>

		<p>"Less (or even better, none) online classes. They're so unproductive and feel like we're being robbed of actual teaching."</p> <p>"At least the early lectures/seminars should be online so students commuting can surely attend them and be less exhausted."</p>
Timing (Starts/finishes)	82	<p>The 9-5 academic days is a point of contention within the comments, 9am starts are particularly unpopular for some commuters and those with late night studying preferences. Overall, 10am is frequently cited as the ideal start time.</p> <p><i>"No 9am sessions... 10am is good."</i></p> <p><i>"All lectures to finish at 16:30 hrs latest."</i></p>
Planning	73	<p>Students feel as though the current timing of releasing timetables is too short, preventing them from organising other commitments, a provisional timetable is not enough for those with families or jobs.</p> <p><i>"To release the timetable early like one month early or two to plan ahead"</i></p>
Condensed schedule	49	<p>Comments centred on how they would like to condense the university week into fewer days on campus to mitigate travel costs and allow for part time work alongside. Teaching scheduled in 1-hour single sessions was described as expensive for students.</p> <p><i>"I would merge seminars together in the same day, then lectures in the same day."</i></p>
Commuting and costs	41	<p>Students had also commented on the cost of traveling to campus to attend teaching, which is significantly increased when attending for numerous 1-hour sessions throughout the week.</p>
Consistency and routine	37	<p>Comments centred on students timetables not changing week to week, or for their to be more advance warning of any potential changes. As this made it difficult to engage in consistent working hours.</p> <p><i>"Not having different timetables every week"</i></p>
Campus logistics	27	<p>Physical movement between scheduled teaching was a point for contention,</p>

		particularly when sessions are scheduled back to back in different buildings across campus.
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Demographics

What institute are you currently studying under?	%	Count
Sheffield Institute of Education	10%	79
Sheffield Institute of Social Sciences	13%	108
Sheffield Institute of Law and Justice	9%	76
Sheffield Creative Industries Institute	7%	60
Sheffield Business School	18%	148
School of Computing and Digital Technologies	11%	89
School of Engineering and Built Environment	8%	66
School of Health and Social Care	13%	105
School of Sport and Physical Activity	4%	29
School of Biosciences and Chemistry	6%	48

Which level of study are you currently in?	%	Count
Foundation	3%	26
Apprenticeship	3%	27
Undergraduate (Year 1)	29%	231
Undergraduate (Year 2)	26%	207
Undergraduate (Final year)	21%	167
Postgraduate	19%	150

Which best describes your mode of study?	%	Count
Full-time	89%	716
Part-time	8%	61
Distance learning (full-time)	1%	5
Distance learning (part-time)	1%	10
Other (please specify)	2%	16

Do you regularly (select all that apply)	%	Count
Commute more than 30 minutes each way	55%	389
Work part-time alongside your course	65%	455
Have caring responsibilities	13%	94
Participate in volunteering, societies or sports	44%	309