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The first-year university student in the age of acceleration: Time beliefs, decisions, and impacts

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a recent project entitled 'Space + [time x practices] = engagement?', conducted at Munster Technological University (MTU), a multi-campus Technological University spanning counties Cork and Kerry, Ireland. The overarching objectives of the project were to deepen understandings of and open paths to addressing a broadly perceived sector-wide reduction in lecture attendance and in time devoted to learning and study among contemporary learners. Here, we will outline salient findings from an all-student survey conducted during semester 2 of the 2024-25 academic year on learner perceptions of time in relation to study and related activities and offer some insights into the study/time beliefs of first-year students.

We highlight an interesting trend in first-year learners' perception of the 'occupation' of being a university learner. 79% of these 'novice' students agree that it is important to attend all lectures, yet also report limited engagement with study or university work outside of their timetabled lectures. This is suggestive of an emergent paradigm of being-a-student which confines itself to the '9-to-5' and involves pragmatic decision-making and trade-offs between competing commitments. We point to some of the most prominent competing priorities outlined by students and raise critical questions about the setting of expectations in the transition from second- to third-level education.

Keywords: student engagement, attendance, social acceleration, student identity

Introduction

This paper reports on findings from a project conducted at Munster Technological University (MTU) with the financial support of the Higher Education Authority/National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) fund. The project – entitled Space + (time x practices) = engagement? – aimed to respond empirically to anecdotal and media discussion on an ostensive 'crisis of engagement' among university learners. We elected to investigate this by taking time as a conceptual frame: focusing on in-lecture time, liminal time between timetabled lectures, and time outside of the lecture timetable (evenings and weekends), we aimed to determine how learners thought about, used, and responded to each of these three learning times. In short, we wish to investigate how important each learning time is thought to be and how and how often each one is actually availed of. Of particular interest in this regard were potential gaps between theoretical evaluations by first-year learners of the importance of in-lecture and outside-lecture study time and their ultimate temporal enactment of their new student role.

At the time of completing our survey (on which more follows), first-year participants were in the second semester of their studies, and as such, were at a particularly interesting stage in their transition to university, being 'novice' university learners, but also having completed assessment in their semester one modules. Furthermore, these students are, at least in theory, both the newest to the university setting and the closest to their previous learning experiences and habits. This places them in an interesting liminal space between the devices and habits which may have served them well in, for instance, second-level education and the habits and approaches which they will ultimately have developed upon graduation from university.

In the present contribution, our core objectives are to:

- set out first-year learners' reported beliefs about the in-lecture and extra-timetable time commitment required by full-time university study;
- survey the impact of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors on learners' decision-making regarding their ultimate use of scheduled and unscheduled learning opportunities;
- evaluate the priorities which compete with study and learning for first-year learners' non-lecture time, and how these drive decision-making regarding time use;
- discuss discrepancies between theoretical evaluations of time commitments necessitated by full-time study and practical enactment of these; and
- situate these developments within their probable structural contexts.

To this end, we present here primarily quantitative data from our learner survey regarding the use of time falling *outside* of the lecture schedule; that is, evening and weekend time. We supplement this with pertinent qualitative data collected through survey open questions. We find that year-one learner beliefs about the importance of using extra-timetable time for study purposes contrast sharply with beliefs about the importance of presence at scheduled learning events such as lectures, and point to a trend among learners – even those relatively new to the higher education (HE) system – to think of university study not as an occupation in itself, but as one priority among a complex of priorities which compete for the learners' time and attention. We seek to illuminate why students may conceive of university learning as a 9-to-5 commitment, and raise fundamental questions about contrasts between academics' and novice learners' concepts of the occupation of and time commitment required by full-time university study. We posit that these contradictions and challenges relating to the availability and usage of time reflect theoretical constructions of the contemporary disruption of linear time, as theorised by, for instance, Hartmut Rosa (2005).

Timescapes and temporalities: Whither time in 2025?

Belonging and anonymity

Students' sense of 'belonging' has become a significant theme in the literature of Higher Education learner engagement (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Ajjawi et al., 2025; Pedler et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017) and is arguably most pertinent in relation to the transition to university. However, as Oldfield et al. (2019) have shown, an increasing sense of anonymity among students appears to be acting as a barrier to the cultivation of belonging. This may conceivably result from a complex of spatio-temporal realities such as, for example,

increasing promotion of and reliance on digital educational 'non-spaces' such as Learning Management Systems (LMSs), which remain surprisingly under-commented.

Barriers to belonging and engagement

While practical challenges such as paid work and commuting are frequently cited as key reasons for low attendance (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024), notably in recent commentary in the Irish media (O'Brien, 2023; O'Connor, 2024), it is increasingly clear these reasons alone are insufficient to explicate downward trends in attendance and independent study. Indeed, Sloan et al. (2020, p. 2214) found little evidence linking these 'classic' reasons with low attendance in a UK post-1992 university. Additionally, a minority trend supportive of paid work as a helpful supplement to learning – particularly with a view to employability after graduation – has emerged (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024), and Remenick and Bergman (2021) have called for universities to consciously deconstruct barriers between working and study. Indeed, this latter study even calls for universities to involve themselves in learners' searches for work, for instance by providing on-campus employment opportunities.

Sloan et al. (2020) also find any-time availability of lecture notes, another frequently cited cause of declining attendance and learning time expenditure (Grabe et al., 2004), to be similarly weakly correlated with actual attendance. Instead, they found greater predictive value in learners' "motivation and interest levels" (Sloan et al., 2020, p. 2214). With no consensus on the genesis of the learner engagement crisis in prospect, it is apt to recall Malcolm Tight's (2020) assertion that our current understandings of the reality of being a student today is simply insufficient.

If typical explanations of the downward trend in attendance and effort expended outside the timetable are excessively simplistic – and perhaps even outright wrong – which are the factors contributing to learners' progressive disengagement? A survey of the literature of attendance remediation would suggest that time is, indeed, the principle upon which the majority of institution- and academic-led interventions rest. This coincides with increasingly nuanced commentary on the complexity of competing demands on learners' time (Richardson et al., 2019; Tight, 2020), which, of course, are likely to be especially keenly felt by first-year students whose range of additional commitments includes acclimatising to a range of *novel* experiences – academic, personal, and social – and tasks (Richardson et al., 2019; van der Meer et al., 2010).

That students are spending less time in lecture theatres and on independent study than their predecessors is scarcely in doubt. Evidence from the US (Babcock & Marks, 2011; Thibodeaux et al., 2017), in particular, has quantified the reduction in time allocated to university learning. Among the reasons discussed has been the construct of "flexibility" and the "hegemonic individualisation" (Bunn et al., 2019, p. 1414) to which it gives rise. In the flexible university, learners can access their learning materials and tasks in a delocalised setting and at any time, disrupting both the situatedness of university and the primacy of time as an organising principle (Bunn et al., 2019). Indeed, under these conditions of "fragmented, nonlinear, and individualised" time (Bunn et al., 2019, p. 1414), the question of whether or not the lecture retains its value has arisen (Andrietti & Velasco, 2015).

The flexible paradigm of Higher Education must represent an especially daunting challenge to the first-year learner, demanding as it does a range of sophisticated skills in 'time management' and self-regulation. The demands it places on students to enact advanced self-management are further exacerbated by the

embedding of the discourse of employability (Clegg, 2010). This conflation of factors suggests a newly contradictory role for time as organising principle in contemporary Higher Education.

Time and/in Higher Education

Yet, even if, in practice, time is losing its long-held place as the core organising principle of a programme of Higher Education study, its theoretical importance as a marker of student commitment and even ability has arguably endured. Bennett and Burke's (2018, p. 921) work, for instance, has highlighted the role of attendance and attitudinal factors such as "time management, commitment and a willingness to work hard" as markers against which academics would form judgements about learners' academic capabilities. Bennett and Burke (2018, p. 913) capture this tension when they note that "[t]he way that we think about time implicitly determines our assumptions about self and others. Ideas about others' – and indeed our own – capability in a field hinge on assumptions about their/our time."

Engagement interventions

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the contradictory but central functions of time in HE, 'cures' commonly prescribed for the malady of low attendance and engagement continue to centre on the concept of linear or clock time. Instruction or guidance in time management is perhaps the most widely recommended corrective, and its importance for new Higher Education learners who may have as yet underdeveloped self-regulatory skills has been emphasised (Thibodeaux et al., 2017; van der Meer et al., 2010). Scholars critical of the time management training approach, however, have pointed to the pathologisation it implies. Thomas et al. (2019), for instance, have commented on the diagnostic tenor of interventions designed to saved time-as-commodity, where Zembylas (2024, p. 493) frames time management as a "harmful productivity imperative" in the broader context of the university. Bennett and Burke (2018, p. 914) frame the time management approach as potentially helpful, but ultimately a set of "correction therapies" for those students whose contingent, subjective construction of time places them outside the institutional time norm.

Another time-reliant solution to wavering engagement popularly proposed is the cultivation of a future time perspective, typically constructed as the capacity to evaluate the importance of present actions in the context of their potential future implications (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Impola, 2023; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). A third approach to broadly the same proposed solution is for academics to play an active role in setting new learners' expectations with regard to the amount of time demanded by university tasks (Fosnacht et al., 2018; van der Meer et al., 2010). Burke and Manathunga (2020) critique this approach, drawing attention to its normative function: in order for the future orientation to be realised, learners will need to choose a specific future and apportion time by means (institutionally) deemed effective. In broadly the same vein, further contributions discuss the import of reflection on or reassessment of past time use as means of prompting different (or more) time use in similar future tasks (Keyes et al., 2025; Thibodeaux et al., 2017).

However, despite the destabilisation of the concept of time in contemporary higher education learning, it remains inescapable as a quantifier of outcomes and of the investment required to secure them. At a transnational level, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) structurally embeds time as a measure of expected input and performance for learners. Sarauw (2024) argues that this has had the impact of accelerating learners' experience of time by binding academic achievement to the concept of pace.

Time, Higher Education, and acceleration

Further factors problematising the accelerating pace of Higher Education learning include, for instance, the previously mentioned de-placed and de-timed learning engendered by the advent of the LMS. Generative AI (GenAI) has brought this detemporalisation of learning to a crisis point, by "collapsing the reflective pauses that traditionally characterize inquiry" (Hou, 2025, p. 4) through its obliteration of the temporal "space between not knowing and knowing" (Hou, 2025, p. 3). This represents a cultural shift embedding instantaneity as a reasonable expectation within the processes of learning, teaching, and assessment, simultaneously foregrounding the centrality of time to the academic endeavour and the ever-decreasing time deemed to be available for it. It also recalls Virilio's (1990) theorisation of instantaneousness as the necessary outcome of inexorable technological advances, and of the inertia and immobility this enables, thus also drawing into focus the mutual impact of fragmenting time on the experience of space.

If, then, we are living a moment of overarching temporal crisis in Higher Education, if this is driving disengagement even among our newest learners, and if the interventions we have trialled have not remediated the situation, what is to be done? While we do not pretend to be able to offer a comprehensive programme of ameliorative actions, we do argue in the present contribution that the temporal challenges – including both attendance at lectures and time spent on independent study – appear to stem not solely from predictable individual challenges or skills deficits, but from a seismic structural recalibration of the meaning and value of time within HE which requires sustained attention.

Impactful restructuring either of the sectoral offering or of learners' expectations will almost certainly not be achieved through individual-oriented interventions such as those reviewed above. It bears quoting Bennett and Burke (2018, p. 918) on the inadequacy of such measures to stem the tide of temporal disruption:

> Across the sector, the lists of self-disciplinary techniques include: 'setting goals'; creating an 'action plan'; 'don't rush'; 'use calendars/diaries'; 'chunk'; 'plan tasks'; 'set deadlines'; 'avoid time wasters'; 'put aside material that you won't read'; 'have a purpose for everything you do'; 'allow extra time for the unexpected'; 'do creative work where you won't be disturbed'; 'do calls & texts, emails and social media at a regular time' and 'organise your workspace'. All of these strategies rely on the individual 'having' regular, consistent and predictable time, when many, who are carers and/or who work irregular shifts, do not. Precarious work, accommodation and responsibilities are not adequately recognised in this highly individualised, neoliberal ethics that is dominated by self-help discourse, where optional support services are mostly only able to offer advice about self-management strategies if students are not able to conform to conventional, homogenous institutional (bureaucratic and pedagogical) timeframes.

Of course, this is not to suggest that individual interventions are without merit. Indeed, such supports regularly transform learners' experiences and yield outstanding results. Nonetheless, the overarching trend appears to continue downward where time invested in learning is concerned, and as such, it is apt to reconsider what we do, what we offer, and what students want from us under our current conditions of intense technological and social acceleration (Rosa, 2005).

Rosa (2005) posits that the combined acceleration of technology and society leave both individuals and structures in a perpetual state of striving but failing to keep up. He considers this to have precipitated "the heightening of the pace of life through and increase in episodes of action and/or experience per unit of

time," which creates a sensation of "lack of time" (Rosa, 2013, p. 65). For Rosa, a condition of "frenetic standstill" (Rosa, 2013, p. 56) results, and operates at individual, structural, and superstructural levels. Our findings find reflections of social acceleration in the experiences of our first-year respondents, highlighting the urgency of recalibrating the philosophy of educational time with a view to mitigating the feeling of standstill.

Methodology

In order to assess both first-year students' quantitative and qualitative insights, we adopted a multiple methods approach in our project and conducted the research under ethical approval from our university's Human Research Ethics Committee (MTU-HREC-MR-24-046-A). We commenced our data collection by distributing a 36-item survey to all students across all six campuses of our university. This comprised a majority of closed, quantitative questions and eleven open, qualitative questions investigating how students make use of each of the three learning times we have outlined above. Of a total of 390 responses, 146 were submitted by first-year students. 18 semi-structured interviews were also conducted, but since only two first-year students participated in interviews, these data have been excluded from consideration in this paper.

Of the respondents in the first year of their course of study, 59.59% identified as female, 37.67% as male, 2.05% as non-binary, and 0.68% preferred not to specify their gender. 93.83% of the first-year respondents were aged 23 and below, however, nine respondents belonged to the mature student category, being 24 years of age or above.

Table 1 Age distribution of respondents in year one

How old are you?	No. of y1 respondents
23 and under	137
24 - 29	5
30 - 39	3
40 +	1
Grand total	**146**

All five of the university's faculties were represented, with 15.75% of responses coming from the Faculty of Business, 9.59% from the Faculty of Creative and Performing Arts and Media, 14.38% from the Faculty of Engineering, 43.15% from the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, and 17.12% from the Faculty of Science and Informatics. It is unclear why the proportion of responses from the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences is so significantly higher than that from the other faculties.

Findings

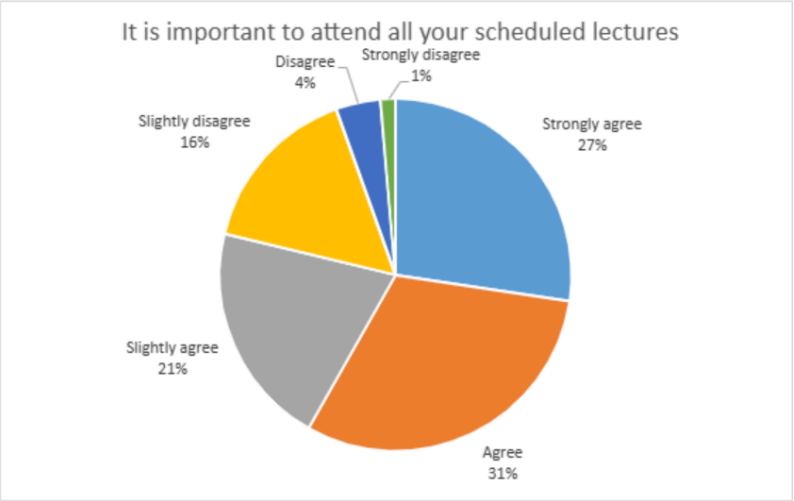

Figure 1 Respondents' views on the importance of attending all scheduled lectures, in percent

As demonstrated in figure 1 above, only 21% of first-year respondents disagreed to some extent with the proposition that attending *all scheduled lectures* is important. Notably, the most common responses were agreement (31%) and strong agreement (27%). This is suggestive of a high value placed on in-person, scheduled learning activities.

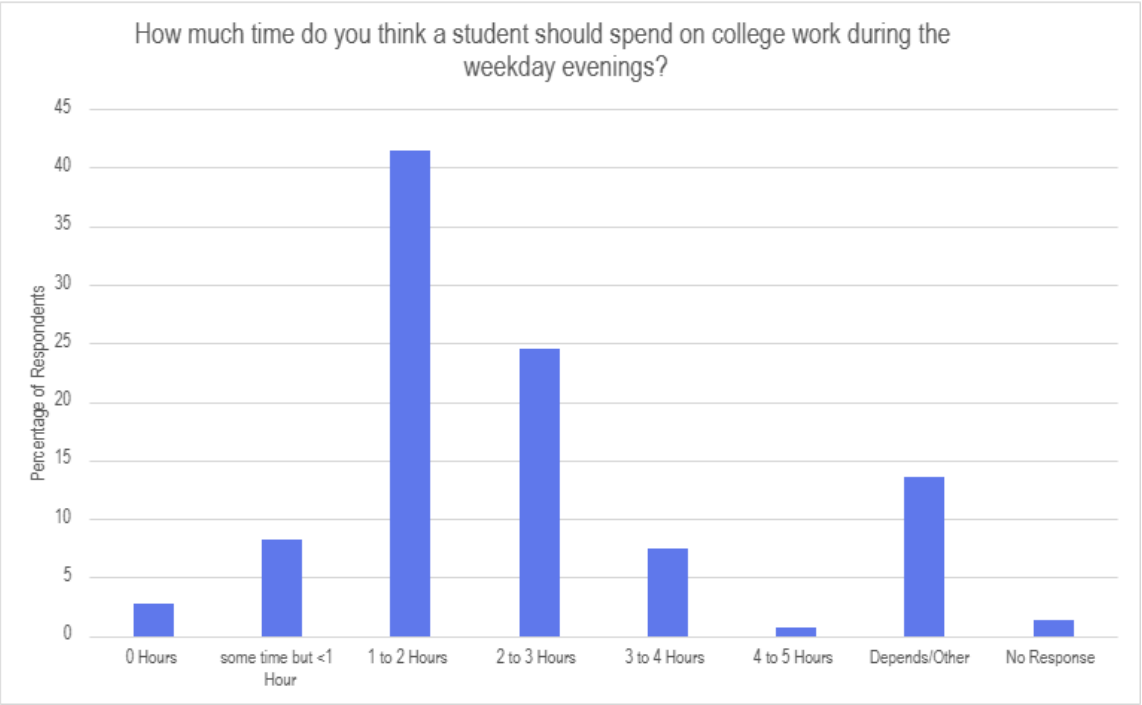

Figure 2 Respondents' views on the ideal time investment in study during weekday evenings, in percent

Similarly, a majority of respondents suggest that in theory, a student should ideally invest a significant amount of time in learning and study activities during weekday evenings (figure 2). The vast majority of

students (66%) believe that between one and three hours would be an ideal amount of time to give to learning on weekday evenings. However, this does not seem to translate consistently into practice, and a notable theme in open survey responses on the question of ideal time investment during evenings was that students have no further capacity for study and university work at the conclusion of the timetabled day. These responses are consonant with quantitative findings illustrated in figure 5 below, where a need for rest proves the most significant factor impacting students' decision to do or not to do study or academic work at evenings and weekends. Four learner comments representative of this theme are reproduced in table 2 below.

Table 2 Indicative comments on the theme of barriers to investing the ideal amount of evening and weekend time in study and assessment tasks (emphasis added)

"Students should have *a life other than assignments and work* on weekday evenings so an hour or two at most."
"Ideally I think the majority of work should be covered during class time, *due to the long college days and class hours you're exhausted by the time you get home* and have no energy for any more work."
"If staff continue to timetable lectures so that by the time students get home it's time for bed, then none! It's ridiculous that timetables aren't sorted before a new semester, and that student well-being is never taken into consideration! It's ridiculous, I'm so tired, constantly, I am struggling to find a part time job, *I have no time for outside of my course* friends, or my family, and many others feel the same way! Will anyone ever listen or care?"
"None because *the days are long enough* we need time to chill out" [sic].

While the idea of commuting is alluded to by one respondent, the primary block to learners engaging more fully with their learning outside of scheduled classes appears to be the perceived denseness of timetabled learning engagements. This is a novel finding and indicates that the heavily commented crisis of accommodation and commuting – while undoubtedly relevant and a contributor to learner (dis)engagement might more accurately be conceived of as an aggravating factor in an already challenging situation or, perhaps more likely, as a component in a complex network of challenges.

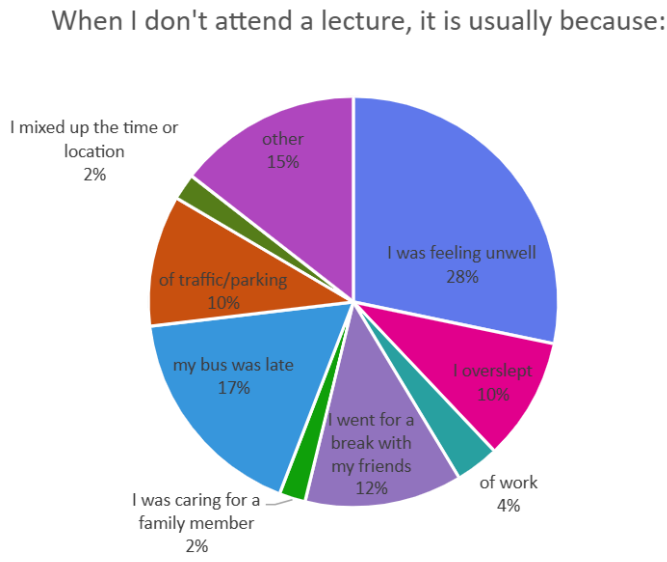

Figure 3 Reasons cited for non-attendance at lectures, in percent

Indeed, returning to the question of lecture attendance, commuting issues account for 27% of instances of lecture non-attendance. Altogether more significant is feeling unwell, which alone is cited as a cause for 28% of non-attendances. With retrospect, it is clear that this answer option should have been subdivided into categories of unwellness, such as, for instance, physical vs mental unwellness. Also notable is the 15% of responses which indicate other reasons for non-attendance. Similarly important to note is the low proportion of lecture absences reportedly attributable to paid work. This finding was unexpected, but, as noted above, it does find precedent in Sloan et al.'s (2020) study.

Figure 4 Respondents' reporting of the frequency with which they study during evenings or at weekends, in percent

On the question of how often they make time to study during evenings and weekends, respondents overwhelmingly report sometimes or rarely doing this. The combined percentage of learners reporting doing so very often or often is just 17%, perhaps further underscoring the perceived centrality of the lecture as the primary locus of learning. An important clarification which will be sought in the next iteration of this research will be whether sporadic study (sometimes, rarely) is linked exclusively – or perhaps almost exclusively – to assignment production and examination preparation.

To broaden our understanding of students' decision-making processes regarding evening and weekend study, a further question investigated the factors that influence their choice to study or not to study during evenings and weekends. A summary of responses is shown in figure 5 below. It is important to note that in response to this question, respondents could (and generally did) select more than one possible answer, therefore responses are shown as a count. Just three first-year respondents selected the 'other' option and of these, one pointed to home maintenance as an important deciding factor, another to sickness and the third indicated that their decision to study (or not) outside the timetable would be made based on whether or not they felt they now adequately knew information from their week's lectures.

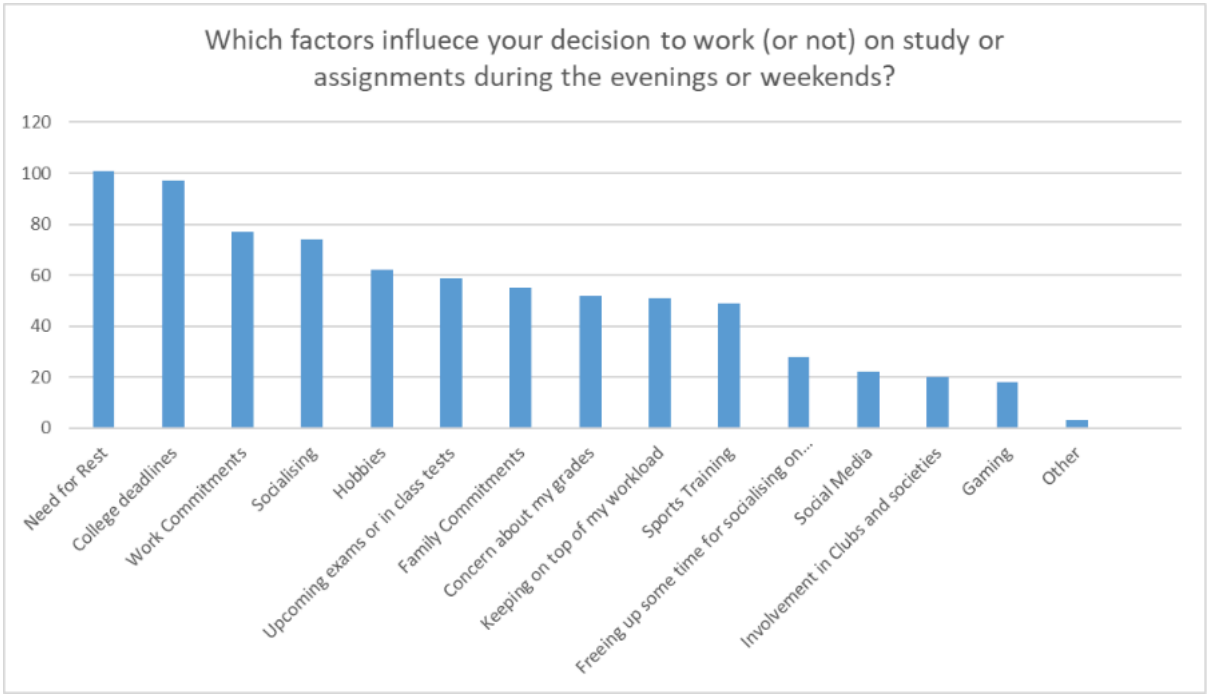

Figure 5 Number of responses recorded to each option regarding drivers of and barriers to independent study

The need for rest was the most commonly selected influence on students' decisions to do or not to do university work at evenings or weekends. However, a complex of common bases upon which this decision was made was evident. In the following four scenarios, students selected two contradictory or competing factors, in a clear demonstration of competing time demands: a combination of college deadlines and the need for rest occurs 75 times; there are 65 instances of overlap between socialising and the need for rest; the need for rest and work commitments co-occur 58 times; and college deadlines and socialising overlapped 57 times. More predictably, there were 50 instances of a combination of college deadlines and upcoming exams or in-class tests. This provides both corroboration and extension of previous findings showing a correlation between upcoming examinations and lecture attendance (Sloan et al., 2020). It is noteworthy that three of these scenarios involve tensions between drivers of and barriers to independent academic work outside the lecture timetable.

Table 3 Respondents' quantification of the average number of hours they spend per week on independent study outside of timetabled classes, in percent

0 hours	1-3 hours	3-6 hours	6-9 hours	9-12 hours	12-15 hours	15-18 hours
11%	48%	31%	7%	1%	1%	1%

The strong trend to *sometimes* or *rarely* engage in study outside of timetabled learning events shown in figure 4 above tallies well with learners' estimation of the average amount of time per week they spend on study outside of timetabled classes (table 3). At 48% of responses, one to three hours per week is by a considerable distance the most popular answer. This is followed by the three-to-six-hours option at just 31%, with zero hours the third most common choice, being eleven times more common than the nine-to-12-, 12-15-, and 15-18-hours options. In short, our average respondent – who is taking six

five-credit modules – is likely, by their own estimation, to spend somewhere between ten minutes and one hour per week working one each module outside of lecture time.

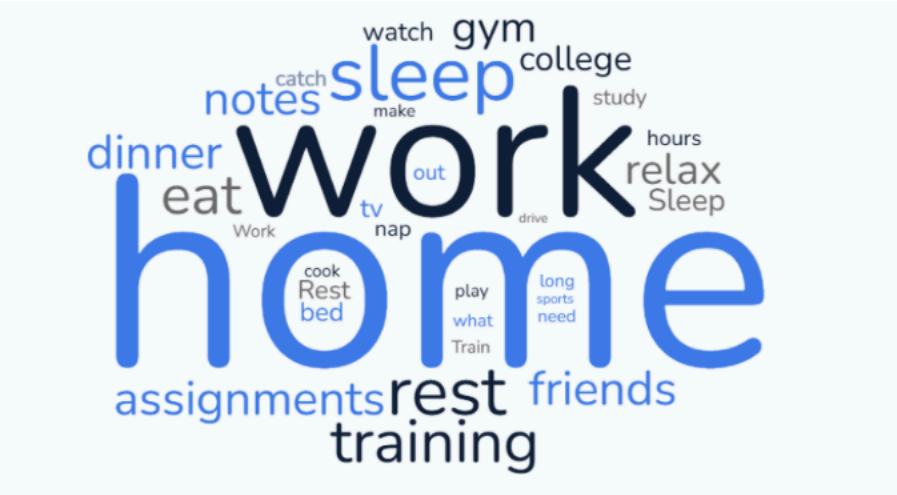

Figure 6 Responses to the open question "What do you usually do when you finish college for the day?"

These indications regarding students' tendency to deprioritise learning and study outside of scheduled lecture time – or, perhaps more accurately, outside of the day as defined by the lecture schedule – raise the question of which priorities take precedence for our respondents. Figure 6 above is a word cloud generated from learners' responses to an open-text question on their activities after the learning day has ended. Interestingly, while work is a relatively prominent theme, the most significant cluster of answers centre around getting home, doing domestic tasks and attending to basic physiological needs such as rest, eating, and sleep. Social activities, interestingly, are not a notable trend in this narrative.

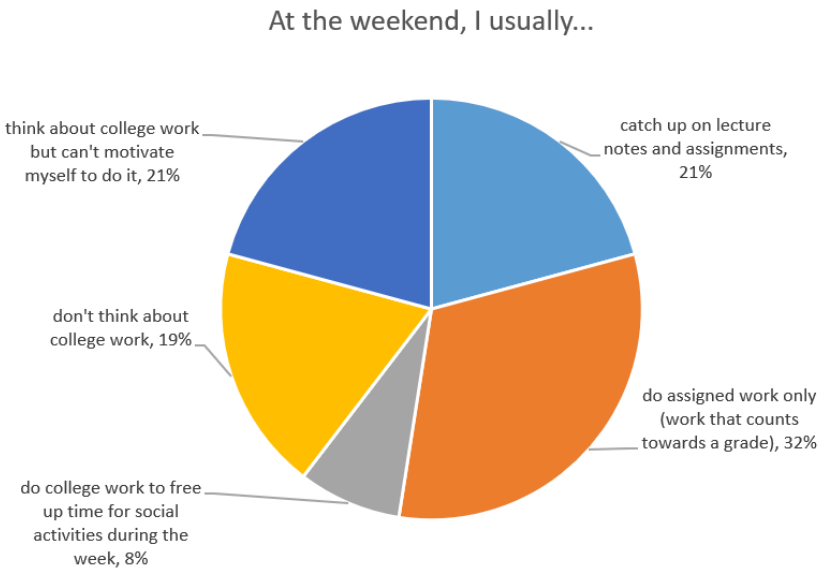

Figure 7 Responses regarding study-related activity at weekends, in percent

A similar question – this time closed with a range of options regarding study and learning from which to select – was posed regarding typical weekend activities. This was intended to gauge the extent to which the demands of university study were thought about during this *rest* period. Once again, an interesting dynamic between intention and action is revealed. While 19% of respondents report not thinking about study at all over the weekend, a further 21% would do academic work if they could summon the motivation to do so, recalling, perhaps, the theme of the need for rest, which is a recurring one. Of the 61% who report using weekend time for study tasks, 21% appear to do so holistically, for the purposes of staying up to date, where a further 32% do so only where graded tasks demand it, and a final 8% do so to free up time for mid-week social activities. These latter two groups could be said, therefore, to be engaging in weekend study with some degree of strategic decision-making, investing time where a return accrues, whether it be a social or an academic one.

Just as extrinsic motivation appears to be the dominant driver of extra-timetable study, so too do extrinsic factors sometimes limit this outside-class engagement. While the open-ended responses shown in table 2 above point to some structural factors perceived as blocks to study outside class time, a further open question on factors significantly impacting time management for study and related activities indicated that extrinsic and often structural needs and commitments impinge upon learners' uses of their available time. Figure 8 below shows a word cloud generated from open-ended responses to this question and strongly suggests that work and personal commitments constitute the greatest challenge to making time for study and assessment.

Figure 8 Word cloud generated based on responses to the open-ended question "Are there any additional factors that significantly impact on your time management for study or other college-related activities?"

Most open-ended responses touched upon several factors, but the key themes which were identified upon thematic coding of the answers are shown in table 4 below. Within the table, the first row shows the most prominent themes in this dataset, and the subsequent rows show a selection of indicative individual responses.

Table 4 Themes identified from open-ended responses to the question "Are there any additional factors that significantly impact on your time management for study or other college-related activities?", with indicative responses

Rest & recovery	College work	Social activities	Commute	Paid work & household chores	Physical activity	Ents and hobbies
"Go sports training or drive home and go for a nap"						
"Socialise for 15/20 minutes and go home. Then eat and go to bed"						
"Go home, rest for an hour and relax then look at what I need to do work on it for a few hours then put it away and rest"						
"Rest. Eat. Train. Then try and go over some lectures from the day."						
"socialise with my housemates/ go to the gym, make dinner, and do college work"						
"Wait for about an hour at times for the bus to show up and be home at around 7, take a break to eat and rest for an hour, at 8 do some college work for an hour max (if I have any due), relax after I'm done and get ready for bed"						

Once again, the theme of rest proves perhaps more compelling than those of commuting and paid work. It is, as yet, unclear why this need is felt so keenly, and this will form an important part of the second iteration of this investigation. A real sense of a dearth of opportunity for social interaction seems also to pervade these answers, perhaps raising the spectre of lingering (inter-)personal impacts of, for instance, the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The qualitative and quantitative survey data which we have presented in this contribution reveal interesting internal tensions in first-year students' concept of the 'occupation' of studenthood. While our findings suggest that respondents believe regular attendance at lectures to be critical, it is evident that a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic challenges is circumscribing their independent learning activities beyond the lecture schedule. It would appear that normative and largely unchanging timescapes (Adam, 1998) in Higher Education may make these issues especially pronounced and challenging for novice university learners who are in the process of making a complex and multifaceted transition from second- to third-level study.

The findings reported above are supportive of a hypothesis arising from our research study; namely, that contemporary Higher Education learners tend strongly to conceive of university study as a 9-to-5 endeavour. The role of being-a-student does not appear to be a particularly significant index of personal identity for many of these learners and might better be thought of as one factor in a complex of competing demands, each of which requires time. The account of contemporary studenthood which emerges from our

analysis appears to reflect not only a student population juggling personal, economic, and academic demands, but of a cohort of novice learners whose relationships with independent learning outside the lecture timetable are strategic and seem to situate university as one priority among many. It is of note that one of the most consistent themes across the quantitative and qualitative data is that of a perceived need for rest, further underscoring a more fundamental shift in pervasive socio-economic narratives of time and performance, mirroring the theoretical construct of frenetic standstill.

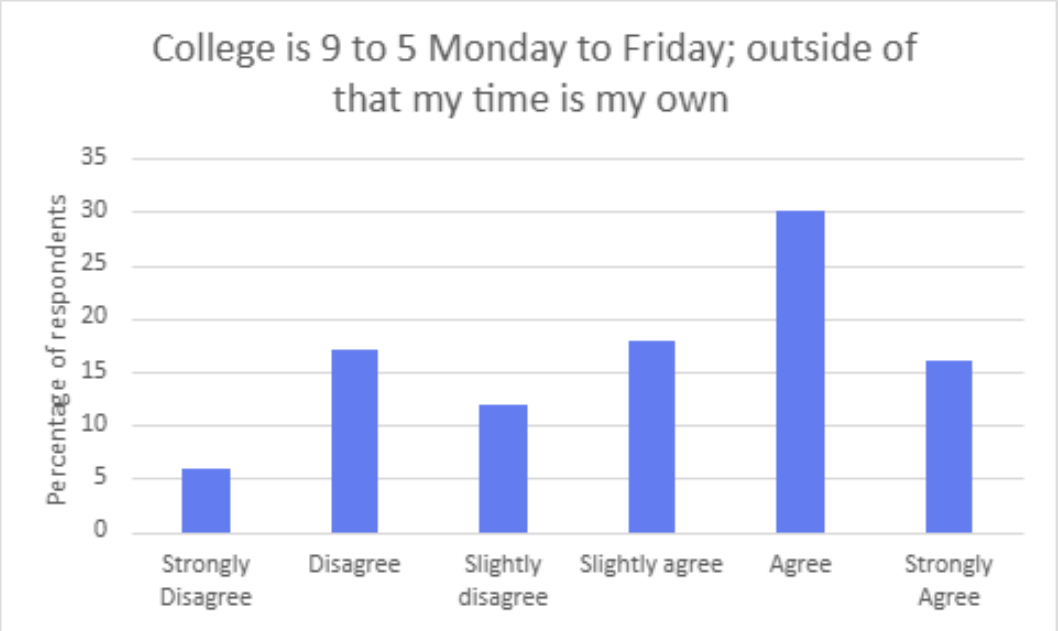

Figure 9 Students' views on the proposition that university study takes place between the hours of 9-5 from Monday to Friday, in percent

Indeed, figure 9 above underscores the extent to which learners concur that study should not be a part of their lives outside the 'workday' parameters of Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 5:00pm. A significantly greater proportion of our respondents agree to some extent with the proposition, with agreement being the single most common option selected. It is particularly notable – and, indeed, particularly of concern – that this concept of the amount of time required to be a successful university learner has been internalised by first-year learners, many of whom will have progressed to university from the time-intensive pursuit of Ireland's Leaving Certificate examinations.

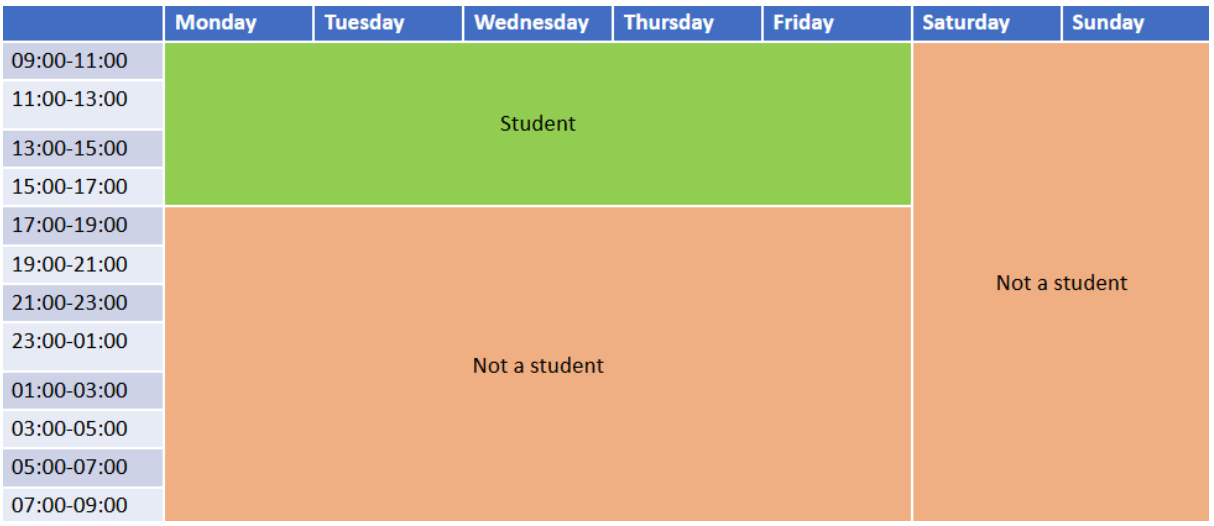

Figure 10 Visualisation of the 9-5 paradigm of 'being-a-student'

This instrumentalised vision of being-a-student is further illustrated by the pragmatic approach that respondents appear to take to decision-making regarding the amount of non-class time they choose to devote to learning (or, rather, assessment) activities. It is not unreasonable to question whether this may be a function of the increasingly market-oriented messaging emanating from the sector at large regarding the university-to-work trajectory, which typically positions the learner as a skills consumer and the university as a skills vendor. In this landscape, it is arguable that by investing the minimum effort required to pass their modules, students are already meeting the terms of their contract with the sector.

Additionally, it is not entirely surprising that this emerging paradigm of the 'occupation' of student, since it appears no longer to be an intrinsically identity-conferring one, should contrast quite starkly with the paradigm(s) of studenthood in which many contemporary academics will have operated during their own studies. In short, academics' expectations and learners' enactment of studenthood seem to be at odds. This, too, represents a fundamental area for development sectorally. Until such time as competing paradigms are brought into constructive dialogue, the ongoing mismatch in expectations is likely only to deepen the temporal crisis.

As noted in our earlier survey of the literature, the '9-5' paradigm of being-a-student appears unlikely to stem exclusively from pragmatic challenges such as financial constraints, paid employment, or commuting, although they have proven undoubtedly significant. Instead, our findings point to a complex interplay of personal circumstances, rapidly changing social realities, and technological mediation. Indeed, socio-technical acceleration – which reveals its impacts through learners' emphasis on competing demands and need for more rest – can reasonably be read as the key factor which differentiates contemporary learners' concepts of being-a-student from those likely still held by a majority of academics.

A notable blind spot in our initial instrument design was that of the interplay between space and time (or, perhaps more accurately, non-space and [non-]time). With digital educational non-places (Augé, 1992) such as Learning Management Systems (LMSs) playing an increasingly central role in Higher Education teaching, learning and assessment, the second iteration of this research project will need to address the impact of the physical displacement (de-placement) these cause to learners' concept of minimum feasible time investment on- and off-campus. For instance, it will be important to determine how strong an influence the

instantaneous and constant availability of learning materials through an LMS has on learners' concept of the necessity of attending lectures and classes in person, and of investing in time-intensive independent learning activities outside of the lecture theatre.

This gap in perceptions of the amount and type of work which should be involved in being a student is perhaps the most significant finding of this research project to date, and will be at the heart of the next iteration of the work which is now underway. In this next stage of the project, we hope to open the constructive dialogue invoked above. Initially, we aim to supplement further learner interviews with a series of staff interviews to build our empirical understanding of colleagues' views on the purpose of on- and off-campus time commitment required by Higher Education learning (Burke & Manathunga, 2020).

Conclusion

Our analysis of a blend of quantitative and qualitative survey data gathered from first-year students reveals a significant gap between beliefs about the ideal amount and type of time investment in study and related activities and what ultimately is invested. While the vast majority of respondents rated the importance of attending in-person lectures highly and 66% believed that students should ideally be doing one to three hours of study per evening, more than 61% say they *sometimes, often or very often* study during the evenings or at weekends and most report doing 0-3 hours per week of independent study. 79% are making strategic decisions about weekend study. This notwithstanding, many first-year learners report a very notable desire for rest, raising questions about the conditions of social acceleration in which they are transitioning to university study. These factors in combination, however, do also raise important questions about the level and nature of time commitment required to satisfy ECTS criteria and attain a university qualification.

Importantly, the sample of respondents on whom we report here were all in the first year of their studies at the time of survey completion. Assuming that the trends we have uncovered in our research – which, we should note, do not alter significantly from first- to final year – are broadly valid and generalisable, it will be essential to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the new hegemony of HE learning time, whether to accommodate it or to reshape it.

It is to be determined whether the best approach to reconciling multiple and potentially conflicting concepts of studenthood and the time it requires will take the form of reorienting learners' expectations or the sector recalibrating its offering. In either scenario, it is clear that, at present, we find ourselves at something of an impasse. Laudable work is being done across the sector to facilitate learners to develop, for example, time management capacities; however, our findings suggest that this may prove inadequate to the future challenges of study management since it is contingent on a concept of linear time which appears to have shifted fundamentally.

Our work demonstrates the need for significant additional research across the sector – spanning traditional and technological universities, public and private providers – to understand how the 9-5 paradigm of studenthood has become so pervasive even among novice third-level students. This speaks to a likely combination of messaging from the education sector to prospective university students about the nature, purpose, and demands of participating in HE.

Perhaps more pressingly still, it suggests a pervasive sense of temporal acceleration and time poverty. This condition has been theorised as endemic to late modernity, and this theoretical framing – although

featuring in some of the recent scholarship on time and HE – requires far more sustained debate and principled responses. As we note above, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where the advent of GenAI has made apparent the temporal disjunction that has increasingly reshaped HE learning and teaching experiences in recent decades.

In the era of frenetic standstill and ongoing social and technological acceleration, it is reasonable to contend that "having enough 'time' has become one of the most stressful aspects of learning" (Bennett and Burke, 2018, p. 913). Time is not the only element of the engagement question which requires attention, however. In this case study on the study/time beliefs of first-year learners, personal, social, and pragmatic priorities are shown to compete strongly with study for the students' attention and investment. As such, among even learners in the first stages of their university studies, studenthood does not appear to be lived as an identity in itself, but rather as a *component* of what Bauman (2000) would characterise as a liquid identity. Studenthood comes in and out of focus with the ebb and flow of deadlines and assessments. This points to a potentially problematic episodic enactment of being-a-student which may complicate the work of remaking learning time.

Biographies

Deirdre Casey holds an MSc in Mathematical Modelling and Scientific Computing and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. She currently lectures in Munster Technological University's Mathematics department. She has extensive experience of research in learning and teaching-focused projects and was a core member of the large-scale TEAMe project on embedding e-assessment in Mathematics education at third level. Deirdre is currently co-lead on a project funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority investigating conceptions of studenthood. Since 2024, she has been Chair of the Irish Mathematics Learning Support Network.

Dr Marian Hurley lectures in Academic English, Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication at Munster Technological University (MTU). Her research interests span the enactment of contemporary studenthood including the practice of academic integrity, plurilingual and pluricultural approaches to language learning and teaching, and Critical Higher Education studies. She is currently co-principal investigator with Deirdre Casey on the Irish Higher Education Authority-funded project 'Occupation: Student?' which is investigating Higher Education learners' conceptualisation of their identity as Higher Education learners.

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