

DSC Annual Project Report 2015

TIMETABLING

Authors and Responsibilities

Risikat Alogba - Sociology, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing the Introduction and Background sections

Scarlett Bawden-Gaul - Drama, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing aims section

Elena Liber - Anthropology, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing results and findings section

Eisaivan Naidoo - Computing, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing aims section

Rabia Nasimi - Sociology and Politics, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing methodology section

Vivan Thi Tang - Anthropology, Postgraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered

Writing conclusion and recommendations section

Aditi Wagh - Media and Communications, Undergraduate

Surveying staff and students

Summarising information gathered
Writing methodology section

Zara Worth - Visual Cultures, Postgraduate
Surveying staff and students
Summarising information gathered
Writing the Introduction and Background sections

Introduction and Background

The following presentation seeks to review issues surrounding timetabling across departments within Goldsmiths University. This presentation will provide a broader look into timetabling issues faced by both, staff and students, as well as providing recommendations for change.

Our research was compiled through the Annual Student Survey, as well as by individually contacting staff and students from our departments and speaking to Course Representatives from our departments. All participants who completed the surveys were students. However, our team also took it upon ourselves to converse with the staff within our respective courses in order to gain an understanding not only of how timetabling affects students but also staff. Our research was led by the following questions:

- Do you prefer your lectures to be spread evenly across the week or to be on as few days as possible? (Spread evenly across the week/on as few days as possible)
- Are you happy with the amount of time you get for breaks in between/during classes? (Yes/No)
- Do you find you have enough time to get from one class to another? (Yes/No)
- How are last minute revisions or cancellations to your modules communicated to you? (Essay)
- Do you feel that you are given sufficient notice about last minute revisions or cancellations? (Yes/No)
- Any further comments? (Essay)

As our research has shown, timetabling has remained a concern for a significant number of students who are dissatisfied with the current system both this year and in previous years. Whilst many students were satisfied with the current timetabling system, there were still numbers of students having issues with the timetabling of

classes, seminars and of society bookings.

Aims

Timetabling is a huge part of students' lives in university, it dictates everything they do and don't do outside their course. And so it is important that the issue of timetabling is run as well as it possibly can be, and students are happy with this service.

The main aims of the project are as follows:

- To make the university aware of how the students feel about timetabling issues
- To identify the most successful methods of timetabling implemented in the university
- To highlight issues both widely and deeply felt by the students
- To present data in order to allow the University to make changes so all timetabling is handled correctly
- Collectively gathering data to identify these problems and aid the university in finding ways to easily and flexibly solve timetabling issues as soon as possible without substantial/minimal interruption to students' studies

We understand that it is impossible to satisfy all students fully, however this project should present one with ideas on how to be fair with timetabling, allowing students to be as happy as they can be while ensuring there is minimal interruptions and problems.

Methodology

In total 707 survey responses were collected, furthermore the initial question asked students to identify the department that they are from and this allowed for the potential to compare and contrast this distribution across the university.

To gather data for our feedback report we employed a questionnaire as a research method for collecting responses. There are many advantages of using questionnaires as a research method, including:

Data collection – It was easier to collect and collate the data, the responses were easy to read, and furthermore the data was easier to analyse than other qualitative techniques of data collection.

Cost – We used the online survey forum survey monkey, which we did not have to pay for as the student's union already has a subscribed account registered on it.

Sample size – The accessibility of the survey allowed for the potential of a large collection of data, thus the survey had the potential to provide more accurate results

to draw conclusions from.

Anonymity – The survey allows the participants the opportunity to give more truthful answers since the data cannot be traced back to them. This anonymous confidentiality can increase the chances of the research being more accurate.

Distribution – Since this was an online questionnaire, it was very convenient to post the link on social media sites such as Facebook and twitter hence, we were able to reach a larger target audience than otherwise.

Nonetheless there are some weaknesses of questionnaires that are important to take into account when analysing the research method and the subsequent responses to be collected by the survey:

Sample choice – Although all the students at Goldsmiths had the opportunity to answer the survey, not all will. Due to this fact, the survey may represent the number of students who regularly check their Goldsmiths webmail. Thus, this sample may not be accurate and representative of the whole student body and may therefore be difficult to generalise the results to all students at Goldsmiths.

Rigidity – It is difficult to cover all possible answers and questions in a survey and furthermore some of the questions may be leading questions which could subsequently result in the data being gathered being specific (relevant) to the questions being asked rather than it reflecting an actual problem with feedback.

Consequently the research method that was employed resulted in data that was collected being quantitative and this has advantages and disadvantages. The quantitative research method allowed for numerical data to be collected therefore the data was not only easier to obtain but also easier to compare and correlate.

However the quantitative research method also has potential negative implications and it is important to take these into account when selecting the methodology. A problem with quantitative data is that it is limiting since it does not provide highly detailed information about feedback since the questions asked within are quite limiting. It is important to take into account that certain issues involving feedback might not have been addressed since the question might not have been asked.

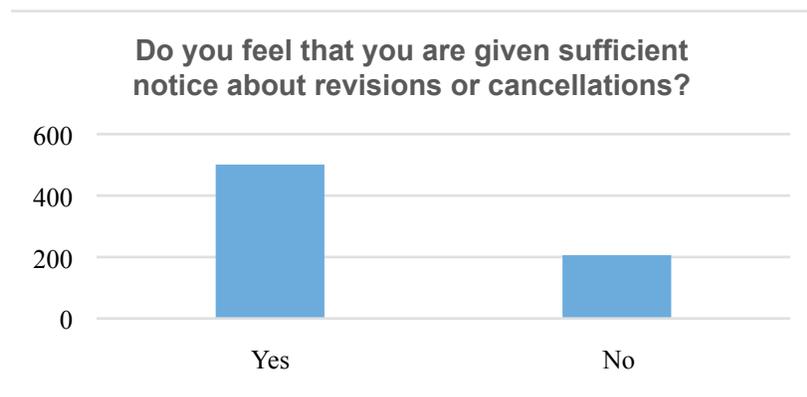
Nonetheless, to overcome this each member of the DSC timetabling group was asked to also carry out individual qualitative research including more specific surveys, polls and questions posted to department Facebook groups, semi structured interviews with staff and students, lecture shout-outs and talking to individual students in person. Also our group spoke to relevant members of staff and conducted some on the ground research, which did not require student participation.

Results and Findings

Summary of the online survey results:

1. Do you prefer your lectures to be spread evenly across the week or to be on as few days as possible?
 - 66% on as few days as possible
 - 34% spread evenly across the week
2. Are you happy with the amount of time you get for breaks in between/during classes?
 - 83% yes
 - 17% no
3. Do you find you have enough time to get from one class to another?
 - 83% yes
 - 17% no
4. How are last minute revisions or cancellations to your modules communicated to you?
 - Answers available in Timetabling Essay Results (attached in email)
5. Do you feel that you are given sufficient notice about last minute revisions or cancellations?
 - 71%
 - 29%
6. Any further comments?
 - Answers available in Timetabling Essay Results (attached in email)

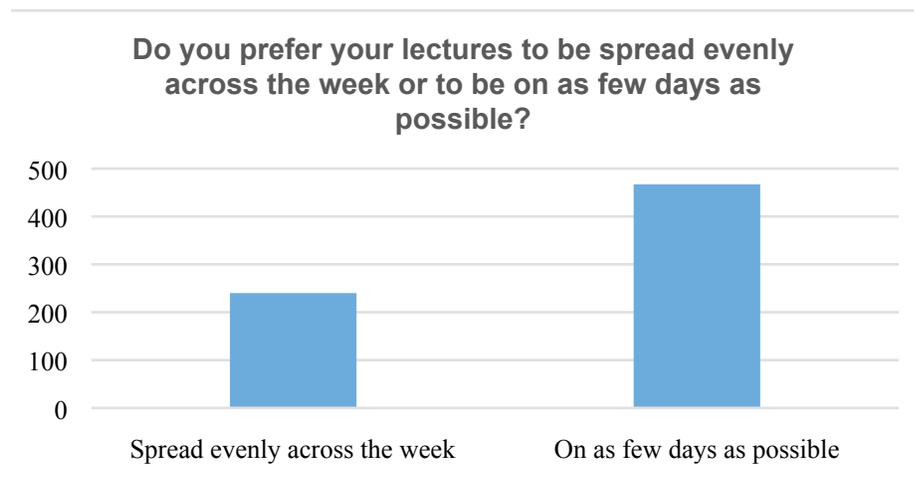
Across all the timetabling data collected at least two thirds of students surveyed are happy with timetabling in the university. The highest positive response we received from the survey was 83% of students think that they are given enough time to get between classes. It seems the new policy of starting at 5 past the hour, and finishing 5 minutes early is working well.



Areas of concern.

One main issue that has been raised is the inconsistencies in handling lecture

cancellations. It appears that among staff there is varying knowledge of policy concerning the cancelling and rescheduling of lectures. Data collected from staff who responded to our offline questions 42% of staff were unclear on the exact policy outlined in the staff handbook. Staff also appears to be unaware of how many lectures get cancelled in a term and whether they have been rescheduled. A common response has been that this is an issue for either the head of department or the department business manager. It seems that this inconsistency in staff knowledge has led to a failure in dealing with lecture cancellations appropriately in some cases, which could potentially impact on assessment for students.



The way cancellations are communicated with students is inconsistent across the university. 71% of students surveyed felt that they were given sufficient notice in the event of a cancellation, however 29% is a high number of students who feel that they are not given enough notice. This could be explained by the fact that although the most common method of communicating cancellations is either through the VLE or via email, however many students have said that these emails are usually late. Many students have stated that the only method of communication is a note on the door of the lecture theatre. This is not a suitable method of communication, especially for students who have other commitments and who have commuted. Social media and hear-say is also a method used by students to inform each other of lecture cancellations: one student response was: "hear-say seems to be more effective". The text alerts associated with the new centralised system may resolve this issue, however unless there are extreme circumstances students should be notified of cancellations or revisions well in advance in order to enable them to plan accordingly.

Another central issue that has been raised by students in the offline data collection is timetabling for joint honours students. There is little or no communication between

departments concerning the timetabling for joint honours students, who end up having to reschedule seminars themselves when they clash. Students get no choice in which seminar they are placed and it does not seem efficient for the departments to then have to negotiate with the student to have them placed in a different group. This will, however, be resolved by the new, centralised system.

Two thirds of students surveyed would prefer their lectures grouped on as a few days as possible in the week, which would be beneficial for students who are also working part time or who have family commitments. One third of students surveyed would prefer their lectures spread evenly throughout the week.

When asked for further comments many students raised the issue of lengthy gaps between lectures and seminars, with some students complaining of five hours gaps between a lecture and a seminar. This causes problems for students with other commitments such as childcare and employment as they are having to take a whole day for only a couple of hours contact time. With such a high percentage of students at Goldsmiths being mature students, such long gaps between lectures does not take into account other commitments that many students will have.

It has also been raised that some courses have scheduled lectures from 5pm until 7pm on a Wednesday. This causes a problem for students as usually Wednesday afternoon is kept free for sports and societies and many societies arrange events on Wednesday evenings which are not accessible to students who have classes scheduled for that evening. This results in some students missing events that are important to student life at Goldsmiths, or having to choose between important society events or lectures, which could also impact negatively on lecture attendance which does not appear to be in the interest of either the student or the department.

Conclusion and Table of Recommendations

Our team combined the results of the online survey with offline research from students and staff to assess feedback on current practices and develop recommendations for improvement.

Based on our findings, our recommendations include:

- Maintain and improve flexibility on module changes
- Maintain and improve flexibility on seminar selections
- Improve collaboration and communication between departments for joint

students

- Release the timetables sooner, not so close to the term start date, to allow students time to prepare and reassess accordingly
- Timetables are not accurate across the board and updating them in real time is necessary at the start of term so a universal, consistent and centralized policy for communication should be determined, e.g., texting
- Though the 5 minute delayed start time is helping allow students/staff time to get to their next destination, there are challenges that still affect start times including ensuring the appropriate rooms are available for the classes and standard room set-up has been considered for chairs, tables and technology
- Ensure all staff are aware of the cancelling/rescheduling policy
- Improve communication of cancelled and rescheduled classes
- Reconsider report questions or assessment guidelines for topics that have not been covered within the term due to inability of rescheduling within the term.
- Group lectures and seminars into fewer days