Tidalic

Time blocking is not time management

What higher education needs to know about student perspectives on time management.

September 2025

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Executive summary

Student calendars have always been full. The need to balance coursework, paid work, and personal commitments is not new. But today, students are being stretched further. The erosion of traditional career pathways has exposed university students to greater levels of competition. This means students must do more, earlier, and with less certainty than ever before. In addition to maintaining strong academic performance and personal wellbeing, they must also develop durable skills and professional readiness through self-directed learning and extracurriculars.

Students today have no shortage of resources and experiences for self-directed learning, but they still only have 24 hours in a day. Where students view the university experience as just one component of a broader, self-constructed education, difficulty in managing priorities can manifest as an apparent time management problem.

Time management has become less about personal discipline and more about design. Students need to construct bespoke systems that help them stay balanced, focussed, and effective across multiple demands, unique to them.

This research draws from in-depth generative interviews with 13 university students, to serve as a conversation starter on time management and learning. Effective time management is not about finding the “right tool” or “right approach” - there is no one size fits all approach to time management. However, despite varied tool use, there are emerging patterns in the reliance on rituals, useful cadences that align with natural rhythms of student life, and nascent criteria for effective tool selection.

Challenges

Despite the availability and uptake of tooling, even the most motivated students face significant difficulties. Challenges arise from uneven assessment loads, unpredictable timetable changes, fragmented communication, and “bursty” external commitments that are core to the academic experience, e.g. internships and placements, or self-directed projects for evidence of professional readiness.

Opportunities

Despite apparent misalignment between university offerings and student requirements, tailwinds such as a push to greater accessibility and flexibility, including blended approaches, provide helpful levers.

This research illustrates student motivations and challenges relating to time management, as well as a catalogue of key student-facing challenges student-derived interventions, logics, and preferences, aggregated into meaningful personas - all of which can be leveraged to help universities improve student outcomes.

Who should read this report

This report is written primarily for higher education sector professionals, and the following groups will find it especially valuable:

- **Student Success, Support, and Retention (S&R)**: Academic and wellbeing counsellors, as well as retention administrators, will gain a clear understanding of the practical realities of time pressures and time management from a student's perspective.
- **Teaching & Learning and Faculty (T&L)**: Teachers (particularly unit chairs), learning designers, and academic developers will gain valuable insight into how students perceive and manage their workload, in the classroom and out.
- **Planning & Scheduling (P&S)**: Administrators involved in P&S will know that timetabling is an increasingly complex task, but alignment with student requirements, behaviours, and expectations, is key to supporting success and retention.

This report is the product of thirteen in-depth interviews with university students, some of whom expressed interest in seeing the output of the research in the hopes of improving their own time management practice. Therefore, an attempt has also been made to ensure there is something in this report for students who wish to reflect on their own systems and behaviours, to glean the experiences of their peers, and to explore new approaches to managing time.

How this report is organised

In **Student motivations and goals (pg. 3)**, we reflect on the "why" that we heard from our interviewees, and the following section **Student perspectives on time management (pg. 9)** dives deep into the "how" including the ideas, approaches, and tools that student adopt. Our interviews did not specifically dive deep into questions of student wellbeing, but the section **Time, control, and wellbeing (pg. 18)** highlights some observations supported with desk research. We conclude with **Key takeaways (pg 19.)** which includes specific ideas for higher education sector stakeholders in Student Success, Support, and Retention (S&R), Teaching & Learning and Faculty (T&L), as well as Planning & Scheduling (P&S).

Student motivations and goals

Student perspectives on time management are anchored on their individual motivations and goals. Although these will always vary from individual to individual, this research finds that patterns emerge in aggregate.

What motivates students to learn?

Firstly, we learned that students perceive that there is, in fact, a time management problem. Student motivations are key to not just appreciating that there is a problem, but also to gain a sense of the nature of the problem.

For instance, we found that it is common for students to seek paid employment during study, a finding that is supported by HEPI-SAES 2025 data[1]. This data also hints at the trajectory of the problem, by identifying that 68% of students undertook paid work during term, a substantial 12% increase from the previous year.

The data shows that for most students, the motivation for paid work was monetary.

The data also reveals a trend towards paid work for the sake of **learning**[1].

Throughout our open-ended interviews with students, we also discovered a tendency towards two levels of granularity. Students “handle” time in two levels: long-horizon thinking, and short-horizon thinking.

These levels differ not just in their purpose or approach, but also in the nature of the related tooling. Simply put, students use different tools for long-horizon thinking and short-horizon thinking, loosely analogous to a strategic level and a tactical level. Precise thresholds also may vary slightly, but there was some emergent commonality.

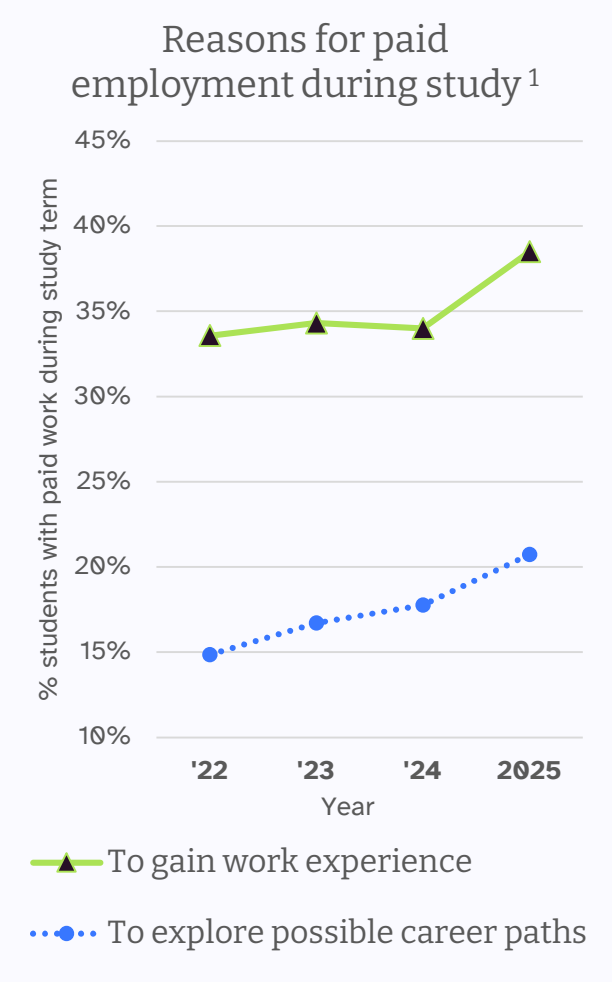

Figure 1: Reasons for work, HEPI-SAES

[1] SAES 2025 [1], wave-on-wave tables, Q11a. “If you chose to take on paid employment during your study, was it for any of the following reasons?”

Long-horizon motivations

Long horizon motivations were typically aligned with long term career goals, but they were often front-of-mind on a semesterly or monthly basis.

At this level, student strategic motivations are front-of-mind, for instance here students would acknowledge that their goals may be a combination of:

- Maintenance of a high GPA
- Increasing employment opportunities and skills
- Inherent interest in subjects

At this level, trade-offs are comfortably exercised because the horizon gives ample room to adjust commitments for achievability. Domain realities weigh heavily at this level, for instance students in fields such as law or finance recognise the need for a strong GPA for entry into a chosen pathway – though even here, we have heard that preparing for that first law clerkship requires significant interview preparation, requiring late-stage students to wrestle with the trade-off.

In other fields, although strong GPA never hurts, there is intense pressure to demonstrate desirability in other ways. Computer science students seeking an internship at top tier trading firms, for example, need to pursue more. Whether that's hackathon participation, or personal projects to demonstrate passion and aptitude via platforms like GitHub, or coding interview preparation – the space is highly competitive, and aspiring candidates need more than a high GPA to stand out.

Anecdote 1:
Minh (not their real name) is a medicine student. Advancements in AI have sparked an interest in software development. He has taught himself coding and is developing side projects. He recognizes that AI development is an inherent interest and as such he expects to have a high level of intrinsic motivation for this goal. On a short-horizon basis, he prioritizes his medical studies first, trusting that he will somehow find time to work on his AI projects.

Anecdote 2:
Eloise (not their real name) is a computer science student and has completed multiple internships at software development companies. However, their goal is to secure an internship at a top tier quantitative trading firm, so they recognise the need to practice *leetcode*-style programming challenges, while also maintaining a high GPA. They confronted a painful short-horizon trade-off when interviews were scheduled just before exams.

Short-horizon motivations

While the long-horizon focuses students minds on thinking and planning, the short-horizon is more about *doing*.

At this level, student attention is focused on factors such as:

- Assignment deadlines
- Upcoming exams
- Internship application due dates
- Internship interviews
- Events like hackathons and competitions
- Inherent interest in subjects
- Personal projects

Typically, these factors coincide concurrently, sometimes in conflict. Where conflict arises, the long-horizon work provides support.

For instance, how a set of hours should be allocated between preparation for exams, vs. an internship application, will depend on the logic behind the long-horizon planning. If a prestigious internship is an early career asset, then it may be worth prioritizing over a high GPA. There is risk here, for the unsuccessful applicant could be left with nothing to show for the time they invested in that interview prep which came at the cost of keeping up with their course work.

That said, where motivators were coupled with urgency, we heard that students were willing and able to reprioritize dynamically. University T&L policies should be commended for their increasing pragmatic flexibility in this regard.

Anecdote 3:
Raj (not their real name) was always a high performing finance student. Their stellar track record earned them an internship interview slot at a prestigious finance firm. They invested significant effort into interview preparation while pushing hard to keep up with assignments and lecture material. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful after the final interview round. The disappointment led them to disengage towards the end of their degree, even deferring job-seeking after graduation.

Anecdote 4:
Charlie (not their real name) is a computer science student who identifies as neuro divergent. They seek *integrity* in their approach to learning, and eschew shortcuts, preferring to learn subjects deeply from first principles; a depth-first approach. Unfortunately, the structure of their degree program often tends towards a breadth-first approach with an implicit priority of nudging students towards productivity rather than deep comprehension. This reduces Charlie's learning satisfaction and engagement.

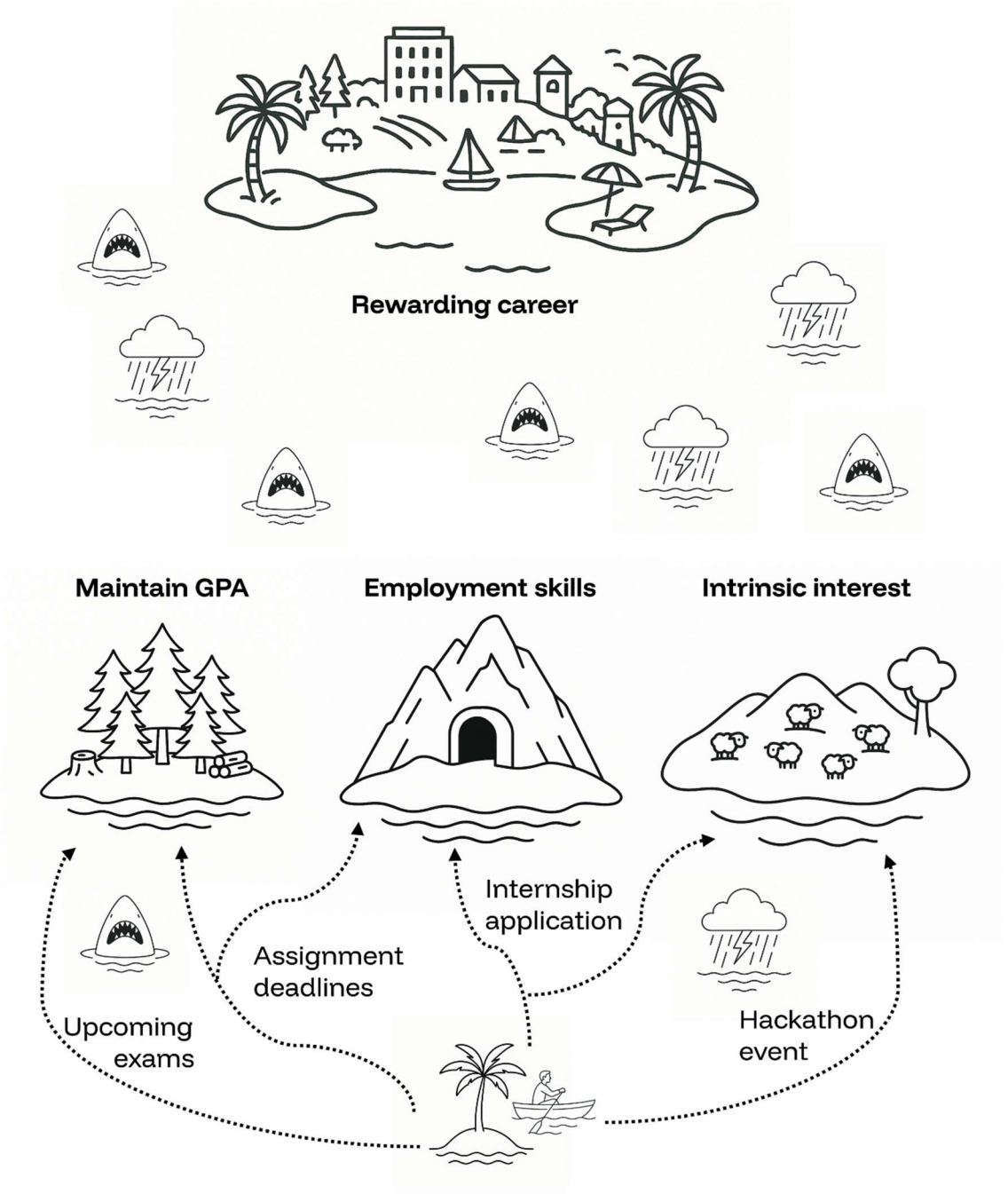

Figure 2: The island-hopping metaphor

Figure 2 illustrate the relationship between long-horizon motivations and short-horizon motivations with a visual metaphor of island-hopping.

Exam dates, assignment deadlines, internship application due dates, and hackathon or competition dates are instances of short-horizon motivators, where there is a specific date on the student's calendar. For a short-horizon motivator to be a motivator at all, it must align with a long-horizon motivation.

But where long-horizon motivators may coexist (setting aside considerations of whether they satisfy mutually-exclusive-collectively-exhaustive criteria, which we may regard as entirely academic in the context of student behaviour), short-horizon motivators can exist in a state of conflict.

With the metaphor, the student starts on a desert island and seeks to journey to a rewarding career. But it is improbable that they will get there without intermediate stops at one or more of the islands representing long-horizon motivators.

To get to a long-horizon motivator, they must act upon relevant short-horizon motivators. For example, by prioritizing internship applications they will advance their pursuit of employment skills and intrinsic interest (assuming they are applying for roles that genuinely interest them).

But the channels to these islands are fraught with obstacles and traps that obstruct short-horizon motivators, such as calendar clashes which place high demand on a student at a critical time in the semester (represented by sharks and storm clouds in Figure 1). Obstacles will be explored in more depth in the next section.

The student may opt to focus their pursuit exclusively to one long-horizon motivator, but by pursuing multiple long-horizon motivators, they increase their pathways available to reach a rewarding career, or whatever their higher-level meta-motivator may be. The obstacles and pathways from long-horizon motivators to the ultimate higher level meta-motivator are hard to foresee, which is why greater optionality through commitment to multiple long-horizon motivators may be wise.

What obstacles do students encounter?

The interviews surfaced several general obstacles that students tend to confront when trying to manage time to serve their motivations.

Too many activities, too little time – all the time

Across all interviews, students repeatedly described a sense of being overwhelmed. But the root cause was not intrinsically the amount of work, rather the issue was difficulty in determining priorities. With multiple overlapping demands (assignments, jobs, clubs, interview preparation), students were often uncertain about how to allocate limited time and attention effectively. This constant negotiation between competing responsibilities led to a persistent sense of too many things to do, and no clear way to decide which comes first, unless there was clear urgency, such as an imminent deadline.

Although workloads varied, the underlying problem was similar: ambiguity about priorities. Many felt pressured to treat every task as equally urgent, resulting in constant busyness.

For some, this reaction to ambiguity eventually calcifies into routine. Time pressure became a normalized part of student life, perhaps even part of the student's identity. Others, however, struggled with the ongoing uncertainty of whether their effort was being directed toward meaningful goals.

Clashing academic and recruitment timelines

While fluctuations in stress across the semester are expected (typically peaking around assignment and exam periods) students reported that the true challenge lay in the *overlap* of academic and external demands, and a major source of external pressure was interview preparation.

Several students described the final weeks of the first semester as their most stressful period, not only due to exams but because final-round internship interviews occurred in the same window. Faced with immediate, high-stakes opportunities, students may consciously prioritize interview preparation over exam study.

Task sizing and estimation

Some students identified task sizing as a recurring problem, and in particular there was a tendency to underestimate.

However, students reported this was mostly an issue in the earlier years of study. With experience, estimation improved. Iteration and practice lead to the adoption of heuristics, such as:

- Intentionally budgeting extra time
- Decomposing every task into groups of three
- Splitting up work into a plan-phase and an execute-phase

Each of the above heuristics were shared by students, though it doesn't appear that their adoption of these were externally supported. Furthermore, we heard that these heuristics were unavailable to them early in their university careers, they were acquired only through learned experience.

Anecdote 5:
Irit (not their real name) was introduced to time management in secondary school. As part of a "house group" activity, all students received time planners and were guided in their use. They found this practice so rewarding that they stuck to it ever since, all the way into the final year of their commerce degree.

Anecdote 6:
Max (not their real name) is an experienced professional who pursued an MBA. By the second term of the program, they felt a degree of stress arising from time pressure. They acquired a "cute" paper-based planner and experimented with its use, which rapidly became an entrenched ritual, complete with post-period review.

Student perspectives on time management

This section focuses on how students plan, schedule, and make sense of their time. It connects directly to what has been explored through the deep-dive generative interviews with 13 respondents — understanding the systems, habits, and rituals these students built to keep up with academic and personal demands. The material is drawn primarily from our source interviews, supplemented with desk research for contextualisation. This section will discuss the following themes:

- Planning ahead - (scheduling, calendarization)
- Starting a task (deadline, interests, discipline)
- Tasks division (learning structures)
- Overcoming frictions (challenges)

Planning ahead

Students organise themselves in a wide range of ways. There isn't a standard model, but rather a set of recurring logics, often differentiated by long and short-horizon motivation, such as exam preparation, self-learning skills, internships, exams, assignments, hobbies and jobs.

But how do students effectively manage their time to achieve long-term and short-term goals?

Given our focus, a starting point can be identified at the beginning of the semester, when students receive their academic calendars, and they take the opportunity to start planning the months ahead (as many of our respondents did). University support for student time planning, however, varies in degree: while we heard that some institutions provide full-semester schedules with minimal changes throughout, others provide only partial schedules and announce updates or additions — such as labs or lectures — at very short notice. Some place entries directly in student calendars, others require students to scour LMS pages on their own.

In any case, by outlining their course schedules, identifying lecture and lab days across the week, and estimating their overall workload, students can establish a solid foundation for their organisational structure.

Tools to reach this goal are mixed — digital calendars, paper planners, or just mental notes. During the interviews, we had examples covering many different solutions:

- **Digital calendars** - The most used tool, partly because some universities offer digital calendar solutions linked to students' email accounts. Examples include Google Calendar, Outlook Calendar, Apple Calendar, OneCalendar, Notion and others.

- **Paper planners** - Less used, but strongly linked to the idea of rituals. The calm overview of the entire schedule, the tactile reassurance, and the process of writing, all without a digital cutter, are feelings that surfaced strongly with this method rather than with digital tools. Paper-based planning methods were presented as calendars, diaries, and checklists.
- **Memory-based systems** - The least utilised method from the interviews, generally adopted by users with minimal planning structure. A differentiation often exists between specific events planned in calendars and those only noted mentally.
- **Hybrid -** It is a combination of digital, analogue, and cognitive planning methods. Often, there is a clear personal differentiation regarding which tool is used for specific categories of events.

This analysis brings us to a key point: what matters are not the tools used, but the *sense of control* they create [2] — a finding echoed by recent meta-reviews showing that perceived time control, rather than the specific tool, predicts both academic success and wellbeing [3].

The need for control often emerges as a response to the wider pressures that students experience — the same ones described in previous sections on motivation and struggle. Overlapping responsibilities, commitments, and volatile schedules make time feel like something to *contain*, not simply to organise. As some students explained, planning is not just a functional act, but a way to feel momentarily “in charge” in periods of uncertainty.

Although planning ahead has a proven positive impact on the well-being and productivity of students [2,3], a constant theme in the interviews is the tension between having a structure and staying flexible. Too much structure feels rigid and guilt-inducing when plans fail, as one of the students noted, missing one planned study block can make they feel “off track for days.” On the other hand, too little structure creates chaos and anxiety, as another student revealed often “crashes” after trying to improvise for too long.

Most students shift between both modes — acting as strategists when things are calm, improvisers when workload or energy changes - for example, planning carefully at the start of the semester, then adapting weekly as tasks overlap. It’s a dynamic rhythm rather than a fixed type.

Starting a task

After planning, the process moves on to the actual implementation. Here, procrastination, discipline, and intrinsic motivation play a role, against a backdrop of time-pressure. This stage overlaps directly with the struggles described earlier: when motivation, fatigue, and perceived competence begin to compete. Starting a task is rarely just a question of willpower - it reflects how students negotiate emotional energy, priorities, and external demands.

Even those who seem very structured rely on pressure to get things done - for example, a student who plans everything early still admits external deadlines “keep her moving”.

Others depend more on engagement and relevance to stay motivated. One of the interviewees, as a PhD student, explained he studies best when his research feels “connected to real life.” This sense of connection is not just motivational but also practical — his long-term pressure comes from completing the degree before his scholarship ends, while short-term motivation comes from paper submission deadlines.

Students often approach planned and unplanned tasks with different motivations and triggers, adding a layer of complexity not directly tied to whether they are strategists or improvisers. Even when deadlines are clearly structured, work tends to compress near the cut-off, showing that structure alone does not alleviate exam-period pressure [4].

On the other hand, from the interviews, we noted how, even if that pressure is not entirely removed, it can be better managed thanks to a higher level of time control — or at least the perception of it. As one of the students explained, having a clear overview of upcoming tasks in their weekly calendar made deadlines feel “less like surprises” and more like checkpoints they could prepare for in advance.

“Now or never”

Many of the students' interviews revealed how they would take into consideration extra time for each assignment or exam, to have room for unexpected problems, such as difficulties on specific topics, or if they underestimated the time needed for a section of the study material. Their drive to start a task, in this case, is to maintain the scheduled pace and avoid panic closer to the deadline. One of the students, for example, says “I don’t like leaving anything uncertain before a deadline — it stresses me out too much.”

A different view was expressed by another student: “Deadlines are what get me going. Without them, I’d probably never start.” Yet another sees deadlines as a focus trigger: “When it’s close, that’s when I can actually focus. Before that, it’s like my brain

doesn't feel the need yet.". Time pressure plays a key role in getting things in motion: it's not about discipline anymore, it's about getting things done, "now or never".

Learning structures

After planning and starting, the next step is actual execution. During the semester, students need to consider the time required for assignments, as well as the exam period. Time management granularity varies: some students allocate entire weeks, while others schedule specific times to study different sections of course material.

Within academic tasks, planning patterns vary by workload type:

- Assignments are typically divisible into smaller tasks, which supports step-by-step progress and clearer estimation.
- Exam prep may involve larger, and longer, more abstract effort that students tend to split informally into stages; this makes them harder to plan, and easier to postpone.

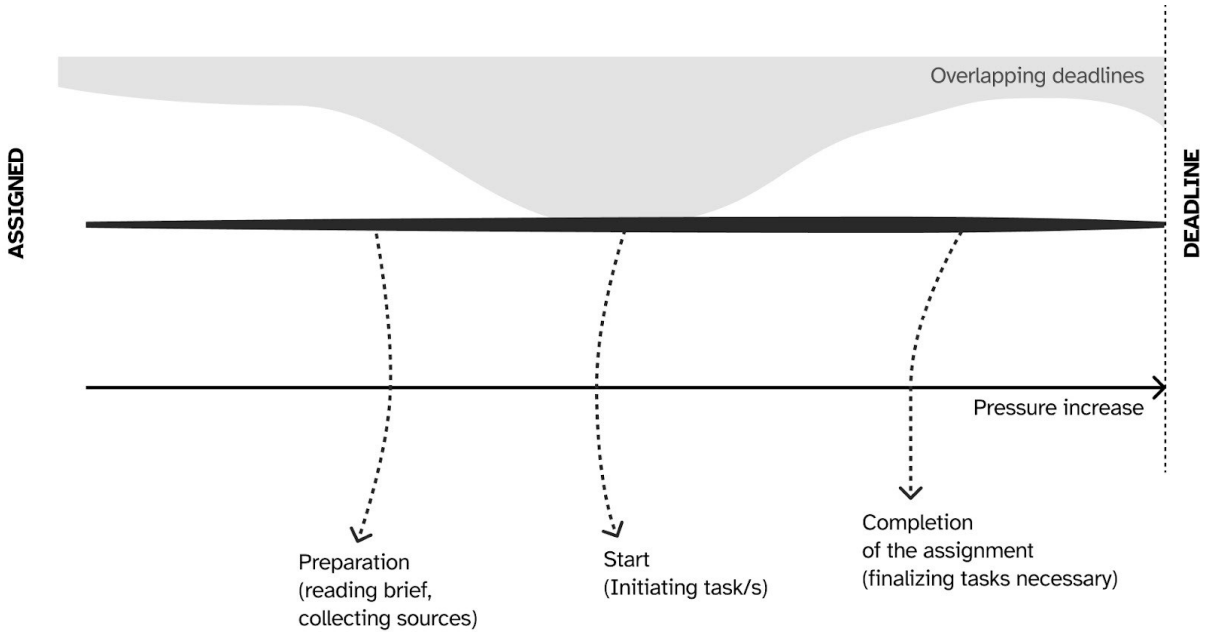

Figure 3: Illustrating the timeline of a student completing a simple assignment

Figures 3 and 4 present this contrast in experiences with an illustration that highlights the complexity and messiness that can arise from high pressure extended periods. Many universities have acknowledged and designed for this by introducing substantial study-without-teaching (SWOTVAC) periods to attempt to reduce complexity on the eve of examinations, but other pressures may remain.

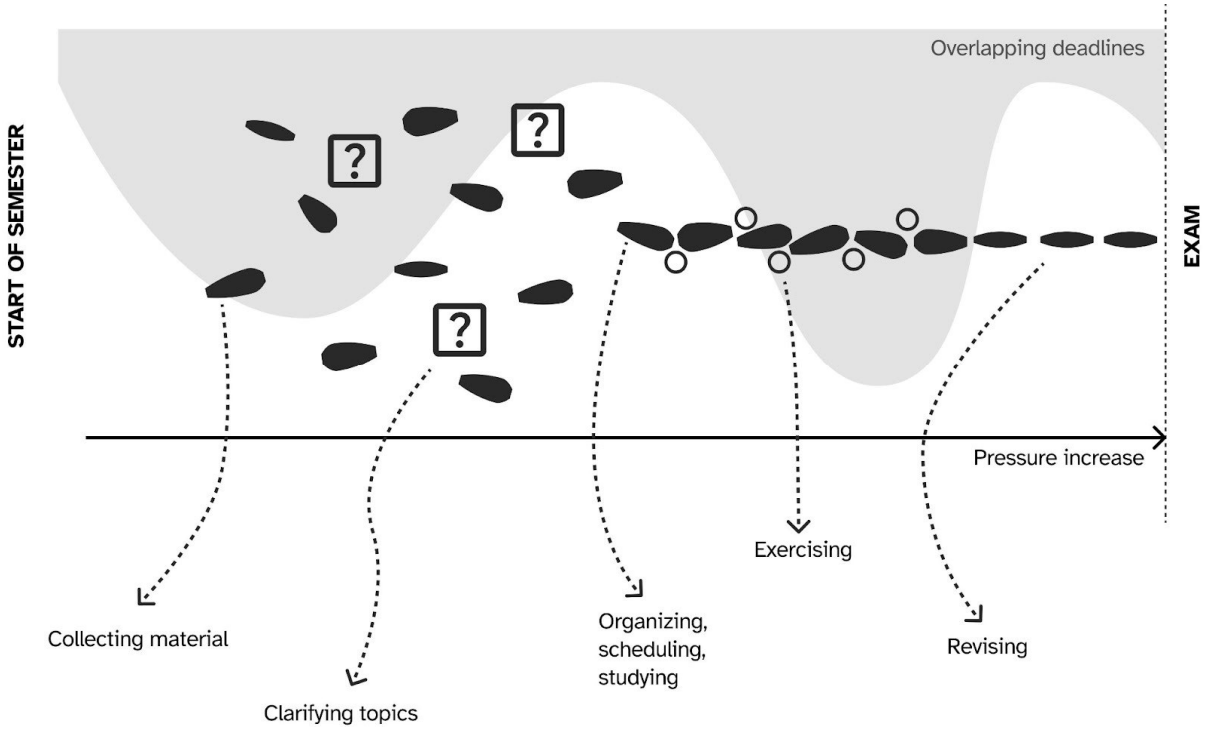

Figure 4: Illustrating a timeline of a student preparing for exams

Common friction points

Several recurring areas of friction appeared across the research:

- **Uneven distribution of workload** between courses (some students mentioned "clusters" of deadlines within the same week). This aspect challenges the viability of any plan/schedule, for both long and short-term goals.
- **Overlapping deadlines** are a consequence of uneven workload distribution - as one student explains, "two major submissions in the same week break any system."
- **Difficulty turning long-term goals into short-term actions -** This links directly to individual learning structures. Large chunks of work or goals are more challenging to break down effectively. One student shared that they "know what to do" but struggle to translate goals into daily steps.
- **Emotional fatigue** and the feeling of losing control over time, which are interconnected with both more and less structured planners. Different students mentioned the need for a break after long weeks of catching up, and one of them says he "needs to stop for two days to reset."

These areas of friction often trigger cycles of procrastination and attempts at recovery, rather than stable planning.

When things get too “heavy”, students rely on resets — clearing to-do lists, taking a break, or reorganising everything from scratch. An example taken from the interviews comes from one of the students who blocks a “reset day” every two weeks, or another one who deletes all old notes and starts fresh.

Reflections

The way students approach their academic life is, unsurprisingly, deeply personal. To narrow it down to its essence, this research focused on two recurring dimensions: time management and learning structures.

What emerged from the interviews was a broad range of individual approaches. While some behaviours overlap, once motivation, stress points, and personal context come into play, it becomes clear that a single, universal system is unrealistic. This absence of a common model is, in itself, a key finding: flexibility and personalisation are at the heart of how individuals manage their time.

When it comes to learning structures, however, a stronger commonality appears among those who maintain some form of organisation: the habit of dividing and grouping material into smaller, manageable parts. This fragmentation helps transform large tasks into achievable segments that can be absorbed progressively. Within this, different levels of structure emerge — from students who simply group materials and start early, to those who assign precise timeframes to each portion of work, leaving buffer time at the end “to be safe.”

Ultimately, these reflections underline the complexity of studying as an ongoing balancing act between structure and adaptability. This points toward the need of a systems that respect personal rhythms — supporting users in shaping their own methods rather than imposing a single way to work.

Student profiles

To analyse and apply some structure to the interview material, we applied two tools:

- **Mapping Profiles**, to visualise how each participant planned and distributed work through time.
- **Personas**, to summarise the main planning archetypes that surfaced — the Structured Strategist, Early Chunk Planner, Overloaded Juggler, and Agile Improviser.

These tools helped compare very different behaviours within the same frame.

Mapping Profiles

Each respondent may be represented with a Mapped Profile, which is a single card synthesis of how they plan, schedule, and organise their academic life. The profiles

capture their main timeframe (daily, weekly, monthly, semester based), the structure of their calendar, and short notes on habits, frustrations, and strategies (see Table 1).

The profile summarises *how students move through time*, offering a comparable view of different planning styles and routines.

Profile	Planning frame	Tools & practices	Behaviour & needs
LUKE (not real name) Archetype: **The Overloaded Juggler**	**WEEKLY** (Plans week per week) Calendar blocks: • **Classes** • **Academic deadlines** • **Work** • **Meetings** • **Social life/ Hangouts**	Uses Google Calendar as both scheduling hub and to-do list, color-coded across academic, work, and personal life.	Feels burnout and guilt about downtime; seeks flexibility but needs a basic structure to manage heavy workload.
ANDREA (not real name) Archetype: **The Agile Improviser**	**MONTHLY** (At the beginning of every month) Calendar blocks: • **Classes** • **Academic deadlines** • **Work**	Listing out class times, all the assignment submission dates and work shifts.	Doesn't like the constraints of a fixed calendar, prefers paper over digital to not fall in the cage of a hard scheduling system.

Table 1: Sample profile maps, for Luke and Andrea (not real names)

Personas

From the interviews, four personas emerged, each representing a distinct approach to planning and time management (see Tables 2-5). Together, these personas reflect a spectrum between structure and improvisation, showing how students balance control, flexibility, and motivation in their own way. These four personas were derived from the 13 student interviews informing this research. Additional data is likely to result in additional personas, and changes to the definitions of the existing personas.

Persona	**The Structured Strategist** *"If I stick to the system, I'll succeed."* Organised, methodical, and system-driven, but easily unsettled by change.
Behaviour	• Plans monthly and weekly on digital or paper tools. • Uses sprints but needs a clear structure. • Struggles when unexpected events occur.
Needs	• Adaptive planning tools. • Visual timelines and alerts. • Support to recover when off track.

Table 2: Persona, The Structured Strategist

Persona	**The Early-Chunk Planner** *"Start early, do a bit each day, avoid panic."* *Starts early and divides tasks into smaller parts to avoid pressure.*
Behaviour	• Begins tasks well in advance. • Breaks work down into manageable chunks. • Uses both calendar and paper tools to stay on track.
Needs	• Milestone-based systems. • Clear deadlines and pacing tools. • Integration with long-term goals.

Table 3: Persona, The Early-Chunk Planner

Persona	**The Overloaded Juggler** *"I'm always behind, but I can't stop now."* *Constantly switching between roles, driven by urgency more than structure.*
Behaviour	• Juggles multiple roles (PhD, research, work, sports). • Faces high cognitive load with minimal tools. • Operates under constant stress and reactive workflows.
Needs	• Load-balancing system. • Smart prioritization tools. • Time recovery and boundary reminders.

Table 4: Persona, The Overloaded Juggler

Persona	**The Agile Improviser** *"Why do today what can be crammed tomorrow?"* Thrives on flexibility and spontaneity, often activating close to deadlines.
Behaviour	• Relies on late cramming and minimalist tools. • Driven by fun, relevance, or interest. • Maintains strong situational awareness and clear priorities but prefers low structure.
Needs	• Just-in-time prompts. • Playful or interest-driven motivators. • Lightweight tracking without micromanagement.

Table 5: Persona, The Agile Improviser

Time, control, and wellbeing

Procrastination seems an intuitive concept because it is a universal experience. Fortunately, there is considerable empirical evidence one can draw on to better understand the problem beyond one's own personal experience.

Meta-analytic review [5] paints a picture of procrastination as being an issue of self-regulatory failure. This interpretation reframes procrastination as less a failure of logic and more a symptom of emotional avoidance, where individuals subconsciously prioritize feeling better in the moment over doing better in the long term.

This is an important issue in and of itself, beyond a focus on academic outcomes. Furthermore, it is a problem that can be addressed. Studies show that procrastination is closely linked with stress, anxiety, and depression, and that students with stronger time management and self-regulated learning skills report higher wellbeing and lower procrastination [2].

In our interviews, several students articulated the instinct that procrastination is about recovery; describing moments of intentional delay to relieve anxiety or regain a sense of control before re-engaging with their tasks.

Going forward, procrastination should be viewed not as a personal failing, but as an intrinsic motion in human pursuit. This reframing unlocks two pathways for improved outcomes:

1) **Destigmatization.** Normalizing procrastination as an emotional response, rather than a flaw, allows more students to seek support for time management.
2) **Intentional design.** The deeper question we wrestle with is whether this subconscious and reactive motion can be made intentional, strategic, and data-informed, reinforcing agency in the process.

Elements of self-awareness and metacognition will be part of this journey, which leads to the proposition for broader integration of durable skills [6] in education – skills that prepare learners to regulate, adapt, and persist across changing contexts.

We see an opportunity to embed time literacy as a measurable and optimizable component of a holistic educational offering which prepares students for a future where their outcomes will depend on academic success and lifelong mental health.

Key takeaways

Students' time challenges are the result of fragmented systems, unpredictable workloads, and the increasing need to incorporate intellectual pursuit beyond coursework, as the erosion of traditional career pathways expose finishing students and early career professionals to more intense competition than ever before.

Today's students must integrate classroom activities (synchronous and asynchronous), self-directed study, paid work, and career preparation into the same 24 hours while achieving a state of flow required for successful mastery of difficult concepts which are essential for course success - before making space for friends, family, and self-care.

Expansion of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs might have a role to play, to the extent that they may "reign in" the amount of "shadow learning" that students feel pressured to undertake on their own initiative, but

This research has revealed that students are making an effort to tackle the problem of time management through judicious use of available tools to develop effective systems and structures.

Now universities must design around the whole student, not just the classroom learner - integrating time literacy, flexible structures, and better-informed scheduling that enable students to stay balanced, confident, and engaged.

Student Success, Support, and Retention (S&R)

Students who feel ownership and flexibility over their time are more likely to stay engaged. When institutional systems fail to accommodate external pressures, like part-time work or self-directed goals, students experience stress, disengagement, or dropout risk.

S&R should:

- Treat time management as a wellbeing and retention issue, recognising that it can be taught, encouraged, and supported. Awareness-raising will help with destigmatization, and encourage students to reach out for help rather than internalize time management issues as a personal failing.
- Continue to prioritize flexible workload planning and pacing options, while advocating for proactive time management support around asynchronous T&L elements.

- Encourage time reflection early in semester as a retention strategy, building on the long-horizon-short-horizon logic intrinsic to students' approach to time management.

Teaching & Learning and Faculty (T&L)

Deep learning depends on cognitive bandwidth, not just access to content regardless of how much care went into cognitive load considerations as part of learning design.

When students spend their mental energy coordinating study around work, volunteering, and self-learning, their capacity for focus and curiosity erodes.

T&L should:

- Collect granular data on student experience, particularly of asynchronous elements of units, to continuously improve unit time commitment estimation for future cohorts.
- Continue to support assessment pacing flexibility to facilitate adaptation with peaks and troughs in student workload. Going further, there is an opportunity to leverage efforts for assessment redesign caused by concerns around AI-led academic misconduct, to align assessment design with individual students' self-directed learning interests, effectively combatting academic misconduct risk through better alignment with student intrinsic motivation.
- Communicate assessment requirements and changes early and clearly to protect cognitive bandwidth, and incorporate task sizing and decomposition as a teachable skill, particularly at the earlier end of student journeys.

Planning & Scheduling (P&S)

Timetabling and workload planning should reflect a hybrid, multi-commitment student life.

P&S should:

- Collect granular data on whole-student time pressure to use at least in an aggregate retrospective level, to identify pressure points in student experience as it relates to course load.
- Improve real-time monitoring of significant external load sources, e.g. through collaboration with industry-facing groups including relevant student clubs, to align academic rhythms with internship and placement cycles, which must include interview preparation time.

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About the respondents

This research would not have been possible without the generous insight provided by a cohort of 13 time-savvy students: 5 from **The University of Melbourne** (AU), 2 from **RMIT University** (AU), 2 from **Nottingham University** (UK), 1 from **Imperial College London** (UK), 1 from **King's College London** (UK), 1 from **Swinburne University** (AU), and 1 from **Monash University** (AU).

The authors would like to thank the respondents AD, CM, DH, JM, JG, MR, ML, MP, OC, PF, SM, SB, and SS - your contribution is much appreciated, but more than that, thank you for showing us a portrait of what good time management can look like.

The authors are grateful for the treasure trove of anecdotes we obtained from our conversation with these 13 time-savvy students. Here are some of our favourites, each of which is attributable to a specific respondent:

- Time-savvy students build rituals around time planning with pen and paper.
- Time-savvy students face tough trade-offs like whether to focus on *leetcoding* to prepare for hedge fund internship interviews, or prepare for exams to defend their hard-earned GPA (the interviews coincided with SWOTVAC).
- Time-savvy students don't check their Google Calendar during the day and would have missed their interview with us if we didn't send them a reminder text (it's okay we don't judge).
- Time-savvy students use Google Sheets to plan and prioritize their goals.
- Time-savvy students write to kikki.K to complain about their new planner layout, and successfully get them to bring back the old layout.
- Time-savvy students wish they could teach time management to someone they care about because they believe better time management would help that person have a less stressful life.
- Time-savvy students will plan how to approach an assignment tonight, but will only start work on it tomorrow.
- Time-savvy students were taught time planning in secondary school and stuck with it since then.
- Time-savvy students don't like too much calendar time-blocking because it feels repressive.
- Time-savvy students schedule catchups with friends as diligently as they schedule schoolwork.

About the authors

Dr. Tirath Ramdas is the Founder of Chamomile.ai. He is an experienced software R&D leader, with prior roles in big tech (Google, HP), startups (Acunu – acquired by Apple, Bromium – acquired by HP), and academia (RMIT University, University of Zurich, Monash University).

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Cover art includes a stock photo by Andrew Neel.

About Tidalic

Created by Chamomile.ai, Tidalic is a cross-platform software solution that integrates multiple calendars belonging to an individual user, providing a single layer of engagement and intelligence to enable effective use of time for goal-oriented students and professionals, with a particular emphasis on knowledge work.

Learn more at www.tidalic.com.

About Chamomile.ai

Chamomile.ai is a software R&D studio, registered as MMC Research Pty. Ltd. based in Melbourne, Australia. We specialize in web application development, and web browser extensions and automation development.

We are dedicated to technical thought leadership on applied Artificial Intelligence, including topics such as Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) techniques and evaluation, AI-enabled browser automation, topic modelling, and others, published on our blog www.chamomile.ai. We also have deep expertise in security product development and related technical areas such as operating systems.

Between 2023 and 2025 our clients have included Fortune 100s, pre-product startups, scaleups, established SMEs, and Australian Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Feel free to say hello@chamomile.ai any time.

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