

Exams companion Final year project interview results

This project aims to improve the revision habits and methods of University students revising for exams by helping them use their time more efficiently and in doing so, helping them achieve higher grades. To do this, a logical first step is being able to understand the current revision methods employed by the average student. This involved conducting interviews with university students, the target demographic of the project. The purpose of interviews was to gain an in depth understanding of how students revise for their examinations.

Information gathering methods such as surveys might have been able to garner a larger sample size but the results would be static and it would not be possible to follow up on questions where relevant based on responses. 24 students from a range of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) courses at 3 separate universities were interviewed for this project regarding their revision habits and methods. The interview itself contained six key questions, though much of the knowledge gleaned came from follow up questions asked after responses to those.

The most important piece of information to be gained from the interviews was the revision methods used by the students to study for their courses. However, student revision habits change depending on if an examination is close, so instead of merely asking how students revised, the question was split into two parts. How do you revise when distant from exams and how does that change when exams approach?

1: *“What is your primary method of course/module content revision when not immediately close to exams.”*

The responses to this question followed a regular pattern, with 22 of the 24 students mentioning some form of ‘reading lecture notes’ and ‘writing dense notes using lecture slides/recordings’. Only one of the students claimed they spent semester time studying extra material recommended by lecturers such as books or articles relating to their modules.

Follow up questions relating to this question revealed most students simply copied or reworded lecture notes on sheets of paper which they stored to reread when examinations approached. Very few students actually did anything with those notes, such as making charts not already given, or making revision cards. Half of the students questioned simply said they occasionally read over notes written during the lectures or watched lecture recordings to try and memorise the information presented.

- 22/24 read or write notes to revise
 - o Of these, 6 only read notes
- 2/24 study extra material recommended by lecturers

2: *“How does this change as exams approach? What do you do differently and why?”*

Here a large majority of students (71%) claimed they switched entirely to doing past paper questions alongside occasionally reading notes taken during semester time. The remaining

29% of students spent the run up to exams taking more notes and reading notes taken previously.

Students also claimed they spent far more time doing intensive revision, spending more hours studying and taking less breaks or leisure time off revision. This was a common theme where students confessed to ignoring exercise, gym or other hobbies to have more time to study.

- 17/24 Revise doing exam questions during exam season
- 7/24 Revise using notes during exam season

3: *“How do you time your revision sessions (revise for timed period with timed break after? Study until distracted or too tired to continue?)?”*

The majority of students said they did not time their revision sessions unless they were doing past papers where they tried to complete the papers in a set amount of time. For other forms of study such as taking or reading notes, they revised during free hours of the day until they got distracted, tired or had a timetabled activity to attend.

Two of the students interviewed did mention timing their revision sessions. One of them by setting an number of hours each day to a given module and trying to complete as much work as possible in that given time for that given module. The other used 1 hour timed note taking sessions, followed by an hour of solving exam style questions related to the topic revised.

- 16/24 students did not time revision sessions.
- 8/24 students timed revision sessions.

3b: *“How do you divide your time among your modules so you can study each of them (one module a day, many modules each day etc.)?”*

This question was a follow up from the question above, but the responses were more divided. Approximately one quarter of the students did not schedule their time beforehand. Instead, during the semester they worked on assignments or tasks that were due and during exam season they revised the modules; trying to give each equal time but without any work schedule.

The remaining students, which was the majority, used various kinds of scheduling methods to divide their attention. This, however was mostly done during exam season, as during semester most students worked on the module they needed to understand better or complete an assessed piece of work for. During the exam season when lectures stopped, most students adapted to a timetable.

A digital time table made using a phone app was the most popular, where each day was dedicated to revising for a different exam. Some students divided each day into several slots, every slot focused on a different exam. This, they claimed, allowed them to go over

the same content several times with a few days breaks in between, allowing them to better commit that content to memory.

- 20/24 students used a scheduling application on their mobile phones
- 4/24 students did not schedule revision sessions

4: *“What do you personally feel is your greatest obstacle to revising, both distant from exams and with exams approaching.”*

The aim of question 3 was to help understand what an application could do to help students study in their opinions. Learning the chief obstacles would help with creating an application that helped overcome those obstacles allowing more efficient use of time spent studying.

Every student mentioned in one form or another, distractions as the largest obstacle. Procrastinating from work that needs to be done by spending large amounts of time on the internet or on mobile phones or simply daydreaming was a common response.

A follow up question asked students what was the main trigger for them to stop studying and start doing something else. Some students mentioned lack of motivation and boredom or burnout from the high pressure and the amount of work required. Others spoke of being unable to concentrate and having a low attention span. Still others said when they came across something in their revision notes they could not understand, or an exam question they could not solve, they were likely to give up for a time to do something counterproductive.

The main issue students faced was a lack of self-discipline. Forcing themselves to stop doing activities that they enjoy and spend time studying was the main issue, procrastinating and distractions stemmed from this. Lacking the self-discipline to continue monotone studying, they turned to social media or other more stimulating activities.

5: *“Have you tried to personally overcome these obstacles and if so, how?”*

Many students here said they tried to solve the problem of distractions by merely trying harder to maintain discipline, and claimed that as exams approached it became easier to study due to panic induced focus. Some also mentioned methods of trying to reduce distraction by removing the things that distracted them such as switching off mobile phones or blocking social media websites on their computers during revision time.

6. *“If they did not work why do you think this is? (lack of discipline or Understanding of technique? something else?)”*

Only one student knew what Pomodoro was and claimed that he had tried to use the technique but due to lack of self-discipline it didn't help him. The Pomodoro technique works by taking 5 minute breaks after 25 minute slots of studying, therefore discipline is required to keep breaks short and working for the 25 minute slots without turning to other distractions.

