ZEITGEIST Presents:

Student Interviews - Insights for University Business School (06/25)

Chapter 1: Participant Overview

22 master's students were interviewed (total ~210 minutes of dialog). The longest interview lasted about 22 minutes. Roughly 2–3 interviews were strongly positive, 2 strongly negative, and the majority were mixed or moderately positive in sentiment.

Group Demographics & General Insights:

- About 16 students are domestic and 6 are international, indicating ~27% international presence
- Approximately 5 students (≈23%) are concurrently working or have major outside commitments (e.g. jobs or a second degree), influencing their needs for flexibility
- Nearly all had taken at least one Innovation Institute course prior to the interview, except a couple of first-semester students
- This diverse cohort provides a broad perspective on the innovation master's curriculum

Chapter 2: Executive Summary – Key Insights

This section synthesizes the central themes identified through interviews. Practical relevance, digital flexibility, structured group work, continuous assessment, clarity, and inclusivity emerged strongly. Practical learning notably dominated discussions due to students' concerns about employability post-graduation. A tension between the desire for flexibility and structured clarity was observed, revealing nuanced student preferences. Students crave digital flexibility for balancing commitments yet simultaneously desire clear structure to navigate academic expectations effectively.

Students Crave Applied Learning (15/22): Approximately 15 students emphasized that courses should focus more on practical, industry-relevant content. "Too much theory... prefer more practice-oriented with fundamental principles and examples," said one student. Courses praised included real case studies, projects, and practitioner insights. For instance, a student highlighted a project course for using "real cases" and practitioners, making it "practical and relatable." Another appreciated a build-your-own-project format, stating "the concept has substance – one could apply it in the work environment." Conversely, overly theoretical modules received heavy criticism; an engineering student noted they are "tailored to a university focus" with "relatively little relevance in practice," leaving them ill-equipped for real-world jobs. Clearly, students find hands-on components crucial for engagement and career readiness.

Flexible Digital & Interactive Learning (~12/22): About half of the students, often balancing studies with jobs or commitments, stressed the value of digital flexibility, recorded lectures, and hybrid learning. The emerging "Digital Flexibility Seeker" values recordings ("I can rewind, pause... with live lectures that's not possible") and flipped classrooms for self-paced study. A working student praised block seminars: "if you're employed, it's difficult to

take time off every week... one intensive week is easier to arrange with the employer." Overall, flexible digital options are crucial for accommodating diverse student needs.

Mixed Preferences on Course Format: Students lacked consensus on the ideal class schedule, underscoring the need for variety. About 3 "Intensive Sprinters" favored one-week block seminars for focused learning ("Block seminars are my absolute favorite"). Around 5 "Steady Planners" preferred weekly or biweekly sessions, citing sustained engagement and manageable workload intervals ("4–5 hours every 2 weeks ideal"). Several students (~4–5) recognized benefits and drawbacks in each format, suggesting a balanced mix might be best. Notably, 2 strongly disliked block formats, feeling overwhelmed and concerned about retention ("it's just too much at once"). The key takeaway: offering diverse formats is essential to match varying student preferences.

Group Work: Great Potential, Needs Structure (≈22/22): Every student recognized value in team-based projects but highlighted significant practical challenges. Most (~10) enjoyed collaborative learning, citing experiences where real projects created engaging teamwork. However, nearly all expressed frustration over the free-rider issue—unequal participation. Even enthusiastic students admitted it's difficult "when someone does nothing." A minority (~3–4) strongly disliked group work, rating it poorly ("In theory I like group work, but in practice I give it a 2"). Almost universally, students emphasized the need for structured roles and peer evaluations to ensure fairness and accountability.

Continuous Evaluation Over One-Off Exams: A majority (≈13 students) preferred continuous assessments—papers, projects, presentations, or oral exams—to single, high-stakes exams. Continuous evaluation aligns with the "Structured Planner" persona, who appreciates deeper engagement and lower stress ("the result doesn't depend on daily form"). A few (~3–4) still favored traditional exams for straightforward preparation ("I like written exams, they're the most uncomplicated to prepare for"). Yet even some of these students disliked the double burden of continuous assignments plus a final exam. Overall, diverse, ongoing assessments were broadly preferred for accurately reflecting student abilities.

Language and Cultural Accessibility (~6/22 international): With about 27% international students, the predominantly English instruction is broadly accepted. International students rely on English ("I don't speak [local language] well") and domestic students acknowledge the career benefits. Although a few domestic-speaking students noted native-language ease for complex topics, most agreed English ensures inclusivity. A few students favored a mixed-language approach, but generally, clarity in English instruction was the primary concern. The bilingual environment is successful, contingent on clear instructor communication.

Clarity and Transparency Matter (~5/22 explicit, almost all implicitly): A strong, implicit consensus highlighted the need for clear, transparent, and organized course structures. Students mentioned confusion from unclear prerequisites ("I have never touched the program called MATLAB before... that's a pretty big setback"), unexpected attendance requirements, and chaotic lectures ("The lecture was so unstructured that one couldn't even listen"). Students also noted inconsistent module structures, resulting in overlaps and gaps ("little coherent structure between individual modules"). The "Structure & Clarity Seeker" persona clearly values well-communicated expectations, structured curricula, and coherent program design.

See Chapter 4 for student persona profiles, and Chapter 5 for specific recommendations addressing these insights.

Chapter 4: Student Personas

The previous chapter offered detailed student responses, revealing rich patterns in their experiences, preferences, and critiques. From these patterns, Chapter 4 introduces six distinct student personas—carefully drawn profiles representing the key needs, motivations, and frustrations of our students. These personas help illustrate major segments of student needs and motivations. Note: students may embody multiple personas simultaneously.

The Hands-On Practitioner – "Show me how it works in the real world." (≈15/22 students): These students are motivated by practical application and prefer courses with real-world projects, case studies, and industry connections. Purely theoretical content frustrates them. One stated clearly, "You learn a lot of theory, but what's important is implementing it in practice. Ultimately it's about this – after graduation we'll all work and if we've never learned to solve real problems, it'll be difficult." They strongly favor courses like Course X or project seminars, emphasizing the need for experiential learning opportunities and constantly asking, "How would I use this in a job?"

The Digital Flexibility Seeker – "Let me learn on my own schedule." (≈8–10/22 students): Valuing flexibility and digital learning resources, this persona frequently balances study with jobs or other commitments. They highly appreciate recorded lectures and hybrid options. A representative quote: "Videos help me extremely – I can rewind, pause... Flexibility is important to me, so I'm not forced to be there every time when life gets in the way." They thrive with asynchronous content, quick instructor responses online, and no attendance penalties.

The Collaborative Team Player – "Let's brainstorm and tackle it together." (≈4–5/22 students): These students genuinely enjoy group projects and class discussions, frequently using words like "fun" and "exchange." They rate group work highly (4–5/5). A typical statement was, "I really liked all modules with Professor A. I really enjoy group work... it's much more fun to develop something as a team." They excel in interactive environments with structured, fair team activities. Their main concern is unequal contributions; thus, clear guidelines and defined roles are vital.

The Independent Achiever – "I trust myself more than a team." (≈4/22 students explicitly, several others partially): Preferring solo work, these students express frustration with group projects, often citing unfair distribution of efforts. A characteristic quote: "In theory I like group work, but in practice I give it a 2 out of 5. Too often one person carries the main burden. At university someone can do nothing and still get the same grade – that wouldn't happen like that in a company." Their needs include accountability measures in group projects and opportunities for individual assessments alongside group work.

The International Participant – "I need an English-friendly, inclusive program." (≈6/22 students): Primarily non-native speakers, they require English instruction and an inclusive cultural environment. "I don't speak [local language] well," highlights their fundamental need for language accessibility. They appreciate clear explanations of culture-specific references and inclusive practices, emphasizing quality English instruction and globally accessible materials.

The Structure & Clarity Seeker – "Give me a roadmap and clear rules." (≈5/22 students strongly, nearly all to some degree): This persona seeks clarity, detailed structure, and consistent communication. They express frustration over vague or poorly structured courses:

"I didn't know what I needed to bring... was blindsided by expected skills," and dislike when lectures are "so unstructured that you can't even listen." They require detailed syllabi, clearly stated expectations, logical course structures, and consistent, timely communication to focus fully on learning.

These personas reflect dominant trends among students, though individuals often embody multiple categories simultaneously. The recommendations in the next chapter address the needs of each persona group specifically.

Chapter 5: Recommendations for Teaching Innovation

Building on the nuanced understanding of distinct student personas from Chapter 4, it becomes clear that addressing diverse student needs requires targeted and thoughtful interventions. By recognizing the specific motivations, frustrations, and learning preferences highlighted previously, we can effectively tailor teaching methods to optimize student engagement and satisfaction.

Drawing on the insights above, here are specific actionable recommendations to enhance teaching at the Innovation Institute, aligned with key themes and student personas. Each suggestion includes the rationale, the number of students supporting it, and relevant personas.

1. Integrate More Applied Learning: Revise courses to include practical projects or case studies. Approximately 15 of 22 students requested more real-world application. Examples include industry-partnered mini-projects, business case analyses, simulations, or workshops. One student specifically requested "current case studies linking theory to industry." Courses by Professor A, praised for industry-connected projects, can serve as a benchmark. *Relevant personas: Hands-On Practitioners, Team Players, Structure & Clarity Seekers.*

2. Increase Digital Flexibility: Provide recordings or live streams and make all materials promptly available online. Around half the students emphasized the need for flexibility. Consider hybrid courses with flipped classrooms or remote participation. Provide equivalents for missed in-person content, like discussion boards or recap videos. One student noted flexibility helps when coordinating with employers. *Relevant persona: Digital Flexibility Seekers.*

3. Offer a Variety of Course Formats: Maintain a mix of weekly, biweekly, and block seminar formats clearly communicated during registration. Preferences varied significantly among students: Intensive Sprinters (~3), Steady Planners (~5), and a combination preference (~5). Clearly label formats early to help planning, avoiding block seminar overlaps to increase student choices and reduce burnout. *Relevant personas: All personas benefit from clear format variety.*

4. Implement Structured Group Work Measures: Address the common free-rider issue with structured group assignments. Recommendations include:

- Clearly defined roles and team contracts outlining responsibilities
- Peer assessments contributing to the project grade (10–15%), ensuring accountability
- Instructor check-ins to resolve conflicts and monitor contributions
- Smaller team sizes (2–4 members) to enhance visibility of individual roles
- Staggered milestones (interim deliverables) for continuous accountability

Nearly all students supported these structured measures. *Relevant personas: Collaborative Team Players, Independent Achievers.*

5. Adopt Continuous and Diverse Assessment: Shift from final exams to continuous evaluations (papers, projects, presentations, quizzes). Approximately 12–15 students explicitly preferred continuous assessment to reduce stress and improve retention. Suggested structures include portfolio assessments and balanced workload distributions throughout the semester, avoiding overly burdensome combinations of continuous assignments with final exams. *Relevant personas: Structured Planners, Clarity Seekers.*

6. Improve Clarity and Transparency: Implement practices to eliminate ambiguity in courses:

- Provide detailed syllabi clearly outlining objectives, schedules, assessment methods, prerequisites, and policies
- Explicitly state required knowledge/software at the outset to avoid "blindsiding" students
- Align teaching content clearly with assessments; use peer reviews among instructors
- Establish and communicate consistent grading criteria, particularly for class participation
- Promptly and widely communicate any schedule or requirement changes
- Structure each lecture clearly, outlining daily agendas and recaps
- Enhance curriculum coherence through clear mapping and communication of course connections

These practices were strongly requested by students for reducing anxiety and enhancing learning. *Relevant personas: Structure & Clarity Seekers, universally beneficial.*

7. Maintain an English-Friendly, Inclusive Environment: Ensure predominantly English instruction and accessible materials, accommodating linguistic and cultural diversity. All international students (≈6/22) depend on English teaching. Maintain strong English proficiency among instructors and provide clear, inclusive content. Additional cultural sensitivity, occasional brief explanations of cultural-specific content, and inclusive practices (e.g., mixed nationality study groups) further enhance this environment. Maintaining this inclusive focus received universal student approval. *Relevant persona: International Participants.*

By implementing these recommendations, the innovation program can directly address student concerns and amplify existing strengths. Prioritizing practical integration, structured group work, and continuous assessment—areas with strongest student consensus—while preserving format variety and inclusivity, will lead to greater student satisfaction and improved learning outcomes.