Time management: What do university students think about it?

Gerenciamento de tempo: O que pensam os estudantes universitários

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Abstract

Time management practices allow users to meet their needs and pursue their goals within set deadlines. At university, time management is an important factor in promoting academic adaptation and good mental health. This article is based on a time management workshop for higher education students conducted over two years. A total of 17 students from public (n = 14) and private (n = 3) universities participated in the workshop, with a mean age of 28.4 years (SD = 15.3), of whom 14 were women. A Descending Hierarchical Classification (CHD) was employed using the software Iramuteq to analyze the participants' conceptions about different time management strategies (both previously adopted and newly acquired), the difficulties involved in using them, and the lack of opportunities to implement them. The results revealed difficulties in relation to meeting deadlines for academic tasks, avoiding distractions, procrastination and maintaining study-life balance. The findings highlight the importance of providing students with spaces to accommodate their time management needs during their time at university.

Keywords: time management; academic achievement; mental health; college students; higher education

Resumo

As práticas de gerenciamento do tempo permitem que os usuários satisfaçam as suas demandas e prossigam os seus objetivos dentro dos prazos estabelecidos. Na universidade, a gestão do tempo é um fator importante para promover a adaptação académica e a boa saúde mental. Este artigo baseia-se num seminário de gestão do tempo para estudantes do ensino superior realizado ao longo de dois anos. Participaram 17 estudantes de universidades públicas (n = 14) e privadas (n = 3), com uma média de idades de 28.4 anos (DP = 15.3), dos quais 14 eram mulheres. O estudo realizou uma Classificação Hierárquica Descendente (CHD), utilizando o software Iramuteq, das concepções dos participantes sobre as diferentes estratégias de gestão do tempo (existentes e recém-adquiridas), as dificuldades em utilizá-las e a falta de oportunidades para implementá-las. Os resultados revelaram dificuldades em relação ao cumprimento dos prazos das tarefas académicas, ao evitar distrações, à procrastinação e como manter um equilíbrio entre o estudo e a vida pessoal. Os resultados evidenciam a importância de proporcionar aos estudantes espaços para acomodar as suas necessidades de gestão do tempo durante o seu tempo na universidade.

Palavras chave: gestão do tempo; sucesso académico; saúde mental; estudantes universitários; ensino superior

Entering University introduces the student to the necessity of learning how to solve new kinds of problems. Among the demands that accompany the abrupt augmentation of these students' liberties, the capacity of managing one's own actions across time stands as one of considerable importance (Nayak, 2019; Soares et al., 2021). Time management becomes a matter of necessity, both for sake of academic success and for the health of undergraduate students (Nogueira-Martins & Nogueira-Martins, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Time management consists in adopting a group of certain habits and behaviors for the purpose of efficiently making use of time, so as to aid in productivity and reduce and avoid stress (Adams & Blair, 2019). Through these practices, certain parts of the day are allocated to specific tasks, both academic and otherwise, as well as for rest and leisure. Araújo et al. (2016) report that the management of time and activities are among the most common anticipated difficulties for students when entering Higher Education, and shows itself to be one of the most reported challenges during this period. Fortunately, it is observed in the literature that knowledge about time management, combined with the offer of techniques for the development of this skill, is associated with the improvement of academic performance since it enhances students' autonomy in regulating their cognition and behavioral (Trentepohl et al., 2022; Wolters & Brady, 2020).

Studies have demonstrated the relevance of this theme in undergraduate education. One research, conducted with 289 students of the academic staff in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (DECE) of Trinidad and Tobago by Adams & Blair (2019) identified the 12 non-academic factors that most affected students' performance. Time management was considered as the most important non-academic factor. In another research, Soares et al. (2011) developed a study with the objective of identifying and comparing several characteristics of academic adaptation of students from different regions of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), being the time management skills one of them. The Academic Experiences Questionnaire (QVA) was applied to 500 students and, in its results, it was pointed out that although some students have shown to manage their time well, many others, especially those from more impoverished regions of the state, don't do so well in this regard.

Umerenkova & Flores (2018) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between time management and academic performance in a University setting. For that purpose, the researchers applied a questionnaire (the Time Management Behavior Questionnaire - TMBQ, adapted to the Spanish language) to a sample of 494 students. Simultaneously, they carried out a focus group with four groups of students with a history of either high or low performance, with

the goal of promoting an exchange of experiences, habits and personal stories. In their results, the authors identified a positive correlation between both of the studied variables, as the group who displayed better time management habits concurrently showed better academic performance. In conclusion, the study suggested the implementation of training sessions with university students for the purpose of fostering time management strategies in this community.

Among the many diverse models and time management systems, it was decided to combine two different methods: one focused on planning and the other on execution. The first one, proposed by Estrada et al. (2011), consists of a time management model structured in three stages: planning, management and control. It consists in the conception of strategies for organizing tasks and enabling oneself to have them done within a set timeframe. The second one addresses the matter of execution, in which one puts effort into avoiding distractions and verifies whether the task at hand truly needs to be executed in the time range to which it was set. And the third one covers comparing the second step with the first. In this last step, there is an assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the method employed and a verification of whether it is necessary to adjust the adopted strategies.

In practice, this time management system consists of long-term goals, subdivided into multiple categories (family, professional, personal). From these goals, weekly plans are drawn up and finally a daily schedule, with tasks established in order to achieve the stipulated objectives. Weekly reviews should be carried out to verify whether the planning adopted is in accordance with the actual possibilities of execution, as well as whether the objectives being pursued, remain relevant.

Another time management system, the GTD ("Getting Things Done") method, created by Allen (2015), features not only a task organization and planning program, but also directions for arranging a predictable environment. Most of time management, the system assumes, is done by reorganizing one's surroundings. Two of its consequences supports this assumption: a) it makes finding objects and information pieces (a certain document or tool, for example) easier; and b) it allows the user to distribute cues in the environment, so as to have it become inviting to the pursuit of his or her goals.

The GTD method, therefore, seeks to help people restructure their surroundings in favor of their own time management goals being assisted by the very environment in which they find themselves. The goal is to free the user from having to worry about remembering the tasks that they are yet to do, delegating that task to their environment. The only thing the user has to worry about is taking action in order to complete what their surroundings remind them.

These two systems contain different approaches to the manner of conducting it. The first, proposed by Estrada et al. (2011), aims at a more objective, deadline–oriented and result–oriented planning; it is, one could say, stricter, as it is a result of adapting business-oriented strategic planning to individual use. The second model, developed by Allen (2015), does not aim exactly at maximizing productivity –it does not, for example, explicitly deal with the setting of deadlines, although it does leave room for it– but at minimizing the stress associated with task management by reducing the amount of cognitive effort necessary to discriminate what task should be engaged with next.

Both of these time management systems have their advantages and disadvantages and, when well-employed, foster better planning and task execution, which helps to promote a sense of control and a subsequent reduction in stress levels (Leahy et al., 2013). An organization system that takes into account the multiple unavoidable time-consuming contingencies that happen daily, such as necessary pauses to eat, commute periods and rest –all of those being activities that are frequently ignored during the conception of task management strategies (Marcilio et al., 2021)–, is capable of producing even greater stress reduction. Both of the discussed systems address such factors.

Based on the literature that demonstrates the importance and advantages of good time management (McCann et al., 2012; Wolter & Brady, 2020; Trentepohl et al., 2022), and based on the techniques presented, the authors held a workshop on the subject directed to university students. Held in two distinct moments (2020 and 2021) and with different groups, the workshop contributed to positive and statistically significant changes in the time management skills of the participating students (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Therefore, the present study aims to perform a qualitative analysis of the interactions of the participants in the workshop, in order to collaborate to the aim of understanding students' conceptions about their relationship with time management, their most common complaints, the challenges they face in dealing with it, and also the key time management strategies that this group uses.

Method

Participants

This study featured the participation of 17 Brazilian university students, with an average of 28.46 years of age (*SD* = 15.3). Of the participants, 14 were women and 3, men. State University students were 14, and private University students, 3. Of these participants, 14 were female and 3 were male. In terms of the type of university, 14 were studying at a state university

and 3 at a private university. They came from Psychology, Nursing, Cultural Production, and Geography courses. For inclusion criteria, the participants were required to be enrolled and active in an undergraduate course. Students with less than 80% participation in the workshop's sessions, or that were exclusively remote students, were excluded from the analysis.

Ethical procedures

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University. All students signed a Term of Free and Informed Consent, through which they were informed of the possible risks and discomforts involved in the participation in the research; of the fact that they would not be financially compensated nor would they be otherwise receive benefits due to their participation; and that they could withdraw their consent in whatever part of the research that they may desire to do so, without being in subjected to harms due to acting thusly, as per Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council regarding research involving human subjects.

Data collection

The workshops were elaborated, organized and conducted by members of the author's lab and were promoted on the laboratory's social network accounts and in online university students' groups. Composed of five sessions, it was carried out across the span of five weeks in 90-minute-long meetings each. The topics discussed in the sessions were defined in accordance to a brief bibliographical review.

The topics worked on during each session were: 1) what time management consists in, in which the very act of planning for the sake of meeting deadlines, and its implications, was conceptualized; 2) sources of distractions and time management tools, in which sources of distraction and ways of dealing with them were addressed, along with the presentation of what tools could be used to promote effective management of time; 3) long- and short-term planning, in which it was explored how to properly carry out a plan that connects long-term goals and short-term tasks, so as to have the latter lead to the accomplishment of the former; 4) daily planning, which addressed the execution of planned tasks as well as the adjustment of the plan in face of necessity, along with different short-term-oriented techniques and the exposition of good and bad time management practices and; 5) systematic review, which addressed how each of the previous steps work together to form a system.

The meeting sessions were structured by a Psychoeducation session, in which a brief presentation of the literature relevant to the topic in question was conducted; Conversation Circles, in which discussions among the participants about the topics in question were

encouraged; and the Sharing of Experiences and Practical Activities, in which students were encouraged to put put in practice the time management practices presented in the session (by filling planning sheets or by doing priority-setting tasks, for example) or to share and discuss situations that they have experienced in the past. All of the sessions also had a welcoming warm-up phase, as well as homework tasks and feedback prompts at the end.

Two workshops were conducted, the first in September of 2020, and the other in July of 2021. Both took place in an online setting over the Google Meet platform. Due to the identical nature of their contents, the material collected from both of them was treated as one, with all the contributions given by the participants having been transcribed for the composition of the textual corpus.

Data analysis

A Descending Hierarchical Classification was employed for analyzing the textual data collected from the workshops. It consists in grouping words by frequency in different classes and joining these classes in different categories. For that purpose, the software IRAMUTEQ (version 0.7) was used.

Results

The speeches of the participants were transcribed and combined, forming the corpus that was analyzed. Each participant's respective contribution was identified by the letter "P" and a subsequent number, generating the identifications by P01, P02, P03, ... up to P17. The corpus consisted of 15.625 words (occurrences), of which 2,244 were unique root words found in the text, separated into 444 text segments (TS) with a total use of 78.83% of its content, which is adequate, since a sample with at least 75% retention is considered reliable (Camargo & Justo, 2018). As a general result, the software subdivided the corpus into three categories and four classes, and the characterization of each class, the frequency of words and the statistical importance (significance) of each term for the specific class is presented in Figure 1. The qualitative analysis of these results was performed by the researchers and reported in the sequence.

The analyses resulted in three categories: "Obstacles and handling strategies", "Daily organization" and "Search for the workshop" (from left to right and from bottom to top in the figure). The first one covers the difficulties that students report being met with in their organization attempts, be it due to deadlines or task load, to the way through which they engage

their challenges, or to the strategies adopted prior to enrolling in the workshop, which motivated them to go after new ways of organizing themselves. The following classes form this category: 3 - "Challenges in time management" and 2 - "Motivations and expectations".

Figure 1

DHC of the Time Management workshop for undergraduate students
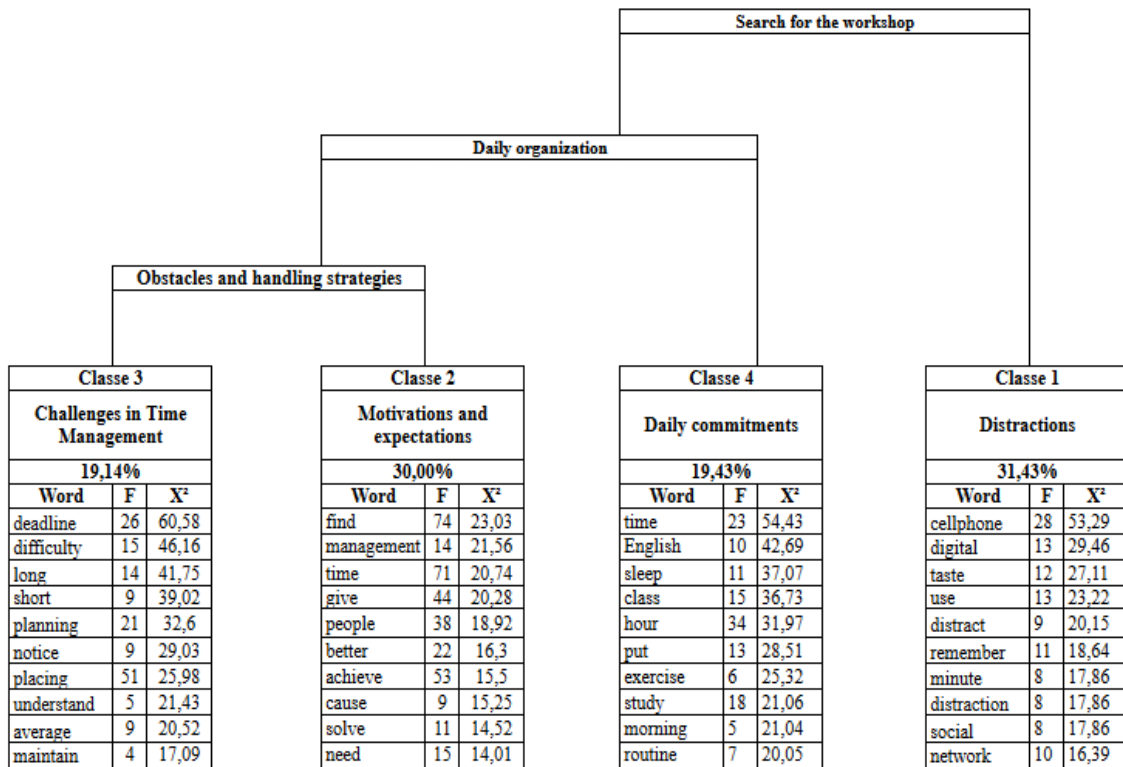
In the second category, formed by the combination of the previous category with Class 4, "Daily commitments", are present the reasons why these participants are seeking to improve their time management capabilities, which are manifested both by declarations of "being tired due to not being able to meet demands. (P07)" and by the manifestation of the desire to improve one's academic performance and to do better in routine activities that each of them necessarily undertake. Multiple particular matters are present in this topic, such as specific courses they are enrolled in and personal routines, but activities common to many students are also present, such as courses that are common to many of the students.

The last category, the most wide-ranging of them, addresses the reasons for which the participants sought the workshop and the main challenges that they face in the subject of time management. This one is formed by the combination of the second category with Class 1, "Distractions".

Class 3, named "Challenges in Time Management", represented 19.14% of the TS. In this class are present the main challenges that the participants report when they attempt to organize themselves to meet set deadlines. Two extracts of this class are presented below:

> Having to define a set period and work so that the project is finished within this timeframe. There are difficulties not only in estimating, but also in managing to elaborate these timeframe goals and to work within them. I think I'm kind of letting life take me along, in the short-term. (P12)

> Because I struggle a lot with managing my time, with managing and thinking medium- and long-term. If I am to try and do everything in a single day, I think it's easier, but thinking medium- and long-term is more complicated for me. (P08)

Class 2, "Motivations and expectations", constitutes 30% of the analyzed TS. Examples of extracts from this class, comprised of the motivations and expectations of the participants about the workshop, are exemplified below:

> I want to take this workshop because with the return to classes in online form I want to learn how to organize my time and also to organize my studies for college and the parallel studies that I have been doing during lockdown, and that I would like to keep doing. I think this workshop is going to help a lot with this. (P02).

> I went after this workshop because I can't manage my time. I work, maintain my house and study, so study is always the last in the list of priorities. I try to make time tables, but I can't meet them. Study is always postponed. (P08).

Class 4, titled "Daily commitments", comprises 19.43% of the TS. It is composed of the main regular appointments in the participants' routines, the way in which they organize themselves and the ways they manage to do that by making use of what they have learned during the workshop:

> From 8 to 9 I go to the English course, there are English classes on Thursdays, and afterwards I do some studying/working/exercising and, after the English class is over, I go do what I feel more inclined to. (P05)

> So, from 9 to 11 I'm still in class. I set lunch to be from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., because sometimes classes last until 11:30, so, as soon as the class is over, I start making lunch. Lunch takes around one hour to be prepared and to eat, and after having lunch I set that I should do my college projects, from 1 to 3 p.m. I set my relaxing time to be from 3 to 4 p.m. and afterwards, from 4 to 5 p.m. I have work, which is the Scientific Initiation project. (P04)

Class 1, "Distractions", comprises 31.4% of the TS. The main sources of distraction, as well situations in which participants report higher levels of attention, are those related to activities that require less effort, as shown below:

> Cellphones, social media websites, music... social media works like that. You only want to have a little peek, but when you come to yourself you've already been there for one whole hour, staring at stuff that has nothing to do with anything, and when

you want to go back to your task you've already lost your train of thought, you know? Tik tok is surreal, it's a black hole; Tik tok sucks you in, really, and there's also people interrupting you at home, especially now during lockdown, because the space has become smaller. (P16)

Sometimes I think that the task is so hard that I won't be able to do it right, so I end up procrastinating it, because I think that I won't be able to do it, or that I won't be able to do it right; I keep putting it off, on and on, until I can't put it off any longer. Household chores, I say, I'm just going to put that laundry in the washing machine really quickly, I'm just going to do those dishes, and in the end it takes more time than I had imagined. It snowballs. (P03)

Discussion

The results show the importance of expanding the current knowledge about the time management practices that university students employ, since many difficulties were reported. In the literature, it is observed that time management is a relevant skill for academic performance, reiterating the importance of studies that address the development of this skill. Trentepohl et al. (2022) demonstrate that university students who underwent interventions aimed at knowledge or practice of time management, showed better academic performance. Thus, the results of this study came to elucidate problematic issues for students.

Among the challenges mentioned by the students, as can be seen in Class 3, "Challenges in Time Management", uncertainty in managing time in face of deadlines and organizing schedules to work within a set timeframe were shown to be the major problems they faced. This result converges with the findings reported by (Nayak, 2019), which points out that students are met with difficulties with procrastination, managing heavy course loads and maintaining study-life balance.

Still in this regard, it is noticeable that there are difficulties in coordinating short-, medium- and long-term goals among students. As previously indicated in the literature (Nogueira-Martins & Nogueira-Martins, 2018), many of the students report facing difficulties in setting aside adequate amounts of time for studying (both curricular and extracurricular activities), for leisure and for family interaction, which makes them vulnerable to stress, anxiety and depression (Leahy et al., 2013; Nayak, 2019). It is important to emphasize, moreover, that good time management consists in planning that takes into account the maintenance and promotion of harmony between personal and academic life (Estrada et al., 2011), and that many times the coordination of multiple short-, medium- and long-term goals pervades multiple areas in a person's life. The combination of Class 2, "Motivations and expectations", and Class 3 results

in the category "Obstacles and handling strategies", indicating the participants' necessity for finding ways to deal with time management demands.

Class 2, "Motivations and expectations", illustrates their search for the workshop in question. The data that composes this class indicates that the undergraduate students currently don't see themselves as holding a repertoire of time management skills sufficient for dealing with the demands imposed on them by the University. Wolters and Brady (2020) argue that time management is associated with other determinants of academic success and that focusing on the active attitude of students in the regulation of cognitive aspects, motivational and behavioral learning is an appropriate way of meeting the need to improve student performance. Thus, it should be considered that such workshops/time management workshops can be offered as a way to promote autonomy among University students.

It is worth mentioning that in the academic setting it is recurrently necessary to ponder about the learning process itself, as well as to make efforts to integrate oneself to the College environment, which is usually not as structured as the one High School life offers (Marcilio et al., 2021). This can make arranging one's personal surroundings so as to make it more predictable, such as proposed by Allen (2015), even more important. A predictable system in the middle of an overwhelming situation can be a source of support. Facilitating access to objects or information is essential to good time management. This understanding can be applied not only to personal contexts, but can also be leveraged for the sake of improving academic experience, as is shown by the necessity of coordinating commitments in multiple fields of life, as can be seen in Class 4, "Daily commitments".

In Class 4, "Daily commitments", the workshop's participants shared their usual tasks. This class is united to the category "Obstacles and handling strategies" by the category titled "Daily organization". It is possible to infer from this combination that in exposing their usual manners of organization and common challenges it is possible to to elaborate new strategies.

The last class, Class 1, "Distractions", refers to what the participants understand as the greatest obstacles for success in time management. In this class, upon analyzing the content of more usual distractions, it is possible to notice that the students tend to show more engagement in activities that require less effort. The manifestation of procrastination behaviors has also been observed, the likes of which have previously been pointed by Nayak (2019) as constituting a problem to be examined further. Since the academic context demands a greater level of dedication (Marcilio et al., 2021), it is once again necessary to highlight the importance of coordinating and prioritizing tasks which require dedication, taking their urgency level into

account. It is necessary to consider that many of the students who invest little time and/or effort in study feature more often among those who experience academic failure (McCann et al., 2012). Therefore, it is necessary that students be capable of evaluating the degree to which their goals are being met and the degree of effort that they have been employing. In that manner, they may be able to adjust their strategies, combining their personal work styles, their academic demands, and their need and/or desire for rest (Nayak, 2019).

Finally, the previously mentioned Classes are combined in the most comprehensive of these categories, titled "Search for the workshop". It is possible to conclude that university students show, most notably, difficulties in practicing the time management skills shown by Estrada et al. (2011), Wolters e Brady (2020) e Trentepohl et al. (2022): planning, managing and controlling. The presence of obstacles against productive time management has been observed, but likewise has their openness and request for learning that skill.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the conceptions adopted by university students with regards to time management. It was also possible to verify the complaints that are common among them in face of the challenges associated with managing time, as well as the strategies adopted to deal with the deadline and workload demands present in academic life.

It has been observed that most of the difficulties reported by the students concerning time management are related to meeting deadlines for academic tasks, avoiding distractions and procrastination, and maintaining study-life balance. In addition, the intervention confirmed that there is a significant demand on behalf of the students for opportunities that could enable them to improve their time management skills. It is possible to say, from the accounts they presented, that the participants could exchange experiences and reflect on the common (and particular) challenges they face, allowing for the integration of the techniques presented during the intervention in their daily lives.

With regards to the limitations of the study, it is possible to cite the majority participation of Psychology students. Finally, the findings here presented encourage that this topic, time management, continue to be investigated in different contexts, especially in an University setting, where managing time is characterized as a major challenge. With the help of further improvement in our knowledge concerning this topic, as well as others related to the academic life, scientific inquiry on this kind of public is hoped to enable the fostering of an academia less susceptible to psychological suffering.

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