ECS401U QUIET ROOM: FINAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Procedural Programming is a large first-year module within EECS, running regularly with 400+ students. In two 2-hour lab slots, 200 students fill the ITL's five rooms to access support, complete and have work marked, with assistance from lab demonstrators.

For some of our students, such as those with neurodivergent conditions, noise and busyness impacts their ability to focus on work. Other students may experience sensory overload, isolation, and depression [1].

We created a quiet room open to any student, which ran parallel to normal lab sessions. This provided a less busy space for students to complete lab activities and get work marked, alongside a dedicated teaching team who were committed to the importance of the space.
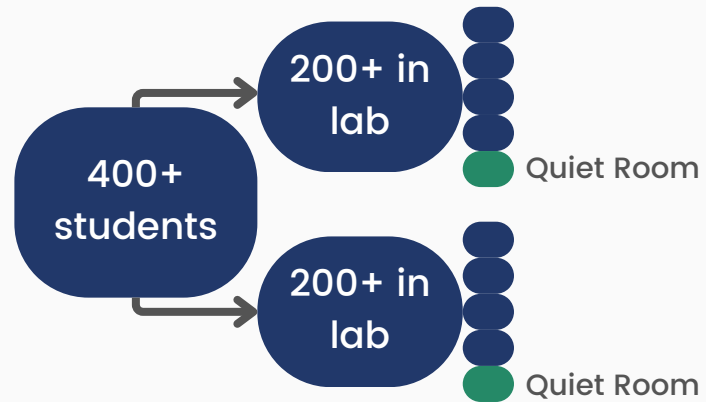
Figure 1: Distribution of students for lab sessions.

THE ROOM

Of the five rooms in the ITL, we chose TB201, a large open room on the top floor, also containing the prayer room.

Being on the top floor meant the room was out of the way, while still making it easy to find teaching staff in other rooms.

Figure 2: The quiet room.

USER FEEDBACK

During the semester, quiet room users submitted feedback anonymously online, using a QR code placed on the desks during labs. 11 entries were submitted during this period.

A final evaluation survey was also conducted at the end of the semester which recieved 4 entries.

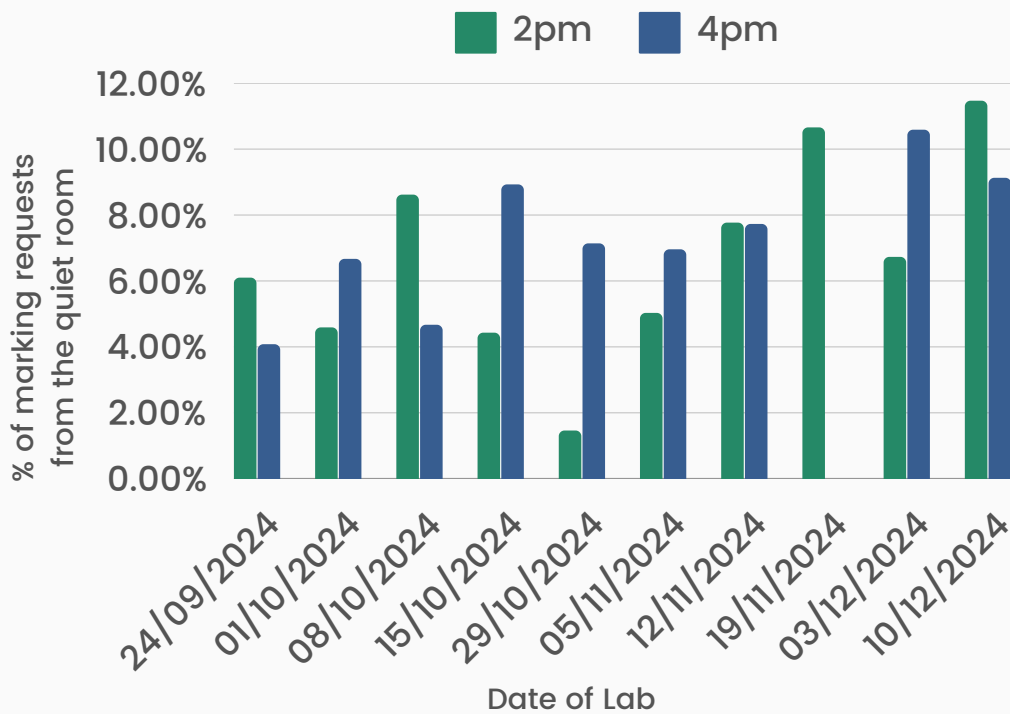All anonymous quotations in this report are from quiet room users.

References
[1] M. Madriaga, "'I avoid pubs and the student union like the plague": Students with Asperger Syndrome and their negotiation of university spaces', Children's Geographies, Feb. 2010, doi: 10.1080/14733280903500166.

Legend: ■ 2pm ■ 4pm

Y-axis: % of marking requests from the quiet room (0.00%, 2.00%, 4.00%, 6.00%, 8.00%, 10.00%, 12.00%)

X-axis (Date of Lab): 24/09/2024, 01/10/2024, 08/10/2024, 15/10/2024, 29/10/2024, 05/11/2024, 12/11/2024, 19/11/2024, 03/12/2024, 10/12/2024

USAGE

Figure 3 opposite shows the percentage of marking queue requests made by quiet room students.

The overall average usage was 7.0%.

4pm data on 19/11/2024 is not available due to a technical fault. Week 5 and 10 are not included as the quiet room was not used during tests, nor the replacement lab session run the following day.

STUDENTS' THOUGHTS

Peaceful Space

"It's nice knowing you can go somewhere that's less busy and much quieter to do your work. It helps me personally due to my anxiety."

"I really like the quiet room! I enjoy having a peaceful space to work without too much noise or too many people moving around."

"I loved it. So much easier to focus and despite having less sleep than on Friday I feel like I retained more today and wasn't dozing off!"

"It's a lot easier to focus when it's quieter. It is also easier for me due to my conditions."

"Very good very chill, strongly recommend."

"I find the other labs too noisy for me to work in so I like having a quiet space while still being able to get help and work marked."

Helpful Demonstrators

"Daniel's support was very useful. I like that he understands how students disabilities can impact them and he provides support as required."

"I'm not sure if it was intended but the choice of demonstrators in the quiet room is very useful. I believe Daniel, Roman and Fiona are very kind and soft spoken which helps a lot with anxiety as well as keeping calm and stress."

"The demonstrators are very helpful. Daniel was kind as usual and helped me fix my code. The quiet room was an amazing idea."

"Very friendly and kind demonstrator. So helpful!"

Noise and Overcrowding

"I enjoyed the quiet room the first week but I think people are chatting too much ... I would appreciate a more library-like quiet rather than lots of chatter. I do enjoy having a quiet room to focus in but some individuals are too loud."

"I think sometimes groups of people who do not actually use the quiet room as intended can be disrupting for those who actually need it. I think quiet conversations between a couple students is fine but some people are just too loud."

"It gets overcrowded sometimes so I think having 2 rooms would be more efficient."

Future Considerations

"I think it would benefit from having more demonstrators able to help if it became more popular, as some angles of the room make it hard to get someone's attention. Overall, it is an enjoyable way to work. I would like if it was available throughout the day too, if it is not already."

"I would like this in other modules."

"Thank you for the room - I very much appreciate its existence!"

"[I would like] more enforcement on noise levels. not using the quiet room for (resit) exams as it means I don't have a space to work in for that week and have to go to a noisy lab."

Figure 4: The quiet room, facing west.

TAKEAWAYS

- **Open to All Students:** A number of survey entries were from students who declared no disability or neurodivergent condition. This also allows those with no formal diagnosis to use the room, and reduces gatekeeping.

- **Suitable Room**: The large open room naturally reduced busyness and crowdedness. The tables in the corner provided alternative working spaces for those with laptops.

- **Understanding Demonstrators**: The same demonstrators worked in the quiet room throughout, and with a keen understanding of the purpose of the room, were friendly, helpful, and a familiar face.

- **Clear and Consistent Rules:** Actions taken against students who do not use the space respectfully must be clear and in place from the start. Some quiet room users used it to jump marking queues, rather than its intended purpose. Similarly, noise expectations should be made clear and enforced throughout.

- **Increased Support**: Students expressed wishes for more resources (rooms, demonstrators) to be allocated to quiet spaces, as well as for "quiet rooms" to be included in other modules.

CONCLUSION

I am grateful that this idea, sparked by my own experiences of being an autistic student, has been recieved positively for many students in ECS401. The provision of quiet spaces (not just small pods) both in and out of teaching times can make a difference to a significant proportion of students, especially on big modules.

As an initial trial for such a scheme, we have learned a great deal. Particularly important was the importance of communicating with students: clearly demonstrating the purpose of the quiet room, setting expectations, and listening to feedback were and will be vital to this initiative.

In the future, with greater support and resources, the quiet room could include:
- Temporary soft barriers to break up the space and absorb additional noise.
- Fidget toys, a sensory space, and alternative seating options (e.g. bean bags).
- "Super-quiet" pods for individuals who need a seperate space.
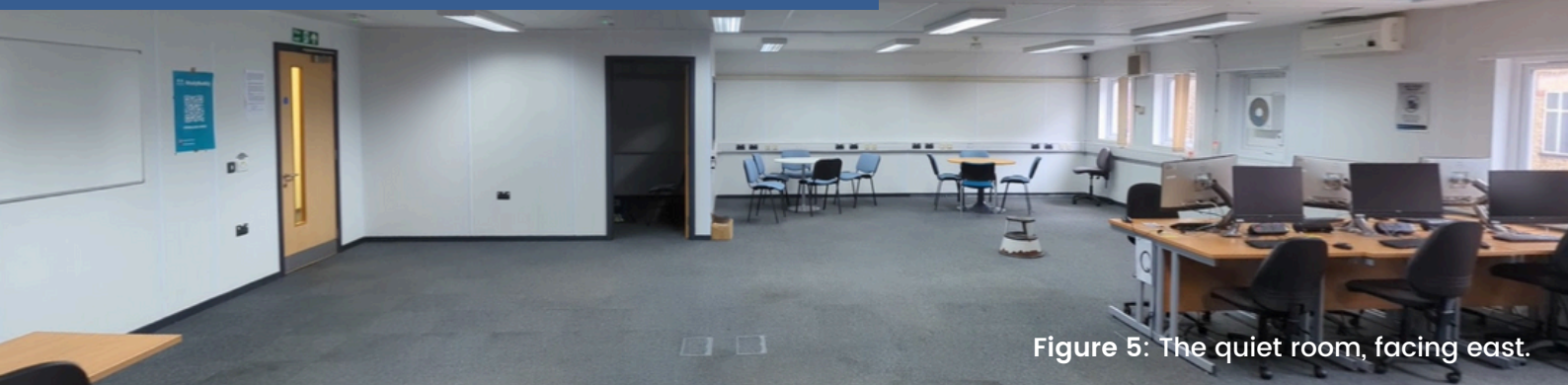- Availability of noise-cancelling headphones and ear plugs.

Figure 5: The quiet room, facing east.