

Study Spaces

To gather insight into the student experience with study spaces, we launched a research project to explore the functionality of the spaces available to students and understand where gaps may exist within the provision. The main insights have been informed by a survey which achieved 186 responses (60% Falmouth University and 40% University of Exeter).





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Introduction

In November 2024, Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union's Student Forum passed a proposal to explore the study spaces & provision available to (neurodivergent) students. The initial proposal acknowledged that students have difficulties concentrating where there are bright lights, noise and other distractions; it also recognised that this has significant impacts to students when they are unable to find suitable places for studying – an issue that is prevalent in neurodivergent students and their university experience.

In late January 2025, The SU launched a research project to explore the student experience with study spaces on campus to identify what students need from spaces available to them and as such any gaps in the current provision. The research included a survey as well as asking students in our network several questions related to their experiences (this included the proposer of the original Make a Change proposal as well as our Neurodivergent Students' Collective). The survey was open for a period of two weeks and achieved a total of 186 responses (60% Falmouth University students; 40% University of Exeter Students). Table 1 (below) identifies the campus split (%) amongst respondents.

	University of Exeter Students	Falmouth University Students
Penryn Campus	40%	22%
Falmouth Campus		38%

As part of the research, we also explored what factors need to be considered when designing spaces for neurodiversity in a higher education setting. Oktra (the UK's leading Office Design & Build company) identified three key areas of focus, related to difficulties that neurodivergent students face:

- Sensory sensitivities;
- Social differences;
- The need for movement.

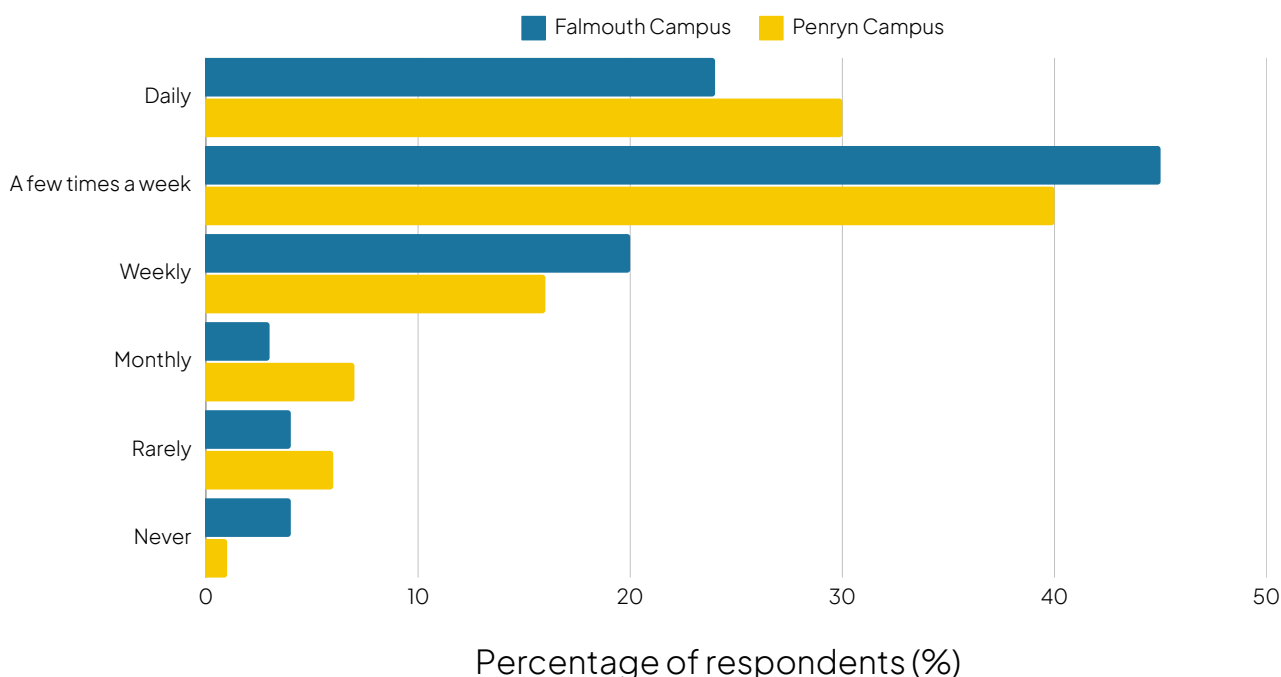
They also highlighted what inclusive spaces in HE means, with them “enabling individuals to accomplish their tasks in ways that resonate most effectively with them”. There is recognition that each student has their own individual needs and so there is not a clear approach for study spaces which would suit all students. However, an inclusive design allows for spaces to be adaptable, practical and flexible enough to meets the wide range of needs of students.

With this in mind, we created a short survey which explored the student experience with study spaces focusing on functionality, location, ease of booking or finding a space as well as identifying what students need from study spaces on campus. The following report draws on the data from this survey as well as insights from students more broadly. It will explore the experience across both Penryn & Falmouth campus and discuss the patterns seen across respondents - the research was also open to BMBS students based at Truro; however, we did not receive a response from these students. As we progress our insight's function, we will explore how to better engage with all student groups.

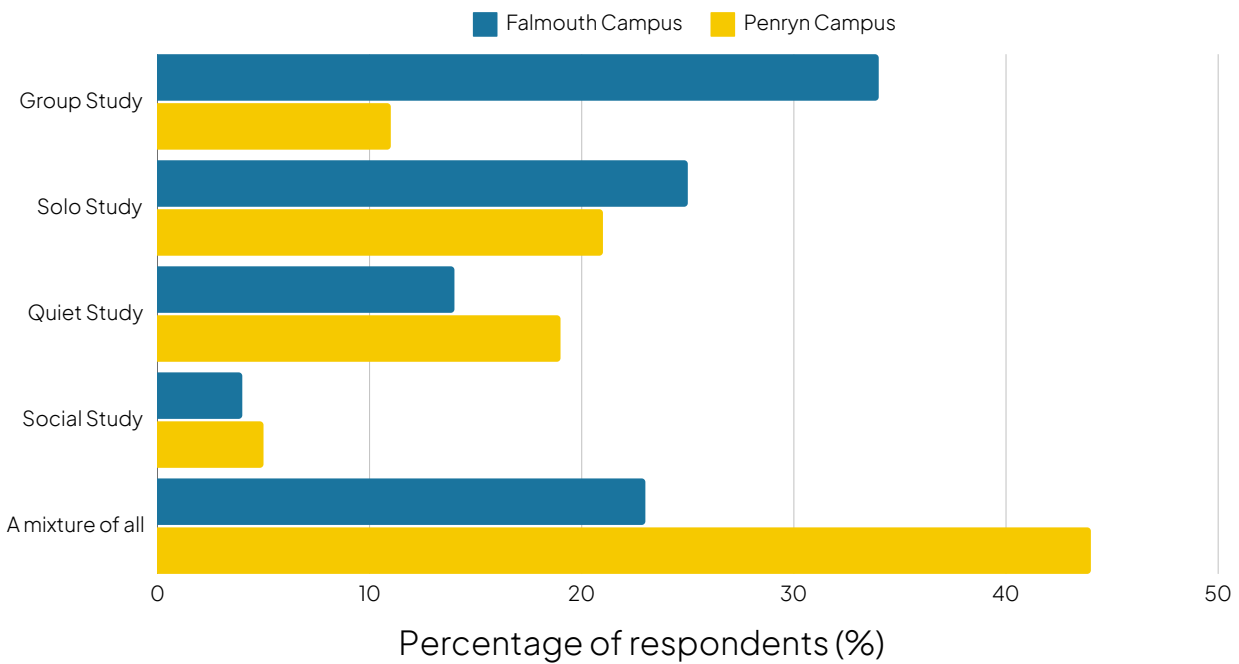
Context

The following section aims to provide an overview of how students study on campus before delving into their experiences of this.

Graph 1 (below) highlights the frequency in which students' study on campus. Across both Falmouth and Penryn, most respondents choose to study on campus a few times a week (45% for Falmouth and 40% for Penryn). Respondents are most likely to study in the library with 86% of respondents based on the Penryn campus choosing this option (a lower percentage of 56% for Falmouth campus respondents). The four most popular study locations across both campuses were the library, within their faculty buildings/rooms, cafes or food outlets, and social spaces.



Respondents were also asked what study type they preferred, whilst Falmouth Campus respondents prefer group study spaces those based at Penryn favoured a mixture of all (group, solo, quiet and social).

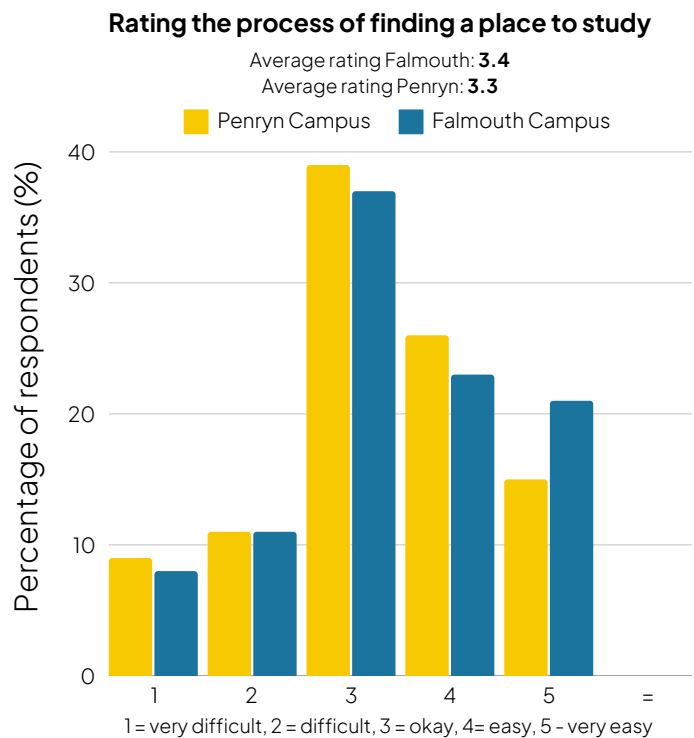


The last question related to the context of students' studying on campus identified that most respondents had not used the booking system to book study spaces (76% for respondents based on Falmouth campus and 61% for those on Penryn campus).

Study Experience

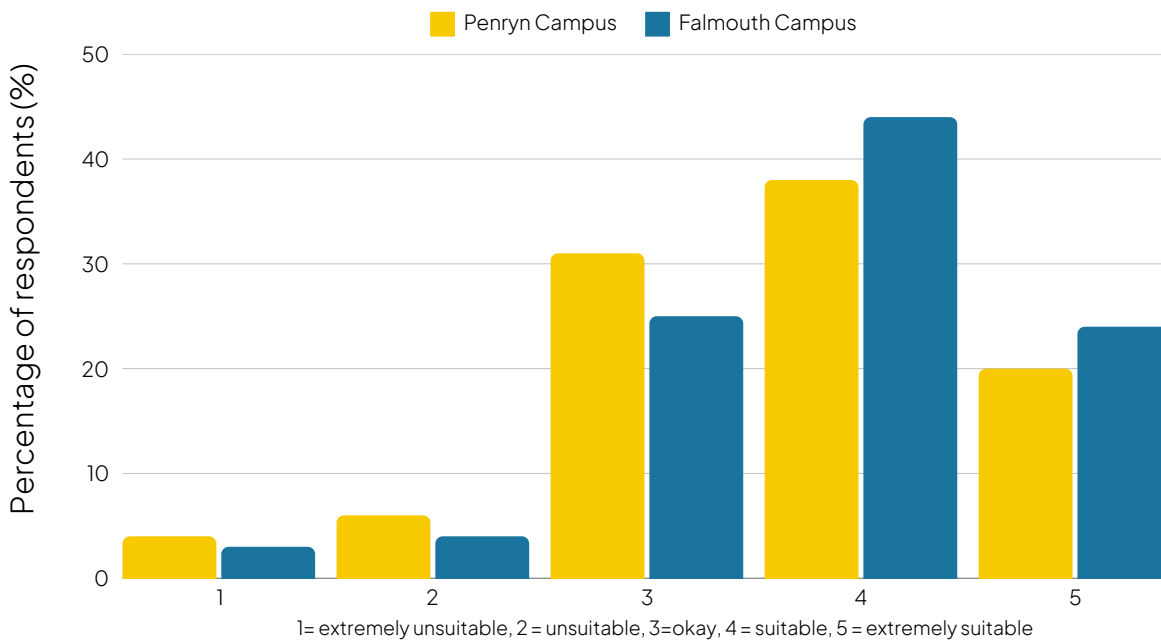
This section aims to explore the student experience with studying on campus. Respondents were asked a series of questions where they were asked to rate a series of factors related to study spaces.

As shown in the adjacent graph, for both Falmouth and Penryn campuses, the average rating for the process of finding a place to study on campus was **3** (3.3 for Penryn and 3.4 for Falmouth) which was neither positive nor negative.



Rating the suitability of Study locations

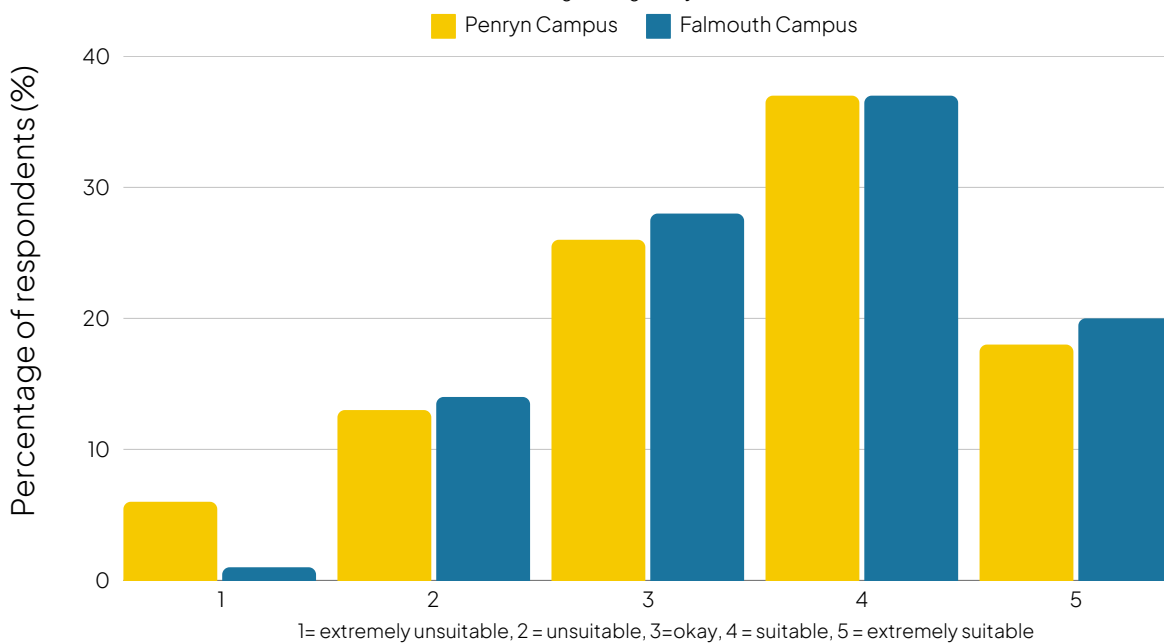
Average rating Falmouth: **3.8**
Average rating Penryn: **3.6**



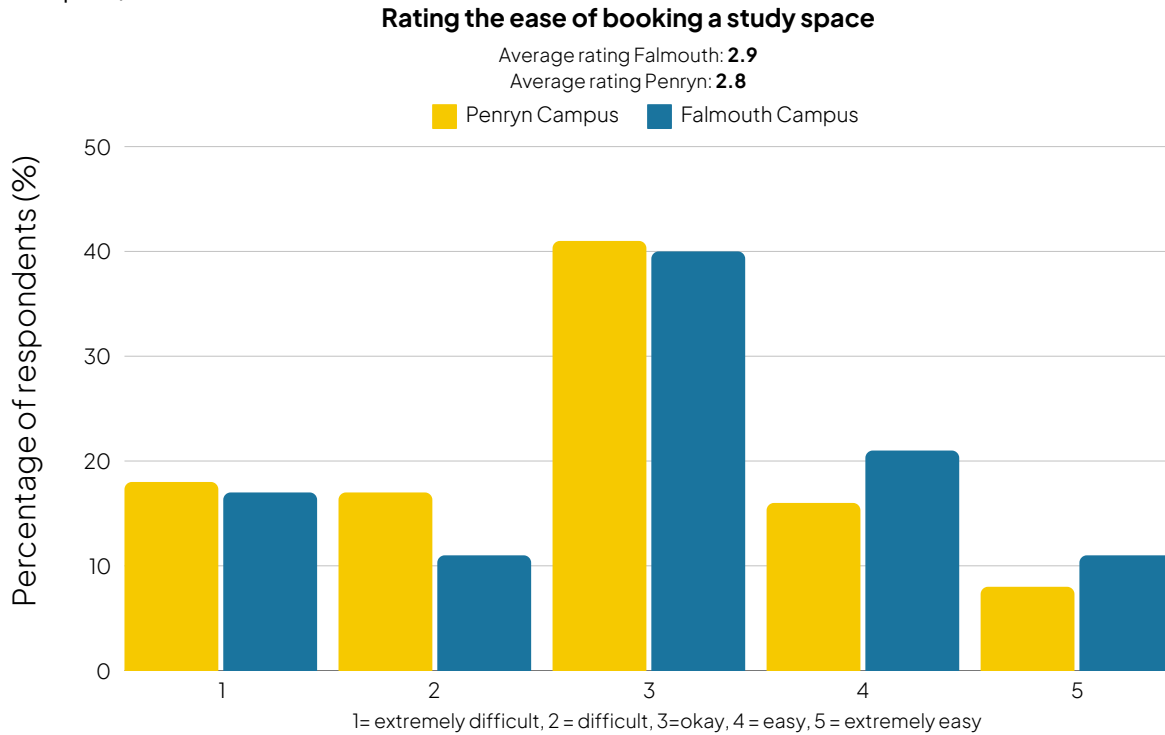
Respondents were also asked to rate the location of study spaces across campus. As shown in the graph, the average rating for both Falmouth and Penryn respondents was between 3 and 4. But overall, respondents have a positive outlook to the location of study spaces available to them. There is a similar pattern when exploring the rating for the suitability of study spaces on campus. Overall for both Falmouth & Penryn campus, the highest percentage of respondents rated the suitability of the study provision as a **4 (suitable)**.

Rating the suitability of Study Provision

Average rating Falmouth: **3.6**
Average rating Penryn: **3.5**

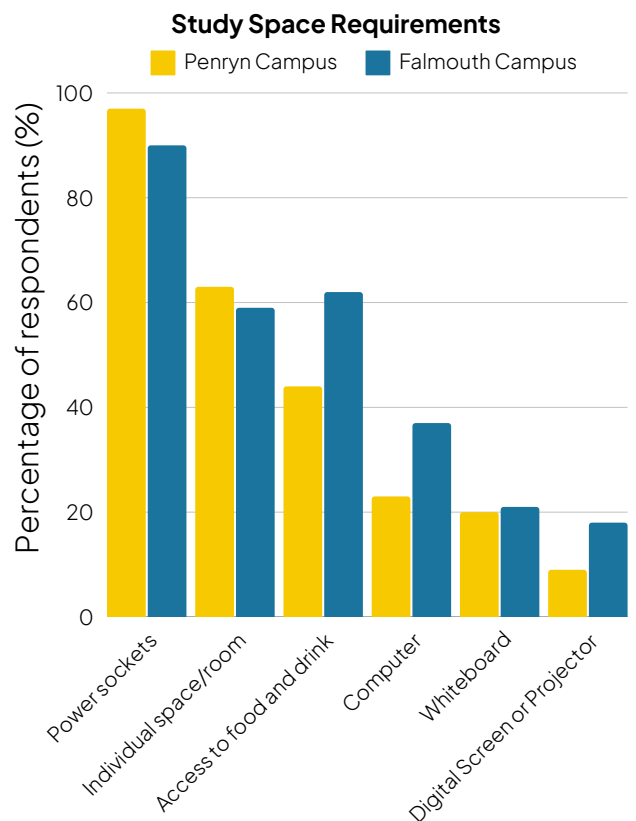


The final question related to the student perspective on study spaces explored the ease of booking a study space. Overall, the highest percentage of respondents (across both campuses) rated the ease of booking a study space as **3 (okay)** with both having a similar average rating (2.9 for Falmouth campus and 2.8 for Penryn campus).



When considering the experience of students with the current study space provision across campuses, respondents had relatively neutral opinions across the given topics. This highlights that the current provision is functional and students are able to have positive study experiences when using campus facilities. However, there are ways that can increase the effectiveness of study spaces and provide students with a more positive experience.

When asked what students would like from their 'ideal' study space, the most common answer amongst respondents was the inclusion of **power sockets** (90% for those on Falmouth campus and 97% for Penryn Campus). Respondents also largely agreed that they would like individual spaces/rooms (59% for Falmouth campus; 63% for Penryn campus) and access to food & drink (62% for Falmouth campus; 44% for Penryn campus).



Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments related to study spaces on campus. For respondents based on Falmouth campus, there was a reoccurring theme related to **quiet study**. With students sharing that:

“The loss of the quiet study room in the library was significant and there is no longer a comparable space.”

“The quiet room in the Falmouth library was my main study space, but it was removed in the renovation to be turned into a studio (even though there are loads of art studios already) and there has been no alternative put in place. There isn't anywhere quiet to study on Falmouth Campus as the treetops and tutorial rooms are always busy/full and there don't seem to be any bookable spaces. The Journalism course don't have a dedicated space, as the Newsroom has now been booked out by other courses and is always in use for their lessons. We have one room that's shared with all of the English and Creative Writing courses, including Masters and PhD students. The art courses seem to take priority and have access to more spaces and resources even though we pay the same tuition fees”

Overall, students on this campus seem to have a positive outlook on the updated Falmouth library (excluding the lack of quiet space), with one student sharing that:

“Pretty comfortable sensory friendly, the new library on woodlane campus is a good example of a well designed space, although they took the quiet space away which is annoying”

When looking at the comments from respondents based on Penryn Campus, there were three clear themes: **power sockets**, **quiet study** and **availability**. In line with our previous findings related to the experience, one student shared that:

“It feels like there needs to be more on campus. I think the options we have currently aren't bad at all they're just limited and some days it's impossible to find a free space”

There were several comments sharing experiences that the power sockets don't always work, such as this one:

“the chargers in the library don't always work, and finding a space is always really tricky as the university is too oversubscribed. It is very stressful and difficult trying to find somewhere to not only sit in the library but somewhere that also has working plug sockets.”

There is a general consensus amongst students that variety is important to them as echoed by this comment:

“The master’s suite is the best place to study as it gives people the option to study alone or in groups. And there’s almost always a study space available.”

As previously identified in this report, there is need for inclusive design across study spaces which has been highlighted with one student who shared that:

“As someone with ADHD, I find it extremely difficult to concentrate in standard chairs like the ones throughout the library. In order for me to focus I need to be able to move around or sit in unorthodox positions. The only study spaces that work for me on campus are the ones with soft bench seating. A lot of the soft seating options have coffee tables which are far too low to study at. I tend to work on one of the sofa benches in the exchange building in the open corridor. However, in winter it gets very cold due to automatic doors opening and closing the whole time. The library is pretty useless to me unless I can get one of the huts with soft seating but they’re snapped up very quickly. Even having some swivel office chairs would help. Anything other than a rigid plastic chair!”

Overall, students are seeking functionality in their study spaces that offer them a variety in choice dependent on what they need from their study sessions.

To support this data further, we also spoke with several students to understand more about their experiences.

Can you give a brief background into your experience of study spaces on campus?

“I very rarely use any of the study spaces on campus because they are too noisy and the lights are very bright. I will only study on campus if I have lectures close to each other so there is not enough time to go home in between. The reading area upstairs in the library (next to the sensory room) is the best place I have found because not many people go up there. Even the silent study rooms in the library, you can still hear the noise from the main library and the doors are glass so you kind of feel like you’re sat in a goldfish bowl.”

Do you think the study spaces on campus meet your needs as a student?

“I don’t think the study spaces meet my needs as there are no single-person study rooms where you can be on your own to work. I find it very hard to concentrate when there are other people around or when there is a degree of background noise. The small rooms that do exist (E.g. the ones in exchange courtyard), and this might sound ridiculous, but they all have one wall painted a really bright colour. To someone who has sensory sensitivities, this is very distracting and overstimulating which again can make it hard to work.”

How do you think the study spaces could be improved to meet your needs as a student?

“Small, individual study rooms that can be booked so if you know you're going to be on campus, you know there will be somewhere you can work. Rooms need some semblance of privacy because having completely glass doors and walls is very off-putting. Potential for dimmable lighting and/or more warm rather than bright lights might be good so people can choose what works for them”

Summary

Overall, the report has identified that whilst students have a largely neutral outlook to the study spaces across campus (with the acknowledgment that they are functional) for their basic needs), there are clear areas where there could be improvements to increase the effectiveness of these spaces and enhance the student experience. For example, the assessment of quiet study spaces and ensuring that there are an adequate number of working power sockets.

The long-term solutions would also look at increasing the inclusive design offering to ensure that all students are able to effectively study on campus - feedback from respondents related to this largely focused on **noise, lighting and comfort**. There were also several comments that acknowledged the renovations to the Falmouth campus library which is seen in a positive light amongst respondents, however the lack of quiet study space in this area has had some negative impact to the student experience.



“Having more silent individual study spaces would be great - I know silent spaces exist already, but having almost like solo pods would be great as this reduces anxiety related to being around other people in a quiet environment. Also generally more 'comfy cosy'-style study spaces would be amazing, like having more access to sofas and dimmable lighting would be great, especially for those with sensory sensitivities. Ambitious I know, but having more adjustable or standing desks would be great to help reduce physical aches from long library study sessions, as well as comfortable & well-supported office-style seats, possible in-built laptop stands stuck to tables and options to plug in laptops to an extra monitor so you have access to 2 screens at once (also supporting accessibility arrangements). Walking pads or being able to incorporate some physical activity/movement (e.g. large exercise balls to sit on) into study spaces could really benefit students' physical wellbeing when studying for long periods of time.”



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