

Undergraduate Non-Submission in Worcester Business School: 101 reasons and no single solution

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Introduction and Context

The University's Strategic Plan 2007-12 emphasises its commitment to provide excellent, inclusive higher education with outstanding opportunities for learning¹ and an outstanding student experience, which is academically rewarding and personally fulfilling for students². Student retention rates are seen as a key indicator of whether these ambitions are being met; thus the University has established a retention target³ of performing at or above the HESA retention benchmark⁴. For 08-09 (the most recently available figures), HESA is reporting 12.1% non-continuation rate for UW⁵ against a benchmark of 10.6%.

Although there are many factors influencing retention relating to characteristics of both students and the course⁶, assessment is central to the student experience, and to levels of student retention and achievement. A large number of students at UW are failing through non-submission of assessment. This has serious financial implications for the University both in terms of 'lost' funding and the fact that retaining students is more cost effective than recruiting new ones.

The extent of assessment non-submission is a particularly significant issue for Worcester Business School (WBS). An analysis of completion, progression and achievement at UW following September 2009 Examination Boards⁷ indicated particularly poor performance against these indicators for WBS, which achieved the lowest Institute completion rate of 56.57% against 72.68% for UW, although the WBS figures did exclude postgraduate (PG) awards (for which completion is far higher), unlike the UW figures. The figure is more acute for the subject of Computing (42%) than for Business Management (61%) and does reflect evidence that Computer Science students generally are the least likely of all undergraduates to finish their course, with Business and Administrative students similarly unlikely (18th of 20 subjects)⁸.

In the context of the above, WBS created the role of Progression Tutor, effective from Sep 09, with a brief to monitor, evaluate and implement initiatives to improve student progression, achievement, engagement and retention and an initial focus on undergraduate (UG) students. This paper reports on one particular initiative in response to the high number of UG students from Semester 1, 2009-10 failing through non-submission:

¹ University of Worcester Strategic Plan 2007 – 12, p.5.

² Ibid, p. 8.

³ University of Worcester Student Retention Strategy 2007-10

⁴ HESA benchmarks are set up to take account of the entry qualifications of an institution's students, the subjects they studied, and their age. They are provided to give information about the sort of values that might be expected for an institution.

⁵ all FT first degree entrants following year of entry

⁶ Ashby A, Jeffery N & and Slee A, (2010), Open University at HEA Conference - Retention Convention: What works? Student Retention and Success, March

⁷ Stowell M (2010), Jan

⁸ National Audit Office (2007), Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education, p21, July

Table 1: WBS UG Deferrals Semester 1, 2009-10

	BUSM	COMP
Level 4	18%	24%
Level 5	20%	39%
Level 6	10%	20%
Total	16%	28%

Objectives

The prime objective was to firstly identify, then attempt to re-engage, students who were failing as a result of non-submission; with a secondary objective of gaining a better understanding of reasons for failure and proposing recommendations for future practice.

Methodology

Semester 1 results analysis was used to analyse failure/non-submission and identify failing students. The views of non-submitting students, course teams and student representatives were gathered via face-to-face discussions (supplemented by some email/telephone conversations with students unable to attend a face-to-face meeting). The process is outlined below.

An early statistical analysis of results indicated that the major reason for deferral was non-submission rather than failure; that the rate of NS was unacceptably high, and especially acute, in UG Computing and at L5 in both UG Business and Computing:

Table 2: WBS UG NS and Fail Rates, Semester 1, 2009-10 by student module⁹

	NON SUBMISSION (NS)				FAIL	
	No of student modules	No of NS students	%	% students submitting no work/mis-registered	No of Fail students (excluding NS)	%
BUSM Yr 1	889	104	12%	6%	39	4%
COMP Yr 1	312	56	18%	13%*	14	4%
BUSM Yr 2	514	86	18%	6%	16	4%
COMP Yr 2	207	64	31%	26%**	14	7%
BUSM Yr 3	721	31	4%	1%***	38	5%
COMP Yr 3	145	20	16%	9%****	7	5%
BUSM TOTAL	2124	221	11%	5%	93	5%
COMP TOTAL	664	140	21%	16%	35	5%

As a result of this, it was decided to focus on students failing through non-submission.

Course Leaders and Module teams were asked to further analyse Semester 1 non-submission results with a view to uncovering possible explanations/trends.

The above informal analysis was undertaken whilst a database of non-submission students, by module, together with contact details, was compiled with the assistance of administrators from Registry Services and WBS. This produced a list of 225 non-submission students by subject and year group, representing approximately 25% of total listed students. Students

⁹ Based on the number of students non-submitting on each module, ie a student who non-submitted on 4 modules would, in effect, be counted four times. Each module counted once only

were blind copy emailed via both the university address and private address (where known) 'requiring' students to attend a drop-in session with the Progression Tutor over two Open Days 8 and 9 March, 9.00am to 5.00pm. Students were also advised to contact the Progression Tutor if they were unable to attend one of the Open Days, and that failure to do so might be taken as an indication that they did not intend to continue with their course. The Open Days were also announced during mandatory modules, on student SOLE, Bredon noticeboards and Twitter. Personal Tutees were emailed with a list of non-submission tutees and asked to advise the Progression Tutor of any known and relevant student circumstances.

The UG Course Leader (Student Liaison) also held a meeting with 8 UG Course Representatives (6 Computing, 1 Business, 1 Joint) asking for their opinions on the reason for non-submissions and possible strategies to reduce the number on 10 February 2010.

Findings

From Course Teams

Whilst not statistically valid, there was some evidence of a possible non-submission correlation with:

- a) module type (eg; Computing programming modules). The suggestion here was that the practical nature of the task was simply too challenging for some students;
- b) assessment type. Eg:
 - Submission (though not achievement) for exams was generally higher.
 - 100% weighted assignments, which are more common within Computing, appeared to present a submission challenge. This view was supported during ensuing discussions with the Computing External Examiners.
- c) previous module taken. There was some evidence for Computing that students who had taken certain prior modules (albeit not pre-requisites) were more likely to submit – presumably feeling/being 'better prepared'.
- d) persistent offenders. A small but persistent core of Computing students, currently re-taking their modules is continuing to exhibit non-submission behaviour.

These points have been taken forward by Course Leaders into full revalidations of both UG Business and Computing portfolios during next academic year.

From non-submission Students

Response Rate:

Of the 225 students identified and contacted, 121 (54%) responded – 76 attending the Open days and a further 45 making contact. Response rates were fairly uniform across disciplines and year groups, with marginally better response from (worse-affected) Computing, especially Computing Level 5.

Table 3: Response Rates of non-submission students to Request to meet with/contact Progression Tutor

	BUSM		COMP		TOTAL	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Level 4	39	59%	17	46%	56	54%
Level 5	26	47%	23	66%	49	54%
Level 6	6	40%	10	59%	16	50%
Total	71	52%	55	56%	121	54%

Reasons for non-submission:

Fuller details of student responses can be found in Appendix 1, but have been summarised into 12 categories as below. Some responses fall into more than one category and are counted in each category:

Table 4: Reasons for non-submission

Category	No of Categorised Responses	% of Categorised Responses
A. Personal problems	21	17%
B. Module registration/repeating	13 (BUSM6; COMP 7)	10%
C. Didn't understand assessment	12 (BUSM 4; COMP 8)	9%
D. Mit circs claimed/approved	12	9%
E. Wrong date/timing	11 (BUSM10; COMP 1)	9%
F. Time management	9 (BUSM 2; COMP 7)	7%
G. Illness/injury	8	6%
H. Work/employment	7	6%
I. Withdrawn/changed course	6 (BUSM 2; COMP 4)	5%
J. Assignment bunching	5 (BUSM 0; COMP 5)	4%
K. Lack of motivation	5	4%
L. Miscellaneous*	18	14%
TOTAL	127	100%

* a significant factor here was communication failure

The volume of 'reasons' is extensive with 56% (the six categories A, D, G, H, K, and L) arguably being personal to the student and beyond the influence of the School or its staff. The six remaining categories (B, C, E, F, I and J) fall within an area where there is potential for WBS to adopt intervention strategies. Further, although numbers are too small to be definitive, the following negative trends within discipline are suggestible:

- Business: 'wrong dates/timing (Category I). *This relates to and reflects the exam/test assessments set in Business, which do not exist in Computing*
- Computing: 'didn't understand assessment' (Category C); 'time management' (Category F); 'assignment bunching' (Category J)

There are no identifiable trends by year group due to small numbers at this level of sub-analysis.

From Course Representatives

Course representatives identified just two possible causes - transition problems during the first semester at university and problems with mitigating circumstances deadline. They recommended a number of strategies to address non-submission, including:

- A mandatory skills module
- Individual/small group assignment tutorials and assignment tutorials between end of teaching and submission
- Emailing students a week before due date (to check progress)
- Early re-assessment opportunities
- Reminders to students to contact tutors in the event of absence
- Restricting right to re-assessment¹⁰
- A financial incentive to pass first time

¹⁰ Interesting this year (2010) Bath Spa University has introduced fines of £150 for any student that does not submit assessment and who wishes to re-submit at a later date

Recommendations

Key recommendations are summarised and allocated for action below:

	Explore with Registry
1.	More student friendly Mitigating Circumstances processes (deadlines, evidence, respecting privacy) e.g. late as possible deadlines, accept confirmation of a problem from student counsellor
2	Various initiative related to rewarding success and penalising failure
3	Notify module leaders of module registration changes (to avoid weekly register printing by module leader/team)
4	Identify Mitigating Circumstances claims on results lists
5	Introduce an early advice system to note suspected withdrawal on class and results lists
6	Obtain more complete listing of personal email and mobile phone numbers at registration
	Course Leaders (Curriculum)
7	Clear advice re module diet
8	Frontload Yr 1 with assignment and time management skills
9	Introduce a study support rota
10	Map assessments and have a strategy to manage end of module assessment
11	Consider a mandatory attendance system/ more formal systems to record attendance via ASU
	Course Leaders (Curriculum) and Module Leaders
12	Include assignment workshops in all modules
13	Break assignments down into stages with phased hand-in
14	More proactive use of Blackboard (e.g. through discussion facility to support assessment)
	Course Leader (Student Liaison)
15	Establish a Facebook page pre-induction to establish a social network/community
16	Twitter sign up during a mandatory session each semester as an alert mechanism
17	Assignment due date reminders (via Twitter)
18	Simplify absent/sick reporting-in procedures (eg to a single individual)
19	Students to be aware of penalties of non-submission /failure
20	Induction survey to identify students who lack a sense of direction

Conclusions and Update

A number of actions have already been taken. Many more are being considered for implementation during next academic year at the level of student communications (including induction), advice and guidance; as well as course and assessment design.

Non-submission rates for Semester 2 are currently being analysed. Whilst there is some indication of a possible, but very minimal, improvement in semester 2, it is too little to claim as at all significant. Further analysis of final results will be undertaken to attempt to identify whether non-submitting students in semester 2 were the same as in semester 1, or 'new' offenders, and the extent to which individual students who did not submit in semester 1 have been successfully encouraged/supported to submit in semester 2.

Appendix 1: Analysis of Student Responses

A1 By Subject and Year Group

A1.1 Business Year 1

Total NS 66

Responded 39 (59%)

Undeliverable email
Withdrew from computing and restarted on creative digital media
Works 40 hour week
Emailed but never came
Buying a house, death in the family, working, fear of redundancy
Needs to rearrange
Didn't know how to do assessment, didn't realise about average mark
Put phone down on Graham
Sent mit circs with letter in November
Sickness before exam
Free choice so will simply resubmit
On holiday and not motivated, is making up an extra module this semester
Withdrawing
Didn't understand PPD and had another assessment due
1st economics test clashed with psychology lecture about assignment, ill for exam
Severe family problem (divorce/attempted suicide)
Replacing module with French
Handed in within 5 days
Lacked motivation, stressed about finding work
Didn't like creative concepts, meant to register for 5 modules semester 2 but only registered for 4
Messed up date on in-class test
Struggled to cope with changes in life
Had to return home because of illness in the family, forgot the deadline
Personal issues near the exam, didn't think he needed it because he's already passed first year
Had to go to Thailand at Christmas and wasn't able to get the work in in January
Personal problems, didn't feel they fitted into mit circs
Joined late and has not coped with being a student, repeating first year modules
Got hand in date wrong
Problems at home, didn't fit in with mit circs, all second assessments seem to come at the same time
Has mit circs
Didn't think he was going to pass due to bad time management
Has mit circs
Couldn't get in, or even get to a post office because of sports injury
Claimed mit circs (but turned down)
Modules don't relate to course but needed to remain as a FT student
Mit circs

A1.2 Business Year 2

Total NS 55

Responded 26 (47%)

Didn't have TT for 3 weeks, friend died then got wrong time for exam
Poor attendance, no excuse
Dyslexic student finding assignment hard
Family bereavement, didn't want to use mit circs
Lack of motivation due to working extensive hours
Got the wrong time for the exam

Work commitments
Mit circs
Got wrong date for the exam
Depressed, got diagnosis, on medication, changed to PT
Trouble commuting, left everything until the last minute
Couldn't use on-line resources from home
Got wrong time for exam
Went home forgot to take IRF and not downloadable
N/S should be a D-
Focussing on 3rd year modules and ran out of time for yr 2 module
Struggled with second assignment
Don't pick up from University email
Wrong exam date
Family problems, felt unable to complete mit circs

A1.3 Business Year 3

Total NS 15

Responded 6 (40%)

Extended course
Struggled with first assignment of a new subject
Personal problems over Christmas, considering deferral
Couldn't get back in time
Mit circs accepted
Computer crashed

A1.4 Computing Year 1

Total NS 37

Responded 17 (46%)

Poor time management, work commitments, 4 assignments due in in January
Contacted Personal tutor
Ill, has completed mit circs
Couldn't get in because of weather
Child with illness, required visit abroad
Personal issues and poor time management
Transfer with dyslexia awaiting statement, financial and accommodation problems
Focussing on year 2 modules, ran out of time
Had trouble with death in the family didn't feel able to complete mit circs, 3 assessments in Jan
Was ill during the semester but also struggled to understand modules
Got date wrong fro 1st assignment and second poorly planned
Laziness and poor time management
Didn't feel prepared for the assessments
Withdrawn
Working almost full time

A1.5 Computing Year 2

Total NS 35

Responded 23 (66%)

Medical concerns
Research methods retaking, had trouble doing the work
Personal problems
Emailed to say coming but never showed
Not a non-submission
Problems with University-supplied support workers
Mit circs

Poor time-management because of having to work
Withdrawn
Took 5 modules in one semester and ended up with 3 assessments in on the same day
Programme Advisor speaking to him
Poor time management, retaking second year module
All assignments coming in at the same time, found research methods particularly difficult
Waiting to hear about mit circs
Financial problems, time management and mit circs for one
Additional module deadline?
Partner depressed child to care for, couldn't make Fridays
Programme Advisor said he needed to sign up, but didn't need to do the module (to qualify as FT)
Emailed but didn't show
Couldn't do scripting but has changed to business module
Was worried about grade for scripting
Withdrawn
Demotivated

A1.6 Computing Year 3

Total NS 17

Responded 10 (59%)

Didn't understand the relevance of the module
Financial problems
Not really interested in computing, second assignments were practical, ran out of time
Personal problems
Has mit circs
Found module difficult
Repeating a first year module
Uncle in hospital, aunt needed help
Time management, cost of travel, couldn't use dream weaver at home because old computer
Too much work

A1.7 WBS Total NS 225

Responded 121

A2 By Topic

A2.1 Miscellaneous

One of the problems with tracking students is communication; it's too easy for students to claim they didn't receive or haven't picked up information.

A2.2 Withdrawn/Changed course

Clearly this information is either not getting to registry or from registry to us.

A2.3 Work

Clearly many students have to work whilst at the University and it is difficult to see how we can address this as an issue. It probably has a greater impact on attendance (see below).

A2.4 Personal problems

Students identified that the mitigating circumstances deadline is too early, sometimes before assignment deadline so if you are ill at this time you could miss both deadlines.

It is also clear that many students either felt too awkward, because of the nature of the situation, to claim mitigating circumstances or that they simply couldn't generate the evidence required.

A2.5 *Didn't understand assessment*

Students commented that the first semester at university is very different to previous studies. Could the transition be made easier by 'weaning' into the way of university life during semester 1? Students went on to say that: BUSM1101 (Personal and Professional Development) should be mandatory for all students as it gives a good idea of expectations and how to approach aspects of study. However, it is clear from the results of the non-submissions that PPD was one of the modules that students seemed to particularly struggle with.

Students also said: Provide assignment tutorials after the end of teaching sessions but just before submission deadlines and provide small group or individual tutorials on understanding the assignment question.

A2.6 *Mitigating circumstances*

It is clear that mitigating circumstances show as non-submission on the student record and that students find the process daunting.

A2.7 *Ill/Injury*

There is little we can do to prevent injury or illness.

A2.8 *Lack of motivation*

This is likely to manifest itself in non-attendance (see below).

A2.9 *Module registration/repeating*

Students said: Reassessment should be as soon as possible after the end of semester 2. Students argued that if both attempts at an assessment are non-submission then the student should not be able to retake or reattempt without loss of bursary or having to pay again.

It is clear from the non-submissions that some students feel able to pick and choose modules almost at whim and this leads to a lack of commitment. Particularly where students feel they can either make up a module by doing an extra one in the following semester, simply having another go in the Summer, or carrying it forward into the following year.

There were at least two students who claimed they were only registered on modules so that they were still able to qualify as FT students.

A2.10 *Wrong date/Timing*

Students said a week or so before submission dates the module leader or personal tutor should send out an email asking for information on progress towards the assignment.

A2.11 *Time management*

A lot of the time management issues relate to the discipline of planning assignments and assignment bunching (dealt with below).

A2.12 *Assignment bunching*

A number of students identified that their reason for non-submission was due to the bunching of assessments, particularly at the end of the module, where it is to be expected that end of module assessments are all likely to occur at the same time.

A2.13 *Attendance*

There is about a 50% correlation between poor attendance and non-submission, but poor attendance is also a good indicator of non-engagement, which will lead to lower levels of achievement.