



## **‘What do you mean I failed?’ Using in year retrieval as a learning tool**

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### ***Abstract***

When students receive a fail mark on an assessment in UK higher education (usually a mark under 40%), the most common experience is that they wait many months for a point of re-assessment after their marks have been confirmed by an examination/progression/award board. The outcome of the board will confirm whether they are to resit the piece of work, repeat the level, or be failed out of the programme of study. This process is a relatively blunt tool and offers little by way of compassion or of learning opportunity. Neither does it reflect the likely approach of employers to poor performance where improvement would be expected within a short timeframe. For the majority of students who receive a resit opportunity, often several months have passed since their original attempt. From both a pedagogical perspective and a graduate outcomes perspective, change is needed to bring about a more compassionate, purposeful, and meaningful approach to failed assessment in HE.

This piece calls for a change in resit practices and outlines the steps taken to introduce ‘in year retrieval’ (IYR) within one university. Data from the pilot phases of the work, the principles established, and the positive impact upon student retention and progression show that enabling students to retrieve failed assessment at a point in time close to the failure yields positive outcomes for learners. The author does not suggest that IYR is the answer to all assessment ills but does argue that it is time that the sector consider anew the often-significant delay learners face prior to assessment retrieval.

**Keywords:** resits; student outcomes; inclusion; compassionate assessment.

## **Introduction**

**Setting the scene:** imagine your line manager has called you for a conversation. They say they have identified flaws in your work which they wish you to correct. They tell you not to speak to them (or anyone else) about this and show your improvement in seven months' time. This exchange is highly unlikely, to say the least. Far more likely is that your employer would want to see improvement very quickly, would potentially encourage you to talk to colleagues or a mentor, and to seek further clarification from them should you need it. A timescale would be set for you to demonstrate improvement. Now apply this same scenario to a failed assessment in higher education. Typically, the student receives a fail mark and then no further support or guidance until after the relevant examination/progression/award board. For the majority of students who receive a resit opportunity, several months have passed often in the meantime.

The current practice in HE offers little by way of compassion or learning. It makes little sense from a pedagogical perspective to expect students, who have demonstrated a weakness in knowledge at the point in time when they had regular access to skilled academic staff tutors, learning materials, and peers, to be able to demonstrate improved knowledge months later. It seems out of step with the way in which learning should be supported (Slater, 2009). From both a pedagogical perspective and a graduate outcomes perspective, change is needed to bring about a more compassionate, purposeful, and meaningful approach to failed assessment in HE.

When turning to the literature to explore this further, it is apparent that very little exists that investigates the value of resits when assessments have been failed. Ricketts (2010) pointed to the scarcity of literature around resits, whilst Burr et al. (2018) found only 11 peer reviewed articles using resit as a keyword within the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) compared with over 65,000 articles for assessment. From current searches by the author, there have been modest additions to the literature around resits, with an ERIC search now reporting 15 articles. Moreover, there appears to be a complete lack of peer reviewed literature addressing any aspect of resits, i.e., timing, value, pass rates, from the perspectives of differential outcomes, inclusion, or compassionate pedagogy. When the HE sector is beginning to understand the impact of assessment upon differential outcomes (Campbell, 2022) and inclusion (Nieminen, 2022),

it is surely time to look anew at our resit practice and to ask whether it remains fit for purpose.

## ***A new approach***

In 2019, the author proposed a change in the way assessment failure was resolved at their institution, a large HE provider well known for its work in supporting learners from non-traditional backgrounds. The resulting discussion concerning in year retrieval (IYR) was informed by similar approaches being offered at six other UK HE institutions, albeit at small-scale subject level rather than the proposed whole university approach envisioned by the author. Analysis of the author's institutional data showed that 90% of students entering the resit period had two or fewer failed assessments, meaning that if they could be offered an opportunity to correct a failed mark within a short period of receiving the indicative mark, we could support them at a point in time that was apposite. Knowing that these learners had received a maximum of two failed assessments also meant that the student workload for retrieval was manageable alongside other planned assessment and learning activities. There were also perceived advantages for staff. If 90% of students were able to successfully retrieve their failed assessments during the academic year, then the burden on staff for marking during the resit period would be almost entirely removed, enabling greater opportunities for protected research, professional practice, and preparation time.

It is important to note here that this scheme entails retrieval of a failure, not a formal resit opportunity, as the failed mark has not been ratified by a board at the point that the student elects to retrieve it. The principles upon which we based the introduction of IYR exempted some forms of assessment, e.g., in-class tests, capstone projects, time-constrained assessments; and IYR cannot be used where an assessment has not been attempted. Elsewhere, the student elects to use one of two IYR opportunities per level of study when they receive a failed grade. Clear guidance and documentation were provided for both students and staff. The basic process is that the student reworks the same piece of assessment, tracking their changes based upon feedback from their tutor. They then submit their reworked piece within 10 working days of the release of the indicative marks. If the reworked piece meets the pass threshold, it is capped at a 40% pass mark, and this is shown as a retrieval mark. The original mark is also retained on the student record.

## **The pilots**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the pilots began in the 2020/21 academic year, a year later than planned. The results showed that in the first year of the pilot, 83% of those students choosing to take an IYR attempt met the 40% pass threshold with their reworked assessment. In 2021/22, results continued to show a positive take up although the proportion achieving the 40% threshold with IYR was lower (64%). Work undertaken to test for grade inflation showed that first-time pass rates for the two years of IYR was comparable with cohorts not participating in the pilots, giving assurance that the introduction of IYR was not presenting an easy way to retrieve failure and that academic standards were upheld. In 2022/23, the pilot was extended to include subject areas from every faculty and 85% of those students who chose to take an IYR opportunity achieved the threshold pass mark.

In the 2023/24 academic year, IYR has been rolled out across the institution and is seen as part of the strategic approach to supporting student achievement and progression. It is also part of our work to reduce the awarding gap and to seek to better understand the learning and assessment experiences of those in declared protected characteristic groups. We are currently engaged in a study to determine the impact of early retrieval upon onward progression as initial exploration suggests that students who are supported through early retrieval rarely experience failure in future coursework, demonstrating the value of enabling self-development in addressing failure in a timely manner.

## **Conclusion**

The work that has led to this point has been far from easy. The author has worked extensively in collaboration with staff, students, employers, external examiners, and Professional Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB) representatives to ensure that the principles upon which IYR is based are pedagogically sound and also support self-development in relation to addressing failure. The author does not suggest that IYR is the answer to all assessment ills but does argue that it is time that the sector looked again at the reasons for delaying retrieval of failed assessment, particularly in light of awarding gap

challenges. If, as suggested above, delaying retrieval of failure does not support good pedagogical practice or enable the development of critical self-reflection on performance, then the question we should ask ourselves is why does the practice persist with such fervour and without strong evidence-based practice to support it?

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