_____

Insights from a study on non-submission of assignments: how can students best be supported?

Samantha King
University of Northampton, UK

Alison Loddick
University of Northampton, UK

Tim Curtis
University of Northampton, UK

Deepak Bhachu
University of Northampton, UK

Presentation abstract

Non-submission of summative assignments has an impact on a significant minority of students but is not well understood (Prinsloo, 2019). At the University of Northampton, 70% of Integrated Foundation Year (IFY) students have a non-submission on their academic profile as they enter Level 4 and nearly 10% of all student assignments overall are not submitted (Coulson and Loddick, 2021). Students who fail to submit initially are offered a second submission point, but their grade is capped at 40%: data suggests that addressing this could close 50% of the GEM (Global Ethnic Majority) attainment gap.

A study was initiated in partnership with IFY academic staff to research into the experience and implications of non-submission of assignments for GEM and non-GEM students in IFY. The project aimed to understand the long-term implications in terms of academic outcomes through understanding why students fail to submit and how they recover from this. Data on student outcomes in recent years was interrogated and interviews were planned with current and former IFY students who had failed to submit at least one assignment. These interviews were conducted by existing IFY students to encourage an open dialogue. Following low levels of participation in the research, the project was widened by inviting all undergraduates who had failed to submit at least one assignment to complete a survey with open-ended questions exploring the non-submission. Insights from this study will be reported, which will inform the practice of both Learning Developers and lecturers. If we

King, Loddick, Curtis and Bhachu

Insights from a study on non-submission of assignments: how can students best be supported?

can offer timely and appropriate support, we may be able to promote assignment submission, which in turn could improve student retention. This would allow more students to achieve their goals and contribute to a sustainable model of higher education.

Community response

The issues surrounding retention and completion are complex and often influenced by a range of institutional factors. This research tried to examine Foundation year students, who faced considerable challenges to feeling a sense of belonging in HE and many of whom withdrew from HE after their first year. These students are also comparatively less likely to graduate.

A significant barrier to retention and completion is mental health challenges, and these are further compounded by intersectional factors. What I found most surprising was how white students were more likely than Black students to report mental health problems or bereavements as a reason for not submitting assignments. The question of why students did not opt for mitigating circumstances when they would undoubtedly qualify was very significant. Mitigating circumstances exist to address some of the challenges these students were facing and this data suggests that there may be institutional barriers preventing them from choosing this option that should be addressed. By supporting students in this way, universities could both mitigate the emotional difficulties caused by mental health concerns and foster the students' sense of belonging in respect to the HE community. This sense of belonging can be crucial to a student's decision to remain at university and complete their studies (see Thomas, 2012).

Often, Foundation students faced considerable challenges with academic literacy and it was interesting to hear that BTEC students assumed that they could continue tweaking their work after the submission point. Understanding these assumptions and their consequences is vital so that Learning Developers can work in partnership with students to make sense of assessment procedures in HE and so students can fully engage with the process in an empowered and knowledgeable way.

The institutional barriers impacting students are also evident in language used across the sector when discussing the disparity in degree awards in respect to GEM and non-GEM

students. It is more appropriate to refer to this as an 'awarding' gap rather than an 'attainment' gap as the latter places some of the blame on the student's lack of success and not the institution which creates and/or reinforces barriers.

The students' voices as part of this project are key to helping universities understand the needs and experiences of their students. It was really interesting to hear about how the research methods were adapted and how this improved the number of results to get a good representation. It would also be interesting to see what data comes out of the interviews that were taking place with students as some of the questions raised in the survey could be explored in more detail. Hopefully this research will begin to help students feel like they can contribute towards addressing these challenges in partnership with education providers, and thus reduce the withdrawal rate in future years.

Next steps and additional questions

The audience were so keen to engage with the rich data collected in this study and we need to ask ourselves: what can we in the LD community do to support the changes that are needed to address the awarding gap and promote assignment submissions? It would be very valuable if the recommendations which emerge from this research could set out some specific steps that we (in HE) can take to address the awarding gap and to push for institutional change in respect to mitigating circumstances and non-submissions.

Authors' reflection

We found it very encouraging how well received our presentation was and have found the community responses very thought-provoking. The comments correctly identify that we are at an early stage in our research and, as a research team, we all found that the results so far raise more questions than they answer. In particular, we agree that the issue of mitigating circumstances is one which is worth investigating further along with the reasons for ethnicity differences in citing health issues and we intend to investigate these in our research going forward.

Regarding the use of language (awarding/attainment) we have found during our research in approaching students that we are more successful when we use language which incorporates the responsibility of the institution and need to ensure we use language which does not 'blame' going forward.

Acknowledgements

References

Coulson, K. and Loddick, A. (2021) 'Non-submission of assessments – the impact on the BAME attainment gap', *Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) Conference*. Online 7-9 April.

Prinsloo, P. (2019) 'Tracking (un) belonging: at the intersections of human-algorithmic student support', *Pan-Commonwealth Forum*. Edinburgh 9-12 September.

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report of the What Works? Retention and Success Programme*. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/what_works_final_report.pdf (Accessed: 9 September 2022).

Author details

Samantha King has been a Learning Development tutor at the University of Northampton since 2018. Prior to this, she gained several years' experience as an EAP lecturer in higher education. She is an ALDinHE Certified Practitioner and a Fellow of AdvanceHE. Her

research interests include supporting widening participation in the HE sector and the development of academic writing skills among students.

Alison Loddick is a Maths and Statistics Learning Development tutor at the University of Northampton. Her research focuses on why university students engage and disengage with their studies.

Tim Curtis is an associate professor in social innovation, systems thinking and sustainability. He is Programme Leader for the Integrated Foundation Year at the University of Northampton and has extensive experience of developing high impact learning and teaching strategies in higher education.

Deepak Bhachu is a Senior Lecturer and Cognate Leader in Business, Management and Marketing for the Integrated Foundation Year at the University of Northampton. A lecturer with 14 years of experience and a background in Sociology, he is passionate about supporting students in their academic journey, with a specific focus on removing barriers to achievement in higher education.