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Providing asynchronous online rapid assessment-related support

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Abstract

Assessment is essential to student learning, but is commonly experienced as stressful by students, and this is particularly true for those who are time-poor due to other responsibilities. Anxiety about being judged for experiencing difficulties by the person marking their work is a particular issue for unconfident students, which can lead them to avoid seeking help from official sources. Such students may informally seek help from peers, which can lead to misinformation or temptation to collude or plagiarise.

We set up asynchronous Rapid Response Forums to enable students to have their queries answered accurately in a timely manner by experienced academic staff who were not marking their work. This reduces any perceived need to go to unofficial sources for support, normalises the idea of help-seeking and facilitates completion of the assessments for those working unconventional hours.

The use of experienced educators to answer queries ensures students' understanding is enhanced, not solely their assessment performance. The knowledge that these forums are available also supports students who do not use them directly, since they are aware that they can have any questions answered rapidly, reducing their anxiety.

The approach of offering greater support to students in assessment completion, whilst still requiring them to demonstrate learning outcomes, has the potential to develop academic confidence, thus enhancing retention and completion.

Keywords: *student support, continuous assessment, plagiarism, learning culture*

Introduction

For distance learning students, regular encouragement to increase knowledge and understanding, and refine skills over time is crucial for success. The majority of distance learners are time-poor, due to work, caring responsibilities or other commitments (Blackmon and Major 2012); for such individuals, "student" is rarely their primary identity. It is very easy in these circumstances for study to be de-prioritised; educators therefore need to design modules to incentivise frequent study and promote continued engagement.

Module design impacts how students interact with their learning and the creation of activities that promote engagement is key (Robinson et al 2008), however, many students will only engage with tasks that are linked to their

final grade (Rust 2002); assessment design is a priority in keeping such students on track. Completing an assessment and receiving feedback is an important step in developing sense of belonging as a student (Chapman 2017), but assessment outcomes can be "make or break" for students at early stages of their study. Ensuring assessment offers opportunities for building confidence can be crucial in retention; timely, specific feedback is needed, alongside enabling success in early assignments in particular (Meer and Chapman, 2014).

At The Open University, UK (OUUK), a programme of continuous assessment, either summative or formative, is used to prompt regular study and engagement with the module material. This not only ensures students interact at various points throughout their study but offers encouragement to deep-learn the key concepts of the

module, and provides the necessary regular in-depth feedback to keep students on track, highlighting both successes and learning gaps. Frequent, low-stakes assessment can boost confidence and encourage further study, and gives students an opportunity to address issues raised and use feedback to develop their skills.

Alongside its benefits, continuous assessment can lead to students feeling overwhelmed and under pressure to continually perform well. Additionally, other commitments of many distance learners that reduce the time they have available to study can lead to increased levels of anxiety, preventing them from studying effectively. These pressures may heighten the temptation to plagiarise, either from each other (Koh et al, 2011) or using the Internet or Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). Being time-poor may also lead students to study only towards assessment tasks, which can reduce satisfaction and result in inconsistent learning and knowledge gaps affecting future studies.

Academic Support at OUUK

OUUK teaches through supported distance learning. Apart from the fixed points of assessments, students have the flexibility to study at their own pace. Several forms of academic support are provided:

Each student is assigned a tutor (teaching focus academic), who supports a group of students within the module. The tutor plays a key role in continuous assessment; they mark and feed back on their students' work and can authorise extensions to deadlines, making them an important factor in whether continuous assessment is a positive experience. The main contact between student and tutor is by email; this allows students to send a query when it arises and the tutor to prepare a thorough written response, but may take time.

Online synchronous support is offered in the form of tutorials, which are usually recorded. However students are often reluctant to ask questions in this environment (Campbell et al 2019).

Students can choose to receive peer support by posting in asynchronous forums. While some students find these a source of community, others feel frustrated by the technology. It can also be difficult to create a positive forum culture (Griffin and Roy 2022). Unfortunately, one negative forum experience can lead students to reject the format entirely, leaving them comparatively isolated from their peers, or dependent on unregulated social media groups for peer interaction, which may exacerbate plagiarism risks.

Asynchronous Rapid Response Forums

During consultations run by the School of Mathematics and Statistics, students indicated they had worries during the run up to continuous assessments and wanted more support, especially close to the deadline.

As well as worries about response times, there are significant numbers of students who feel reluctant to ask questions of their own tutor because they fear judgement by the person marking their work; reassurances do not always dispel this concern. Students also worry about how much support they can legitimately seek, with university policy stating that their assignment must be entirely their own work.

To ease concerns, asynchronous Rapid Response Forums were created on three key modules, giving students the chance to ask questions with a guaranteed response in less than 24 hours (in practice typically in under two hours). The forums are private, so students can see only their posts and the responses to them. The responses are only given by one of a small team of experienced tutors. Students' own tutors are not aware of whether they have posted in the forum, so they can ask without fear of judgement.

Students are encouraged to ask direct questions about the assessment and help is in the form of hints and tips on how to resolve their question, which are framed so the assessment will still be the student's own work. The closed nature of the forums means students can be assured that the responses they receive will always be compassionate and supportive.

The forums are open for one to two weeks before the assessment deadline dependent on the module, with the modules studied earlier in the degree, with less experienced and less confident students, open for longer.

If students post multiple times on the forum, the hints will also help them to improve their self-efficacy as a distance learner by developing their skills in resolving difficulties.

The forums (alongside other factors including a generous extensions policy) are part of developing a compassionate approach to assessment; this is not just offering practical support with assignments, but establishing a culture in which students needing support is normalised, rather than seen as a weakness.

A further benefit is that the existence of these forums disincentivise the seeking of "unofficial" help from fellow students via social media. Whilst mutual support is desirable *per se*, students in unofficial spaces may offer full solutions (which is unacceptable), inaccurate information, or even if well-informed and well-intentioned, are generally less adept

than educators in giving constructive hints. These forums offer students a space where they can ask freely, confident in the knowledge that responses will be correct, appropriate, and with no risk of plagiarism.

Since their instigation the forums have been well used, and qualitative feedback sought via surveys provided insight into the reasons why students value them. The initial reason for opening the forums was to improve students' support; as highlighted by one student "Contacting a tutor can be a lengthy process and wait". The benefit of rapid responses is mentioned by another student "I found that forum so helpful due to the speedy answers which are really helpful in the stressful last few days before handing in an assignment".

They have the added advantage of helping students who are less confident and allowing them to attempt questions: "These forums helped me to increase my score by attempting questions I was unsure on enabling me to gain some marks for my ideas". One student even said that being able to ask on the forum kept her on the module, as she was on the verge of giving up due to finding a particular assessment so challenging.

We found benefits reported even by students who had not used them, "I didn't use this, but it is comforting to know there is a backup for last minute panics". Feedback also confirmed that students who used the forum rather than searching the internet for help found their study more effective.

Conclusion

For time-poor, distance learning students, completing assignments to a deadline can be very stressful. A simple initiative of ensuring that students have rapid trustworthy advice at this time can be the difference between them continuing with their studies or withdrawing. It can also help with confidence to attempt a question and reduce the temptation to plagiarise. The reach of these forums goes beyond those students that use it, with a ripple effect giving confidence to students just by knowing it is there. The promotion of the culture of seeking support should enhance student success even on modules where these forums are not in place. This initiative has been taken up outside the School of Mathematics and Statistics, and we hope to see it extend further.

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