

Completion rates in flexible learning

Philip Gibbs & Elly Kale

Abstract

The aim of this research was to find out the perceived reasons and/or factors contributing to delayed submission of students' assignments and failure to complete their courses. Researchers from the Department of Governance and Leadership at Divine Word University sent out questionnaires to participants as an email attachment to all those enrolled in courses for their department via flexible learning at the University over the previous two years. The response rate was low so they did a second survey when the students were on campus for their two weeks' intensive residential study. The research found that the most significant program management issue raised was effective communication between lecturers and students. Several respondents asked for an extended live-in period to give them more time to work on assignments before they returned home. Returning after their residential session, students have to contend with work commitments and other distractions. The study calls for further discussion and follow-up so as to provide opportunities for creative ways of dealing with issues raised, thus bringing an improvement in the problem of delayed submission of students' assignments and a rise in program completion rates.

Keywords: completion rates, delayed submission, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea, flexible learning,

Introduction

The Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) at Divine Word University (DWU) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) provides quality administrative support services to the faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Informatics, Education and Health Sciences for the programs that they offer in flexible learning mode (Flexible Learning Centre, 2015). Prior to this, all flexible learning courses were under the Faculty of Flexible Learning, which was a separate faculty at the time. Currently, the courses are taught by staff in academic faculties and coordinated by staff members from each department. The move was a recommendation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Audit Team headed by Professor Jeanette Baird, now Vice President Quality Assurance at DWU.

The team found that while many degree programs meet the requirements of the country's National Qualifications Framework, some qualifications offered through the Faculty of Flexible Learning appeared unlikely to meet PNG NQF requirements as they did not meet international expectations for the volume and depth of learning at particular qualification levels. The panel therefore

recommended that the Faculty of Flexible Learning be dismantled and be reconfigured as an administrative and logistical centre for support and facilitation of external studies of all forms, including residential schools (Matbob 2013). The table in Appendix 1 shows a list of all courses in their respective faculties currently offered via the flexible learning mode.

This study is concerned with delayed submission of student assignments and reduced completion rates for courses in the Department of Governance and Leadership, which is part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, offering courses in the flexible learning mode.

The issue of completion rates has been a topic for debate (Bothwell 2016, Edwards and McMillan 2015, Siebarth 2013, Tertiary Education Commission, NZ 2015). Not all universities record their completion rates. According to Siebarth, 55% of universities in the US and Canada could not report on their online course completion rates. Completion rates that are recorded vary according to whether students are on-campus or online. Researchers have noted low retention rates of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Parr 2013, Reich n.d.). Parr finds the average completion rate for such courses to be 7% with a range from 19% to 0.8%. A study of successful completion of on-campus courses at Universities in New Zealand revealed a consistent completion rate of 86% (Tertiary Education Commission NZ, 2015), but little is said about how they achieve such a relatively high rate. Edwards and McMillan's study of Australian Universities found a 74% completion rate for those studying for a Bachelor degree. However, they also took into account the background of students and found rates of 70% for regional students, 69% for those from low socioeconomic status, 60% from remote areas, and 47% for indigenous students. Bothwell's study in Europe found rates ranging from 82% in the UK to 59% in Norway. Success in UK in its on-campus programs was attributed partly to a tight admissions system. The mode of teaching and learning must be taken into account when comparing completion rates. Courses at the Open University of Tanzania with programs based on e-learning have had a completion rate of only 23% (Rwejuni 2014). Contributing factors to the low completion rate were shortage of study materials, low commitment of students and supervisory delays. MOOCs, being fully online have a reputation for low completion rates, yet a recent study in developing countries with data from the Philippines, Colombia and South Africa found that 49% of MOOC users received a certificate and another 30% completed the course (University World News 2016). Researchers' noted positive outcomes from combining online and traditional face-to-face instruction in "blended" mode (Frankle 2005). These blended learning courses may include live discussion with the instructor and students through conference calls and networking and interaction through the use of class problems posted on a discussion board.

Until now, courses offered through flexible learning at DWU do not follow a consistent blended mode of learning, but rather have one week of on-campus face-to-face learning followed by a time set by the instructor for the student to send in a completed assignment from their workplace. Aside from research units, there is little interaction between instructor and students after the live-in,

face-to-face week at the beginning of the unit. Possibly the resulting schedule flexibility might also contribute to low completion rates, since there are not the same mandatory dates for students to finish their assignments as with on-campus programs.

Research purpose

The aim of this research was to find out the perceived reasons and/or factors contributing to delayed submission of students' assignments particularly the non-residential assignments which students are required to work on outside of the campus. Delayed or failed submission leads to some students not completing their course of study. Records from flexible learning at DWU show that only a minority of students have actually made it to graduation while the majority either withdrew, absconded or delayed their studies. The majority of these have outstanding assessment tasks. Table 1 shows the total number of students who enrolled and completed their studies successfully over the past three years in the Department of Governance and Leadership (DGL) program for the four courses it is offering. The figures are from 2012 to 2014 for Masters of Leadership in Development (MLD), Masters of Public Administration (MPAdmin) and Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA). Diploma in Project Management (DPM) figures are from 2011 to 2014.

Table 1: Students enrolment and completion at DGL Program, DWU 2011-2014

	(MLD)	(MPAdmin)	(BPA)	DPM
Total enrolled	37	58	65	198
Total graduated	14	20	42	93
Total dropped out	23	38	23	105
Completion rate	38%	34%	65%	47%

Source: FLC Database, 2016

Research question

The primary question asked was: "What are the main obstacles to completing courses offered through flexible learning?" This question was supported by two other complementary questions. (*See appendix 2 for a sample of the questionnaire*).

Prior to conducting this study, a similar study was attempted in 2011 by former lecturer Br Pat Howley, a Marist Brother who was teaching at DWU from 2004–2014. However, his study was not completed by the time he left DWU due to delayed submission of responses from research participants. We felt that Br Howley's questionnaire was perhaps too detailed as it had 13 questions with 43 options to tick, so we decided to simplify our questionnaire, hopefully making it easier for participants to respond.

Research method

One hundred and seventy three questionnaires were sent out to participants as an email attachment to all those enrolled in DGL courses via flexible learning at DWU over the past two years. Only two emails failed to be delivered to the recipients' email addresses. However, from the questionnaires that were successfully sent, only 21 responded. Thus, we did a second survey when the DGL students were on campus for their two weeks' intensive residential study in Madang between April 4 and 22, 2016. Unfortunately, the DPM coordinator did not return the responses from the DPM group. Fifty questionnaires were distributed to the MLD, MPA and BPA course participants. Thirty-eight (38) of the questionnaires were returned with responses from the participants, bringing the total responses to 59 out of 223 total questionnaires sent by both email and hard copy. We received ethical clearance for this research in March 2016 (No. FASS/FS/1/2016).

Findings

The responses to the first question asking, **“In your experience, what do you think is the main reason why students are not submitting assignments on time”**, are shown in the following table. Responses came from 21 email responses and 38 responses from students whilst on campus for two weeks' intensive study.

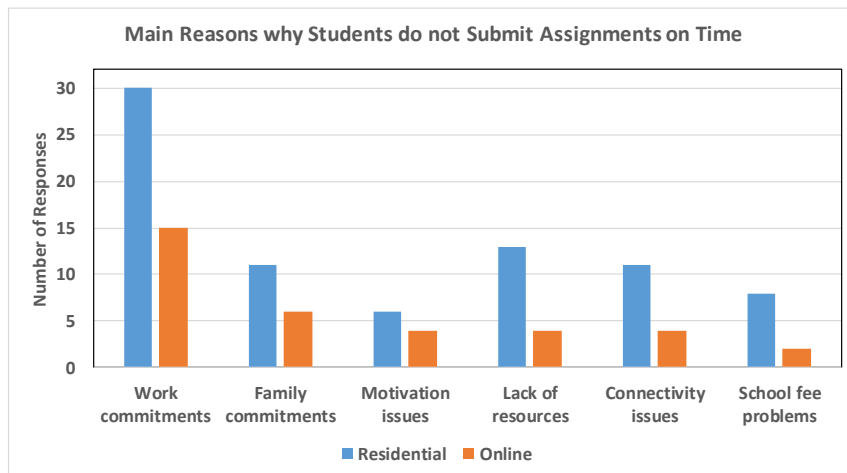


Figure 1: Main reasons why students do not submit assignments on time

Comparing email and hard copy responses to question 1

Comments accompanying question 1 were as follows:

Respondents by email (shown here in order of frequency)

Balancing work and study (4)

Lack of commitment (3)

Communication between FLC staff and students (2)

Customary obligations (1)

Flexible learning students who replied while on campus:

- Lack of commitment (4)
- Need for two weeks instead of only one for teaching each unit (4)
- Need to remain an additional week on campus to work on assignments (3)
- No internet in remote location (3)
- Dormitories not conducive to study (1)
- Unclear assignment due dates (1)
- More time for teaching the units (1)
- Lack of knowledge of the Moodle learning platform (1)
- Accident (1)

Question 2 was an open question asking, “**What do you think could help students complete the course on time so they can graduate?**”

Respondents by email gave the following suggestions (shown here in order of frequency):

- Personal commitment and time management (7)
- Improve communication between staff and students (6)
- Extend assessment due dates (4)
- Extend residential study duration to three weeks (2)
- Offer the courses full-time instead of the current arrangement (flexible mode) (1)
- Timely dissemination of assessment results (1)
- Extra units for underperforming students (1)

Responses from students while on campus were as follows:

- Communication / follow up on assessments tasks by lecturers (8)
- An additional residential study week per semester (6)
- Timely consultations and feedback on marked assignments (4)
- Provide additional time to complete assignments (2)
- Prerequisites taught at the start, e.g. Moodle, intranet, APA referencing (1)
- Multiple short essays of 1000 words instead of one long essay (1)
- Securing sponsorship for school fees (1)
- Availability of and access to resources (1)
- Short lecture on time management (1)
- Lecturers to coordinate due dates on different units to relieve pressure from students (1)
- Supply sufficient materials for students to download materials from (1)
- Increase residential assessment to 70% and reduce non-residential to 30% (1)
- Encourage reward (bonus points) for students who submitted assignments on time (1)
- Do proper selection of students, based on merit (1)

The third question asked, “**If you are a student with work/assignments outstanding, please complete the following statement, “I would be willing/able to complete my studies if the following issue(s) would be solved. Name the issue(s)”**”

Respondents by email listed the following:

- Availability of resources particularly reference materials (1)
- Internet connectivity and access (1)
- Timely dissemination of assessment results (1)
- Allow an additional week for students to work on assignments on campus (1)
- ICT and online teams support (1)

Responses from students while on campus are as follows:

- More time allocated for assignments (6)
- Effective communication between staff and students (4)
- Availability of more resources (4)
- Timely feedback on assignments submitted (3)
- A week of consultation after formal lectures (2)
- Reminders of due dates by lecturers (2)
- Good knowledge on Moodle (1)
- Improved health condition of students (1)
- All to complete outstanding assignments before continuing onto the next semester (1)
- Announce units of study before students come on campus (1)
- Flexibility in paying school fee (1)
- Issues with student laptop (1)
- Provide counselling (1)

Discussion

We have divided the discussion into two areas. The first is to discuss program delivery issues. This is related to the way the programs are provided and managed, and also DWU staff performance. The second is to discuss students' issues, which include personal issues and their learning management.

A. Program delivery issues

Relatively few responses highlighted organisational issues in program delivery. One example is the following:

“There needs to be better communication between lecturers as sometimes two lecturers put the same due date for their different courses”.

Some raised the technical issue of internet connectivity, not only when they are home, but also while on campus at the University – both in the seminar rooms and at the dorms where they stay. This makes it difficult for them to access Moodle and other websites for information download.

Internet connectivity is also a problem for some once they return home. A student wrote, *“The school where I am teaching does not have internet access. This situation made my research and submission of assessments troublesome”.*

Practical Issues such as issues of style (APA) and use of the Moodle learning platform were also mentioned in several responses. This is a reminder to staff

to look into such practical concerns if these are indeed obstacles to completing courses of study offered through flexible learning.

Several respondents suggested extending the residential time by a week so that they would have more time using University facilities to complete assignments. Students commented:

“We need to remain on campus a week after lectures to work on assignments while the subject is still fresh.”

“I need to remain on campus to collect research information for assignments before I leave.”

“Increase residential from two weeks to four weeks so as to have time to do assignments.”

Having an additional residential week is raised in eleven responses. To have an additional week would increase costs, but it seems to be a preferred option for many students and is something for the University to consider as an option.

The main program delivery issue identified is lack of communication between staff and students. Responses from the students include the following:

“In research we need the staff to enlighten us.”

“We need more time for lecturer and student interaction”.

“We would benefit from effective communication from the lecturers with students as well as email from the school with information on resources and reminders about submitting assignments.”

Improved communication between staff and students was raised in six email responses and eight students from the on-campus group. It is supported by other responses such as the request for timely feedback on assignments.

“I would like to have my marked assignments so I can learn from my mistakes and complete and submit any incomplete assignments”.

“It would be good to have a friendly reminder on due dates on assignments and quick responses on marked assignments.”

This communication issue is obviously a felt need that Flexible Learning staff should pursue further. When students return home after two weeks of residential study and, if not followed up with regular communication, they easily become demotivated to work on their assignments and delay them in on time for marking.

B. Student issues

The main issue and the biggest challenge students face in trying to complete their assessment tasks is dealing with work commitments. Balancing work and study is something some students do not handle well. As a result, assignments are submitted late or not submitted at all and this delays their study completion and/or graduation.

One student wrote from experience, “If a student is promoted into a new role (senior role) or was internally transferred into a different department and there are some external or internal trainings happening at the work site for this person then these work commitments will cause a problem for the Flexible Learning student.” Other respondents said that due dates for assignments can come at the busiest time of the year in their jobs. It is difficult to know how staff at the University can respond to this issue other than perhaps providing input on time management.

Limitations of the research

There were a limited number of responses yet we consider them sufficient for us to derive useful and valid observations.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to find out the perceived reasons and /or factors contributing to delayed submission of students’ assignments and failure to complete their courses. Program delivery issues and student issues have been discussed. The most significant program management issue raised is effective communication between lecturers and students. Timely marking and return of assignments emerges as a significant perceived concern. Staff have noted this point and are working on ways to structure courses to have more communication and feedback with students after the residential period. Moreover, the suggestion by several students for an extended live-in period merits consideration by Flexible Learning staff. Returning after their residential session, students have to contend with work commitments. It might be worth considering ways to help them, through input on time management, or for the University to try to schedule assignments outside of peak work times. Further discussion and follow up will provide opportunities for creative ways of dealing with issues raised, thus bringing an improvement in the problem of delayed submission of students’ assignments and a rise in program completion rates.

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[See appendices 1 and 2 are on the two following pages]

Authors

Philip Gibbs at the time of researching this issue was Head of the Department of Governance and Leadership at Divine Word University. He is now Acting Vice-President Research and Higher Degrees at the University.

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Appendix 1: Courses offered through the flexible learning mode, DWU

Faculties	Department	Undergraduate Courses	Post graduate courses
Education	Curriculum and Leadership	-Bachelor of Education (Primary, In-service) -Diploma in Education Management Training -Diploma in School Management and Leadership	-Master of Educational Leadership -Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning (PGCHETL)
Business and Informatics	Finance and Management	-Bachelor of Management -Diploma in Business Studies -Diploma in Human Resource Management -Diploma in Management	-Master of Business Administration (MBA) offered in POM campus -Master of Business Administration in Leadership (MMLBA)
Medicine and Health Sciences	Health Management	-Diploma in Health Services Management	
	Public Health Leadership and Training	-Advanced Diploma in Emergency Medicine	
	Eye Care	-Advanced Diploma in Eye Care	
	Rural Health	-Bridging program (HEOs with Diploma to upgrade to Bachelor Degree)	
Arts and Social Sciences	Governance and Leadership	-Diploma in Project Management -Bachelor of Public Administration -Diploma in Justice Administration -Diploma in Custom Studies -Diploma in Pastoral Care	-Master of Leadership in Development -Master of Public Administration

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for this study

Course completion rates

Description

We, in the Department of Governance and Leadership at Divine Word University, are concerned about the completion rate for our courses and we are conducting a short survey to help us find ways to improve the situation. Since you are a former or current student with flexible learning at the University, we would be grateful if you could complete and return the short survey below before the end of March, 2016. We intend collating the results and presenting them along with recommendations to the Faculty at the University. We will not be recording names or addresses, so the information given in response to the three questions below will be treated as anonymous.

Background statement

Teaching staff find that many students enrolled in FL courses at DWU submit assignments late and some fail to complete the course. Why is this and what can be done to improve the situation?

1. In your experience, what do you think is the **main** reason why students are not submitting assignments on time? Please tick one box and feel free to comment.
2. Work Commitments Family Commitments
Motivation Issues Lack of resources (e.g. text books)
Connectivity Issues (internet) School fee problems
Assessment requirements too demanding

Other (specify)

Comment

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2. What do you think could help students complete the course on time so they can graduate?

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3. If you are a student with work/assignments outstanding, please complete the following statement, "I would be willing/able to complete my studies if the following issue(s) would be solved. *Name the issue(s)*

.....
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Thank you. Please return the completed questionnaire to Ms Elly Kale ekale@dwu.ac.pg Lecturer, Governance & Leadership