

The background of the cover is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows the dunes in a light, hazy atmosphere, while the bottom half is a darker, more detailed view of the sand's texture. A starfish is visible in the bottom right corner, partially buried in the sand.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

Re-assessment Strategy

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SUMMARY

In the 2002/03 academic year the Biosciences Division of the School of Applied Sciences in the University of Wolverhampton re-organised its teaching; reducing both the number of student contact hours and the number of taught weeks within the semester to allow for both assessment and, if necessary, re-assessment within each module. Formal examinations were only permitted at the end of semesters 2, 4 and 6. Assessments in semesters 1, 3 and 5 were in an alternative format appropriate for the evaluation of the learning outcomes involved.

The reorganisation of the assessment and the supporting teaching, together with other changes in practice, have resulted in improved student performance and retention. Additionally both the assessment policy and the associated teaching have received favourable comments from both staff and students.

Keywords: retention, assessment, re-assessment

INTRODUCTION

Historically many students have entered university with little appreciation of what university life and work will be like and today, in addition to this, more and more students are entering higher education with a range of different educational and social backgrounds. Inevitably some of these students will need more time to adjust and fully engage themselves in the independent learning environment of university. Until this happens they are at a higher risk of not completing their course of study.

Non-completion of university is a complex issue; often there are multiple contributing factors, but certainly if a student performs poorly in their first year they are more likely to withdraw feeling academically inadequate. Studies have confirmed that the majority of those who withdraw from or fail higher education courses do so in the first year (Benn 1995). Recent HESA (2005) statistics confirm this observation with 7.3% of the total first year UK student population in 2001/2 not continuing in any form of Higher Education compared to the expected total of 14.1% of 2001/2 entrants who will neither gain an award nor transfer to other forms of Higher Education. A policy of replacing formal exams at the end of semester 1 with informal exams or alternative means of assessment, and giving the students a second attempt within a short period of time to pass them if they fail, could therefore significantly help those students who take longer to adjust to the working environment of university.

The University of Wolverhampton's mission is "to be a first class regional university dedicated to providing high quality provision so that individuals can realise their full potential and pursue a challenging and dynamic career." Helping students make the transition from secondary level to tertiary level education and ultimately progressing through to course completion is therefore key to the university's mission statement. As such the university has changed both its assessment strategy and retention policy for year 1 students.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are 2.2 and 3.3.

- 2.2** Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students.
- 3.3** Students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their course or course component.

Cook, *et al.* 2005

THE PRACTICE

In the 2002/03 academic year, the re-assessment strategy for the BioSciences Division of the School of Applied Sciences was introduced both in response to a policy change on student assessment at University level, and a drive towards promoting retention. Course timetables were reworked and the number of contact hours with the students reduced by an average of around 10%. The number of taught weeks was also reduced so that there would be time for assessment and then, if necessary, re-assessment within each module. Formal examinations were not scheduled in semesters 1, 3 and 5, and were only conducted at the end of semesters 2, 4 and 6. The assessment and re-assessment strategy for each module was explained to the students in each module guide.

Reassessment strategy timetable

Semester 1	Week 13	Informal tests Feedback on tests Revision workshops
	Week 15	Re assessment
Semester 2	Week 2	Feedback on Sem 1
	Week 13	Formal exams Feedback on exams Remedial tutorials/ Recovery packs
	June/ July	Re-assessment

Semester 1

The most significant component of the strategy was the widespread introduction of Class tests in semester 1 taking place no later than week 13, the penultimate week of teaching, after 1 induction week and 11 weeks of lectures. These replaced the formal end-of-semester examinations in week 15. A student who failed this Class test could be re-assessed either in week 15 or in the inter-semester reading week. The re-assessment was treated as a formal resit for which the maximum mark was a pass. The nature of these re-sits varied from equivalent papers through to seen tests or conventional coursework assignments.

With the revised teaching schedule, module teaching teams were able to timetable feedback sessions on the end of module assessments and revision workshops before the re-assessment of students. These normally consisted of a group session followed by individual advice to address specific areas of academic study. This exercise supported the statement in the strategy that the re-assessment offers “a real opportunity for students to improve their performance”.

An internal subject board meeting was held at the end of semester 1 “to monitor student progress and inform personal year tutors and professional skills tutors about students who are at risk of generally under-performing”. Feedback to the students was provided as soon as possible, generally by the end of the second teaching week of semester 2.

Semester 2

Formal examinations were scheduled after 13 weeks of teaching in semester 2, starting at the end of May. However the re-assessment of these end-of-year examinations was moved from September to June/July. This meant that the re-sits were closer to the delivery of teaching and so the information was relatively ‘fresh’ in the minds of the students. It also provided some time for remedial tutorials. In order to maintain a commonality of approach with other assessment patterns within the University, formal re-assessment grades were again limited to a pass mark.

Failure in any of the terminal examinations for semester 2 modules was reported to the students after the subject board meeting and students were given another chance to pass these modules, either by formal re-examination or a “recovery pack”. Recovery packs can be issued along with notification of failure. The packs varied between modules but examples included problem solving exercises, coursework essays, on-line tests or short answer assignments, depending on the module criteria.

The main advantages of the new assessment strategy included scheduled examination feedback, remedial help and timeliness of re-assessment. The results of this strategy have been an overall improvement in module pass rates with a greater involvement of students in the learning process and students being able to identify their own learning needs. This has also had the knock-on benefit of feeding through to improved retention.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The main resource implications of the new assessment strategy were on staff time. Although formal contact time with the students was reduced, greater time was spent on providing remedial help. More time and effort was also needed for the design of re-assessments and revision workshops.

Staff and Student opinions

Staff believe that the changed assessment strategy has had an overall improvement on student retention and progression.

“it is difficult to single out this approach as we changed both our assessment strategy and retention policy for year one. We have had an overall improvement in our student retention and progression, but whether this is due to the assessment or the retention and progression project it is hard to tell.”

One student commented on the effect of passing exams has had on confidence.

“Well I didn’t get the grades I wanted, but doing these modules, I’m passing them, it’s giving me confidence and I’m thinking, I’m passing them so I think it’s beneficial.”

Others commented on how the university helped them prepare in advance for their assessments by

“... giving us specific self directed study time around test times, and we were also always advised to read through the practical methods prior to the practical sessions.”

The advanced warning of examinations given to students at the beginning of term also received favourable comments. One student also commented on how they appreciated the chance to be re-assessed in their tutorial module.

“...I find tutorials brilliant as my progress is constantly assessed and I am given the chance to rectify my mistakes”

The implementation of the reassessment strategy has had many positive consequences. These include the following advantages for the student:

- formally timetabled feedback sessions on terminal examinations;
- timely reassessment whilst learned materials are still fresh in the student’s mind;
- opportunities within the academic calendar to provide tutorial support concentrating on areas of weakness identified in the first attempt and before re-assessment.

and the following advantages for the staff :

- improved retention;

- the ability to offer tailored help to students;
- freeing the August / September period entirely from marking and the subsequent administration of referred candidates. In contrast to having this free time at the end of the academic year (June/ July) at the end of an arduous period of teaching, staff are at their freshest after the summer vacation and this provides quality-time at the start of the academic year.

The construction of the re-assessment strategy may result in students not taking the first attempt at assessments seriously and attempting to spread the assessments over a longer period of time. This concern was recognised early and the following points need bearing in mind:

- Since the re-assessment has simply been moved from the end of August to within the module timetable this change simply offers no more opportunities for re-taking assessments than other, more traditional, systems. Students are made aware of this when embarking on the module with the re-assessment times being integrated into the module timetable.
- The philosophy of most students has remained to attempt to pass the module at the first opportunity. The change to re-assessment within the module appears to have led to no increase in the numbers of students who have had to attempt reassessment.

CONCLUSION

As with many initiatives aimed at improving student performance, progression and retention, many practices are changed simultaneously. The attribution of effectiveness therefore remains a problem. Nevertheless, it is clear that the opportunity of remedial support followed by timely re-assessment can have the effect of boosting student confidence and performance.

CONTEXT

The University of Wolverhampton

Institutional context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12612 undergraduates • 5211 part-time undergraduates • 794 staff
Departmental context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 120 Bioscience undergraduate students • 40% male 60% female • 19 Academic staff • 3 demonstrators • 10-20% mature students via access course • $\frac{2}{3}$ of students live in the West Midlands and the majority live at home

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