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Impact of a grace period on student submission behaviour and academic performance

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ABSTRACT

Fixed assessment deadlines are widely used in higher education but may disadvantage students whose learning is disrupted by competing academic, work, or personal demands. This study examined whether introducing an automatic, penalty-free grace period influences assessment submission behaviour and academic performance in an online undergraduate course. One hundred and ninety-eight students enrolled in a fully online first-year Health Communication course were analysed across two major assessments. Submission timing was categorised as on-time, grace period, extension, or non-submission, and associations with assessment marks were examined. Submission behaviour showed strong continuity across assessments: students who submitted on time initially were most likely to do so again, while early non-submission was associated with continued non-submission or withdrawal. The grace period was widely used and appeared to provide functional flexibility, with a greater proportion of students submitting on time by the second assessment; however, a substantial minority continued to rely on the grace period. Importantly, assessment marks did not differ meaningfully across submission categories, indicating that penalty-free flexibility depended on when students submitted rather than on how well they performed. These findings suggest that automatic grace periods can support equity and engagement in online learning without compromising academic standards, provided expectations are clearly communicated, and early support is directed towards students who disengage from initial assessments.

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Introduction

Assessment deadlines are a core component of academic structure in higher education, intended to promote time management, accountability, and fairness (Kennette and Rivers 2024; Nickels and Uddin 2003). However, strict submission deadlines can contribute to heightened academic stress, reduced motivation, and compromised performance, particularly for students managing multiple academic and personal responsibilities (Kennette and Rivers 2024; Nickels and Uddin 2003).

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In response to these pressures, many institutions and academics have increasingly explored flexible submission policies, such as grace periods, late banks, and proactive extensions, that allow students to submit assessments within a specified time-frame beyond the original deadline without incurring penalties (Hajshirmohammadi 2023; Hills and Peacock 2022; Ruesch and Sarvary 2024; Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019).

Flexible deadline policies have been shown to promote self-regulated learning by allowing students to manage their time more effectively while reducing anxiety associated with rigid submission due dates (Hajshirmohammadi 2023). Providing students with structured extensions can facilitate deeper engagement with course content, enabling them to refine their work and produce higher-quality submissions (Santelli et al. 2020). However, some studies caution that excessive deadline leniency may encourage procrastination, as students may perceive extended deadlines as an opportunity to delay task initiation, leading to last-minute submissions and diminished academic performance (Naturil-Alfonso et al. 2018).

Previous research has been limited in its examination of the impact of flexible submission deadlines on academic performance. While some studies suggest that structured grace periods enhance student learning by allowing more time for reflection and revision, others indicate that they may not necessarily improve academic performance (Hott 2024). Dianati and Collings (2020) argue that while submission flexibility may benefit students with additional learning needs, it can also challenge academic staff to maintain assessment consistency and timely feedback. Additionally, grace extension periods bring an element of unpredictable submission timelines that can place additional strain on academic staff, complicating workload management and grading efficiency (Luckner, Purgathofer, and Fitzpatrick 2019).

Unlike standardised policies such as plagiarism guidelines or academic integrity frameworks, grace periods are not universally implemented across higher education institutions. Instead, their adoption is often driven by individual educators or departmental policies, reflecting perceived student needs, disciplinary norms, and pedagogical philosophy (Beer, Roy, and Ames 2023; Hills and Peacock 2022; Xavier and Meneses 2021). While some institutions advocate structured flexibility as part of student-centred learning approaches, others maintain strict adherence to deadlines to promote academic discipline and standardisation in assessment practices (El Galad, Betts, and Campbell 2024; Kennette and Rivers 2024). The absence of a universal policy on grace periods highlights an ongoing tension between flexibility, accountability, and consistency in higher education assessment design (Beer, Roy, and Ames 2023; Naturil-Alfonso et al. 2018).

Given these considerations, there is a need to better understand how grace periods influence student submission behaviours and academic outcomes. Although prior research has extensively explored flexible deadlines, primarily focusing on student perceptions, stress levels, and overall performance, few studies have examined the consequences of implementing an automatic, penalty-free grace period. This is especially pertinent to submission behaviour across multiple assessments (Boswell 2023; Ruesch and Sarvary 2024; Santelli et al. 2020). Existing evidence suggests that flexible deadlines may reduce stress and improve perceived fairness without adversely affecting grades; however, behavioural patterns such as repeated use of grace periods, transitions between

submission categories, and consistency across assessments remain underexplored (Hott 2024; Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019).

The present study contributes to this emerging body of work by examining submission behaviour and academic performance within a fully online first-year Health Communication course at a New Zealand university. The course enrolled both recent school leavers and adult learners, providing an appropriate context for exploring flexible deadline use within a diverse student cohort. This study is situated within the New Zealand higher education sector, where flexible deadline policies are not standardised across institutions or programmes, in contrast to some international contexts that have trialled structured models of deadline flexibility (Hills and Peacock 2022; Ruesch and Sarvary 2024). Such variation underscores the importance of examining how grace periods function within specific national and institutional settings.

Specifically, this study investigated whether students who used an automatic one-week grace period in the first assessment were more likely to submit on time, submit within the grace period, or request an extension in a subsequent assessment. It also examined whether submission timing was associated with differences in assessment marks. By analysing behavioural patterns across two major assessments, the study provides new empirical evidence to inform ongoing debates regarding the pedagogical value and practical implications of flexible deadline policies in higher education.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews literature on flexible deadlines and student submission behaviour, highlighting conceptual debates and empirical gaps. This is followed by the study's methodology, results, and discussion of theoretical and practical implications. It concludes with limitations and recommendations for future research.

Literature review

Flexible submission policies are increasingly recognised as an effective way to support student well-being, promote autonomy, and accommodate the diverse responsibilities contemporary learners manage. Common approaches include grace periods, late-bank systems, proactive extensions, and collaboratively negotiated deadlines. Across multiple studies, students consistently report that flexible deadlines reduce stress, increase perceived fairness, and enable more effective time management (Boswell 2023; El Galad, Betts, and Campbell 2024; Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019).

Student experiences with flexible deadlines

Students frequently highlight the importance of flexibility when balancing academic work with employment, personal commitments, extracurricular activities and other course deadlines. Flexible deadlines help students manage competing responsibilities without sacrificing the quality of their submissions (Hills and Peacock 2022; Nickels and Uddin 2003). Kim and Murphy (2024) reported that 86% of computer science undergraduates favoured grace tokens, soft deadlines, or request-based extensions over strict deadlines. Students value flexibility even when they choose not to use it, and requesting extensions under traditional policies can itself be a source of stress or uncertainty (Kim and Murphy 2024; Sherif et al. 2024).

Empirical studies reinforce these perceptions. Ruesch and Sarvary (2024) examined an extension without a penalty system that offered both an ideal due date and an automatic extension date. They showed that while 78% of students used the extension without a penalty at least once, half used it only once during the semester. Students reported reduced stress, better management of unexpected events such as illness, and improved ability to meet deadlines in other courses. Importantly, grades did not differ between users of the extension without a penalty and non-users, suggesting that flexible deadlines influence submission timing without compromising academic performance.

Similar findings have emerged across disciplines. Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren (2019) reported that graduate students using a five-day late bank reported reduced stress and improved assignment quality. Zannella and Sutherland (2025) similarly observed that flexible deadlines enhanced students' mental health and engagement. These benefits appear particularly important for students with unstable internet, limited study space, significant work commitments, or caregiving responsibilities (Nunes, Laliberté, and Rawle 2023).

Educator perspectives and implementation challenges

Educators generally recognise the benefits of flexibility for student well-being and equity (Beer, Roy, and Ames 2023; El Galad, Betts, and Campbell 2024). Both students and educators often favour collaborative deadline setting, as it promotes dialogue and builds shared responsibility (El Galad, Betts, and Campbell 2024). However, educators also report barriers to implementing flexible deadlines. Large class sizes make it difficult to manage staggered submissions or provide timely feedback (Xavier and Meneses 2021). Course-level moderation timelines and institutional grade submission requirements further constrain flexibility. Some educators express concern that excessive flexibility may disrupt learning progression, increase procrastination, or reduce assessment rigour (Naturil-Alfonso et al. 2018; Xavier and Meneses 2021).

While these concerns are understandable, the evidence on procrastination is mixed. Yılmaz (2017) reported that students in online learning environments procrastinated more on assignment submissions than those in traditional face-to-face settings, suggesting a potential risk associated with greater autonomy. However, more recent research challenges the assumption that flexibility inevitably leads to increased procrastination. Hills and Peacock (2022) found that although students appreciated flexible deadlines, they rarely used extensions for low-stakes tasks, indicating that flexibility does not necessarily undermine self-regulated learning. Campbell and Reid (2025) similarly reported that most students continued to submit on time even when offered generous grace-token systems, with many finishing the course with unused tokens. Collectively, these findings suggest that students tend to use flexibility strategically rather than habitually.

Submission behaviour and academic performance

Research examining submission timing shows that flexible policies influence when students submit assessments, but do not consistently affect performance. Penalty-free late submission systems and grace periods typically reduce the need for extensions

(Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019) and may alleviate the administrative burden on academic staff. While some studies suggest that flexible deadlines lead more students to submit closer to the extended due date, many students still aim for the original deadline (Campbell and Reid 2025). Evidence on academic outcomes remains mixed: several studies report no performance differences across submission categories (Hott 2024), whereas others suggest that early or on-time submissions may be associated with better outcomes, depending on the course structure (Luckner, Purgathofer, and Fitzpatrick 2019). Overall, the relationship between submission timing and performance appears context-dependent and remains underexplored. Despite the growing body of research, there is limited empirical research on automatic grace periods, as opposed to request-based or discretionary extensions. Additionally, it is unclear what the pattern of submission behaviour is across multiple assessments. Previous research indicates that submission behaviour likely reflects stable self-regulatory habits rather than impulsive responses to individual deadlines. Studies on flexible deadlines reveal that students who submit on time tend to show consistent planning across tasks, whereas those who rely on extensions or grace periods may display more varied submission patterns over time (Dianati and Collings 2020; Luckner, Purgathofer, and Fitzpatrick 2019). Therefore, it was hypothesised that students who submitted on time for the first assessment would be more likely to do so again for subsequent assessments than those who initially relied on extensions or grace periods.

Simultaneously, evidence suggests that students often use flexibility strategically, repeatedly using grace periods or late banks across multiple assessments when available (Ruesch and Sarvary 2024; Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019). Accordingly, it was hypothesised that students who utilised the automatic grace period for the first assessment would be more likely to use the same option for the second, demonstrating consistent study practices.

Lastly, though flexible submission policies affect when students turn in work, findings on their impact on academic performance are mixed. Some studies show no significant grade differences between on-time and late, penalty-free submissions (Hott 2024; Ruesch and Sarvary 2024), while others suggest slight benefits for earlier submissions, depending on course design (Luckner, Purgathofer, and Fitzpatrick 2019). Given these mixed results, the current study examined whether assessment scores varied across submission types (on-time, grace period, extension) without assuming a specific directional effect.

Method

Participants and course context

The research involved 198 undergraduate students enrolled in a fully online introductory Health Communication course at a New Zealand university. The cohort included both recent school leavers and adult learners returning to study, reflecting the diverse demographic profile common in New Zealand's distance-learning environment. The course examined fundamental principles and theoretical frameworks underpinning effective communication within the health sector and served as a compulsory component of several degree pathways. The two main assessments (Assessment 1 and Assessment 2), each contributing 40% to the final course grade, evaluated the submission categories,

including on-time submission, automatic grace period, and extension. The raw percentage marks from Assessments 1 and 2 were used for the analysis.

The on-time submission was defined as the initial submission date, with an automatic grace period of 7 days after the original submission date, without penalty. The course coordinator provided an extension of 7 to 10 days after the automatic grace period, accommodating instances of illness, injury, bereavement, or other serious personal situations that hinder a student's ability to submit the assessment on time. Non-submission was a student failing to submit their assessment, while withdrawal was the official process of de-enrolling from the course. The institution's academic semester duration was 17 weeks, including 12 weeks of teaching, which had a two-week mid-semester study period and concluded with three weeks dedicated to study and examinations. The submission due dates for Assessments 1 and 2 occurred in week 7 (during mid-semester study period) and week 14 of the semester, respectively.

Communication and implementation of the grace period

All students were informed of the initial due date, the automatic one-week grace period, and the process for requesting formal extensions through the course guide and learning management system announcements from the course coordinator. The grace period was explicitly designed to address unforeseen challenges, while the original deadline remained the preferred submission deadline to maintain pacing and alignment with course content. Students were not required to provide justification or documentation to use the grace period, ensuring consistent and equitable access for the entire cohort.

Statistical analyses

To examine whether submission category changed between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2, a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted to determine whether there was a significant association between submission behaviours in Assessment 1 and Assessment 2, specifically whether students who submitted on time, used a grace period, or requested an extension in Assessment 1 followed a similar submission behaviour in Assessment 2.

The Pearson Chi-Square statistic (χ^2), degrees of freedom (df), and p -value were reported to determine whether submission behaviours significantly changed between assessments. If a significant relationship was found ($p < 0.05$), standardised residuals were examined to identify which submission categories contributed to the observed association.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each assessment (Assessment 1 and Assessment 2) to examine whether submission category influenced assessment marks. The independent variable was the submission category: on-time, grace period, or extension. The dependent variables were Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 marks (continuous variable representing a percentage). Prior to conducting the ANOVA, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, and Levene's test was non-significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that normality and homogeneity of variance were met.

To assess the extent to which submission category predicted assessment marks, separate linear regression analyses were conducted for Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 marks. The submission category was treated as a categorical predictor, and the dummy coded using on-time submission was used as the reference category. The models estimated the effect of grace period and extension submissions relative to on-time submissions.

Regression assumptions were evaluated using residual plots, normal probability plots to check for normality, linearity, and multicollinearity. Standardised beta coefficients (β), t -values, and p -values were reported for each predictor to determine the strength and significance of associations.

To examine whether marks changed between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 and determine whether submission category influenced this change, a 2×3 repeated-measures ANOVA was performed. The within-subjects factor was Assessment (Assessment 1 vs Assessment 2), and the between-subjects factors were Assessment 1 Submission Category and Assessment 2 Submission Category.

Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was conducted to check for violations of the sphericity assumption, with Greenhouse-Geisser corrections applied where necessary. Tests of within-subjects effects assessed whether marks significantly changed over time, while tests of interaction effects evaluated whether submission category influenced mark changes. Tests of between-subjects effects determined if overall mark differences were attributable to the submission category. A Pearson correlation was performed to determine the relationship between students' Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 marks. All statistical analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Statistics version 29, IBM New York, U.S.A.). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation [SD], and 95% confidence intervals [CI]). The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Table 1 summarises the independent and dependent variables examined in the study, together with their operational definitions and data sources.

No demographic or prior academic control variables were included in the analyses. The study was designed to examine behavioural patterns associated with submission timing within a single course, in which all students were exposed to identical assessment tasks, deadlines, marking criteria, and instructional context. Including controls such as age, enrolment status, or prior academic achievement

Table 1. Study variables and measures.

Variable type	Variable	Operational definition	Measure/data source
Independent variable	Submission category	Timing of assessment submission relative to the original deadline	Categorical variable: on-time, grace period (≤ 7 days late), extension (7–10 days late), non-submission
Dependent variable	Academic performance	Assessment outcome	Raw percentage mark for Assessment 1 and Assessment 2
Repeated measure	Assessment occasion	Change in performance across time	Assessment 1 vs Assessment 2 marks
Behavioural outcome	Submission behaviour across assessments	Consistency or change in submission category across assessments	Cross-tabulation of submission categories (Assessment 1 \times Assessment 2)
Control variables	None	Not included (see rationale below)	—

was not possible due to limitations in available administrative data and was not central to the study's research questions, which focused on within-course submission behaviour rather than individual differences. This approach is consistent with prior research examining assessment submission patterns where the primary interest is behavioural response to policy design rather than causal attribution of academic performance (e.g. Ruesch and Sarvary 2024; Schroeder, Makarenko, and Warren 2019).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Of the 198 students enrolled in the course, 17 students did not submit in Assessment 1, resulting in a submission rate of 91%. Over half the students (54.7%) used the one-week automatic grace period, while 35.4% submitted on time, and 9.9% requested a 7–10-day extension. For Assessment 2, 26 students did not submit their assessment, and 6 withdrew from the course, resulting in a submission rate of 84%. Under half of the students (48.8%) submitted on time; 39.1% used the one-week automatic grace period; and 12.1% requested a 7–10-day extension. The descriptive statistics for Assessment 1 and 2 submission categories and marks are presented in Table 2.

In addition to group-level descriptive statistics, associations between continuous outcome variables were examined. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a small but statistically significant positive association between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 marks ($r = 0.25$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting modest consistency in academic performance across assessments. Consistent with the ANOVA and regression analyses, this association was independent of submission category, reinforcing that submission timing was not meaningfully related to assessment performance and that other factors accounted for the majority of variance in marks. Correlation analyses were not conducted for submission category variables, as they were nominal and appropriately examined using chi-square tests and categorical comparisons.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for Assessment 1 and 2 submission categories and marks.

	Submission Category	n	Mark			
			Mean Mark (%)	SD	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)
Assessment 1	On-Time	64	73.3	15.0	69.5	77.0
	Grace	99	67.2	20.4	63.2	71.3
	Extension	18	70.7	21.4	60.1	81.4
	Total	181	69.7	18.9	67.0	72.5
Assessment 2	On-Time	81	74.7	14.2	71.5	77.8
	Grace	65	72.7	17.2	68.4	76.9
	Extension	20	68.0	18.7	60.1	77.7
	Total	166	73.2	16.0	70.7	75.7

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 submission category.

Assessment 1 Submission Category	Assessment 2 Submission Category					Total
	On-Time	Grace	Extension	Non-Submission	Withdrew	
On-Time	42 (65.6%)	16 (25.0%)	4 (6.3%)	2 (3.1%)	0 (0.0%)	64
Grace	33 (33.3%)	40 (40.4%)	13 (13.1%)	11 (11.1%)	2 (2.0%)	99
Extension	6 (33.3%)	6 (33.3%)	2 (11.1%)	4 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	18
Non-Submission	0 (0.0%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)	9 (52.9%)	4 (23.5%)	17
Total	81 (40.9%)	65 (32.8%)	20 (10.1%)	26 (13.1%)	6 (3.0%)	198

Testing the Hypotheses

Students who submit on time in Assessment 1 will be more likely to submit on time in Assessment 2 than grace-period or extension users

A cross-tabulation analysis examined the relationship between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 submission categories. The results are presented in Table 3. The Chi-Square test was statistically significant ($\chi^2(12) = 77.661, p < 0.001$), indicating a strong association between the submission category in Assessment 1 and Assessment 2. A significant linear-by-linear association was also observed ($\chi^2(1) = 51.594, p < 0.001$).

A Chi-Square test of independence was conducted to assess whether the submission category in Assessment 1 was associated with the submission category in Assessment 2. The results were statistically significant ($\chi^2(12) = 77.661, p < 0.001$), indicating that submission behaviours changed between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2. A significant linear-by-linear association was also observed ($\chi^2(1) = 51.594, p < 0.001$), suggesting a systematic trend in student submission behaviours.

Submission behaviours showed a level of consistency, with students who submitted on time in Assessment 1 most likely to do so again in Assessment 2 (65.6%) (Table 3). Grace period users showed mixed outcomes: 40.4% used the grace period again, and 33.3% improved to on-time submission (Table 3). In contrast, submission behaviours among extension users were more unstable, with 22.2% failing to submit in Assessment 2. The highest risk group was students who did not submit in Assessment 1; over half (52.9%) remained non-submitters in Assessment 2, and 23.5% withdrew from the course.

Students who use the grace period in Assessment 1 will be more likely to use it again in Assessment 2

Students who used the grace period for Assessment 1, 40.4% continued to use it in Assessment 2, the most common transition pattern for this group. This was higher than the probability of shifting to on-time submission (33.3%) or requesting an extension (13.1%).

The submission category (on-time, grace, extension) will be associated with differences in assessment marks

To assess differences in Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 marks across submission categories, the one-way ANOVA found no significant differences in marks based on

submission category for both assessments (Assessment 1: $F(2, 178) = 2.050, p = 0.132$; Assessment 2: $F(2, 163) = 1.106, p = 0.333$).

To examine the relationship between submission category and marks, the results indicated that the submission category was not a significant predictor of marks in Assessment 1: $\beta = -0.099, t = -1.330, p = 0.185$ and Assessment 2: $\beta = -0.113, t = -1.459, p = 0.147$. The regression models explained only 9.9% (Assessment 1) and 11.9% (Assessment 2) of the variance in marks, suggesting that other factors likely play a larger role.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to assess whether marks changed between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2 and whether the submission category influenced this change. There was no significant ($F(1, 153) = 0.012, p = 0.914$) main effect of assessment (Assessment 1 vs. Assessment 2), indicating no overall improvement in marks from Assessment 1 to Assessment 2. There was a marginal ($F(2, 153) = 2.717, p = 0.069$) interaction effect (Assessment \times Assessment 1 Submission), but it was not significant. There was no significant ($F(2, 153) = 0.109, p = 0.897$) interaction effect (Assessment \times Assessment 2 Submission), indicating that the Assessment 2 submission category did not influence mark changes.

Discussion

Theoretical contribution

This study provides new empirical evidence on how an automatic seven-day grace period influences submission behaviour and academic performance in higher education. While previous research has examined request-based extensions or flexible deadline tokens, little work has explored the behavioural patterns that emerge when all students receive a built-in, penalty-free grace period.

The current findings show that the submission category did not significantly influence students' marks in Assessments 1 and 2, suggesting that submission behaviour did not significantly affect academic performance. Thus, introducing an automatic one-week grace period did not affect students' marks either positively or negatively. Additionally, the results indicate the submission category was not a significant predictor of assessment marks.

Previous research has reported that grace periods and flexible submission dates can reduce student stress, improve time management skills, and enhance learning outcomes (Hajshirmohammadi 2023; Kennette and Rivers 2024). Approaches such as automatic extensions, late submissions without penalties, and bonus points for on-time submissions have been explored, with students generally preferring flexible deadlines and reporting more positive perceptions of academic staff who implement them (Kennette and Rivers 2024). In a recent study, 45% of students indicated that assessment submission dates should be flexible, not only for emergencies (Ruesch and Sarvary 2024). Implementing a grace period for assessment submissions can improve student performance by alleviating stress associated with strict deadlines and late penalties. For example, Thomas (2017) found that introducing a five-day penalty period reduced the number of late submissions and enhanced assessment quality, as students prioritised content over strict adherence to submission deadlines. Similarly,

Wyre (2019) observed that allowing late submissions with minimal consequences led to greater student satisfaction and indicated that flexibility enabled students to improve their work without the burden of significant academic penalties. Thus, a grace period for submissions, rather than rigid late penalties, may encourage students to produce higher-quality work free of the anxiety of academic repercussions. In support of this, the current study's findings indicate that an automatic grace period did not adversely affect academic performance. Recent research reinforces the idea that flexible submission dates are beneficial; for instance, 94% of surveyed students reported feeling less stressed with penalty-free extensions. Furthermore, 82% acknowledged that extensions assisted them in managing other coursework, while 73% claimed it helped them address emergencies. The survey also demonstrated that there was no impact on students' marks (Ruesch and Sarvary 2024).

Students who submitted on-time in Assessment 1 were 3.8 times more likely to submit on-time in Assessment 2 than those who used the grace period in Assessment 1. This suggests that on-time submitters tend to maintain consistent submission behaviour across assessments

The results also showed that grace period students in Assessment 1 were 40.4% more likely to continue using the grace period in Assessment 2, with a notable proportion (33.3%) transitioning to on-time submission, indicating that the grace period provided greater flexibility. This is consistent with previous research indicating that grace periods help alleviate stress, enhance time management, and support better task prioritisation (Hajshirmohammadi 2023). On the contrary, many students will often utilise the maximum time available before submitting assessments, regardless of the flexibility provided. This suggests they adjust their schedules to meet perceived deadlines rather than exploit flexibility to meet their individual needs (Conner 2024). Research has also shown that when deadlines are lenient and there are no penalties, students are likely to treat them as a backup, leading to procrastination and increased late submissions (Korpusik, Freitas, and Dionisio 2022). Similarly, Walsh (2019) reported that allowing excessive flexibility in submission deadlines, such as permitting work to be submitted a week or more after the due date, increased procrastination, leading to fewer assessments being submitted than when a strict deadline was enforced. In contrast, Ruesch and Sarvary (2024) provided a different viewpoint by implementing a submission system that encouraged students to submit their work either by the ideal due date or by the extended due date without penalty. They found that this approach did not lead to increased procrastination among students and allowed them to manage their time more effectively.

An automatic grace period for assessments can create uncertainty about whether students will submit work on time or late. This can make it difficult for academic staff to manage their workloads and may lead to variations in grading. Staff are typically allocated a specific timeframe; for example, the current institutional policy allows three weeks to assess and return submissions, ensuring that feedback is made by the due date. This schedule facilitates timely mark verification and moderation in line with institutional policy. However, when a significant proportion of students opt for the automatic grace period, it delays grading, leading to uneven workloads across marking periods. This unpredictability can result in compressed grading timelines, potentially increasing cognitive load and stress for academic staff, particularly during peak assessment periods (Luckner, Purgathofer, and Fitzpatrick 2019). Despite the influx of late submissions during

the grace period, additional grading time is often not allocated, intensifying the time constraints on academic staff.

Additionally, workload equity among academic staff is a concern, particularly in courses with multiple markers. If one staff member receives a large number of grace period submissions while another primarily marks on-time submissions, discrepancies in grading may arise, potentially leading to inconsistencies in assessment rigour and feedback detail. In contrast, an extension without penalty can be advantageous in large courses, as it reduces the number of emails requesting an extension, allowing academic staff to focus primarily on teaching rather than being distracted by extension requests (Ruesch and Sarvary 2024). In the present study, there was no difference in the percentage of students requesting an extension between Assessment 1 (10%) and Assessment 2 (12%); however, if there were no automatic grace period, this would have been notably higher, resulting in increased email traffic requesting extensions.

Some students and academic staff may perceive on-time due dates as early submissions and view the one-week automatic grace period as the definitive deadline. This perspective is an important consideration when evaluating the implementation of assessment grace periods for students and staff. Having two submission dates undermines the principle of imposing a deadline, which, in real-world situations, typically conveys finality. There are various real-world deadlines, including tax filings, local council rates and taxes, job applications, loans and legal applications, and medical prescription repeats. In education, while flexibility can support student well-being, it is important to balance this with the need to prepare students for real-world expectations. However, as Kennette and Rivers (2024) argue, providing more flexible deadlines can better support students' future careers by allowing them to develop transferable skills such as time management and metacognition. Thus, having a clearly defined submission policy that encourages timely completion of work and allows extensions without penalties promotes flexibility when students encounter difficulties while maintaining a balanced structure and equity (Ruesch and Sarvary 2024).

Implications for practice

The findings have several practical implications for academic staff and institutions considering flexible deadline policies. Given that academic performance did not differ across submission categories, educators can implement grace periods with confidence that academic standards are not compromised, thereby supporting student well-being without reducing rigour. The strong continuity of non-submission across assessments highlights the importance of early identification and support for at-risk students, as timely intervention may help reduce disengagement and withdrawal. Automatic grace periods can reduce the administrative burden of managing individual extension requests, a task often cited as time-consuming by teaching staff. The policy also promotes equity for students balancing employment, personal commitments or constrained study environments, offering flexibility that accommodates diverse circumstances. Finally, grace periods preserve the original deadline's structure while allowing autonomy, as most students continued to submit on time even with additional days available. Collectively, these implications underscore the value of integrating structured flexibility into assessment design, particularly within large or diverse cohorts.

Limitations and future research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. It focused on a single course within a single institution, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Replicating this research across various disciplines, course levels, and delivery modes would enhance confidence in the results. While submission behaviour and marks were evaluated, the study did not explore students' experiences, such as stress and time management strategies, that could provide deeper insights into why students choose grace periods. Qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide a richer understanding of how students interpret flexible deadlines, the strategies they use when deciding whether to submit early or use additional time, and the psychological factors that influence these choices. This represents a valuable opportunity for future work. Additionally, further research should investigate whether grace periods operate differently in high-stakes versus low-stakes assessments and how student characteristics (e.g. age, work hours, first-generation status) interact with submission timing. Understanding how various populations utilise and benefit from grace periods will help institutions design assessment policies that optimise learning outcomes, equity, and academic standards.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicated that the submission category changed significantly between Assessment 1 and Assessment 2, indicating unstable submission behaviour. Despite varied submission behaviours, students' academic performance, examined by assessment marks, did not differ significantly. This suggests that while submission behaviour is fluid across assessments, it does not strongly predict student performance in terms of assessment marks.

Implementing a grace period requires a well-defined framework, open communication, and strategic alignment with course objectives. Students must be clearly informed about the original deadline and the grace period duration to encourage accountability and effective time management. When thoughtfully implemented, grace periods serve as a pedagogical tool to enhance self-regulated learning while preserving academic integrity. Their timing and administration must be carefully managed to avoid marking delays, ensure fairness in assessment timelines, and maintain institutional standards.

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