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CAN TEACHERS CATER FOR STUDENTS' DIVERSE NEEDS WITHOUT INCREASING THEIR OWN WORKLOADS? A TRIAL OF AUTOMATIC NO-PENALTY EXTENSIONS

ALICE NEIKIRK* AND TIM CONNOR[◇]

Universities increasingly strive to support diverse student populations, yet current accommodation systems often rely on reactive, disclosure-based processes that can add to academic workload and reinforce deficit-framing of students with atypical learning needs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a proactive alternative, but full course redesign can be resource intensive. This study replicates Ruesch and Sarvary's recent trial of 'ideal deadlines' with automatic no penalty extensions to examine whether this partial UDL intervention can benefit a more diverse student cohort. Mixed methods surveys, submission data, and extension request records were analysed across two years and two compulsory courses in criminology and law. Students in both courses strongly preferred structured deadlines with integrated flexibility and reported reduced stress, improved time management, and enhanced experiences in other subjects. Individual requests for formal extensions also decreased by approximately 60%, substantially reducing the administrative and pastoral workload for academic staff. Student performance remained stable across control and trial years. Qualitative feedback highlighted benefits for students managing disability, caring responsibilities, or complex life circumstances, though some reported increased procrastination. Findings indicate that modest, targeted applications of UDL—such as flexible due dates—can foster more inclusive learning environments without adding to academic workload.

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I INTRODUCTION

Universities have made considerable strides towards broadening participation. This has resulted in students from more diverse backgrounds and a wider range of abilities entering university. Cultural shifts around mental health and neurodiversity also means that students who previously may not have been able to succeed at university are now considered when designing classroom learning. While this diversity of learners enriches the university experience for everyone, to effectively support this range of students requires strategic analysis and careful planning. Currently, much of the support is ad-hoc, reactive and requires students to disclose personal information to access accommodations. This means that academics are frequently called upon to make judgements based on limited information, are at times themselves exposed to distressing information, and may spend a considerable amount of time evaluating these requests. This reactive approach, when coupled with increased teaching workloads, can feel overwhelming for academic staff and may inadvertently reinforce the ‘deficiency model’: the idea that groups who need additional supports are less capable, less motivated, or less hardworking than other students.¹ This runs counter to the motivations of many academics, who believe a more equitable world can be achieved through access to education.

Perhaps partially in response to these experiences, academics have started to consider alternative approaches to supporting students. In particular, the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has become popular. Universal design principles are premised on the assumption that, rather than teachers reactively accommodating an individual’s specific needs, teaching can be designed so everyone is accommodated and no-one has to self-disclose to access features which support their learning.² Universal design means designing for everyone and hence involves building in more flexibility than is common in the traditional ‘one size fits most’ approach. However, given the constraints of time that academics face, the complete redesign of courses may not be feasible. Further, the existing evidence base may not be quite robust enough to merit widespread adoption.

Nonetheless, it may be that there are particular areas where aspects of universal design may be readily implemented with a minimal time burden. In a recent study, Ruesch and Sarvary found that providing students with ‘ideal’ assignment deadlines, coupled with an integrated no-penalty extension, reflected universal design principles.³ The goal of having a defined due date, with built in flexibility, was to reduce bias

¹ Penny Jane Burke, ‘Access to and Widening Participation in Higher Education’ in Pedro Nuno Teixeira and Jung Cheol Shin (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (Springer, 2020) 58.

² Ruth Colker, ‘Toward Universal Design in the Classroom’ (2021) 71(1) *Journal of Legal Education* 57.

³ Joseph M Ruesch and Mark A Sarvary, ‘Structure and Flexibility: Systemic and Explicit Assignment Extensions Foster an Inclusive Learning Environment’ (2024) 9 *Frontiers in Education* 1.

in the granting of extensions, help empower students to balance their time when facing multiple deadlines, and reduce the administrative burden of courses for educators. Ruesch and Sarvary's study, which examined the impact of a specific universal design feature in relation to due dates, seemed to achieve those goals. While these results are promising, that study took place at an elite university in the United States. This study sought to replicate the original study to determine its applicability in Australia, with a cohort of students from different backgrounds than their counterparts in the United States. Replicating research regarding universal design principles helps to determine not only if these approaches are sound, but if the principle itself is robust.

II UNIVERSAL DESIGN

There are a multitude of definitions of universal design or universal design learning (UDL). For this article, the concept is premised on the need to embed an 'awareness of human diversity to inform the use of design strategies that result in inclusive environments'.⁴ The hope is that by pro-actively taking steps to support all students, it has potential to positively impact on their academic journey.⁵ In this regard, it is both a theory and a methodology – the design principles inform interventions in the classroom to create an inclusive learning environment.⁶ Inclusive learning environments are those that make it as easy as possible for students with a diverse range of learning needs to access and comprehend course content, stay engaged in class, and demonstrate what they have learned.⁷

Much of the existing research focuses on making course materials accessible in a variety of formats – text base, video, podcasts – and improving assistive technology.⁸ This reflects the 'general understanding of UDL in a tertiary setting; UDL is a flexible educational framework that aims at making the educational material

⁴ Emily Tarconish et al, 'Universal Design for Instruction & Learning in Higher Education: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Headed?' (2023) 36(3) *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 207, 208.

⁵ Sherrilyn Coffman and Christine Draper, 'Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education: A Concept Analysis' (2022) 17(1) *Teaching and Learning in Nursing* 36.

⁶ Ling Zhang et al, 'Unraveling Challenges with the Implementation of Universal Design for Learning: A Systematic Literature Review' (2024) 36(1) *Educational Psychology Review* 35.

⁷ Noor Jwad et al, 'Universal Design for Learning in Tertiary Education: A Scoping Review and Recommendations for Implementation in Australia', *Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training* (Report, January 2022) <<https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10814/universal-design-for-learning-in-tertiary-education-a-scoping-review-an-recommendations-for-implementation-in-australia>>.

⁸ Aibhin Bray et al, 'What next for Universal Design for Learning? A Systematic Literature Review of Technology in UDL Implementations at Second Level' (2023) 55(1) *British Journal of Educational Technology* 113; Chuck Hitchcock and Skip Stahl, 'Assistive Technology, Universal Design, Universal Design for Learning: Improved Learning Opportunities' (2003) 18(4) *Journal of Special Education Technology* 45.

accessible to the largest number of students'.⁹ With rapidly emerging technological innovations, such as AI-generated transcriptions of lectures and programs that can read academic articles aloud, materials are becoming more accessible for a wider range of students.¹⁰ These technological innovations may also mean that students who do not want to disclose their disability have a variety of options to support their unique needs (provided the university provides them with access to appropriate software).

In criminology and law programs, there are additional considerations due to unique student attributes coupled with professional goals. Students enrolled in criminology degrees enter the program with relatively high rates of previous victimization.¹¹ While not all victimization will lead to long-term negative impacts, this can mean that course 'content can invoke feelings of anxiety, act as triggers for past traumatic experiences, or even cause direct trauma due to the nature of the subject matter'.¹² An Australian study of students enrolled in professional courses such as law found 'distress rates to be much higher in the tertiary student population than in age matched population data'.¹³ Depression rates of law students are disproportionately high, and well-being seems to diminish within the first year of law school.¹⁴ The highly competitive nature of law school can mean that opportunities for peer-to-peer support, a key protective factor against depression, are diminished.¹⁵ Anxiety and depression are areas where students can get formal support through the university. However, this requires them to disclose to either disability services or the course coordinator.

There are students who are grappling with not only the stigma of disclosing a disability but fear that they will be viewed as 'too disabled' to be a lawyer.¹⁶ Law graduates must pass a 'fit and proper person' test before they can be admitted to practise, and the relevant disclosure

⁹ Noor Jwad et al (n 7) 10.

¹⁰ Marie Sakowicz and Foad Hamidi, 'Exploring the Role of Generative AI in Supporting Students with Disabilities, through the Lens of Universal Design for Learning' (2025) 15 *American Journal of STEM Education* 1.

¹¹ Colleen P Eren, Shirley Leyro and Ilir Disha, 'It's Personal: The Impact of Victimization on Motivations and Career Interests among Criminal Justice Majors at Diverse Urban Colleges' (2019) 30(4) *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 510.

¹² Jayson Ware, Helen Farley and William Grant, 'Criminal Justice and Criminology Students' Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being: A Scoping Review of the Available Research Evidence' (2024) *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 1, 16; see also Shannon E Cusack et al, 'Prevalence and Predictors of PTSD among a College Sample' (2019) 67(2) *Journal of American College Health* 123.

¹³ Catherine M Leahy et al, 'Distress Levels and Self-Reported Treatment Rates for Medicine, Law, Psychology and Mechanical Engineering Tertiary Students: Cross-Sectional Study' (2010) 44(7) *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 608, 615.

¹⁴ Massimiliano Tani and Prue Vines, 'Law Students' Attitudes to Education: Pointers to Depression In the Legal Academy and the Profession' (2009) 19(1) *Legal Education Review* 3.

¹⁵ Norm Kelk, Georgina Luscombe, Sharon Medlow and Ian Hickie, 'Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards depression in Australian law students and lawyers' (Research Monograph 2009-1, Brain and Mind Research Institute, University of Sydney, January 2009).

¹⁶ Jasmine E Harris, 'Debating Disability Disclosure in Legal Education' (2021) 71 *Journal of Legal Education* 94, 104.

guidelines specifically mention mental illness. Although those guidelines do indicate that a mental or physical health condition or disability will not, of itself, prejudice an applicant's ability to be admitted, they also state that 'your Admitting Authority is likely to consider that any behaviour or conduct arising from, or attributable to, that condition or disability is relevant, and should therefore be disclosed'.¹⁷ Concerns have been expressed that these disclosure requirements represent 'another example of applicants being increasingly asked to supply personal details about their lives' and that disclosures 'may be applied as a discriminatory barrier to entry'.¹⁸

At least in the context of the university itself, one of the strengths of a Universal Design approach to teaching and assessment is that the need to self-disclose is eliminated. While this might not help change cultural norms which stigmatize mental illness, it helps empower individuals to make decisions about where, when, and to whom they disclose. This relates to another crucial Universal Design principle – flexibility, which involves creating an environment with choice so learners are making decisions about their education beyond flexible delivery of the same content.¹⁹ This can be difficult to achieve with set learning outcomes, and when the course outline (also referred to as a syllabus) is approached as a contract. It can also be difficult for time-poor teachers to co-design flexible assessment regimes or course delivery. Nonetheless, perhaps there are modest ways to introduce flexibility, such as by designing deadlines with integrated automatic extensions. Flexibility around due dates has certainly been proposed as a potential way to help reduce student distress^{20,21}

Universal design principles have been around for over forty years, but the evidence base that underpins these principles is still not well established.²¹ While the principles are appealing, but in practice there is a risk that they may not result in inclusive, effective learning environments.²² This would not be the first time that a concept has been rapidly embraced without a robust evidence base. An example of this is the idea that different people have different learning styles, which some

¹⁷ Law Admissions Consultative Committee, 'Disclosure Guidelines for Applicants for Admission to the Legal Profession', *Legal Services Council* (Guidelines, June 2024) 8 <https://legalservicescouncil.org.au/content/dam/dcj/legal-services-council/documents/LACC_Disclosure_Guidelines_June_2024.pdf>.

¹⁸ Hugh Breakey, Charles Sampford and Justine Rogers, 'Fit and Proper Person Test', *Professional Standards Councils* (Discussion Paper, 2020) 5 <<https://www.psc.gov.au/research-library/certification/fit-and-proper-person-test>>.

¹⁹ Coffman and Draper (n 5); Eric J Moore et al, 'Voices from the Field: Implementing and Scaling-up Universal Design for Learning in Teacher Preparation Programs' (2018) 33(1) *Journal of Special Education Technology* 40.

²⁰ Megan Cantrell, Jonathan Orsini and Rebecca Williams, 'How Can We Help?: Strategies for Instructors to Alleviate Undergraduate Student Stress' (2023) 67(1) *NACTA Journal* 51.

²¹ Michael PA Murphy, 'Belief without Evidence? A Policy Research Note on Universal Design for Learning' (2021) 19(1) *Policy Futures in Education* 7.

²² Meredith George and Wendy Newby, 'Inclusive Instruction: Blurring Diversity and Disability in Law School Classrooms Through Universal Design' (2007) 69 *University of Pittsburgh Law Review* 475.

scholars argue has perpetuated stereotypes about learning and fostered ineffective teaching styles.²³

Research into UDL has been particularly limited in Australia.²⁴ Part of this evidence gap may be due to the variety of definitions of relevant methodologies, which can make comparative and replication studies difficult.²⁵ It may also be because the time and resources need to redeveloped courses to support Universal Design principles can be a barrier to adoption (Kumar, & Wideman, 2014).²⁶ This barrier may be particularly difficult to overcome if there is not institutional buy-in, which is necessary to provide financial support and designated time to redevelop courses.

It is also unclear whether a universal design approach needs to be applied holistically to be effective, or, if even ‘doses’ of specific principles at key points in the academic journey can have a similar impact. This is an important consideration: if the larger universal design theory has not been thoroughly validated then it may be ‘premature to unquestioningly embrace it’.²⁷ Redesigning assessments, courses, and curricula is labour intensive, so there needs to be a sound evidence base that this shift is merited. This reflects a larger gap in the literature regarding teaching in higher education – a lack of replication studies. As Plucker and Makel note: ‘Replication is the intentional repetition of previous research to confirm or disconfirm the previous results, serving as a *de facto* reliability check on previous research’.²⁸ There is need to replicate existing studies to decide if the findings are robust and applicable in a variety of educational settings.²⁹

III THE ORIGINAL STUDY

In 2024, Ruesch and Sarvary published findings regarding ‘structured yet flexible deadlines’ for assignments.³⁰ Their project was designed in line with universal classroom design principles. Rather than reactively changing deadlines for students who both need an extension and have the self-confidence to ask for one, extensions were available to all students. Their study first asked students which of the following three options they preferred: a separate, firm deadline for each assignment; all assignments due at the end of semester; or an ideal deadline, with built in flexibility. They then set a deadline for an assignment, with an extension without penalty integrated as an option for all students. At the end of the semester, they evaluated this approach with a Likert-scale survey with spaces for qualitative feedback. They

²³ Philip M Newton and Mahallad Miah, ‘Evidence-Based Higher Education – Is the Learning Styles ‘Myth’ Important?’ (2017) 8 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1.

²⁴ Noor Jwad et al (n 7) 6.

²⁵ Zhang et al (n 6).

²⁶ Noor Jwad et al (n 7).

²⁷ Murphy (n 21) 10.

²⁸ Jonathan A Plucker and Matthew C Makel, ‘Replication Is Important for Educational Psychology: Recent Developments and Key Issues’ (2021) 56(2) *Educational Psychologist* 90, 90.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ruesch and Sarvary (n 3).

found this approach to due dates both reduced student stress levels and lessened the administrative load on academics. Learning experiences improved because students were able to better manage their time and academics were able to focus on teaching, rather than on the pastoral role and administrative load that comes with extension requests. Ruesch and Sarvary's findings were similar to an earlier study that provided proactive extensions on assignments and found it supported students' time management skills.³¹ However, their 2024 study was not a direct replication of that earlier research.

IV REPLICATING THE ORIGINAL STUDY IN A DIFFERENT CONTEXT

Ruesch and Sarvary's 2024 study took place at an elite university (Cornell University) in the United States. At such institutions, students enter university as high-achievers: 83% of Cornell undergraduates are in the top 10% of their graduating classes.³² They also enter university with a familiarity with how a university functions and with access to supportive networks of people who have navigated higher education before: 86% have a parent who graduated from university, and 17% have parents who were alumni.³³ In contrast, at the University of Newcastle 57% of undergraduates followed a non-traditional path into university (did not graduate from high school or took a considerable break from studies) and 52% are the first in their family to attend university (University of Newcastle 2025). During the 2023-2024 academic year, Cornell University had 16,551 undergraduate and graduate students, of whom approximately 9% identify as having a disability.³⁴ At the University of Newcastle, the university average is 21%, with higher percentages in both criminology (27%) and law (also 27%). This suggests there are significant differences between the cohort of students who participated in the original study and students at the University of Newcastle. These are differences which are particularly relevant when designing a course. A cohort with higher rates of disability and non-traditional pathways into university may face more structural barriers than other students. Further, not having access to family members who have previously navigated the higher education landscape may make the formal process to request an extension appear more daunting. Embedding flexibility may have an even greater equity benefit for this particular student cohort than the more academically and socio-economically homogenous group in the United States.

³¹ Melissa Hills and Kim Peacock, 'Replacing Power with Flexible Structure: Implementing Flexible Deadlines to Improve Student Learning Experiences' (2022) 10 *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 1.

³² 'Profile: Class of 2022', *Institutional Research & Planning – Cornell University* (Report) <https://irp.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Profile2018_first-year.pdf>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 'Cornell University Enrolment 2023-2024', *New York State Education Department (NYSED)* (Web Page) <<https://data.nysed.gov/highered-enrollment.php?year=2024&instid=800000036397>>.

Further, while there are similarities between the tertiary education system in Australia and the United States, there are also key differences. In Australia, an undergraduate criminology degree is generally three years (rather than four), which pushes students to quickly identify their degree program, rather than having a year to explore a broad range of courses (science, literature, math, social sciences) as required in every undergraduate degree in the United States. Further, class sizes and approaches to learning are quite different in Australia and North America. In the latter small classes that combine lectures and applied content are the norm. At the University of Newcastle an average criminology or law class would have 40 to 60 students, and lecture material is generally pre-recorded, with classes reserved for discussion and applying content.

While Ruesch and Sarvary's research is based on universal design principles, it is not clear if their approach to structured, yet flexible deadlines will have the same impact with a student group from more diverse academic backgrounds studying in a different tertiary education system. The goal of this project was to assess whether, in this very different context, Ruesch and Sarvary's approach still demonstrated universal design principles and lead to similar positive outcomes. The research questions mirrored the study being replicated but were modified to reflect the courses chosen for the trial at the University of Newcastle. The survey questions were nonetheless designed to help us answer the same research questions that Ruesch and Sarvary addressed, namely:

1. What assignment submission deadline system do students prefer?
2. What assignment submission behaviours are practiced when the Extension Without Penalty (EWP) system is deployed in a large, second year criminology class and a final year law class?
3. Does the EWP system impact student performance?
4. What are the real and perceived benefits of the EWP system, and do they foster an inclusive learning environment?

V METHODOLOGY

The replication study ran over two iterations (2024 and 2025) of two courses: *Criminal Justice in Practice* ('criminology course'), a compulsory second-year course in the Bachelor of Criminology and *Company Law* ('law course'), a compulsory final-year course in the Juris Doctor and Combined Bachelor of Laws (Honours) programs. In the criminology course, the trial was applied to two assessment items: a professional journal (accounting for 20% of the course mark) that was due early in the semester, and a case plan (accounting for 40% of the course mark) that was due much later in the course. In the law course, the trial was applied to a major research essay (accounting for 40% of the course mark) that was due toward the end of the semester.

The *law course* trial differed somewhat from the original study because the course coordinator (Connor) was concerned that final-year law students might be more likely to simply treat the extended deadline

as the 'real' deadline. To try and reduce the likelihood of this, students who submitted by the 'ideal' deadline were promised more detailed written feedback than other students received, including comments and suggestions in relation to each individual paragraph in their essays.³⁵ This of course begs the question whether students who submitted by the extended deadline were disadvantaged by receiving less extensive feedback, which would be inconsistent with UDL principles. To reduce this possibility, students who submitted by the extended deadline were given the option of booking an appointment with the course coordinator to obtain detailed verbal feedback and were provided with a range of other feedback resources to help them understand how they could have improved their essay.³⁶

Students first learned about the research project in Week 1 of classes, via a video, embedded canvas materials, and face-to-face communication in tutorials.³⁷ They had a week to consider participating in the first survey and were informed that they could still use the 'extension without penalty' even if they did not complete the survey. The first mixed-methods survey collected demographic information and the students' perception of what kinds of deadlines would best support their learning. They also had the opportunity to share any concerns about having a flexible due date through qualitative, free-write responses. The first survey took approximately two minutes to complete and was completed at the end of the tutorial in Week Two.

The second survey was completed during the last tutorial of the term and also took approximately two minutes. While some demographic information was collected again, the main questions focused on students' experience with the flexible deadlines. Both those students who used the flexible due dates and those who did not were invited to participate in the survey. Again, quantitative data was collected and there was a free-write section where students could write in their individual perspective and/or experiences. Both the surveys were anonymous, and the answers were not identifiable. This could have

³⁵ The essay discussion forum in the course learning management system (Canvas) was also closed a day before the ideal deadline, so that students who submitted by that deadline would not be disadvantaged by the teacher answering student questions after they submitted.

³⁶ Students who submitted by the extended deadline also received numerical scores for each component of a detailed marking rubric, along with text automatically generated from the rubric. For example, if a student's numerical mark for the 'statutory interpretation' component of the rubric was in the credit range (65% to 74%, they received the following text: 'Reasonably good level of understanding and critical analysis of relevant legislation, cases and arguments presented in sources (including Gen AI). Most arguments are relevant and well developed but at times they could be more critical and nuanced'. In addition, students who received a 'pass' or 'fail' grade for any component of the rubric were provided with brief explanations of which aspects of their work on that component had prevented them from achieving a higher mark for that component. The course coordinator also provided all students with recorded generic audio feedback, where he discussed what the cohort as a whole did well and what could have been improved, as well as anonymised exemplar student answers with detailed written comments.

³⁷ The university's Human Ethics Committee approved the research before students were invited to participate (Human Ethics Approval number H-2024-0143).

made it difficult to withdraw an individual student's answers from the research data, but fortunately no students requested to withdraw from the project.

Data was also collected regarding the overall number of submissions, submissions received by the ideal deadline, submissions received by the extended deadline, and late submissions. These were collected only as aggregate numbers and not linked to individual students. Similarly, requests for extensions were tracked across the two years (2024 and 2025) of the study as well as the year preceding the data point. This year (2023) acted as a 'control year' to compare student performance and the number of extension requests in a year in which the authors had not attempted to embed universal design principles.

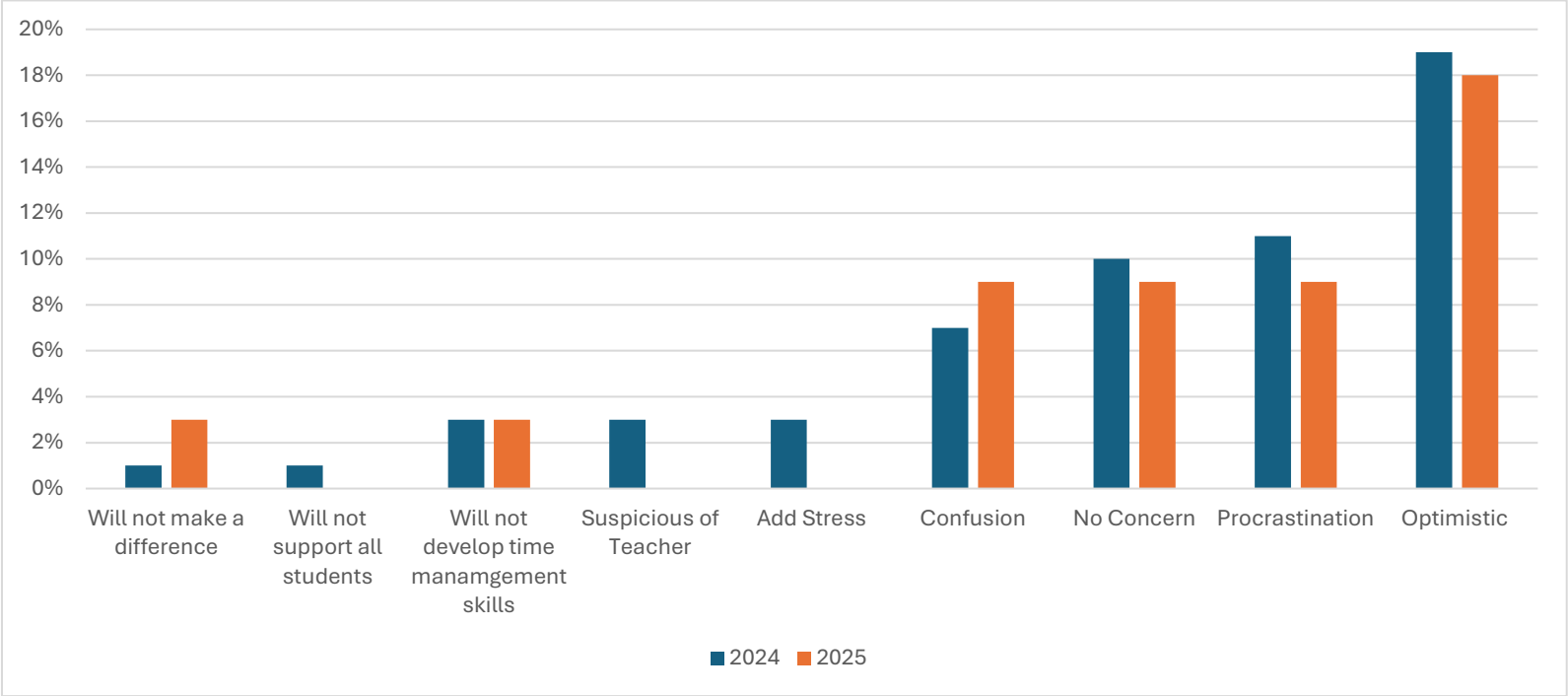
VI FINDINGS OF THE CRIMINOLOGY COURSE TRIAL

A *Preferred Due Date Model*

Criminal Justice in Practice is a compulsory second year course with 188 students enrolled during 2024 and 221 enrolled during 2025. In 2024, 72 students completed the first survey which captured their preferences for the deadline structure in the class. For this survey, only 4% of students expressed a preference for no deadline for assignments (all due at end of the semester), 8% preferred a single deadline for each separate assessment item, while 87.5% preferred the extension without penalty model. In 2025, fewer students completed the first survey (32/221) but results were still very similar with 84% preferring the extension without penalty model. In 2025, 3% of respondents preferred one deadline while 13% wanted all assignments due at the end of the semester.

In addition to sharing their preferred way of structuring assignments, students were also invited to voice concerns or provide feedback on the extension without penalty model. The prompt was, 'Each assignment in this class has a due date, and some assignments have extension due dates. You can submit those assignments by the extension due date without any penalty. We are providing the extension due dates so you can use them for certain times when you have other exams, sickness, or you just simply need a break and you do not want to think about an assignment. Please list all concerns you have about having two deadlines for some assignments'. In 2024 and 2025, most students did not complete this section while others listed multiple concerns. The following chart (Chart 1) presents qualitative responses that were thematically coded, quantified, and calculated as a percentage of all survey respondents.

Chart 1: Concerns Before the Trial (Criminology Students)



Across both years (see Chart 1), the most common response for students was that they were optimistic the flexible due dates would support their learning, but were also concerned that it may contribute to procrastination.

During the last week of the semester, students were asked again about their preference for designing assessment due dates. In 2024, 83 students responded. Of those, only 1% prefer single deadline and 7.5% preferred all assessment items due at the end of the semester, while 91.5% preferred the extension without penalty option. For this cohort, there was a modest increase in support for the extension without penalty by the end of the semester. In 2025, this was slightly different. Of the 82 students who responded, 80% preferred the extension without penalty model, slightly lower than the survey at the beginning of the semester, though this change may reflect a larger sample group for the Week 12 survey compared to the Week 2 survey (82 versus 32).

B Use of No Penalty Extension and Impact on Student Performance

For the first assignment, 25% of students used the extension without penalty in 2024. This increased to 50% in 2025. It is not clear why this increase occurred, as the assignment was due during the same week as previous years. For the second assignment, a much higher percentage of students utilized the extension without penalty option. In 2024, 80% submitted by the extended due date and in 2025 this increased slightly to 82%. The higher number of students using the extension for the second assignment may reflect that this assignment is weighted more heavily than the first assignment and is due later in the semester, when more assignments in other courses are due.

Across both assignments, the no-penalty extension had no overall impact on student performance, either as an improvement or diminishment. The assignments and marking criteria remained the same across the year before the study (control point) and the two years included in the study.

C Benefits (or drawbacks) of the extension without penalty system

At the end of the semester, all students (including those who did not use the extension without penalty) were invited to provide quantitative and qualitative feedback on the impact the due date system had on their studies. Students could select multiple advantages and disadvantages of the extension without penalty system. We here separately report those advantages identified by all criminology students and those advantages reported by criminology students who did not use the no-penalty extension option (Charts 2 and 3), while the identified disadvantages are not disaggregated (Chart 4).

In 2024, 83 students completed the survey, and each identified an average of seven advantages of the extension. In 2025, 82 students completed and an average of seven advantages were identified. For

students who used the extension, in both years the most positive impact was on levels of stress. It was also viewed as improving their experiences in other courses and supporting time management in general (Chart 2). Students who did not use the extension reported similar advantages (Chart 3). The most common response was 'my stress was reduced' and 'this made things better for my other courses' where the most common benefits selected. For students who did not use the extension, the third most commonly reported benefit was that this approach to deadlines demonstrated instructor empathy and understanding. This was also a common advantage identified by students who did use the extension.

Chart 2: Reported Advantages (All Criminology Students)

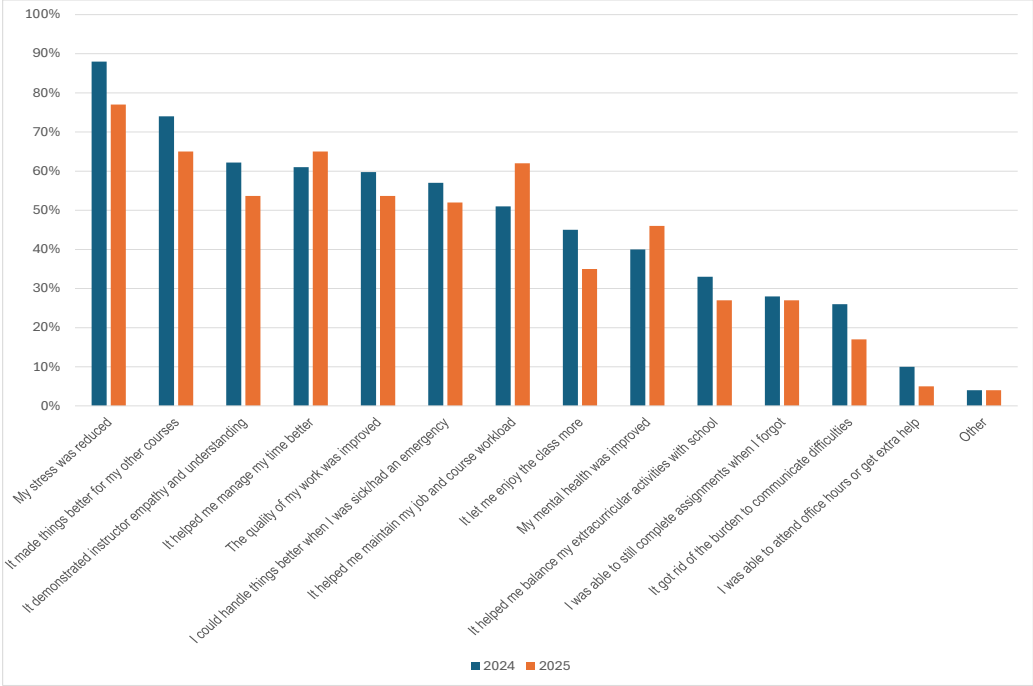
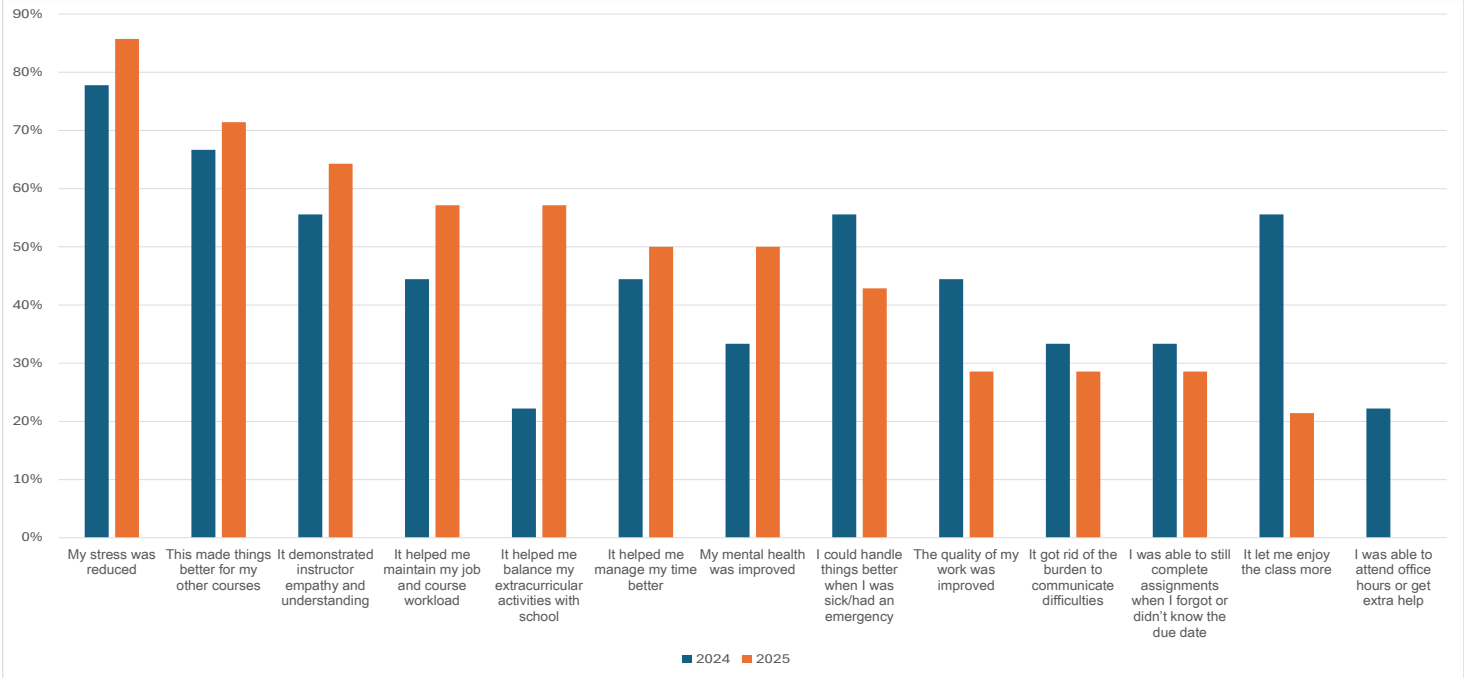


Chart 3: Reported Advantages (Criminology Students Who Did Not Use the No-Penalty Extension)



The free-write qualitative section added nuances to the categories that were replicated from the original study. Some students who have care responsibilities or disabilities self-identified in the qualitative section and reported a positive impact of the flexible due date system. For example, 'I had children fall unwell, it helped knowing I had a little extra time and could comfort my children without penalty to my assessments' (Criminology Student A, 2025).

Multiple students shared that the flexible due date system helped them balance mental health challenges and course work:

'I have several mental health conditions and a disability, which has often meant I have had to request extensions to complete my work on time, especially during times of trauma. This has often added a lot of extra stress navigating the adverse circumstances process (even with a RAP³⁸) (and waiting for an outcome), and in one instance I was treated very poorly by a course coordinator after disclosing my sexual assault. This has also often led to withdrawing from units and my program being heavily delayed, which has heavily impacted my self-esteem. Knowing the extensions were there relieved a lot of stress and anxiety and meant I was able to complete both assignments without dealing with the adverse circumstances process. I experienced absolutely no negative outcomes either individually or overall, as a class (ex-assignment grading wasn't delayed), and in general it allowed be to get the most out of the class' (Criminology Student B, 2025)

While others noted, 'I think it is great...for students like me with current medical issues and uni RAPS, it takes away the communication pressure with course coordinators' (Criminology Student C, 2024). Another shared a similar sentiment, really enjoyed using this system! I appreciated not having to apply for an extension when I needed it. I have an RAP but I haven't needed to use it thus far for an extension because of the flexible due date. I have ADHD³⁹ so I found it beneficial to aim for the ideal due date and when I needed to use the extra time there was less stress and shame about needing it' (Criminology Student D, 2025).

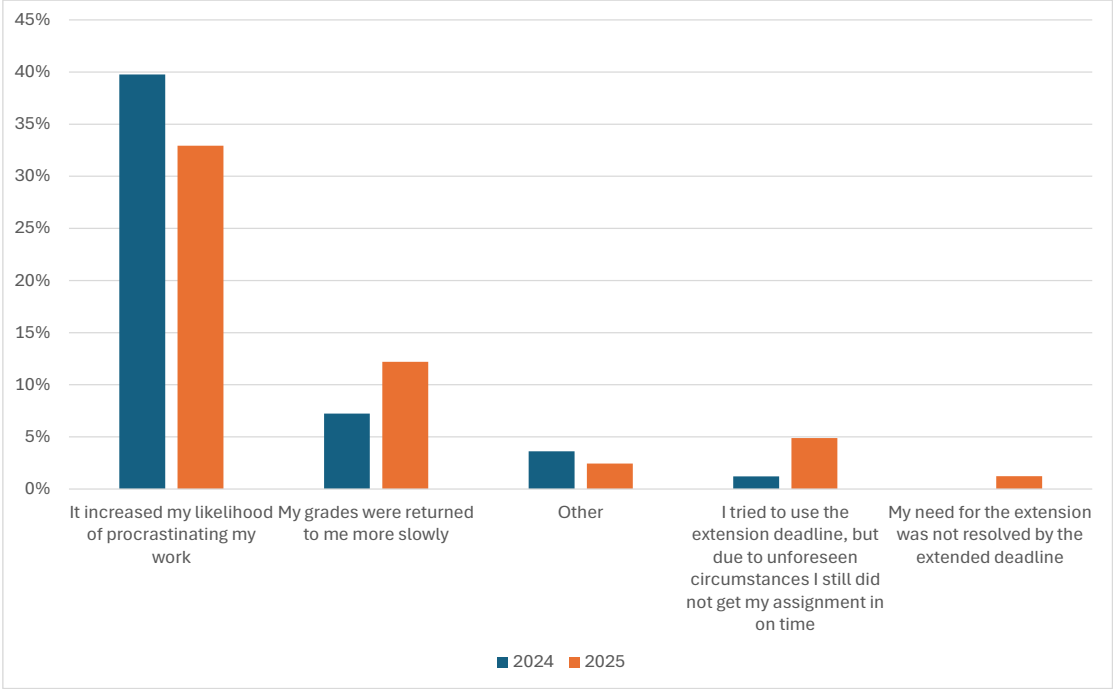
While there was not an impact on over-all student performance, a number of students noted that it improved their learning experience, It made me feel valued as a student and supported' (Criminology Student E 2024). Others noted that they thought it made the university more equitable, it allows for more equity in the university. Some students have mental health, family and personal problems which affect their ability to effectively complete assignments, this allows for those students to keep up with their peers who struggle with less outside issues' (Criminology Student F, 2025).

³⁸ 'RAP' is an acronym for reasonable adjustment plan. This is a personalised document created by the student and accessibility support staff that outlines the academic adjustments a student needs to reduce the impact their health condition or disability may have on their studies.

³⁹ ADHD is the acronym for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. This is a condition that can interfere with executive function and self-regulation.

While the vast majority of students, even those who did not use the extension, reported it had a positive impact on them, some students identified disadvantages (See Chart 4).

Chart 4: Reported Disadvantages (Criminology Students)



In 2024, students reported 577 advantages and 43 disadvantages. This was similar in 2025, with students identifying 565 advantages and 44 disadvantages. The most common disadvantage was that it ‘increased procrastination’ (33 students in 2024; 27 students in 2025). In the qualitative feedback some students thought it was pointless, ‘there really isn’t a massive need for something like that...seems pointless but I don’t get the idea in practice’ (Criminology Student G, 2025). Another noted, ‘why not just push the original due date back a week?’ (Criminology Student H, 2024). These comments were anomalies but are important to consider when testing a universal design principle.

The second most common perceived disadvantage students reported was that grades were returned more slowly. The assignment grades were returned at the same rate as the control year and within the university's marking policy based on the ideal due date. This may reflect a desire for students to receive feedback more quickly, rather than a delay in returning grades.

VII FINDINGS OF THE LAW COURSE TRIAL

A *Preferred Due Date Model*

At the University of Newcastle, *Company Law* is a compulsory final year course, which means that students in combined LLB(Hons) programs take it in their fifth year and students in the Juris Doctor program take it in their third year. In the control year (2023), 138 students took the course, with enrolments rising to 160 in 2024 and 188 in 2025. As was the case for the criminology trial, the law students were surveyed in Week 2 to help us understand their expectations regarding the automated extension trial, and then again in Week 12 to gauge their experience of that trial.

Response rates for the Week 2 survey provided good samples, with 63% of students completing this survey in 2024 and 50% doing so in 2025. In both 2024 and 2025, at this early stage in the course the final-year law students were generally positive about the idea of an automatic no-penalty extension, but to a lesser extent than the second-year criminology students. Of the three suggested options, 71% of the 2024 cohort and 55% of the 2025 cohort preferred the idea of the automatic extension.⁴⁰ The significant decline in popularity for the automatic extension idea in the 2025 Week 2 survey may have been related to the fact that in that year the University changed the rules regarding extensions for all assessment items, such that (unless the course coordinator chooses to ‘opt out’) students can obtain a three-day extension without providing any evidence, although they still needed to

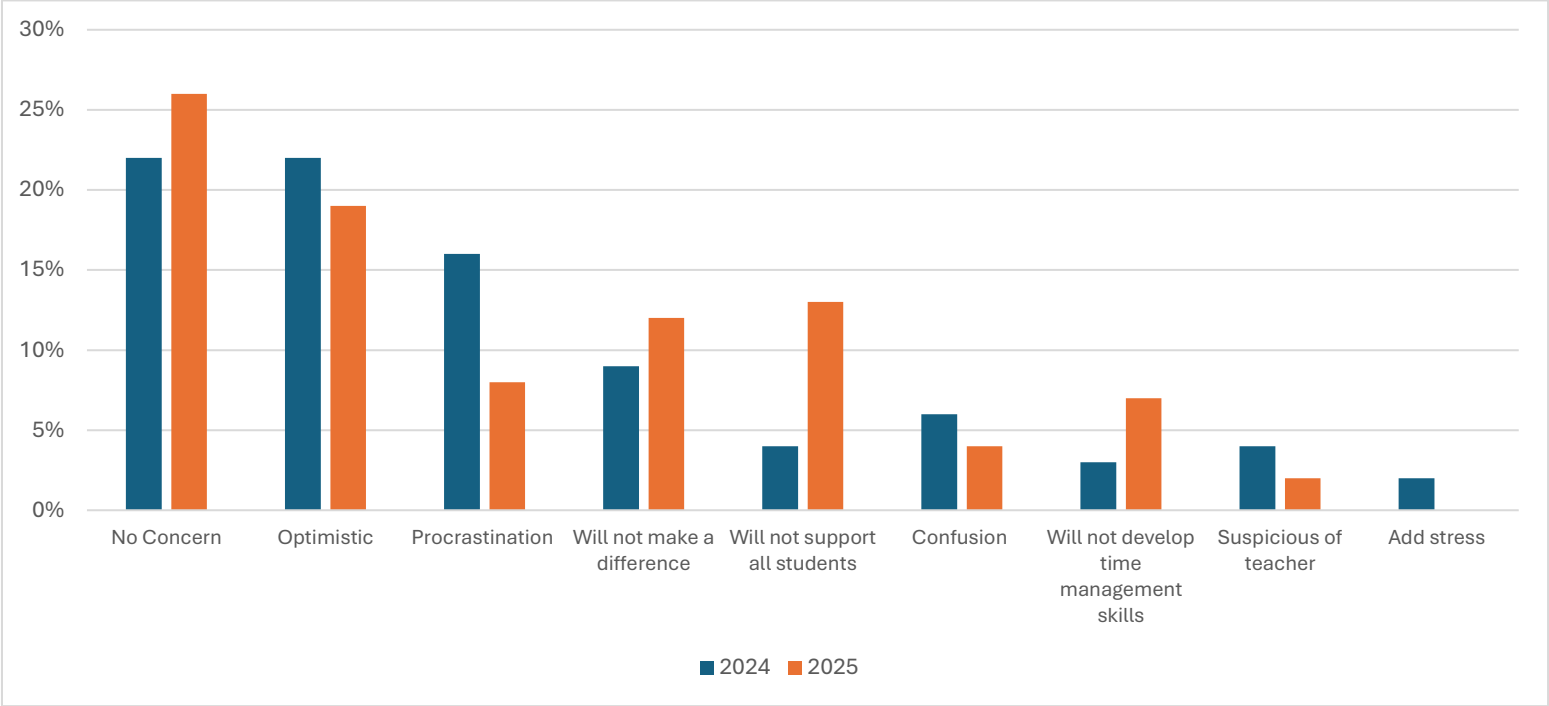
⁴⁰ The preferences for the other two options were: single deadline for each assessment item - 12% in 2024 and 29% in 2025; all assignments due at the end of the semester item - 17% in 2024 and 16% in 2025.

state a reason that falls within the relevant policy⁴¹. This new policy may have muddied the waters in terms of students' views of the automatic extension trial. In the 'free writing' section of the 2025 Week 2 survey, the most common concern students expressed about the automatic extension option is that it could encourage procrastination and hence extend the stress associated with completing the assignment (See Chart 5). Like Chart 1, the following chart (Chart 5) presents qualitative responses that were thematically coded, quantified, and calculated as a percentage of all survey respondents.

This concern may have resulted from their experience of the 'three-day extension without evidence' option in their other courses in the first semester of 2025, although no students expressly mentioned this. While in both years most comments in the 'free writing' section of the Week 2 survey were positive about the automatic extension idea, a significant minority of students in 2024 also expressed concern that it might encourage procrastination, and in both years a few students expressed concern that this approach was 'poor training to become a lawyer', or that the automatic extension may make the course coordinator more reluctant to approve further extensions based on adverse circumstances.

⁴¹ The 'three-day extension without evidence' option was not offered as part of this research trial. If students needed a further extension (on top of the automatic one-week extension) then they needed to provide evidence that their situation met the requirements of the university's adverse circumstances policy.

Chart 5: Concerns Before the Trial (Law Students)



For the second survey (held at the end of the course) the response rates also provided solid samples, although the response rate did fall to 28% in 2025 (in 2024 it was 45%). In 2024, the law students' enthusiasm for the automatic extension did not change very much as a result of experiencing it (in Week 12, 69% of students preferred this option, compared to 71% in Week 2). However, in 2025 student support for the extension without penalty increased significantly over the course of the semester (74% in Week 12, compared to 55% in Week 2). As was the case for the criminology trial, it is hard to know to what extent the change in response rates across the two surveys affected this finding (the response rate fell from 50% in Week 2 to 28% in Week 12).

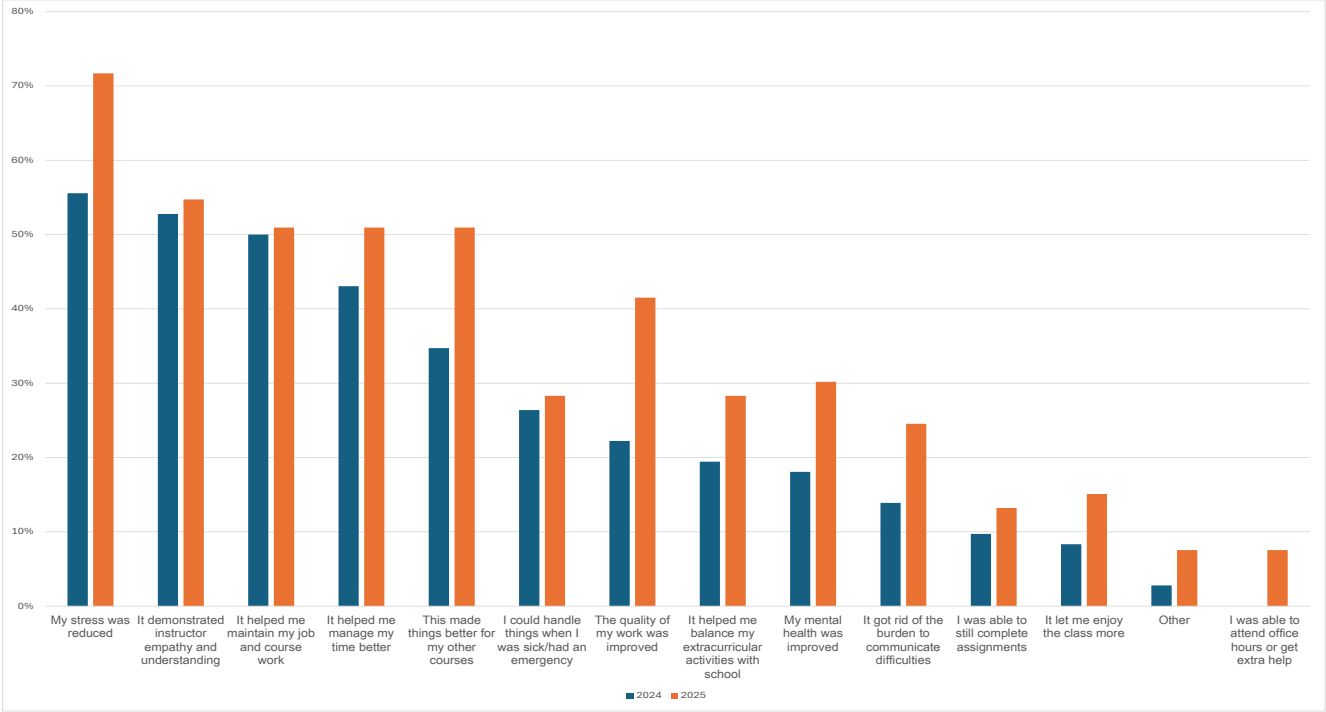
B Use of No Penalty Extension and Impact on Student Performance

Across both trial years, the great majority of law students utilized the extension without penalty option (91% in 2024 and 93% in 2025). There was no significant change in student performance as a result of the trial—average marks in the two trial years were much the same as in the control year. The law essay questions were different in 2023, 2024 and 2025, but the skills assessed and the marking criteria remained the same across the three years.

C Benefits (or Drawbacks) of the Extension Without Penalty System

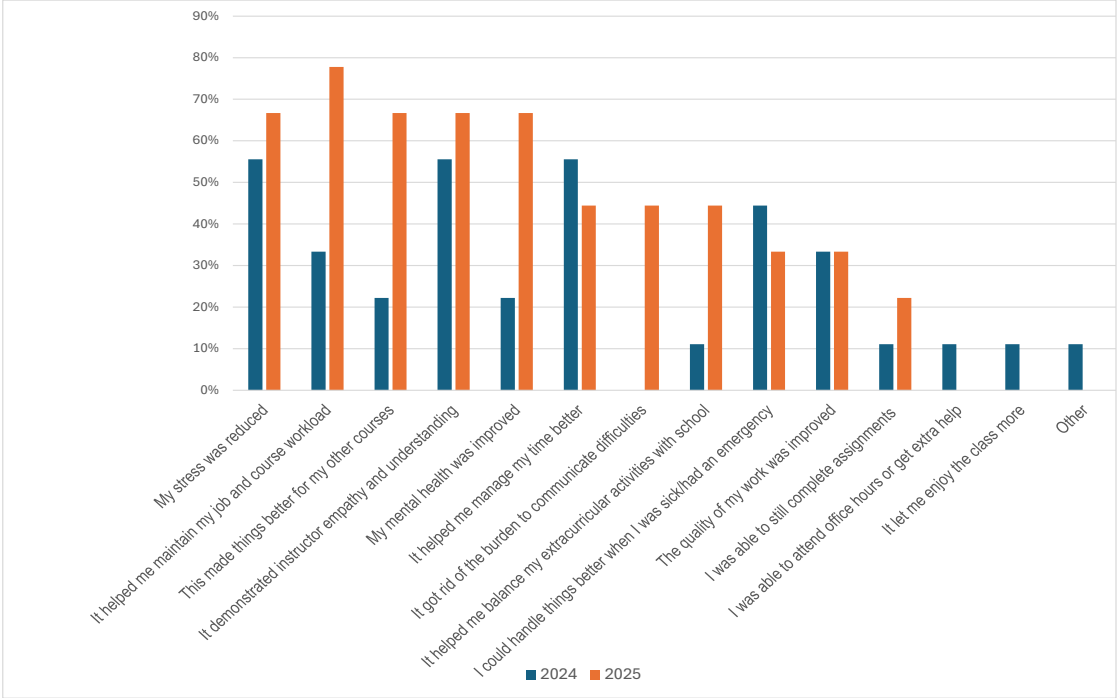
After they had experienced the extension without penalty trial, most law students reported that the benefits significantly outweighed the drawbacks. Of the law students who answered the Week 12 survey, on average each indicated that five of the fourteen listed potential advantages, and only one of the six listed disadvantages, applied to them (Chart 6). Their responses are shown as a percentage of the total number of respondents. Because students could select multiple answers, the percentage will add up to more than one hundred.

Chart 6: Reported Advantages (All Law Students)



Students who did not use the extension without penalty had similar perceptions of the advantages of the extension without penalty system (Chart 7)

Chart 7: Reported Advantages (Law Students Who Did Not Use the No-Penalty Extension)



This is broadly similar to the Week 12 survey answers provided by criminology students (who selected an average of seven advantages and one disadvantage).⁴² The particular advantages identified by law students were also similar to those selected by criminology students, with 'my stress was reduced' being the most commonly identified advantage across both trial years—selected by 56% (2024) and 72% (2025) law students and 88% (2024) and 77% (2025) criminology students. The next seven most selected advantages were also common across the two disciplines, although not in the same order. Those main advantages can be clustered as academic impacts and well-being supports. The most common academic advantages are

- It helped me maintain my job and course workload (75% and 51% law students/51% and 62% criminology students).
- This made things better for my other courses (35% and 61% law students/74% and 65% criminology students).
- The quality of my work was improved (22% and 42% law students/60% and 54% criminology students).

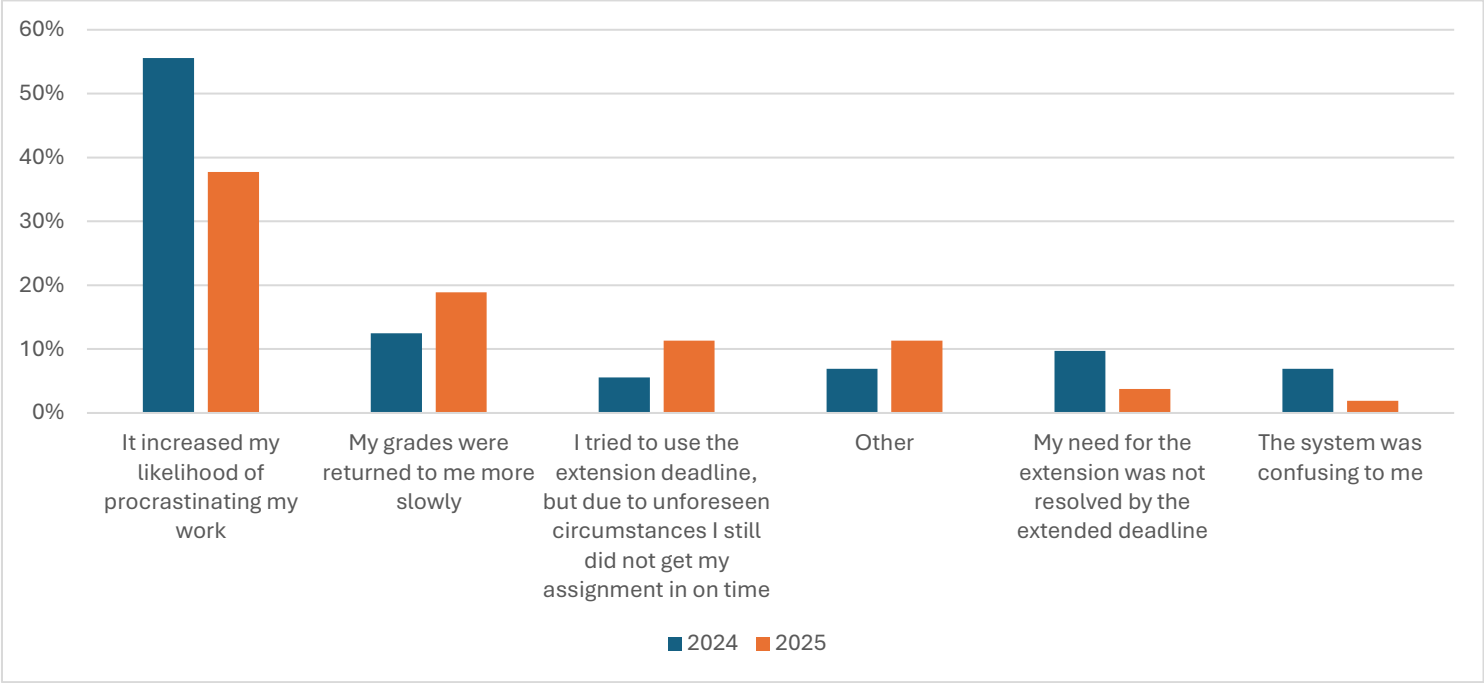
The most common advantages that supported well-being are:

- It helped me manage my time better (43% and 51% of law students/61% and 65% criminology students).It demonstrated instructor empathy and understanding (53% and 55% law/62% and 54% criminology).
- I could handle things better when I was sick/had an emergency (26% and 28% law students/57% and 52% of criminology students)
- My mental health was improved (18% and 30% law students/40% and 46% criminology students)

These findings suggest that structured due dates, with penalty free extensions may support academic performance as well as student well-being, though how advantages are perceived and experienced may vary across the educational journey. Similar to the criminology cohort, law students also reported some disadvantages (Chart 8)

⁴² The breakdown for the law students was an average of 4 advantages and 1 disadvantage per law student in 2024 and an average of 5.7 advantages and 0.8 disadvantages per law student in 2025.

Chart 8: Reported Disadvantages (Law Students)



When it came to selecting disadvantages that applied to them, 'It increased my likelihood of procrastinating' was by far the most commonly selected disadvantage (selected by 60 law students and 81 criminology students across the two trial years). Across both criminology and law students, this concern did drop after the first year. Interestingly, the next most common disadvantage was 'My grades were returned to me more slowly' (19 law students/16 criminology students) which increased as a perceived disadvantage across both student groups. Although this was not strictly true (the turnaround time for returning grades was the same in the trial years as it was in previous years) it does take considerable time for teaching staff to mark complex assessment tasks completed by large numbers of students, so it is understandable that students might think the trial could have delayed the marking process. Across both the advantages and disadvantages, there were no noteworthy difference between those law students who took advantage of the extension and those who did not.

As was the case for the criminology trial, the law students were given the opportunity to provide further information in the free-write qualitative section of the Week 12 survey, and 49 law students took up this opportunity in 2024 and 42 did so in 2025. A significant minority of these free-write responses were relatively brief and did not add much beyond repeating advantages or disadvantages that students had already selected from the drop-down list earlier in the survey. Positive examples that echoed the 'my stress was reduced' option included statements like:

'I really think the extension without penalty saved me in this course ... it allowed me to finish the essay while being able to manage my stress.' (Week 12 survey 2024)

'I think it's an incredible idea. I work 4 days a week and it reduced my stress so much' (Week 12 survey 2024)

'I had more time for my other assessments and it greatly reduced the stress of worrying about a deadline' (Week 12 survey 2025)

More critical examples that echoed the 'It increased my likelihood of procrastinating' option included:

'I think personally, it made procrastinating more excusable' (Week 12 survey 2024)

'This has no discernible effect on students. The label 'extension without penalty' is just that; a label. I look at it and say 'ok, so the due date is the later of the two'. There is no 'extension'' (Week 12 survey 2024)

'I think that it will make people effectively just view the second due date as the proper due date and disregard the first one' (Week 12 survey 2025).

However, most student answers in the 'free write' section were more thoughtful and provided a deeper understanding of how the trial was perceived and experienced. Compared to the criminology trial, fewer law students in the free-write section self-identified as having caring responsibilities or disabilities (only four students mentioned this in the Week 12 survey in 2025, and only one did so in the final survey

for 2024). Two of these responses indicated that the automatic extension approach was not necessarily ideal for students with their particular disability:

'I would personally prefer all assessments have 1 preferred due day, but no penalty if they are late as long as they are handed in before the end of semester. This helps students who focus on one subject at a time (like me, an autistic student) get their assignments done' (Week 12 survey 2024).

'For a student with ADHD like myself, it provides no benefit. The ADHD brain will automatically work to the extended deadline' (Week 12 survey 2025).

However the other three were more positive:

'I was very grateful to have the ability to submit my assignment without penalty at a later date. I had many assignments due within a few days of each other. I am also battling an illness which I did not have to consider in previous semesters. The illness + the assignment load (all being due within 1-2 days of each other) was stressful. If I was required to submit the assignment on the preferred date, the quality of my work would have been poor and not reflective of the importance I put on my study.' (Week 12 survey, 2025)

'I like it - I resisted the urge to treat the extended deadline as the only deadline, aimed for the first one, missed, barely made the second deadline. I had a lot of other stuff going on too, including sick kids and school holidays. I had most of the work done by (first) deadline but the wrapping-up process took a whole (interrupted) week, I still had to bung it in with only minutes to spare, and inadequate proof-reading....' (Week 12 survey, 2025)

'I understand the merit of it - some students will want feedback, some will not. Some will not have as many commitments and will be able to meet the first deadline, but the flexibility advantages those with a lot going on. The net result is you can get the marks to us quicker, and give feedback to those who actually want it. My personal experience was that I placed a lot of pressure on myself to meet the first deadline. I had to go home to help my dad following a major surgery, so the last few days of my writing were heavily disturbed. However, because I was 90% done I felt obliged to tie it off by deadline 1. I know my work would have been better had I used the extra week. Overall, I think the two deadline system is worthwhile because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. However I selected my prior answer because I felt you set the first deadline too early. This was a really difficult essay ... Given this, I think set the first deadline say 5 days later, and the next date 5 days after that.' (Week 12 survey, 2025)

These three responses have been quoted at some length because, in addition to demonstrating the value of this approach for students with chronic illness or caring responsibilities, these answers highlight some of the key themes that emerged more broadly from the free-write section. Whereas some students rejected the exercise as pointless because they simply regarded the extended deadline as the 'real' deadline, other students recognised that students had a choice and could resist 'the urge to treat the extended deadline as the only deadline'. A

significant number of students reported that resisting this urge had been helpful, since aiming for the first deadline and then being able to submit by the second deadline reduced their stress and improved the quality of their work. This has implications for how and when this kind of approach should be implemented – if all assignments in every course in a program had an automatic no-penalty extension then this may well make it more difficult for students to resist the urge to treat the extended deadline as the real deadline. The way staff communicate about the initial deadline could potentially also assist students to aim for it as the preferred deadline. As one student commented:

‘The [ideal] due date should be emphasised more. The extension without penalty is only activated at the expiration of the due date. Maybe I can utilise it better this way’ (Week 12 survey, 2025).

In short, although most law students found the automatic extended deadline beneficial, it cannot be treated as a complete solution that will accommodate the needs of all law students. Moreover, the benefits of the ‘double deadline’ approach depend to a considerable extent on how students perceive and respond to it, and students will likely find it easier to respond to it constructively if it is not overused and if teachers advise and encourage students to take the first deadline as seriously as they can.

VIII IMPACT ON ADMINISTRATIVE AND PASTORAL WORKLOAD

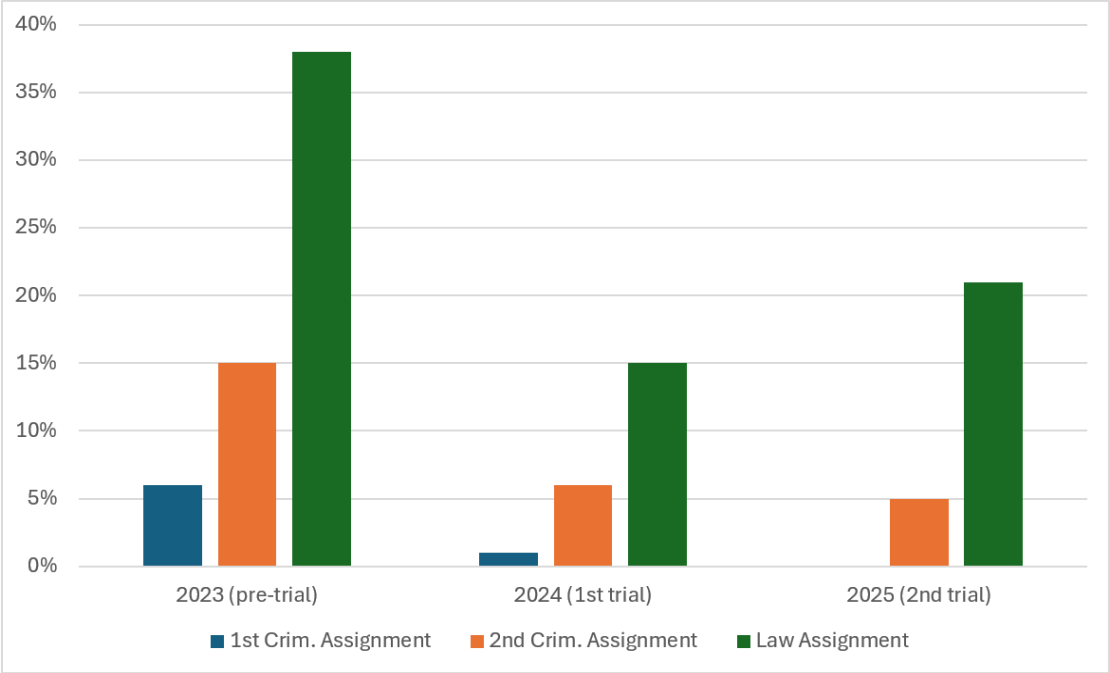
Across both criminology and law, the trial resulted in a significant drop in student requests for extensions due to adverse circumstances, which reduced the administrative and pastoral burden for the course coordinators. For the first criminology assignment, in the control year (2023), 6% of students asked for extensions. This dropped to 1% in the first year of the study (2024) and then to zero in 2025. In both 2024 and 2025, approximately four students still submitted late (beyond the extension without penalty), but these students did not request an additional extension. For the second criminology assignment, in the control year (2023) 15% of students requested an extension due to adverse circumstances. This dropped to 6% of students in 2024 and 5% in 2025. This represents a reduction of approximately 65% in requests for extensions between the year before the flexible due dates were implemented (2023) and the second year of the project (2025).

The results were similar for law. In the control year (2023), 38% of students submitted at least one request for an extension based on adverse circumstances, and 11% of students submitted at least two such requests (that is, they requested at least one additional adverse circumstances extension, on top of their first extension). This fell significantly in the first year of the trial (2024), with only 15% of students submitting at least one request based on adverse circumstances (on top of the automatic extension) and only 4% students submitting at least two requests based on adverse circumstances. The results were

similar in 2025, with 20% of students submitting at least one extension request based on adverse circumstances and 5% submitting at least two.

These reductions in adverse circumstances applications significantly reduced the administrative and pastoral load associated with teaching the law and criminology courses. At the University of Newcastle, course coordinators are required to assess each individual adverse circumstances application, including assessing the adequacy of the evidence provided. Students also often seek to make contact with their course coordinator (eg after class, or by email) before formally submitting an adverse circumstances application, to explain the issues they are facing and to directly plead their case for an extension. When teaching large, compulsory courses the associated workload can be onerous, so the reduction in such applications is noteworthy.

Chart 9: Students Requesting at Least One Extension Based on Adverse Circumstances



IX DISCUSSION

Do structured due dates with flexibility foster an inclusive learning environment without creating additional work for academics or students? The findings from this study were generally positive and support the findings of the original research project. Across both classes, students preferred a set due date with a flexible option. This preference was identified in the first survey, before students experienced the due date structure and was maintained throughout the semester. This preference was more pronounced in the second-year criminology course. It is not entirely clear from the survey data why the law students were somewhat less enthusiastic about the automatic extension approach. One possible explanation is that students in their fifth (LLB) or sixth (JD) year of tertiary study have become more accustomed to using the usual adverse circumstances application process to apply for an extension if they need one, and hence are less worried about whether making a formal application might lead their teacher to view them negatively. This interpretation is certainly consistent with the very high number of adverse circumstances applications by law students in the 'control' year (2023).

Similar to the original study by Ruesch and Sarvary,⁴³ for the criminology and law course most students were enthusiastic about the flexible deadline trial. Reported positives included that it facilitated time-management and reduced stress, while there was concern about additional procrastination. In terms of supporting an inclusive classroom, this was not a major trend in the quantitative data for students who used the extension. However, it came through in the qualitative data quite clearly. For students who did not use the extension, they reported the practice did support a more inclusive classroom experience. Similar to the original study, even students who did not use the flexible due date reported a decrease in stress and that it enhanced their experiences in their other courses. The most common disadvantage was also **similar**: that it could lead to procrastination. The percentage of students who identified this as a disadvantage decreased across the two years of the study. In 2025, Ruesch and Sarvary published a follow-up study examining some of the challenges of introducing new pedagogical approaches, like the extension without penalty, to students.⁴⁴ They found, similar to our study, that when a policy (like extension without penalty) is communicated consistently to students and becomes established and understood, the benefits increase. This was particularly evident in the law cohort: in the second year of the policy this cohort perceived more benefits from the policy,

⁴³ Ruesch and Sarvary (n 3).

⁴⁴ Joeseeph M Ruesch and Mark A Sarvary, 'Instructors as communication strategists: using multimodal communication to implement a new course policy on assignment extension due dates' (2025) 10 *Frontiers of Education* 1.

expressed less concern about procrastination and reported less confusion regarding the extension without penalty. The decrease in concerns about procrastination occurred alongside an increased confidence in their ability to manage time more effectively, although these trends should not necessarily be interpreted as causally related.

One key concern with the adoption of universal design approaches is that by mainstreaming accommodations it may create an impression that every student's unique needs have been supported. The findings from this study do not support that assumption. While most students who anonymously shared they had a disability thought the flexible deadline system was supportive, a few students indicated that this system was not ideal for students with their particular disability. A few students also voiced concern that the automatic extension system might make their teacher less willing to approve further extensions based on their Reasonable Adjustment Plan. Creating a more inclusive space does not negate that some students will still need additional support or greater flexibility, and this needs to be communicated clearly so students do not feel like they have been 'mainstreamed' out of necessary support. Perhaps a more accurate way to describing these modest and partial approaches to universal design is 'incremental universal design'.

Across the courses, there was no drop in student performance. The original study assessed the impact on student performance within the one cohort: comparing those who used the extension without penalty and those who did not. It found no difference in student performance. Our study analyzed grade trends from before and after the extension without penalty system was implemented, rather than within the one cohort. Our findings aligned with the original study in that there was no difference in student performance, either negative or positive. Multiple students reported they had more time to edit their submissions. Although the overall grades across the three years did not improve, this suggests that some individual students' performance may well have improved.

In line with the original study, in this study designing a course with ideal deadlines, coupled with integrated extensions, reduced the academic's workload. It did this by lightening both the pastoral load and the administrative load, with formal requests for adverse circumstances extensions dropping by 60% across the classes. This suggests that while some students will still need accommodations to support their learning, flexible due dates do support many students. Staggering the marking also made it easier to manage marking loads, particularly in these larger classes.

Duncan et al have identified four key barriers to integrating universal design into teaching, 'resources and time constraints, knowledge awareness, institutional barriers, and implementation challenges.'⁴⁵ Using an ideal due date, with an extension without

⁴⁵ Jill Duncan et al, 'Uncovering Challenges in Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education' (2025) 49(2) *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education* 94, 94.

penalty option, may be a modest way to overcome some of these challenges. While the evidence base regarding universal design principles is still emerging, this is at least the third study which has found flexible due dates may be an approach that supports students.⁴⁶ This approach may not work across every class in a degree program, but future research could explore if there are particular periods in students' academic journey or specific courses where this approach might be most effective. This study suggests that flexibility early in the academic career, with set deadlines as students gain experience and confidence, may be ideal.

A *Limitations*

This study only considered one specific aspect that sits within a broader universal design approach—assignment due dates. While due dates do tend to be a source of stress for students, there are other factors which could also support successful participation in higher education. Neither class demonstrated an overall improvement in student performance, though several individual students noted that the extension helped them submit more polished work. A more nuanced study could map student grades across multiple courses and assignments to determine if flexible due dates does improve performance for some students.

A key benefit identified in the literature on legal education is that universal design principles can support the dignity and privacy of people with disabilities.⁴⁷ For the students in these classes, they did not need to disclose information to their course coordinator to access a flexible due date but, because the universal design principles stop at the classroom, they still need to disclose to the university and other course coordinators. In this regard, flexible due dates in stand-alone classes can only ever be incidentally supportive. However, even this rather modest integration of universal design principles through structured due dates with integrated flexibility, seems to provide helpful support for many students.

As a replication study, this research used the original language of an 'ideal deadline' to provide students with clear information about course sequencing and emphasize that deadlines are important. However, this language may subtly stigmatize students who, for academic or personal reasons, cannot meet the ideal deadline. Future iterations of this approach could adopt more neutral terminology. The term 'original deadline' may be equally effective at communicating information about course sequencing without implying that those who use the extension are less capable students.

⁴⁶ Hills and Peacock (n 31); Ruesch and Sarvary (n 3).

⁴⁷ Colker (n 2).

X CONCLUSION

Earlier scoping studies in Australia found that university wide policies and procedures which support universal design principles are most effective at supporting a wide range of students. However, the universal design evidence base is still emerging. By replicating an earlier US study, which had similar positive results, this article contributes to an emerging body of research on universal design in higher education. This study suggests that even a ‘dose’ of flexibility can support students to have a more positive classroom experience, without having a negative impact on student performance or on the workload of academics.

Despite different student cohorts, class sizes, and subject matter it appears that providing structuring due dates with integrated flexible due dates can support universal design principles. Crucially though, when students had flexibility around a due date it meant course coordinators had more time to focus on teaching. The administrative burden of evaluating applications requesting an extension lightened considerably. The chance of inadvertently not supporting a student because they did not complete a form correctly, was also largely removed.

This study contributes to a growing body of research suggesting that targeted, relatively modest interventions (such as structured yet flexible deadlines) can be implemented without negative impacts on student performance or academic workload. While not every student reported this approach supported their needs, the vast majority reported that the intervention was beneficial. Although further research across disciplines and institutional contexts is needed, the findings presented here provide cautious support for the broader adoption of similar, incremental UDL approaches.

XI ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No Generative AI tools were knowingly used in preparing for or drafting the main body of this article. However, a Generative AI tool (Microsoft Copilot) was used to generate the initial draft of the article's abstract. The authors then critically reviewed this draft and modified it to ensure the abstract reflected the authors' position and evince