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Initial findings on student progress and satisfaction in a new model of hyperflexible online delivery for university students

Colin Beer
Central Queensland University, c.beer@cqu.edu.au

Kate Ames
Central Queensland University, k.ames@cqu.edu.au

Noal Atkinson
Central Queensland University, n.atkinson@cqu.edu.au

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Colin Beer, Kate Ames, Noal Atkinson, Damien Clark, and Peter Hosie

Corresponding Author

Kate Ames, 160 Ann St, Brisbane QLD 4000, Australia

Abstract

University degrees are usually delivered in defined sessions —by term, semester, or in week-based blocks— whereby students are required to complete their studies by the due date. Term or session-based schedules that require students to complete the study within set timeframes are, however, potentially restrictive. Temporal challenges associated with work and life can impede progress and add to the specific problem of student attrition in online learning. As universities seek to deliver innovative options for their students, increased attention is being paid to alternate models of delivery. This paper reports on the development of a hyperflexible online Master of Business Administration (MBA) course by a regional university in Australia, which has grown to more than 1,000 students since its launch in 2017. Delivered entirely online, the degree was specifically designed to address an inequity; MBA programs are traditionally expensive, and in Australia, the requirement for students to travel to attend residential schools and examinations adds significant cost to already expensive tuition fees. This paper analyzed enrollment data, course analytics over a two-year period, and student surveys conducted at the end of the second year of delivery (n = 98) to evaluate the development and implementation of the course as a hyperflexible course whereby students have almost complete control over their study at the postgraduate tertiary level. Results highlight the potential for the model to enable student success through flexibility.

Keywords

online learning, tertiary qualifications, higher education, distance, flexible learning

Initial Findings on Student Progress and Satisfaction in a New Model of Hyperflexible Online Delivery for University Students

Colin Beer[1], Kate Ames[2], Noal Atkinson[3], Damien Clark[4], and Peter Hosie[5]

Learning Design and Innovation
Central Queensland University, Australia

[1]c.beer@cqu.edu.au
[2]k.ames@cqu.edu.au
[3]n.atkinson@cqu.edu.au
[4]d.clark@cqu.edu.au
[5]pjhosie@outlook.com

Abstract

University degrees are usually delivered in defined sessions —by term, semester, or in week-based blocks— whereby students are required to complete their studies by the due date. Term or session-based schedules that require students to complete the study within set timeframes are, however, potentially restrictive. Temporal challenges associated with work and life can impede progress and add to the specific problem of student attrition in online learning. As universities seek to deliver innovative options for their students, increased attention is being paid to alternate models of delivery. This paper reports on the development of a hyperflexible online Master of Business Administration (MBA) course by a regional university in Australia, which has grown to more than 1,000 students since its launch in 2017. Delivered entirely online, the degree was specifically designed to address an inequity; MBA programs are traditionally expensive, and in Australia, the requirement for students to travel to attend residential schools and examinations adds significant cost to already expensive tuition fees. This paper analyzed enrollment data, course analytics over a two-year period, and student surveys conducted at the end of the second year of delivery ($n = 98$) to evaluate the development and implementation of the course as a hyperflexible course whereby students have almost complete control over their study at the postgraduate tertiary level. Results highlight the potential for the model to enable student success through flexibility.

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Introduction

This paper reports on the first 24 months of student progress in an online postgraduate course offered by a regional Australian university that represents a new model of delivery. The course, an online Master of Business Administration (MBA), is offered *hyperflexibly*, meaning students can enroll at any time into the courses and units, and can also submit assessments at any time. The only limit to the study pattern is a capstone unit closed to enrollment until prerequisite units have been successfully completed. All units require completion within five years of initial enrollment.

The model is unique internationally and was developed as an innovation project aimed to address questions of equity and access to postgraduate study more broadly, with a specific focus on regional students. The development team coined the model a tertiary accredited self-paced online course in an attempt to differentiate the course from a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC).

Literature Review

Online learning

Online learning is increasingly popular and ubiquitous in higher education delivery (Seery et al., 2020). Many institutions that have traditionally offered programs via on-campus delivery only have transitioned to online environments by engaging in MOOCs, which were introduced to the higher education sector internationally in the late 2000s. MOOCs are now well-established in higher education, introducing masses of students to new knowledge and new ways to study (Breslow et al., 2013; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013a, 2013b; Stracke & Trisolini, 2021). MOOCs are not formal qualifications in themselves, but in some cases can contribute to formal qualifications through articulation and credit pathways (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013a). As more institutions engage with online course delivery, new approaches to this delivery method have emerged and universities traditionally known for on-campus teaching have partnered with online delivery specialists to develop innovative course packages in response to the demand for micro-credentials and flexible pathways.

However, one feature of MOOCs is a high level of student attrition (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013b) and questions about quality have also been raised (see Stracke & Trisolini, 2021 for a useful summary). High dropout rates are the norm, and students primarily engage with MOOCs to learn new skills and knowledge (Breslow et al., 2013; Goopio & Cheung, 2021; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013b; Vitiello et al., 2018). Moreover, MOOCs have been credited with disrupting higher education and introducing online learning to teaching staff and students who previously had only been exposed to face-to-face or blended delivery models. Distance or online programs, including MOOCs, provide non-traditional students with greater opportunities to learn and gain qualifications (Stoessel et al., 2015). This is, however, complicated as non-traditional students may come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, or regional areas, or have limited prior exposure to higher education.

Most student attrition is due to factors unrelated to the study (Beer & Lawson, 2016; Stoessel et al., 2015), and attrition rates for online courses are generally higher than for on-campus studies (Peck et al., 2018). Studies have examined the risk of attrition in distance courses and the findings have varied. For example, students who are unable to self-regulate study and are less motivated are at higher risk of dropping out (Peck et al., 2018). Those least likely to drop out will be those who have extrinsic motivation (that is, a study is a means to an end) and demonstrate self-efficacy (Peck et al., 2018). This complements findings that those students who are self-regulated tend to learn more effectively; are more patient, more resourceful, and more confident; and are higher achievers (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Pintrich, 1995; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Debate exists regarding the relationship between the successful completion of online study to prior qualifications or professional experience, with Stoessel et al. (2015) affirming but Niemczyk et al. (2018) negating. Stoessel et al. (2015) found that full-time employed students, migrant students, and female students were more likely to drop out of the online study and that older students and parents

were less likely to drop out. While Stoessel et al. (2015) noted that their finding about women was unexpected, their suggestion that women did not have the same career motivation for study may be consistent with Peck et al. (2018) who linked extrinsic motivation as having greater potential for retention. That an alternative study by Sultan and Hagger (2013) identified men as more likely to be non-completers of distance study indicating some of the conflicting research and potential for very specific contextual issues that can influence student study.

These studies raise considerations for instructional designers of online courses when specifically addressing sociodemographic influences and reasons for attrition. One of these is that designers should build courses that are perceived as having a high task value, encourage and motivate the students in their progress, and build learning strategies into the course and study work so that students can improve their performance as they work through the material. (Peck et al., 2018, p. 9). Regardless of how well-designed a course may be, students may still be required to drop out of the study if they cannot meet the requirements for assessment and commitment within the time boundary associated with course schedules.

Time-Bound Requirements for Online Study

The impact of due dates and pressure to complete specified requirements have received little attention in the literature associated with attrition, presumably because a time boundary is an assumed inherent requirement of the study. There are unanswered questions about the relationship between attrition, program structure, and time-bound requirements to complete by established dates. Most higher education study, including that completed within MOOC-like learning environments, is bound by time or session (term) enrollment and due dates. Students enroll in a suite of study units that contribute to a qualification at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. They then progress at recommended rates depending on institutional requirements. For example, a full-time student may enroll in four separate units during a term or semester session, or a part-time student may enroll in two separate units during that same period. Some institutions teach in two terms a year, others teach in three (or more). In most cases, therefore, students have a specific amount of time in which they must complete the requirements of each unit.

Higher education course development and delivery are informed by regulatory requirements related to quality and funding internationally. In Australia, the Higher Education Standards Framework: Threshold Standards 2015 (Australian Qualifications Framework Council [AQF], 2013), requires that course design considers indicative student workload. The Australian Qualifications Framework (2013) refers to a notional student workload known as the volume of learning that is associated with a qualification level; for example, the AQF refers to a volume of learning as "sufficient for graduates to achieve the learning outcomes for a qualification of this level and type" (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 28). This is generally understood as 150 hours per six credit point unit. These units are generally studied within terms (12 to 16 weeks, depending on the institution). Universities that receive public funding in Australia do so in accordance with the Higher Education Support Act (2003), which uses term-based delivery as the basis for funding.

Context for Change

No information exists on the impact of removing term or session-associated dates in the literature. It does not appear that this has been a specific object of study, and overwhelmingly, research into teaching practice in higher education environments is based on an assumption of term or semester as a required component of course delivery. However, with 90% of contemporary students engaged in full-time or part-time employment, it is time to question traditional delivery models and explore alternatives (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

The impetus for a new model of hyperflexible online delivery came from a desire to address complicated relationships between attrition, motivation, and increasingly busy student lives. Due to vast distances, low populations, and limited services in regional and rural areas in Australia, online education is the only possibility for post-secondary education for many Australians living outside metropolitan areas. These students are often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, older, working, and potentially isolated technically, emotionally, and geographically (Nelson et al., 2017). They may be impacted by some prohibiting factors that further reduce the attraction of postgraduate study. These include the cost of tuition, the requirement for travel associated with residential schools, and term-based study that conflicts with the demands of work or life. Many regional residents are already well-engaged with community networks and do not necessarily seek opportunities to leave their region. They may simply want to improve their knowledge and increase their potential for progress within their local area.

This study was conducted at a regionally-based university on Australia's East Coast. It is a national university, with a presence in multiple locations across five Australian states. It is also one of six *comprehensive* universities in Australia, offering vocational (work-based) as well as higher education courses. It has approximately 33,500 students (25,000 higher education and 8,500 vocational) and a long-established reputation as a distance education provider, with more than half its domestic students electing to study by distance. The university had not engaged with MOOCs because it has long been a distance education provider and almost all of its courses have already been established as online offerings.

In 2016, university staff identified an opportunity in the highly competitive MBA market. MBA courses are traditionally expensive, designed for those who have worked extensively in managerial roles, and if delivered online, comprise residential school components that facilitate executive networking. In 2019, the MBA market in Australia comprised 110 offerings with the most expensive costing $126,000, and the average cost of around $50,000 (News, 2020). Despite the apparent saturation in the market, there was room for an affordable, flexible, online-only MBA to better meet the needs of regional Australians different than those already in the market.

The university invested in technology and instructional design to develop its first hyperflexible course. A team of technical and online curriculum experts was brought together, supported by an implementation team. This team had significant collective expertise in online learning as evidenced by almost 300 publications, 37 teaching awards including three Australian citations for outstanding contributions to student learning, and almost $500,000 in research grants at the time. The project was conceptualized as a disruptive innovation project and resulted in the development of an online postgraduate MBA program consisting of 11 units including a capstone unit. It was designed to meet the AQF requirements for the volume of learning and quality standards but is not

delivered on a formal term basis. Students enroll at any time, study in their own time, complete assessments at their own pace, and are required only to complete all graded assessments within a set period of five years from their date of enrollment. They are supported by a small academic team who engage with them personally via social media and through assessment feedback. All course material is pre-produced and designed for online delivery. There are no requirements to attend residential schools, and no in-class group work or discussion is required. Rather, assumptions are made that students are already working in teams or engaging in groups with whom they can reflect in authentically oriented assessments.

The course is comparatively open-entry. That is, the normal requirement for significant experience within management was relaxed; students were required to demonstrate three to five years of experience with formal qualifications, or more experience if they did not have formal qualifications. Due to the specific difficulties and complexities associated with online study, students were asked to self-select as independent learners experienced in, and equipped for, using technology and learning online. Prior to enrollment, students are required to review a sample study unit and complete an orientation quiz, as well as acknowledge terms and conditions of entry that reinforce the independent nature of the course. Once enrolled and engaged with the online content, students can track their progress, with all activities and resources providing estimates to students on how long they are expected to take.

Forums have been identified one essential ingredient of an effective online course, providing an opportunity for asynchronous communication and instructional interaction (Alzahrani, 2017; Mackness et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2010). However, a question emerged as to what might happen if options for discussion via an internal forum were removed. There is evidence that online discussion forums can be a source of stress for students, and an administrative burden for staff (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013b; Mackness et al., 2010). No discussion forum was enabled on the Learning Management System (LMS); rather, a private online social media group was established that students could join. Students were advised of this group upon formal enrollment. While social learning is acknowledged as important and an influencing factor on student progress, uncertainty remains regarding the extent that students, particularly post-graduate students, need to be socially engaged with one another to learn. The development team engaged with many such problems and potential solutions. Additional questions, among many, included: How will we manage and track online submissions if there are no due dates? What is the relationship between terms and student progress? How will students progress if time-based restrictions on them are removed? What interventions will encourage progress? Will students respond to interventions? Therefore, the specific research question addressed by this paper is:

- How do students behave online and respond to study materials in the absence of deadlines in a university-level hyperflexible course?

This question is important because it informs intervention measures to support and motivate students to continue within a highly independent learning environment whereby students have self-identified as competent and self-sufficient learners.

Methods

This paper's findings are based on a secondary analysis of course data sourced from the student information system, the moodle LMS, and the course's learning analytics system, along with a

survey of students conducted in early 2020. The self-paced and flexible enrollment strategy in this course created a challenge for the implementation team. Existing university systems, such as the student information system and Moodle, operate an assumption that the teaching delivery model is term-based and unit-centered. Additionally, university systems that provided student progress and performance reporting were incompatible with the hyperflexible model where each student has their own enrollment date and could progress on a path and pace of their choosing.

The curriculum team included learning analytics researchers with experience in the development of university-wide learning analytics applications. A database was developed that collected, aggregated, and filtered student data from the student information system and the LMS to provide teachers with visibility over student progress and performance. This allowed the implementation team to look for patterns in the student activity data that could help with course operation and contribute to ongoing curriculum enhancement. The study employs a descriptive research methodology. Descriptive research is a methodological approach that helps describe a phenomenon and its characteristics and is often an exploratory precursor to more detailed research (Nassaji, 2015). The data in this study is based on patterns apparent in the data resulting from the initial development of a learning analytics approach that complements the hyperflexible learning environment.

The data in this study is based on the enrollment of students in two distinct cohorts: pilot and non-pilot students. The pilot students are those who enrolled in the course prior to its launch. These students were offered enrollment in the entire course at significantly reduced fees conditional on being available to test systems and providing early feedback on course content, assessment, and their experiences. This pilot group included university staff and a group of 12 industry-based students enrolled as a cohort group. Non-pilot students are those who enrolled in the course after July 1, 2018, as full fee-paying students. Non-pilot students could elect to enroll in and pay for the entire program at the time of enrollment or enroll in the course but pay for units individually. On June 1, 2020, there were 57 pilot students and 443 non-pilot students enrolled in the course. The analysis of these two cohorts within the hyperflexible course provides a point of contrast within the hyperflexible environment. The findings presented in this study are an initial exploration of the hyperflexible course after almost two full years of operation. While it is still too early to establish the impact –if any, of the hyperflexible model on student retention, this study highlights some interesting patterns and behaviors that can inform future studies.

Results

In the first two years, students enrolled part-time in traditional term-based units would normally have been expected to complete eight units if studying part-time. It became immediately clear that the pattern of behavior was somewhat different from that observed in standard term-based online courses. The findings in this section relate to student demographics, location, enrolment patterns, course access options, progression, performance, communication, and administration. In addition, each student's prior qualifications were gathered at enrollment time to assess their ability to complete a master's level degree and to provide background information to teaching and support staff.

Student Demographics

The average age for non-pilot students was 40 years old and for pilot students 45 years old, with all students having some form of professional experience. The following Table 1 shows the prior qualifications and the level of qualification for a sample of the students in each cohort. Note that prior qualifications data was available only for 221 of the 443 non-pilot students at the time of the study.

Table 1. Number of Prior Qualifications

Student With	Pilot (*n* = 57)	Non-Pilot (*n* = 221)
Prior undergraduate qualifications	40	120
Prior postgraduate qualifications	15	50
Prior vocational qualifications	10	55
No prior qualifications	4	28

Student Location

During the two years of offering, the course was open to Australian domestic students only. Some students in the course were based in highly remote areas, such as Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory and Broken Hill in New South Wales. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of all students in the course and highlights the regional and remote focus of the course. In some cases, clusters of students were associated with government agency cohort enrollments. Areas such as southwest Western Australia and the Wide Bay region in Queensland are examples of where government departments chose this course as a professional development option for their staff. Four cohorts comprising a total of 31 students were admitted to the course as non-pilot students. Overall, the geographic dispersion of the students shown in Figure 1 indicates the actualization of the design intent to focus on regional and remote students.

Figure 1. Student Geographic Locations

Student Enrolment Patterns

Students enroll and begin their studies immediately and do not have to wait for a term to commence. Figure 2 indicates enrollments by month of the non-pilot students for the first 22 months of operation. There was an unanticipated demand for cohort enrollment, and workplace-supported cohorts were enrolled in December 2018 and May/June 2019 which explains the enrollment increases at these times. The large spike in December 2019 was due to an advertised 2020 price increase. Broadly, this figure highlights a particular difference with the hyperflexible approach, whereby student enrollments occur as a stream, and not a batch, such as might be seen in a term-based course.

Figure 2. Enrolment Trend for Non-Pilot Students
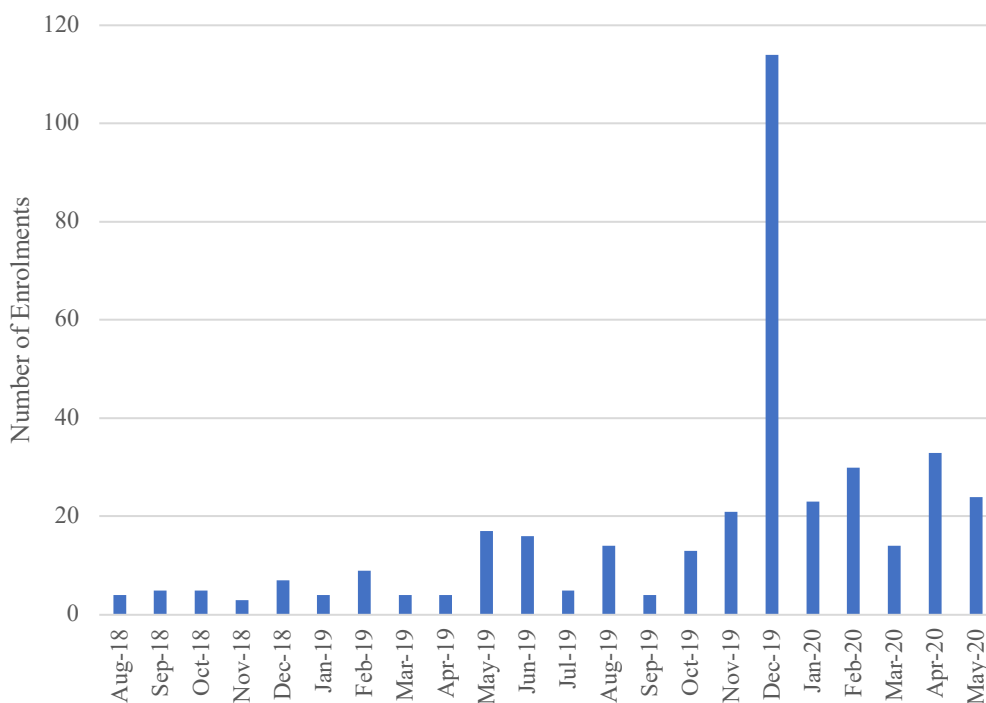
Student Progress

Tracking progress in a hyperflexible course environment proved to be challenging as students were commencing their courses at different times and progressing at their own pace. In a term-based unit, all students are required to finish the unit by the end of the term and progress can be collectively determined against the end-of-term timeframe. With a hyperflexible course, student progress is specific to the individual student and is based on the date that each student commenced. Table 2 shows various progression indicators for each student cohort such as how many students access course materials, how many completed assessments, how many individual assessments were completed, the number of active days across student enrollment, and how many students completed unit requirements.

Table 2. Comparison of Student Progression

Student Progress	Pilot (*n* = 57)	Non-Pilot (*n* = 443)
Accessed course content	91%	97%
Completed any assessment	42%	38%
Individual Assessments Submitted	**Pilot (*n* = 157)**	**Non-Pilot (*n* = 1311)**
Proportion of active days on the LMS across total enrolment	5%	17%
Number of students who have completed units	6	80

Students in the non-pilot group generally made better overall progress than pilot students. Between July 2018 and June 2020, 97% of the non-pilot students had accessed course resources compared with 91% of pilot students. At the time of the study, all of the pilot students had been enrolled in the course for almost two years whereas the non-pilot student enrolments were distributed across both years of operation and had less time in the course than the pilot students. The non-pilot students had completed more assessments proportionally and numerically than the pilot students. However, six of the pilot students had completed units suggesting that a small number of the pilot students were progressing well. The proportion of active days on the LMS is a simple representation of the total number of days that the students had been enrolled, against the number of those days they had accessed their course material. This is important when considered against the AQF volume of learning that broadly equates to six to seven hours per week for a five-year coursework master's degree. Days active on the LMS are a useful proxy indicator for student motivation and persistence, both of which are indicators of a student's ability to self-regulate their study (Barnard et al., 2009).

Overall and based on the data, most of the non-pilot students progressed well in these early stages of their studies, with most being on track to complete within the five-year timeframe. The most advanced students have completed the course and averaged more than 20 hours per week of study time with a distinction-grade average. By contrast and with some notable exceptions, the data also suggests that most of the pilot students are behind in their studies after nearly two years and will struggle to finish their degrees within five years based on their current activity patterns. This represents a challenge to the curriculum team, who have specifically targeted this cohort with additional encouragement and support. The large variations in student progress are also indicative of the self-paced nature of the course and continue to be monitored closely by the curriculum team.

Each element of content in the LMS has been assigned a notional time it would take to complete for the average post-graduate student. This can also be used to track student progress by providing an indicator of how long each student is spending on their studies per week. Course staff can use this indicator to identify students whose study pattern is insufficient for them to complete the course in the required time. Table 3 shows three students who enrolled on the same day, but each spent different amounts of time studying per week, as indicated by accessed course material.

Table 3. Example of Student Activity Per Week

Student	Days Enrolled	Hours of Content Accessed	Approximate Hours Per Week
Student A	166	183	8
Student B	166	72	3
Student C	166	43	2

In this example, Student A is spending approximately 8 hours per week on their studies, and given a notional volume of learning for a coursework master of 1,700 hours, this student is on target to

complete their studies on time. While this method of monitoring student progress is imprecise, when coupled with the monitoring of assessment completions and performance, it provides the teaching team with useful metrics for monitoring their students in a hyperflexible course.

Assessment Submission Behaviors

The curriculum team began to notice that students took considerable time after enrollment to submit their first assessment in particular. On average, students took over three months to submit their first assessment, yet subsequent assessments were often submitted within days of the first submission. Table 4 shows the number of days between enrollment in units and the first five assessment submissions for the 500 students included in this study.

Table 4. Assessment Submission Behaviors

Submission Sequence	Submitted Assessment	Mean Days After Enrollment for Submission
1st Submission	250	102
2nd Submission	193	118
3rd Submission	153	138
4th Submission	133	144
5th Submission	118	149

The 1,064 assessment submissions noted in Table 4 represent a wide variety of assessment types including quizzes, essays, reports, reflections, and case studies. The mean number of days after enrollment does not convey the variation within this range of days. That range spans from 11 to 518 days (*Median* = 55). While this pattern highlights potential future research and has yet to be statistically analyzed, the broad pattern aligns with anecdotal reports from the curriculum team about *assessment anxiety* among these students. The curriculum team is now aware of this pattern and is taking some initial steps to encourage students with their first assessment submission. The curriculum team is proactively encouraging new students to engage with their assessments earlier and is reviewing the resubmission process to alleviate the fear of failure that can impact students who may not have participated in higher education for some years. Table 4 also indicates that once students have submitted and received feedback on their first assessment, they appear more confident in submitting their subsequent assessments. Although further study is needed, this pattern may provide useful insight into the assessment design in early units of study within a hyperflexible course.

Student Performance

Linking closely with student progress are measures of student performance. Collecting and monitoring student results are important for this course for two reasons. Firstly, student grades provide the student with a quality benchmark of their achievements against a standard. Secondly, the curriculum team can use the results diagnostically to determine how the curriculum is performing. As an example, Table 5 shows little variation in performance between the pilot and non-pilot students as indicated by the mean grades received for their completed assessments.

Table 5. Assessment Results

Assessment Result/Grade	Pilot Submissions (n = 157)	Non-Pilot Submissions (n = 1311)
Average Assessment Result	77%	71%
Average Assessment Grade	Distinction	Credit

There were 157 assessment submissions from pilot students during this two-year period, compared with 1,311 assessment submissions from non-pilot students. The pilot students averaged a Distinction grade across their 157 assessments compared with a Credit average for the 1,311 assessments submitted by the non-pilot students. The overall grade difference, collectively, between these two cohorts was only 6%. It is also anecdotally evident to the curriculum team that those assessments that drew on authentic-type requirements, and which asked students to reflect on personal experience or professional practice, resulted in higher grades across both cohorts.

Assessment Performance

Collectively, students had attempted all 41 summative assessments across the course. Table 6 shows the top five assessment items based on the number of submissions and their corresponding mean student result. This, along with other data sources, was used diagnostically to track the performance of the course's assessments.

Table 6. Assessment Submissions and Mean Result

Assessment Item	Submissions	Average Result
A	139	54%
B	129	69%
C	107	62%
D	95	75%
E	85	70%

For example, assessment item A had a relatively low mean result of 54% over 139 attempts. This may indicate the assessment task requires further clarification, the concepts being tested are not adequately covered in the preceding course materials, or the assessment needs a redesign. Further research is useful to explore and refine this method of monitoring assessment performance.

Student Communication

All students received entry interviews and personalized phone calls from the academic Head of the Course at specified intervals. There was anecdotal evidence that these interventions prompted action by the students. The course does not have online forums as would a traditional course. Instead, a closed, course-based social media group was established to which 113 students had subscribed at the time of analysis. Students posted requests to engage with other students in their geographic areas, posted recommended readings, and also established an online Facebook study group for those interested in further networking. A number of students posted proactively to the group, but most students demonstrated *lurking* behavior, which is a known phenomenon in online learning and participation more broadly (Beaudoin, 2002; Crawford, 2011; Palmer et al., 2008). Students also received a monthly newsletter delivered to their email inboxes. On average, student activity on the learning platform routinely increased after these monthly newsletters. Meanwhile, students who met predefined inactivity thresholds were sent email reminders designed to reengage them in the course. The data on the impact of these reminders has yet to be analyzed by the curriculum team.

On the surface, the hyperflexible approach is less communicative with students than a traditional delivery approach where there are unit and course forums, discussion boards, and so on. However, even though the number of communication channels is reduced with the approach, the focus shifts

to the quality of student communication over these limited channels. For example, feedback to students on assessment represents an important communication channel with students in a hyperflexible course. As such, the curriculum team introduced a moderation and review process that monitors the feedback that students receive from markers to ensure that it is appropriately developmental and encouraging. Unlike a traditional delivery model often supplemented by face-to-face interactions, the quality of feedback in this model is of utmost importance.

Student Administration

Due to the flexible nature of enrollment, individual applications were reviewed after enrollment by course staff. In two cases, students were determined to be not eligible for the study and were refunded payment and manually withdrawn from the course. Of 155 enrollments, three students requested full course refunds within the trial period. One of these students withdrew for reasons of personal hardship, one recognized they were not suitable for such independent study, and the third failed to meet residency requirements. No requests for appeal, review of grades, or extensions are yet to be received during the study period. The curriculum team noted that the workload for course staff with the hyperflexible model is different from traditional delivery methods. While traditional delivery methods are associated with workload spikes aligned to the start of term or assessment due dates, workloads within this course are more distributed and consistent.

Student Satisfaction

Students have indicated overwhelming satisfaction with the model, based on an analysis of a student survey (response $n = 93$) conducted as part of the course's annual review in 2020. The survey was distributed to students between February and May and was comprised of a Likert scale and open-ended questions. Students were informed via a monthly student newsletter and results were collated as a course 2020 Student Survey. Students reported they were attracted to the degree because of the low price, flexibility, and employer-sponsored opportunity. Most students agreed that the flexibility of the course helped them achieve their outcomes with 32 students agreeing (34.4%) and 56 students strongly agreeing (60.3%) (see Table 7). Further to this, most students agreed that the flexibility within the degree helped them balance studies with the rest of their life with 87 students (93.6%) either agreeing ($n = 29$) or strongly agreeing ($n = 58$) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Student Survey Responses – Flexibility and Motivation

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The flexibility of the degree helps me achieve my learning outcomes	56/60.3%	32/34.4%	3/3.2%	2/2.1%	0
I feel that the flexibility of the MBA (Leadership) helps me balance study with the rest of my life	58/62.4%	29/31.2%	6/6.4%	0	0
I am not worried about the overall qualification – I am simply enjoying learning new things	5/5.4%	21/22.6%	25/26.9%	35/37.6%	7/7.5%

Students were asked about factors that impacted the study, with time and pressures associated with family being the overwhelmingly dominant themes. Flexibility was one of three dominant responses when students were asked what they enjoyed most, along with the quality of content and learning new ideas. Students reported that the volume of content and finding time or motivation for the study were the greatest challenges or things they liked least about studying under this

model.

Students were asked about the motivation behind their decision to engage in this course. The rationale for this question is underpinned by research that indicates student enrollment in MOOCs is often driven by the desire to learn and to determine whether a contrast exists with this hyperflexible model. While 26 students agreed and or strongly agreed (28%) that learning was their primary driver for selecting this course, the majority of students (72%) indicated that achieving the qualification was their primary motivation or balanced with a desire to learn (see Table 7). However, this indicates that more than a quarter of the students did not see the overall qualification as the main reason for their study.

The curriculum team will further study the future impact of this novel distribution of student motivations and the potential impact on student attrition. However, it is encouraging to note that overall, student responses indicated the flexible model supported their learning, professional, and personal goals.

Discussion and Reflections

As the hyperflexible approach is relatively new at the tertiary level, there are no established benchmarks against which we can measure student progress. Indeed, one of the challenges for the development team was explaining the model to peers external to the university and some educators within the institution. While the university's expertise in distance education is significant, and most academic staff have experience in developing and delivering online courses, externally, a preoccupation with MOOCs within the sector meant that MOOC-style learning was the benchmark for innovation and was the framework for understanding. For many people, a MOOC had become their first exposure to online learning, particularly when also framed within innovation. When talking about our project, people would ask, "Oh, is it like a MOOC?" MOOCs are, in themselves, generally unregulated. Designing a fully accredited hyperflexible course required a number of specific considerations, such as moderation of assessment, transfer of grades between learning and management systems, and so on. Normal administrative functions such as census dates (when enrollment numbers are reported to the Australian federal government) and enrollment dates are required to be considered at the individual student level rather than the cohort level, which incurs an additional administrative burden and is out of step with existing university systems and processes.

The findings in this study provide a baseline for the curriculum team to conduct future analysis and research. As the hyperflexible approach is considerably different from current university term-based operations, the curriculum team is taking an applied research approach to operation. The findings of this study represent an evidence-based reflection opportunity for the team to gauge how the course is performing, and how it is meeting the needs of its target market. The self-directed model of this course has been well received by the students who appreciate its flexibility, and its suitability for their busy lives. The model appears to be particularly well-suited for post-graduate students who are, perhaps, more experienced learners than younger undergraduate students.

Though still in the program's early days, as students have another four years to complete the requirements of their course, overall, there are encouraging signs. That some students immediately self-selected as unsuitable for independent study, despite indicating that they acknowledged these

conditions upon enrollment, indicates the approach is working as it should. This type of study is not suitable for some people. Ultimately, it is designed for a student demographic impacted by workload cycles or family issues, but otherwise capable of self-directed learning. If some of the attrition factors relating to individual students are temporal in nature, the hyperflexible model should help with student attrition. For example, a student who experiences a relationship breakdown or illness is not penalized under this model as they would in a term or session-based delivery model. The overall approach to designing a new model for tertiary course delivery aligns with another study that suggested universities need to shift their thinking about student attrition, as contemporary models of delivery struggle to adapt to changing societal norms (Beer & Lawson, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper explored the question of how students behave online and respond to study materials in the absence of deadlines in a university-level hyperflexible course. Its findings and discussion were based on secondary analytic data associated with student activity in the first 24 months of progress by students on a new hyperflexible model of online postgraduate course delivery. The emergent results provide a baseline for analysis regarding student perceptions, progress, and experience in such a flexible model. While it is early days, it is already clear that the pattern of engagement by students in the postgraduate hyperflexible course is unique. Exploration of the relationship between temporal boundaries, progress, and student quality in higher education is new but is worthwhile as it specifically addresses the issue that most students drop out of distance or online study due to life factors, rather than study factors.

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