Making deadlines and exams more accessible for students with hidden burdens

Deadlines are an everyday part of college life for both students and lecturers. Many might think of deadlines as fair and non-discriminating across the board for all students, and just part of how we do things and assess people's learning. However, this is not always true as many students have 'hidden burdens' which stop them from fully participating in college life (both academically and socially). These can be things such as having to work part-time to afford rent, or having childcare responsibilities at home. These realities frequently restrict their schedule or pop up unexpectedly for them - and cause issues in terms of deadlines and online exams.

Being flexible (where practical) in deadlines for assignments/essays etc. and the timing of online exams may allow these students to participate more equally when it comes to assessment. The key thing here is communication and an open mind. **Communicating with students about what works best for them and being open to accommodating them is always a good start**.

IMPROVING DEADLINES
FOR STUDENTS WITH HIDDEN BURDENS

• Consider your students' overall workload

• Don't just base it on how long the assessment 'should' take to do

• Give students flexibility if the deadline isn't based on a learning outcome

• Encourage students to reach out to you if they have an issue

Offer the chance for students to give feedback in a meaningful way, and do your best to implement it

ONLINE EXAMS
FOR STUDENTS WITH HIDDEN BURDENS

• Give students more time to complete your exam

• Consider alternative assessments for students

• Talk to your students about what works for them in terms of format
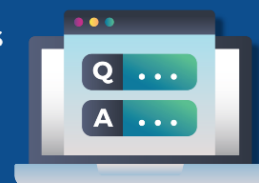
Always remember, not every student has the home environment to sit an exam in the 'traditional' manner

I'd like to respond to some reservations or opposition to further flexibility and accommodations when it comes to deadlines:

- **"Deadlines act as good motivation"**
  Deadlines shouldn't be in place just to pressure students into working within a certain timeframe. Deadlines that are too tight or restrictive can often cause unnecessary anxiety for students and prioritise an attitude of 'getting the work done' over doing good work first and foremost.
- **"Students can fall behind on assignments"**
  The onus is still (as it always has been) on students to complete their work.
- **"Students don't need more time"**
  This makes an assumption about students that may not apply to everybody. If there is no legitimate academic reason (based in the stated learning outcomes of the module) for a deadline that students are finding to be tight or hard to aim for, then students should feel comfortable in questioning why it has been set as such.

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When it comes to online exams, which many of us - both lecturers and students are getting used to for the first time:

- **"Students are more likely to cheat/plagiarise"**
  Students shouldn't be restricted by the assumption that given more time, they are more likely to plagiarise their answers. Plagiarism shouldn't be affected by moving an online exam from 5 hours to 24 or 48 hours (or even longer). If the academic integrity of your exam is threatened by giving 24 hours to complete it, then the same thing is true even if it 5 hours or 2 hours – so time isn't the real issue.
- **"Students don't need more time"**
  The time of the exam may not suit some students – so giving them space to sit and do the exam over the course of a day or two days will allow them to work around any responsibilities/burdens they have.

WHY?

- Some students have 'hidden burdens' that can be hard to work around, such as
  - Childcare responsibilities
  - Part-time work

- Tight deadlines may be seen as a 'motivation' but can cause unnecessary stress and prioritise just 'getting the work done' over doing good work

- Flexibility and more time (where practical) shouldn't impact the academic integrity of exams or assignments

These infographics were developed as part of the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project Summer Student Partner Programme

Trinity College Dublin — The University of Dublin

By actively listening to student needs and feedback, we can work together to make college more accessible and inclusive!

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Recognise that students with hidden burdens may often have:

- Less time to study/work than other students
- A more restrictive or less predictive schedule
- An environment which is non-conducive to online learning.

These factors can lead to issues managing multiple deadlines, and engaging with assignments and exams. Overall, the main thing to remember in relation to this and generally speaking, is that clear and open communication with students is key. In a given situation, the majority of students may not need accommodations to be made, but this doesn't mean those who do should go without. It is important that they are included and given the opportunity to express what works for them so that they can better engage with college. Communicating constructively with them and being open about what's possible can be very helpful.

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