

***Workload and Wellbeing***

***in Responsive Blended Learning***

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*Report*

*Heriot-Watt Student Union*

*October 2020*

# Summary

Throughout the feedback obtained by the Student Union, and a regular feature of the biweekly School Officer meetings, students are feeling overworked and overwhelmed. There is a shared sentiment of the workload feeling overwhelming, staff not providing enough guidance on navigating asynchronous materials, and concerns over mental health and wellbeing. While there is a strong feeling of this amongst the students, there is also value found in Responsive Blended Learning through the flexibility, recording of materials for use in revision, and the staff’s rapid transition to a new mode of learning.

With the triangulation of the data between the various forms of feedback and the overlap with the Early Experience Survey (EES), the following recommendations have been made based on student input and the understanding of workload challenges facing staff.

# Recommendations

1. More clear and consistent communications from the University at all levels, including guidance on navigating asynchronous materials and expectations of students on assessments
2. Policy on contacting students outside of normal business hours
3. Initiatives to promote student-student and student-staff community, e.g. synchronous sessions to have space before and after for socialising, sessions aimed specifically at socialising and/or dedicated Teams pages/channels for students to interact
4. Timetabled break to combat screen fatigue and encourage students to get up and walk around
5. More communications from support services on support available to students
6. Where possible, consolidation of and/or spreading out posting of asynchronous materials to prevent overwhelming students

# Feedback

## School Officer Poll:

**Are students finding there to be a higher workload with Responsive Blended Learning?**

Yes – **70%** (12)

No – **0%** (0)

Maybe – **29%** (5)

Total School Officers – **23**

Response rate – **73.9%**

## Class representative Poll:

**Are students finding there to be a higher workload with Responsive Blended Learning?**

Yes – **80%** (40)

No – **2%** (1)

Maybe – **18%** (9)

Total Class Reps – **201**

Response rate – **24.9%**

See ***Appendix II*** for Microsoft Forms poll results.

## Academic Congress Discussion Topic:

**Wellbeing in Responsive Blended Learning**

Benefits:

* Feeling more included due to big online meetings
* People who usually are too shy to contribute find themselves able to as online sessions increase their confidence and help their education
* Less travel time means more time for studies
* Group work helps to not feel isolated
* Can go through asynchronous material at own pace

Drawbacks:

* Students feeling isolated, especially where facilities are closed and access is limited
* Clarity from the University in communications is variable across the institution
* Students find that their work has to be to a higher standard with studies being online, feeling that staff expect more of them
* Students across the Schools find that there is too much to learn as increased asynchronous materials having to be completed before synchronous sessions create a bigger workload, resulting in them finding it hard to cope and facing burn out
* Feeling overwhelmed by their studies was shared across all the students in attendance
* Busy timetables and large workloads mean less time to think about wellbeing
* Students find the new mode of learning more stressful
* Working from home and e-mails coming in at all hours, including on the weekend, means students find it hard to switch off
* Communication with classmates is slower and/or more difficult
* Screen fatigue

## Speak Week Qualitative Data:

**Q: “What do you think needs to be changed or is working well? The box looks small, but you can write as much as you'd like - get it off your chest!**”

Area of feedback (self-assigned by respondents) as percentage of 175 responses:

Academic – **75.5%**

Wellbeing – **24.5%**

Community – **10.8%**

Other – **8.8%**

Facilities/Buildings – **7.8%**

Events – **5.9%**

Societies/Volunteering – **5.9%**

Sports – **3.9%**

Key areas raised (assigned by the Union) as a percentage of 175 responses:

Support/Guidance – **22.4%**

Workload – **19.7%**

Tech – **4.8%**

Fees – **4.1%**

Wellbeing/Mental Health – **1.4%**

The key areas raised are preliminary and are based on initial readings of comment contents, more in-depth analysis will be provided to the Schools.

Asking students to put their experiences in their own words has shown that individual students often face numerous issues, or they may have identified some benefits along with some challenges. This is reflected in the analysis of the qualitative data, as some responses were required to be counted in multiple categories (see example below). As such, percentages do not total to 100%.

*“I think that everything on vision has been going fairly well so far. I find it really helpful that lecturers have been recording and posting everything as it means we can go back to it at any time. It has been quite a heavy workload so far which can be stressful. The main thing I would want to change is lecturers posting their notes and powerpoint slides before the actual lecture. This means that we can take notes beforehand, go into the lecture with some understanding, and know what to ask questions on if we found anything difficult when reading through.”*

Beneficial themes from responses:

Of the 175 Undergraduate responses, students gave positive feedback on the blended learning model, including learning from home and the quality of asynchronous materials, at **21.7%** (38). Students commented that staff have adapted well and are helpful with their learning experience in **8.0%** (14) of the responses, with **2.3%** (4) specifically mentioning staff facilitating social interactions and tackling loneliness. Highlighting some of the benefits of Responsive Blended Learning, **2.9%** (5) of respondents expressed a desire for blended learning to be continued on beyond the pandemic. The remaining positive themes students highlighted were: usefulness of the Virutal Learning Environment at **1.1%** (2), communications at **1.1%** (2) and take home exams at **0.6%** (1).

Challenging themes from responses:

The most widely and deeply felt issues expressed by students related to 5 key themes:

* Quality and value of synchronous learning – **25.1%** (44)
* Significant increase in workload – at least **21.1%** (37)
* Mental health, stress and studying from home – **13.7%** (24)
* Students needing face-to-face activity – **14.9%** (26)
* Inadequate guidance from lecturers on work, navigating asynchronous material or lacking 1-to-1 support – **12.0%** (21)

The next grouping of themes that were less widely felt but still significant in occurrence were:

* Access to facilities, including practical course facilities, the Library and study spaces – **7.4%** (13)
* Staying focused, motivated and experiencing screen fatigue – **6.9%** (12)
* Staff being too busy to help, unprofessional or needing more training – **6.9%** (12)
* Too many ongoing assessments – **6.3%** (11) with **2.3%** (4) specific mentions of too many deadlines and **2.9%** (5) specific mentions of group work difficulties
* Clarity on face-to-face activity, exams and timetables – **6.3%** (11)
* Lacking social interactions – **6.3%** (11)
* Internet connectivity problems and it impacting contact or assessment times – **4.6%** (8)

The remaining themes that were highlighted but had low occurrences were as follows:

* Blackboard causing issues for students through Collaborate Ultra or Vision – at least **2.3%** (4)
* Students feeling like there are high expectations of them due to online nature – at least **1.7%** (3)
* Worried about impact on grades – **1.7%** (3)
* Issues with communications from staff and the University – **1.7%** (3)
* Problems with global course teams – **1.7%** (3)
* Hardware issues in synchronous and asynchronous learning – **1.7%** (3)
* Difficulty engaging in large online classes or reaching out for help – **1.1%** (2)
* Accessibility for auditory-based disabilities – **1.1%** (2)
* Accessibility and support for disabilities – **0.6%** (1)

Selected, anonymised quotes added in ***Appendix I***.

The thematic elements taken from the Speak Week data do not exist in isolation. From the University’s Early Experience Survey (EES), one of the top concerns of students was their mental health (**32%**) with themes relating to Learning & Teaching also being similar. In regards to Learning & Teaching, live sessions and the students’ view of value and quality were highlighted, alongside students struggling with the switch to asynchronous learning. The need for greater interaction within live sessions was another element raised in the EES. Furthermore, the beneficial value of recorded materials was shared between the Speak Week data and that of the EES. Students’ need for face-to-face activity due to difficulties engaging in the online environment and group work were further highlighted in both. The ease with which students stay motivated in online learning varied from **36%-56%** in the School-specific EES breakdown. Overall, EES respondents rated enjoyment of Responsive Blended Learning at **54%** for “Somewhat Agree” or above and **46%** for “Neutral” or below. From the EES, overall students rated their learning experience so far as “Good” or above at **59%** with **41**% rating it at “Average” or below.

# Appendix I

*“Having pre-recorded lectures is working well to fit individual timetables but having a discussion about the content in the live lectures may be useful.”*

*“I am happy with the work done so far and online lectures have been great the blended learning is working really well. I think the lecturers have done a great job swapping to this in such a short period.”*

*“All lectures have been recorded for all my courses - recordings helpful for revision”*

*“I’m actually finding online lectures and tutorials to be fine ~ in some ways I can see that people feel like they can participate easier in this type of environment (less shy) however the on campus experience does play a big role for a lot of us as well. I’ve spoken to a lot of people about it and there’s a general consensus that the on-campus environment motivates us a lot. Working from home comes with a lot of distractions.”*

*“access to recorded lectures is epic”*

*“I am really enjoying having uni online! Including take home exams, much less stressful”*

*“I think what's been working well is the support teachers have been communicating constantly for their students. It's very reassuring that if you ever tell your teachers that you're struggling, they'll definitely understand and make sure that you're sorted.”*

*“Loving my classes - everything seems to be working smoothly so far.”*

*“I enjoy the online style for learning for most of my subjects. the practicals are a bit more difficult but we manage I think”*

*“The professors have been amazing adapting to the new online platform. It's understandable that they are new to this and still learning their ways around it but it's going well so far.”*

*“So far, the university has been really good at getting information out to me and my friends, it’s good to see when I've heard that other universities haven't been as hands on.”*

*“The online responsive blended learning is better than in person lectures. If covid ends, I think it would be better to keep everything or at least most things online. It's easier to access, easier to study at your own pace, you don't have to take an hour's bus journey, and it also means that lectures don't have to waste pens and paper and/or whiteboard markers.”*

*“All of my lecturers ([DEPARTMENT]) are doing a wonderful job. They always ask the class if they have any questions and show they listen to feedback by saying "most people didn't like this, so this is what we're changing" which I think is great. [V] put a survey up at the start of the year to know his students better so he can provide examples relevant to their lives, organised a way for people to form study groups online and made videos over July with a student and [W] going over the material needed for the course which is also very helpful. Discourse is working very well to ask questions and get answers efficiently. All the lecturers seem very friendly and approachable which makes asking for help a lot easier. The lecturers in question are: [V], [X], [Y] and [Z]. Overall, I think they have adapted to RBL very well, but my one concern is the subtitles in the videos not being effective. Many students in the university rely on lip reading and cannot do that online so subtitles would be the appropriate substitute however the automatically generated captions often don't understand what the lecturer is saying and miss very important concepts”*

*“Due to the big switch to course work I am completely snowed under. I spend every waking second working on coursework, thinking about coursework, writing up coursework. There is no break, yet the expectations of the students are still high. Its week 5, I have 3 deadlines in week 7, 3 in week 9, 3 in week 12 and on top of that a group project with 8k words and research behind it. This is not sustainable for my mental or physical health. Even reducing the 8k word expectation to 4k or 6k would relieve so much more stress. Since all course directors changed to more course work the deadlines keep piling up and I am at a breaking point. My main stress is [COURSE CODE], there is no time within the next 6 weeks to even begin writing or reading for it. Staff know how hard it is for them, we would really appreciate a bit of slack for the doubled workload”*

*“The stress so far is unbelievably higher compared with previous years. I had a group meeting for one of my projects and one of the members completely burst into tears. Other members confessed similar events themselves that same week. Working from home is taking such an intense toll on the mental health of all the members of my small group project, I can't even imagine the bigger picture. The workload has increased because they turned to ongoing assessment. Having every course switch to this style doubled the workload and doubled the stress. It’s simply not working for students”*

*“The amount of coursework for year 4 [DISCIPLINE] students is crazy. People are very worried and are seriously struggling. It is nice to do some group exercises in smaller groups, but so far we had only one short opportunity to do that. It is difficult to engage in a discussion in a digital room with 100 people. Perhaps a 10 min of a casual chat before each online lecture would make it feel like the lecturers actually care about people. At the moment there is no conversation before the lecture and no causal chat afterwards what makes it a bit odd, unnatural experience. In a normal setting we would have all been talking to one another. I would also suggest more information/emails from the wellbeing services. Students are clearly struggling but not many are aware of the services that are available to them. We have to be honest, this is tough. Expecting students to do same (or more) work is a bit harsh. No one can focus as well as we would at the library or during the lecture. Some measures of kindness would be appreciated. I am not saying we should compromise the standard of work required by the university, but a simple casual chat with the lecturer would be helpful for people to see that our teachers are also humans and perhaps get some advice on what has helped them to focus/get work done or what is still a challenge.”*

*“This whole "Inverted classroom" idea sounds great on paper and I'm sure it sound great to the powers at be. We'll in practice from what I've seen so far no its actually quite rubbish and seems to give lecturers a get out of jail free card. I'm all for independent study and if the whole coronavirus situation means I have to study harder and read around the material more then so be it. I thought it would actually be better for my education, but this assumes that we get at least some guidance from lecturers and help when needed. So far one of my classes has been given slides for the course made by another academic oversees. Now believe me when I say this, there were so many basic mathematical errors in this slide it made the lecturer presenting them curse. I mean absolutely riddled with basic errors you wouldn't even of thought a undergrad made them. I know material had to be made quickly but that was unacceptable and really should be investigated. The hypocrisy of the lecturers is another thing, "Email us if you have questions", now they work hard and are really busy so I don't expect a lot from them but essentially got told that there too busy and haven't the time to help. when I emailed one lecturer in particular asking a question regarding a tutorial I got an email that simply read "YOU ARE WRONG". So, this whole we are here to support you nonsense they are preaching about is [CENSORED].”*

*“Languages students that study BSL + another spoken language need more support. The workload is unbearable and none of the staff are willing to do anything about it. We have spoken to countless staff members about all of us having very low mental states and nobody seems to care because the view is that "Doing both languages is hard so you should drop one.", but then why do they offer the course if this is the attitude? There is no clear outline or breakdown for our assessments and, yet again, nobody is helping us to find this out. We are only halfway through the semester and I personally have already seen the negative effects that this year has had on my course-mates and I. The lack of care is astounding, and we are really disappointed.”*

*“As the lecturers have been advised to share lecture PPTs/material but not actually use the live sessions for lecturing, they only cover key points on the topics. For most courses this works fine, however some lecturers share extensive amounts of information heavy material, which would have been useful to have a full lecture on (like we normally would), rather than being expected to learn everything by reading 70+ PPT slides on our own and be quizzed on the topic in the live sessions.”*

*“I feel like we aren't getting taught sufficiently this year at all and are expected to teach ourselves most of the material - if i wanted to do this I would have joined the open university. I am in fact appalled by how low the standards of education have went this year within my department.”*

*“I think most people would like some clarity on what may be happening next semester, and clarification on what the December exams will look like, as a lot of lecturers are saying different things, or don't really know themselves. This means it is difficult to prepare for them. Many of us are also concerned on how this change to online learning may affect our grades this year. I don't believe that my grades will be as good as previous, as the quality of learning and support is not the same. I think allowances should be made for students in light of the current situation, as there will also be more external pressures on students with the current climate.”*

*“The way live lectures are taught for some classes I feel should change. There should be less emphasis on video content outside of lectures and a greater emphasis on teaching content in live lectures. It often feels as if I am teaching myself everything and that I'm not really part of a community or university at all. I also think some lecturers give too much time too breakout groups (30 minutes is a lot!) and pressure use of features such as camera and microphone. However, for the most part I think staff have adapted well to the changes and most ensure they are available and approachable for any concerns or difficulties. In classes where teachers appreciate not everyone enjoys participating, using mic or camera there is such a welcoming and comforting atmosphere. To know that they understand and you're not letting them down by using the chat or whiteboard function is really nice.”*

*“Would want on-campus learning as sitting at home gets frustrating. We would want Responsive Blended Learning as suggested. I understand due to the pandemic things are tough, but we could come to university for the tutorials and lectures could be online.”*

# appendix II

## School Officer poll results

## Class representatives poll results