

“An intelligent response to the modern student”: Enhancing flexibility with an institution-wide, no-questions-asked extension policy

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Abstract

Students are coming to university from non-traditional backgrounds and have substantial caring and work commitments. Our university recently introduced an extension policy that enables students to access a no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension on a single assessment for each subject they enrol in. There is no requirement for students to provide a reason or supporting documents, or for academic approval. The aim of this study was to explore the value and impact of the extension policy from the perspectives of students and academic staff. In 2024, 19,469 students accessed at least one automatic 7-day extension. The most common enrolment type was undergraduate students studying part time (41% of all students enrolled). This group had a significant increase in success rate across 2024 if they accessed the extension (6%, $p < .0001$). Students ($n = 501$) and academic staff ($n = 96$) completed a survey. Students highlighted the advantages in reducing stress and helping to manage work–study–life balance. Students also appreciated that they did not need to disclose any personal circumstances. Students who had accessed the extension indicated that the main reasons were to manage work demands and stress; reasons not permissible using the formal extension policy. Feedback from academic staff was polarised. Many highlighted the challenges of the extension policy, particularly on academic workload and perceived negative impacts on student accountability. This was in contrast with students who reported accessing the extension to cope with workload and stress. Academic staff who were in favour of the extension policy appreciated the need for enhanced flexibility.

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Practitioner Notes

1. An institution-wide, no-questions-asked 7-day extension policy was highly accessed and supported work–study–life balance of ‘modern’ students.
2. Flexible extension policies remove the need for documented evidence and have the potential to benefit all students by enhancing accessibility and inclusivity.
3. Part-time undergraduate students who accessed the extension had significantly higher success and were significantly more likely to either graduate or be retained in 2025.
4. Despite concerns from academic staff regarding accountability and time management, students found no-questions-asked extensions were more like the workplace.
5. Universities should review policies to ensure they support the needs of ‘modern’ students.

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Keywords

Extensions, assessment deadlines, flexibility, part-time, equity.

Introduction

University study has generally been designed for 18–22-year-old full-time students who transition to higher education from high school. In many countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and United States, university students are diversifying and now serve as the ‘new majority’ (Malm & Weber, 2017). More students than ever are mature aged, studying part time and have substantial work and caring commitments (Malm & Weber, 2017; Wilson et al., 2025). It is well documented that the educational outcomes of students from non-traditional backgrounds are consistently poorer than their more advantaged peers, and some of this can be directly explained by individual barriers to higher education (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). It has been suggested that universities should become more inclusive to support the success of all students. One simple, yet practical and high-impact approach to increase flexibility may be to provide no-questions-asked extensions.

Literature

Managing extensions for assessment submission due dates is a common element of a teaching academic’s workload. Extensions at university have traditionally been offered in various ways, including: (a) informal and privately negotiated arrangements with the teaching academic, (b) formal application process through a centralised system, (c) disability support plans, and/or (d) embedded flexibility in courses (Bosch, 2020). Extensions may be negotiated between the student and academic or professional staff; however, these commonly require academic approval. To date, there is no research that evaluates the impact of institution-wide, no-questions-asked extension policies, as research in this area is primarily conducted by academics evaluating attempts to introduce flexible due date policies in their own classes or cohorts (Gurung et al., 2025; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024).

Many students are fearful of asking for extensions (Hills & Peacock, 2022). This particularly impacts students with disabilities (due to fear of stigma, effort, and cost), women (due to fear of rejection or burdening others), and first-in-family students who are unaware they can request extensions (Alenezi & Alenezi, 2024; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024; Whillans et al., 2021). In addition, many universities’ extension policies do not allow students to receive extensions for reasons that are now common issues for students such as work demands (Moore & Greenland, 2017). The process of asking for extensions can be more onerous and stressful for particular cohorts of students, including those with disabilities and mental health disabilities, who can find form filling, negotiating, power dynamics, and fear of rejection or stigma especially overwhelming (Fossey et al., 2017). Extensions are therefore not always accessed by students who have genuine need (Gurung et al., 2025). Students with disabilities often need to negotiate and self advocate for accommodations, including extensions, while also dealing with stigma, the (costly) burden of proof, and the disclosure of sensitive medical information or personal circumstances (Fossey et al., 2017; Gurung et al., 2025; Norris & Wood, 2023).

To alleviate the stress associated with requesting extensions, a range of flexible, penalty-free approaches to hard deadlines have been proposed. These include extended due dates, grace periods, extension ‘banks’ where students are allocated a fixed number of additional days, a ‘pause button’, or ‘life happens pass’ (Boswell, 2023; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024; Taylor-Partridge et al., 2024). These approaches often provide extensions for students whose requests are not permitted or are difficult to evidence under university policy. Flexible extensions address many of

the barriers that exist for students who may struggle with the demands of university, including students with disability or from underrepresented backgrounds (Hills & Peacock, 2022). Students express positive views regarding flexible extension policies and feel their work is of a higher quality when they receive an extension (Edwards et al., 2022). Students also report additional advantages of flexible extensions that include the ability to manage family and work demands, more positive attitudes toward lecturers/university, reduced likelihood of failing their subject or discontinuing their studies, and less stress and anxiety (Boswell, 2023; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). Additional advantages of flexible assessment policies for students include increased student agency and autonomy, removal of barriers, reduction of academic bias regarding granting extensions, reduced stigma for students needing extensions for disability or sensitive reasons, improvement of students' academic performance and learning experience, and the reduction of student anxiety (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2024; Taylor-Partridge et al., 2024).

More recently, automatic (Schwartz et al., 2024) or 'no-questions-asked' (Taylor-Partridge et al., 2024) extensions have been proposed. In Australia, 17 of the 39 public universities have introduced some form of institution-wide flexible extension policy that vary in length from 2–7 days. Although exact numbers are not known, it is evident that many universities outside of Australia are also either investigating or implementing a range of flexible deadline policies (Barua & Lockee, 2025). There is much variability in how they are implemented—from an online, automatically approved application to an email to a subject coordinator requiring a reason or a grace period where no penalty will be applied. Given the scale of implementation across the sector, it is surprising that there is such limited research evaluating the implementation and impact of no-questions-asked extensions.

Institutional context

Our large regional Australian university has diverse student cohorts where approximately 70% of students study part time and over 81% of our students belong to at least one equity group. Approximately 70% of students are aged 25 years or older. In March 2023, our university introduced a no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension that students can use on one assessment item per subject each semester. The extension must be requested prior to the due date of the assessment and will not extend due dates beyond the end of the teaching period. The decision to change the existing extension policy was made to address the needs of our students and the increasing stress and cognitive load of study while managing their day to day lives. It also acknowledges the administrative and emotional load on academics who have to negotiate and process extension requests from increasing numbers of students. By using an 'automatic' model, we reduced these elements of academic workload, and, by not requiring that students provide reasons for extension requests, we were also reducing the stress and financial burden on students. The choice of duration (7 days) also ensures that the extension will always include a weekend, which is particularly important for many of our part-time students who have work commitments during the week. The automatic 7-day extension is not available for exams, intensive schools, workplace learning, laboratory/fieldwork, or time-dependent tasks. Therefore, approximately 83% of all subjects across our university offered an automatic, no-questions-asked 7-day extension. Prior to this initiative, extension requests were negotiated between student and subject coordinator either informally on an ad hoc basis or through the formal special consideration process requiring documented evidence and approval. The formal special consideration process is still available and allows for extensions for longer periods of time. It is

also available for additional assessments outside of the 'one no-questions-asked extension per subject' rule. Students with a registered disability are provided with a Disability Access Plan that can be used as evidence for the formal special consideration process.

Research questions

This study was guided by several research questions, beginning with the overarching research question: 'What has been the impact of the introduction of a no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension policy for students and academics?' Supplementary research questions included: 'What are students' experiences of using the automatic 7-day extension policy?' and 'How does students' use of the automatic 7-day extension policy impact on academics and their work?'

Method

A mixed-methods research approach was used to evaluate the no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension, which included analysis of aggregated and anonymised whole of university data and an online survey of students and academic staff. Ethics approval was received from the appropriate university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Protocol No H24290 and H25099).

The extension was evaluated across the three main trimesters of the 2024 academic year. Each trimester is 12 weeks in duration with a mid-session break after week 6. Student results were downloaded and joined to all automatic 7-day extension requests (date of request, subject code, assessment item) and to subject assessment information from the subject outline tool (subject code, assessment item, due date, value). All data were then deidentified.

The 3,333 students who took the extension in the first 10 weeks of the summer trimester, which ran from November 2024 to February 2025, were emailed a link to an online survey. A total of 501 students completed the survey (response rate 15%). During this time, all students were enrolled online, with some subjects having an on-campus intensive school. The summer trimester is the smallest of the three main teaching trimesters, with approximately half the number of students as trimester 1 or 2. Most students who enrol in the summer trimester are enrolled part time in either one (60%) or two (31%) subjects. In 2024, 26% of students in their first year of university commenced their degree in the summer trimester, and students in their commencing trimester made up 13% of all summer trimester enrolments. There was also good subject availability in the summer trimester, with 241 subjects offered (compared to approximately 900 in trimester 2), ensuring that students from almost all courses can enrol in summer. Academic staff were invited to participate via an announcement on the staff bulletin board and via an email forwarded by their Head of School. Informed written consent to participate in the study was obtained from participants. The research team developed the survey questions based on a review of the literature, familiarity with teaching a variety of year levels and cohorts, and the open text reasons students provide in the formal special consideration extension process. Staff and students were asked the open text questions, "Can you tell us about your experience of the automatic 7-day extension?" and "How can the automatic 7-day extension be improved?"

Due to the high-level analysis on the effect of extensions without the presence of control groups, the evaluation was constrained to an observational methodology. Student success rate was calculated as total number of passing grades/total number of substantive grades per student across 2024. Student relative retention rate was calculated as the proportion of students who

either graduated or were enrolled in 2025 divided by all students who were enrolled in 2024. The remaining students were not enrolled in 2025; however, it will not be clear if they are counted as attrition or not until later in 2026. Graphpad Prism version 10.4.0 (Graphpad Software) was used for statistical tests and graphing. A 2-way ANOVA determined the statistical significance of the progress rates between extension/no extension based on students' enrolment (undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time, full-time). A Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to determine the statistical significance of the difference student retention (yes, no). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Data analysis of the survey open text responses involved the three co-researchers reading the responses carefully and meeting on two occasions. The first meeting was used to discuss and compare initial insights. After a sample of responses had been analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), a second meeting was held to develop a richer and more nuanced reading of the data. Following these discussions, the three co-researchers coded the remainder of the responses.

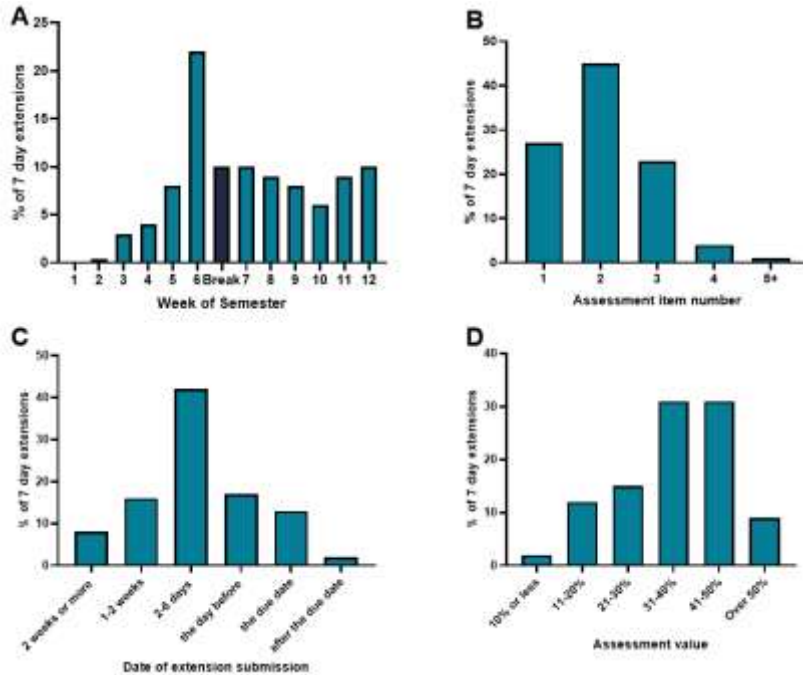
Results

In 2024, the no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension was accessed in 83% of all subjects offered across the university. During this time, 19,469 individual students accessed 58,233 automatic 7-day extensions across multiple subjects of enrolment. The average number of extensions per student in 2024 was six and the median was two.

The most common week for students to access an extension was week 6 of the 12-week trimester, directly before the mid-semester break (Figure 1A). It was most common to see extensions for the second assessment (45%, Figure 1B). Of the students who accessed the extension, a total of 24% of students requested the extension at least one week before the due date, 42% of students used it 2–6 days before the due date, and 17% accessed it the day before the due date. Unfortunately, 13% of students submitted their extension request on the assessment due date, and 2% submitted their request after the due date, making them ineligible under the policy, as it must be requested before the due date. (Figure 1C). It was most common for students to use the extension for assessments with a weighted value between 31% and 50% of the cumulative subject mark (Figure 1D).

Figure 1

Summary of Automatic 7-day Extension Requests showing (A) The Week of Semester, (B) The Assessment Number, (C) The Days/weeks Before the Due Date And (D) The Value Of the Assessment as a Percentage of the Total Cumulative Mark in the Subject



In 2024, the most common enrolment type was undergraduate students studying part-time, who made up 41% of all enrolled students (Table 1). There was a significant increase in the average success rate of 6% in this group if one or more automatic 7-day extensions were taken ($p < .0001$), which equated to approximately 574 additional passing grades. There was also a significant increase in this group either being enrolled the following year or graduating (i.e., not withdrawing from study) of 10% ($p < .0001$). This equated to approximately 919 additional students not withdrawing from the university.

Table 1

*The Increase in Average Success Rate and Relative Retention Rate if Students Took One or More Automatic 7-day Extensions across 2024 * $p < .0001$*

| | Undergraduate | | Postgraduate | |
|--|---------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| | Part-time | Full-time | Part-time | Full-time |
| % of all students | 41% | 31% | 25% | 3% |
| Increase in success rate | 6%* | 2% | 0% | 0% |
| Increase in relative retention rate | 10%* | 3% | 1% | 1% |

The student survey was completed by 501 students. On average, the 68% of students who reported that they studied part-time were older than students studying full-time—39 years and 30 years, respectively (Table 2). Nineteen percent of students who accessed the automatic 7-day

extension disclosed in the survey that they were living with a disability that was not registered with the accessibility and inclusion team at the university.

Table 2

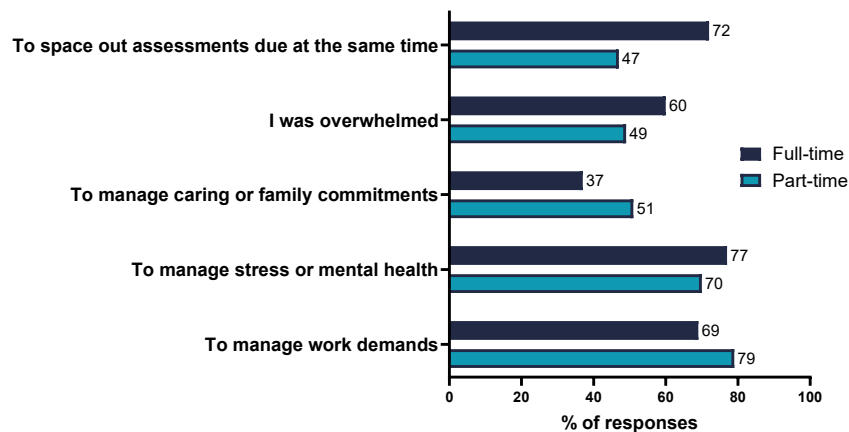
Self-reported Characteristics from Students who Completed the Survey

| | Part-time | Full-time |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| Responses | 341 | 158 |
| % of responses | 68% | 32% |
| Average age | 39 years | 30 years |
| Caring responsibilities | 55% | 37% |
| Disability, illness or condition that impacts studies | | |
| Have a study plan | 7% | 8% |
| Do not have a study plan | 19% | 21% |

In response to the survey question “What are the reasons that you took an automatic 7-day extension?”, part-time students reported that the advantages were to manage work (79%), stress or mental health (70%), and caring responsibilities or family commitments (51%; Figure 2). In addition, a main reason provided by full-time students was to space out the number of assessments due around the same time (72%).

Figure 2

Student Responses to the Question “What are the reasons that you took an automatic 7-day extension?”



Note. Percentages add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response.

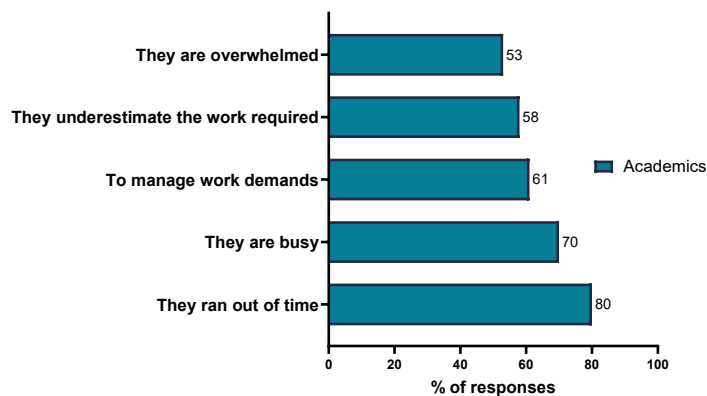
Of the 96 academic staff who completed the survey, 42 had worked at the university for over 10 years. A range of levels of academic staff completed the survey, including lecturers (57), senior lecturers (15), associate professors (7), and casual teaching academic staff (8). On a scale of 0–10 in response to the question “Overall, how satisfied are you with the automatic 7-day

extension?”, the average response was 3.8/10; 18 academic staff responded 0 (not at all satisfied) and four responded 10 (very satisfied).

Academic staff were asked, “In your experience, what do you think are the main reasons for students to request an extension?” The two main reasons provided by academics were “they ran out of time” (80%) and “they are busy” (70%), neither of which were top reasons provided by students. Of the top five reasons provided by academics, two reasons—“to manage work demands” and “feeling overwhelmed”—aligned with the top reasons provided by students (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Academic Responses to the Question, “In your experience, what do you think are the main reasons for students to request an extension?”

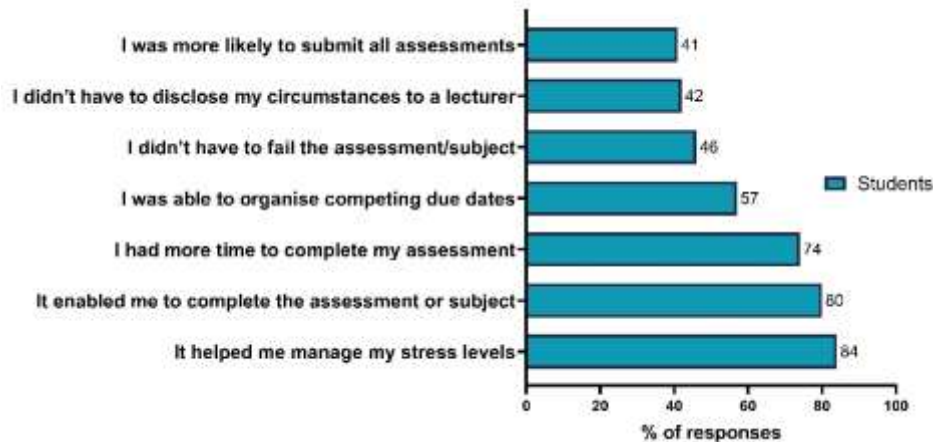


Note. Percentages add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response.

When asked “What have been the advantages of the automatic 7-day extension?”, students most frequently reported that it helped them to manage stress levels (84%) and it enabled them to complete the assessment or subject (80%). Other advantages were being able to organise competing due dates (75%), avoiding failing (46%), and not needing to disclose an illness or circumstances (42%). Additionally, 41% of students reported that due to the extension, they were more likely to submit all assessment items in a subject (Figure 4). Students were also asked, “If there was a time that you chose not to request an extension, what was the main reason?” The most common options selected were that they “did not need it” (40%) or “in case I needed it later” (30%, data not shown).

Figure 4

Student Responses to the Question, “What have been the advantages of the automatic 7-day extension?”



Note. Percentages add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response.

Feedback from students who accessed the automatic 7-day extension

In open text survey responses to the question “Can you tell us about your experience of the automatic 7-day extension?”, students were overwhelmingly positive about the automatic 7-day extension, highlighting the flexibility that it provided. A total of 25 students described the extension as a “life saver,” “safety net,” or “game changer” in comments such as, “The seven-day extension has allowed me to complete all assessments with competing time frames and submit them on time and receive great marks. As an older busy single mum working full-time this has been a huge game changer” (S377).

Many students commented on the importance of the extension to juggle study with work, family and life circumstances that were outside of their control ($n = 133$): “As a mature age student, working and raising a family, I find it difficult to juggle the demands on my time. The automatic extension helps significantly with this” (S23). Students highlighted unpredictable events associated with full-time work and caring responsibilities: “With young children my plans to sit and complete my work don’t always go to plan as they need me and young children don’t understand that mum needs to sit and study” (S15). Additionally, unplanned life events such as illness impacted students being able to submit assessments on time: “I have had weeks where all of my children have been unwell, and the automatic extensions have allowed me to take care of my family without the pressure of an assignment being due” (S29). Additionally, students were able to identify how the extension benefits the majority: “I have thoroughly enjoyed my use of the 7-day extension. I think very highly of it and consider it to be an intelligent response to the ‘modern student’” (S102).

Students also highlighted the many advantages of not needing to disclose personal circumstances ($n = 44$). They appreciated not having to share personal information with academic staff to justify the need for an extension or to “plead my case to uni professors who may not understand or approve” (S163). Applying for traditional extensions can be particularly difficult when the reason is an “accumulation of a collection of factors” (S186) and can be difficult to evidence. Students highlighted the difficulty and costs associated with booking a medical appointment with short notice. Interestingly, even for some students with a Disability Access Plan, who can use their plan as evidence to apply for a formal extension, preferred to not provide a reason and use the extension; “I love that I don’t have to give a reason” (S415). One student described how the extension “reflects a more contemporary study environment that is closer to what occurs in the workplace and outside of study” (S501). By not needing to disclose personal circumstances, students highlighted that the process is non-judgemental, saves money, time and mental load:

It prevents me from having to revisit and trigger those mental health reasons that cause the struggles and the need to explain myself. I don’t want to be upset every time I need more time to finish an assessment. My course is assessment heavy and it’s a huge mental struggle all the time. So it’s a relief to be able to get an automatic extension without feeling incompetent or shame (S351).

Students highlighted the importance of the extension in alleviating stress ($n = 46$): “There are always unexpected circumstances with children and just knowing I am able to take an extra week if necessary reduces my stress significantly and allows me to manage my workload better” (S413). One student explained:

It made life so much easier knowing that if I needed it, I could call on it. Rather than juggle work and uni responsibilities, I could work through the course knowing I had a “get out of jail” card if I needed it (S322).

Students studying full-time were more likely to highlight the importance of being able to spread out assessments that are due around the same time ($n = 33$). Students reported feeling stress and overwhelm when assessments are due at the same time and noted that, by having the extension, they could manage their time effectively: “It helped me manage competing due dates for multiples subjects” (S20). Additionally, students reported that they were more likely to complete assessments: “If I didn’t have that extension I think I would of [sic] been too stressed to finish the assignments off” (S59).

Students highlighted the importance of the extension to support success in their studies ($n = 46$). One student reflected that: “I felt I was able to submit a better-quality assessment because I had more time to focus on that assessment and I wasn’t as overwhelmed” (S20) and another: “I would not be getting the marks I have without it” (S166). Another student described the breathing room that the extension provided juggling work and caring commitments and “despite all these hurdles and was even able to achieve distinctions and high distinctions” (S336). A number of students indicated that it was directly linked to avoiding failing grades, late penalties, or dropping out: “It was the difference between being able to complete a subject and dropping out” (S282) and “I would have failed literally every subject without it” (S211).

When asked “How could the automatic 7-day extension be improved?”, the most common response was to have the extension available for all assessments in a subject ($n = 161$). For some

students, an advantage of access to extensions in all subjects would be the ability to delay assessment submission to incorporate feedback:

I think that students should be able to request an extension for ALL regular assignments in each subject of a session, unless of course it is time sensitive, such as an exam... If I could have extended my assignments to account for incorporating feedback received later than expected, I may have achieved a higher mark as a result (S29).

Some students indicated that they had difficulty locating where to apply for the extension ($n = 49$) and identified issues with the systems not communicating or found it confusing that the new due date was not updated in the LMS ($n = 43$). For many students, the barriers to being able to access flexibility are cumulative:

I am a pretty awkward person, you can verify this with the lecturers I have had direct contact with. Having to contact the lecturer for an extension is a hugely terrifying and daunting task and makes me feel like I'm failing. Having the 7-day extension in my back pocket allows me to cut myself some slack, it gives me breathing room to juggle my work/study/home life. Now I don't have to sit up until midnight agonising over completing an assessment or not completing and having a breakdown about having to contact the lecturer. For me it's a safety net (S345).

Feedback from academic staff

Of the academic staff who participated in the survey ($n = 96$), 96% indicated that they had taught in at least one subject that offered the automatic 7-day extension. The views of the academic staff who participated in this study were largely in stark contrast to the positive views of students, with many academics strongly opposed the automatic 7-day extension policy. They felt that the policy increased administrative workload, confusion, and had negative impacts on student accountability, time management, and learning. In response to the question "How could the automatic 7-day extension or extensions in general be improved?", academic staff expressed a range of views on the impact of automatic 7-day extensions on students' time management and accountability ($n = 34$).

I agree in principle with this allowance, however, the practical outworking of this is not always beneficial for students who have no real or justifiable reason for the extension. It often means they feel like it's okay to not prioritise uni work and subject timelines (A47).

They argued strongly that it undermines equity, delays feedback, and fosters unrealistic expectations for students entering the workforce.

It has meant that students aren't learning life skills in communication and time management, students are not getting the help they need because staff don't know their situation, it has created more work and stress for academics and casuals, there are already special consideration processes and SAPs in place for EDI [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion] reasons (A9).

Some academic staff recommend removing the policy entirely or replacing it with shorter, evidence-based, or discretionary extensions. Academic staff commented that the act of granting extensions should be at the discretion of the academic and suggested that the availability of the

extension should be reduced or more selectively applied ($n = 16$): “In my opinion, the 7-day extension should be scrapped and extensions based on the medical certificate advise or lecturer’s discretion, should be given to students who have medical conditions or disabilities” (A70). Academic staff advocated for shortening the extension period to 2–4 days, arguing that this would still support students’ needs while minimising disruptions to marking schedules and assessment timelines ($n = 9$). Others proposed limiting the extension to specific types of assessments, such as early or low-stakes tasks, where the impact on learning and grading logistics would be less significant ($n = 2$). A small number of academic staff suggested expanding the 7-day extension policy to include all assessments, full-year subjects or acknowledging the value of flexibility in accommodating diverse student needs and easing marking timelines for large cohorts “as it staggered the return dates” (A5).

Some academic staff expressed concerns that students were taking extensions “just in case,” potentially undermining time management and accountability: “I am aware quite a few students will take the automatic extension routinely as a backup in case they don’t finish the task in time” (A5). There is also a perceived negative impact of academic flexibility on professional readiness. Some staff worry that unconditional extensions may be “giving students an unrealistic idea of deadlines in the workplace” (A32). Academic staff identified a range of reasons that they believed why students access the extension. Several academic staff expressed concerns that students use it for convenience rather than genuine need, applying for the extension simply because it is available ($n = 9$), treating it as a default option or a “get out of jail free card” (A55). Academic staff felt that students use the extension strategically, planning it into their schedules rather than reserving it for emergencies ($n = 3$). Other responses included: “they do not prioritise their education” (A10) and “sometimes they just plain forget” (A8). Additionally, some academic staff did not feel students used the additional time effectively: “the quality of the work submitted has not changed with this additional opportunity” (A37). Academic staff expressed the concern that the automatic 7-day extension has significant implications for timely and effective assessment feedback ($n = 6$). They indicated that delayed assessment submissions compress marking timelines, making it difficult to return feedback promptly and restricting students’ ability to apply it due to “not having enough time to take in the feedback and make changes to their next assessment before it is due” (A39).

Some academic staff valued the automatic 7-day extensions, commenting that they “are great and seem to really support students” (A12). However, more often, academic staff expressed concerns that the extensions may in fact hinder meaningful support and engagement by reducing opportunities for communication between students and staff, making it harder to identify and support those who are genuinely struggling ($n = 3$). This was demonstrated in comments from academic staff: “if students are struggling early in the subject, it would be beneficial to be in direct communication with them” (A21) and “some students who were struggling and needed extra support used the auto-extension, but because I didn’t know the reason I wasn’t able to offer them appropriate support” (A43). Academic staff expressed a strong preference for requiring students to provide a reason or supporting evidence when requesting an extension, even if the process remains automated ($n = 15$). Suggestions included providing a brief explanation or selecting from predefined reasons to help staff identify those who may need additional academic or wellbeing support ($n = 6$).

A significant issue highlighted by academic staff was the online system and technological issues ($n = 24$), in particular the lack of integration with learning management system (LMS) and other university platforms ($n = 4$). Some emphasised the negative impact on accurate record-keeping and timely feedback and the manual workload required to update due dates and track extensions, which increased administrative burden ($n = 10$).

Discussion

This study is the first to demonstrate the positive impact of an institution-wide, no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension policy on student experience. Universities are looking for ways to better support increasingly diverse students. Here, we provide evidence that a 7-day extension can support students who are juggling multiple commitments, such as work and caring responsibilities. While the extension policy was highly accessed by all students, part-time undergraduate students were significantly more likely to remain enrolled or graduate if they accessed the extension policy. Similarly, these students saw an increase in their success rate across 2024 if they accessed one or more extensions. The proportion of part-time students is increasing in Australian universities; however, they are currently twice as likely to drop out of university as their full-time peers (O’Kane et al., 2024). Universities invest significant resources into supporting students to succeed, and this research shows that a relatively simple and cost-effective approach of providing students with a little extra time can positively impact student success.

Feedback on the extension policy from students was overwhelmingly positive, with students reporting that the extension helped to not only manage stress levels and complete assessments but also enabled them to care for their families and meet work demands. In this sense, the policy addresses the reality and needs of modern students who frequently have to manage multiple and often competing commitments and circumstances that are outside of their control. In this context, extensions are an approach to accessible and inclusive learning design meaning all students can benefit (Hills & Peacock, 2022; Zannella & Sutherland, 2025). In this study, the automatic 7-day extension was accessed widely, affirming the demand for increased institution-wide flexibility for all students.

Supporting students and reducing barriers

Of students who completed the survey, 70% were studying part-time, 55% had caring responsibilities, and their average age was 39 years old, indicating that the sample was representative of our university’s student population. The two main reasons that students requested the extension were to manage work demands and to manage stress and mental health. Both reasons are specified in the formal extension policy at our university as reasons that students cannot apply for an extension. Stress reduction has been shown to be an especially common reason for extension requests (Fossey et al., 2017; Gurung et al., 2025), highlighting the need for policies to be updated to better support the needs of the modern student (Wilson et al., 2024). The third most common reason provided by students was to manage family or caring responsibilities. This is only permitted in the formal policy in extreme circumstances (described as family/personal reasons, such as death or severe medical or personal problems), therefore not covering the vast majority of caring or family issues that might delay assessment submission, such as a child who is unwell. Applying for a formal extension also requires documented evidence, which was highlighted by students as being time consuming, costly, and can compound the stress

of an illness or emergency. It also disproportionately affects students from equity backgrounds, for whom accessing documentation is often difficult due to factors such as limited healthcare access in regional or remote areas or financial constraints (Fossey et al., 2017; Gurung et al., 2025; Norris & Wood, 2023). A key finding of this study is that removing the need for documentation or 'evidence' reduces unnecessary stress and associated costs for students.

This need for medical evidence is a particular barrier and impost for students with disabilities, who disproportionately need medical care (Pitman et al., 2022). Approximately two thirds of the students who completed the survey who disclosed they had a disability are not registered with our disability and inclusion team and therefore do not have the benefits of a Disability Access Plan. This aligns with other studies that have demonstrated that the number of students in higher education who are living with a disability is higher than typically reported, particularly as some students choose not to disclose their disability (Pitman et al., 2022). The decision to disclose a disability can be a burden for students and can vary over time (Dollinger et al., 2024; Edwards et al., 2022). Disclosure can be very stressful for students, given that the nature of health conditions is often very personal, as well as the stigma associated with mental health illnesses and disabilities, which are increasingly common amongst university students (Gurung et al., 2025; Norris & Wood, 2023; Zannella & Sutherland, 2025). Here, we provide evidence that providing a no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension is an effective accommodation for all students, including those with an unregistered disability.

Academic staff experiences and perceptions of the extension policy

Survey responses from academic staff revealed polarised opinions, with academic staff either clearly endorsing or rejecting the automatic 7-day extension policy. However, most academics viewed the policy negatively in some regard, with many making assumptions about the reasons students ask for extensions. Concerns raised by academic staff largely related to increased workload, and negative impacts on student accountability, time management, and learning. In contrast, the academic staff who were in favour of the policy fundamentally understood the intent, recognising the value of providing assessment flexibility for students and benefits on academic workload. Concerns regarding increased workload associated with flexible assessment submission dates have been previously noted (Barua & Lockee, 2025). However, these studies do not refer to no-questions-asked policies, which are designed to significantly reduce the time required in communicating with students, obtaining and checking documentation, and the 'emotional labour' of making decisions on students' needs or eligibility for an extension (Abery & Shipman Gunson, 2016).

Survey responses revealed a significant misalignment between student and academic staff perspectives on the automatic 7-day extension policy. For example, academic staff suggested that extensions were related to potential erosion of assessment deadlines and students were failing to develop time management skills. However, students described using the extensions strategically to map assessments across multiple subjects and manage work-life-study commitments and unpredictable work or family needs. Many academic staff felt that students often treated the original assessment due date as a 'soft deadline,' using the extension as a default rather than in response to genuine need. However, students' breadth of reasons provided substantial evidence that supports the genuine need for flexibility, particularly as students' needs were often difficult to identify and support through traditional processes or whose circumstances make applying for extensions very difficult. Research also supports our finding that students would

prefer not to have to disclose a reason or provide evidence, another significant barrier for flexible approaches for students, particularly those with disabilities. The provision of evidence was an element that several academics felt was an important part of the extension process, while not considering the privacy implications, stigma, and costs associated with such disclosures (Norris & Wood, 2023; Zannella & Sutherland, 2025).

Academic staff also expressed concerns that the extension policy undermined students' preparedness for professional environments. However, many students are employed while studying and indicated that it felt contemporary and was more closely aligned with expectations in the workplace. Additionally, despite the concern from academics that students were overusing the extension policy, students reported reasons for not using the extension were that they did not need it or they were saving it. This strategic response to accessing the extension policy was a direct result of only being able to access one automatic 7-day extension per subject. In a small study investigating a single course, students reported that while they did not 'overuse' flexible extension policies, they appreciated that it was available even if they did not access it (Hills & Peacock, 2022). Students also reported producing higher-quality work. However, the limited available literature presents mixed findings; some studies show improved outcomes in a single Psychology course following extensions (Gurung et al., 2025), while others find no significant difference in a single Biology course (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). In this study, we show there was a significant, university-wide increase in success rate of undergraduate part-time students using an observational methodology. However, there is a need for future research to evaluate the impact on student outcomes of flexible extension policies to model casual relationships.

While some academics might resist policies like flexible assessment extensions, it appears that an institutional shift is needed that re-centres students and contemporary students' needs. To assist and support academics in this shift in student demand, universities need to develop policies that acknowledge and reflect their student's complex lives in ways that also acknowledge and reflect the increasingly difficult pressures and constraints of academic work. What appeared to be a number of assumptions and stereotypes about students' need (or requests) for more flexible deadlines expressed by many academics were in stark contrast to the actual reasons expressed by students. This indicates a real need for academics to consider the changing needs and circumstances of 'modern' university students and for universities to develop processes and policies that embed and reflect the benefits that such flexibility provides. Many views critical of the policy were underpinned by an attachment to assessment processes that have been in place for a very long time and are a part of university culture and, therefore, rarely questioned. Many academics at our institution were not supportive of the new extension policy, and this was in part due to a lack of consultation and clarity around the reasons for its introduction, the challenges, or the benefits. We recommend when considering a flexible extension policy, universities should share and explain the benefits for both staff and students. Importantly, university leadership must ensure staff are consulted and supported during such a policy's design and implementation, particularly in relation to any implications for workload and workflow.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is that it was conducted at a single regional Australian university with a high proportion of students who study online and part-time. Some findings may therefore not be applicable to other universities or specific disciplines. The observational design also does not allow for causal inference and increases in part-time online student relative retention rate and

success may be influenced by other factors that were not controlled for in the analysis. Both the student and academic staff survey responses may also be subject to self-selection bias and may not represent the full spectrum of views.

Conclusion

There has been recent, widespread adoption of institution-wide, flexible extension policies across the higher education sector. This study demonstrates the value of an institution-wide, no-questions-asked, automatic 7-day extension policy in supporting our students with diverse needs and managing competing demands across study, work, and life. As universities around the world grapple with how to best support diverse cohorts of students, we provide evidence that a no-questions-asked extension was widely accessed and incredibly positively received by students, particularly those enrolled in an undergraduate course and studying part-time. It provided a flexible, inclusive mechanism that reduced stress, improved relative retention and success rates, and removed barriers associated with traditional extension processes. While academic staff expressed mixed views, the findings highlight the importance of aligning assessment policies with the realities of the modern student. A key component of our extension policy is that students can only access one extension per subject. Future studies should investigate the ideal length of extensions, the number of extensions available per subject, and the process that balances the benefits for students (no documentation, no reason, no delay) with academic concerns.

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