An evaluation of use and impact of zero grades in assessment.

Are we being consistent, fair and transparent

eSTEeM Final Report

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Contents

The Open University

Executive Summary

Project context

This project investigated the application of late markers (L-markers) to tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) submitted late, i.e., after the official deadline or agreed extension. An L-marker is applied at the discretion of associate lecturers (ALs), within the eTMA system. By ticking a checkbox on the PT3 summary form, the student will receive feedback/feedforward comments related to their work, but any grade awarded for the TMA will be automatically over-ridden with a zero score.

Prior to the project, it had become apparent that there was a lack of clarity over the extent to which L-markers were used within modules based in the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences (LHCS). Additionally, it had been recognised that there were inconsistencies with regards to when such markers should be applied to students' work, and there were concerns as to whether we were being consistent, fair or transparent.

Project methodology

To evaluate the use of L-markers, in partnership with ACQ/Data Analytics, we extracted all assignments which had L-markers applied, for all modules within LHCS, over the time period 2018-2021 (i.e. over the period immediately before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and in the immediate post-pandemic period).

To enable us to listen to AL perspectives relating to L-markers, we created an anonymous mixed-format JISC questionnaire, collecting both qualitative and quantitative information. To widen the discussion beyond one School, the questionnaire was distributed via email to a randomly-generated list of approximately 1000 ALs across the University.

To explore what happened to students after an L-marker had been applied, the internal management system, VOICE, was interrogated manually to determine number of assignments submitted/modules studied after application of the L-marker.

Implications of findings

Our findings indicated that within LHCS, whilst L-markers were used rarely, there was a lack of consistency with regards to their application, and hence this raised significant concerns relating to fairness to students. Our findings suggested that Stage 1 students may be most impacted by receipt of a zero grade and less likely to continue their studies.

Our findings also indicated that there was a lack of transparency for both ALs and students. Although student-facing guidance was available regarding potential penalties for TMAs submitted late within TMA/assessment policies, the guidance was unlikely to be easily found by time-poor students. There was no formal guidance for ALs regarding late marker application/best practice.

Recommendations from the project

A review of the University late submission policy is recommended, to reflect on whether current strategies, where non-academic variables (leading to late submission) impact assessment scores, are fair to our students and in keeping with the needs of our diverse student base and in the context of retention concerns.

We suggest that alternative mechanisms to deal with late submissions are available, which might include, for example:

- Fixed percentage deduction (in line with 10% penalties applied to late EMA submissions)
- Sliding scale deduction of marks, depending on 'lateness'
- Capped score
- No penalty

It is also recommended that clear and transparent guidance is made available for students, associate lecturers, staff tutors and module teams. Staff development events should include opportunities to share best practice.

Aims and scope of the project

Context: assessment within the OU

Assessment is at the core of teaching and learning at the Open University (OU). It is used to measure student learning against institutional and AQA standards and, most importantly, assessment has a pivotal role in consolidating student understanding and in supporting progression along their learning journey. The student response to their assignment is complex, with aspects such as student expectation, self-esteem and emotional reaction identified as key drivers for how effectively students engage with marked assignments (Walker, 2009; Lipnevich, 2016).

At the OU, there are a variety of different types of assessments, however, the focus of this project is tutor marked assignments (TMAs). Although there are exceptions, as the name suggests, TMAs are typically marked by the student's individual tutor (Associate Lecturer, AL).

The submission deadline for TMAs is set by individual Module Teams (MTs), although there may be discussion between MTs for modules which are frequently studied concurrently, to attempt to avoid conflicting/overlapping assignment periods for students studying at full-time intensity. Registered students have access to deadlines as soon as module websites open (typically prior to official module start date). MTs set deadlines at specific points to support and assess specific learning outcomes and to pace students through module material.

Internal analytics and prior research have demonstrated that students study at the OU for a variety of reasons (e.g. to update their skills, gain qualifications,

enhance existing careers or change direction, for their own self-worth and to remain mentally active, etc…), consequently, there is no 'typical' OU student. Additionally, over 70% of OU students work full or part-time during their studies, many students have caring responsibilities, and the University is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities (e.g. 36400 students declaring a disability studied at the OU in 2020/21, and over 10000 students reporting mental health difficulties). Many of our students enter the university with few previous educational qualifications and limited awareness of the demands of distance higher education. Additionally, it has been suggested that students in distance learning environments may be more vulnerable to procrastination (Yilmaz, 2017).

Given this context, somewhat inevitably, there are times when a student requires more time to complete a TMA and there is the potential for some flexibility in submission after the original deadline.

Should students require an extension for a TMA, they are directed to contact their tutor to discuss their assignment and, if the tutor authorises the extension, a new deadline is set by the tutor. Alternatively, students may contact the Student Support Team (SST) to request an extension.

Scope: zero grades and L-markers

Within the OU, there are specific circumstances resulting in a zero grade being applied to a tutor marked assignment (TMA):
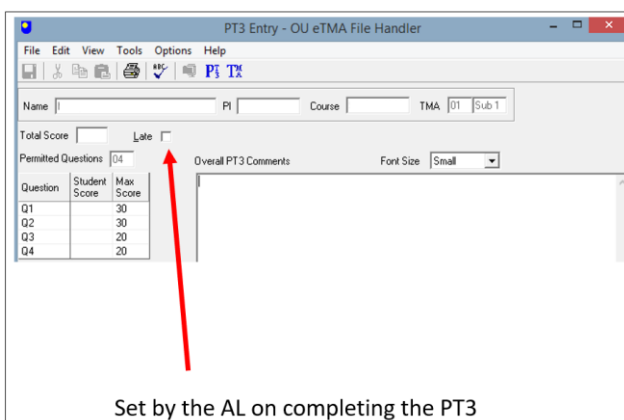
- Permanent zero grade arising due to poor academic progress/achievement of learning outcomes for the assignment. An

exploration of student outcome from this is beyond the scope of this project.

- Temporary zero grade arising due to academic integrity concerns. Although more common pre-2024 (i.e. before the university-wide Academic Conduct Review), in exceptional circumstances, a zero score can be applied whilst a TMA whilst an investigation is in progress. An exploration of student outcome from these circumstances is also outside the scope of this current project, due to the confidential and sensitive nature of investigations.

- Zero grade arising as a result of application of an L-marker. Such markers can be applied at the discretion of the Associate Lecturer, for assignments where students have submitted their assignment late without (or beyond) an agreed extension. It is these circumstances that this project seeks to explore further.

Application of L-markers

L-markers are applied directly by the AL on the PT3 summary form, within the TMA file handler, prior to being returned through the eTMA system (Figure 1).

Figure 1: eTMA PT3 summary screen, L-marker tick box

By ticking the L-marker box, the AL can provide marking comments as normal, on both the submitted script, and on the summary PT3 form; in such a way the student has access to the benefit of teaching feedback and feedforward. However, whilst the AL can also provide a breakdown in scores for individual questions on the PT3 form, the L-marker overrides these scores and results in a zero score being applied to the student record. A substantial body of research (e.g. (Winstone and Boud (2022)) indicates that students often focus on the extrinsic motivator (i.e. grade) rather than the intrinsic motivator (i.e. the learning), emphasising the importance of exploring the impact of receiving a zero score for an assignment.

Project aims

It might be anticipated that an L-marker would be applied in exceptional circumstances, given the potential impact on a student's grade. However, there is uncertainty with regards to the number of L-markers that are applied, and, if/where markers are being applied, whether they are being used consistently between tutors on the same module, between modules or at different study stages. Any inconsistencies have the potential for variability in student experience.

This first aim of this project was therefore:

- to quantify the extent to which L-markers are used in the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences (LHCS) and, where they have been used, to explore the timing of application

Quantifying L-markers may help identify patterns, for example, analysing where/when markers have been applied is important to identify whether there are potential issues with assignment deadlines. Additionally, their usage might identify the need for clarification in guidelines/policy, or communication between tutor/student, student/university and tutor/university. Inconsistent application of L-markers may arise due to differences in application of University guidance. For example, there is the potential that some ALs may be experienced in other educational settings and may not be aware of any differences in approach to work submitted late, compared to their other institution. Some tutors may provide marking feedback to a student who submits late without an agreed extension (or beyond an agreed extension), but return it with an L-marker, which will indicate that no score is awarded for the assignment; others may mark and grade as normal.

The second aim of this project was therefore:

- to explore AL perspectives and perceptions around use of L-markers.

There is the potential that the experience of receiving a zero grade may compromise the student's response to the assignment, and indeed, their ongoing study. In the post-Brexit, complex and shrinking environment of higher education in the UK, any factor which has the potential to impact retention needs to be better understood.

The third aim of this project was therefore:

- to explore 'what happened next' to students where L-markers had been applied.

This timing of this project enabled a quantitative exploration of L-markers before, during and immediately post-pandemic. This time-period offers a unique exploration of L-markers, during a period of societal and academic disruption. During this period, tutors alike may have been experiencing workload challenges of supporting students through flexible assignment extensions while providing high standards of support to the cohort as a whole.

This project explores L-marker use in modules within LHCS, attempting to explore issues of consistency, fairness and transparency, with a view to suggesting alternative models of application.

Activities

Number of L-markers

In partnership with ACQ/Data Analytics, we extracted numbers of assignments which had L-markers applied for all modules within the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences (LHCS) over the time-period 2018-2021. Since commencement of the project, LHCS curriculum has changed, but at the time of data collection, modules involved are shown in Table 1. We considered key demographics: sex, age, disability flag, ethnicity, WP flag, caring responsibilities for those students, shown in Table 2.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Post-graduate
SDK100 (J and B)	SXHL288, S295, S290, S215, S248, S294, SK299, SDK228, SK298, S285	S315, SD329, S317, SK320, SXLNM390	S826, S807, S827, SXH810, SD816, SXM810

Table 1: LHCS modules during period of project

Sex / disability	*Number (%)	Carer	*Number (%)
Male	21 (22.8%)	Carer	8 (8.7%)
Female	71 (77.2%)	No	37 (40.2%)
		Do not wish to declare	1 (1.1%)
Disability declared	33 (35.9%)	Blank	46 (50.0%)
No disability declared	59 (64.1%)		
Ethnicity	*Number (%)	PEQ	*Number (%)
Ethnicity: White British	58 (63.0%)	No formal qualifications	5 (5.4%)
Other White	2 (2.2%)	Less than A-Levels	22 (23.9%)
Asian British (Indian / Pakistan)	8 (8.7%)	A-Levels or equivalent	31 (33.7%)

Asian (Other)	4 (4.3%)	HE qualification / credits	23 (25.0%)
Black	4 (4.3%)	PG qualification	2 (2.2%)
Mixed	1 (1.1%)	Not known	9 (9.8%)
Other	4 (4.3%)		
Refused	2 (2.2%)		
No ethnicity information available	9 (9.8%)		

*n=92 There were 84 different individuals with at least one L marker applied to a TMA, but some individuals had more than one L marker applied.

Table 2: Aggregated demographic data associated with L marker

AL perspectives

To enable us to listen to the perspectives of ALs we created an anonymous mixed-format JISC questionnaire, combining open- and closed-ended questions which would enable us to collect both qualitative and quantitative information within the same instrument. To widen the discussion beyond one School, the questionnaire link was distributed via email to a randomly-generated list of approximately 1000 ALs across the University. The survey collected

information relating to AL length of service, faculty, and study-stage along with questions related to awareness, usage and perceptions of L-markers. Quantitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis, performed by two independent ALs as well as the project leads.

Impact on students

To explore what happens to students after an L-marker has been applied, the internal management system, VOICE, was interogated manually, and relevant service-records (SRs) for the affected students analysed to determine number of assignments submitted and modules studied after application of the marker.

This proved the most challenging aspect of the project, in terms of time for data collection and analysis of findings.

Findings

How many L-markers applied?

In partnership with ACQ/Data Analytics, we extracted all assignments in LHCS which had L-markers applied, over the time period 2018-2021 (Figure 2). All of these markers were on undergraduate modules within the school and covered all stages of undergraduate study.
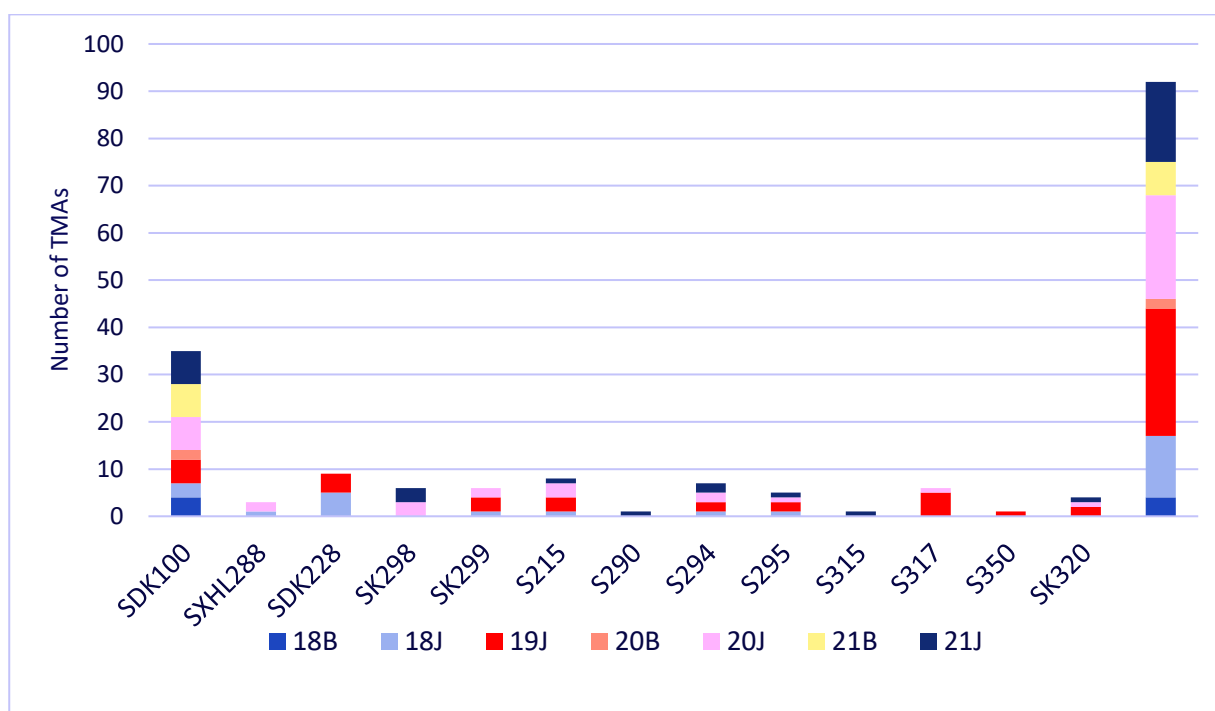

Figure 2: L markers applied to assignments within LHCS modules by presentation over the period 2018 -2021

Given that the project covered over 20 modules, each with between 3-6 TMAs per presentation, it was reassuring that L-markers – anticipated to be a rare occurrence - were indeed applied to a relatively small number of scripts. No post-graduate module reported any L-markers. Of the undergraduate modules, 7 modules recorded no L-markers, and over the remaining 13 modules, over the

total period, only 92 L markers had been applied to assignments. Interestingly, 17 L-markers were applied in 2018; in 2019 J – the first pandemic presentation – the number of L-markers almost doubled, and remained higher than pre-pandemic, for the remainder of the study.

The project authors had anticipated that there might be more flexibility with regards to late submissions for students studying at Stage 1; these students are frequently new to the University and/or distance learning, and many are returning to study after a significant gap. At this Stage, students are often not only learning core scientific concepts, but are also learning key study skills, including time management and negotiating online distance education. However, somewhat surprisingly, the Stage 1 module had the highest number of L-markers out of all the modules hosted in the school.

More than three times as many L-markers were applied to students whose sex was recorded as female on OU systems compared to those recorded as male on OU systems. However, the majority of the modules where L-markers had been used were on the Health Sciences Qualification pathway, where there are typically more female students than males.

Analysis of demographic data showed no evidence of disproportionate application of L-markers related to age, disability status, ethnicity, WP status, or caring responsibilities.

How late is late?

However, although numbers of L-markers were low, the data indicated that there was some variability in application. We analysed L-marker applied to TMA deadline (Figure 3).
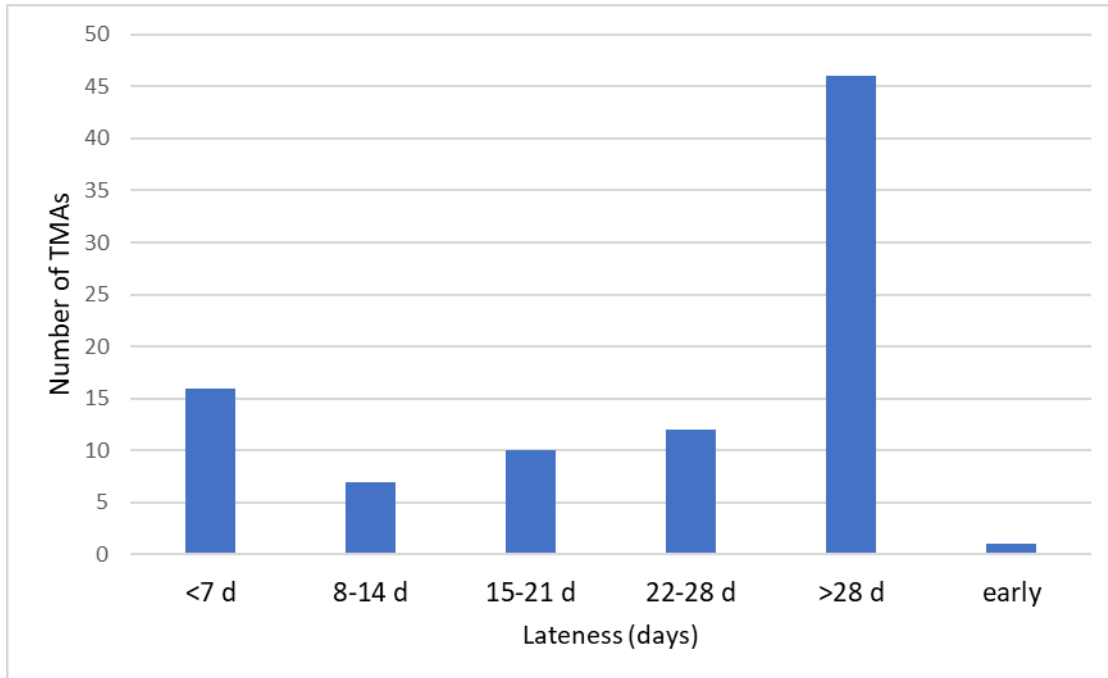

Figure 3: 'Lateness' of assignment when L-marker applied

As illustrated in Figure 3, there was some variation over what was considered late enough to warrant an L-marker. As might be expected, scripts submitted more than 28 days beyond the deadline were marked with an L-marker. However, somewhat surprisingly, 16 scripts were awarded L-markers only 7 days post-deadline (and of those, 10 were from a Stage 1 module). Of further concern, Figure 3 shows that a script was awarded an L-marker, despite having been submitted *ahead* of the TMA deadline. This illustrates a danger of a simplistic tick box for this process – it is easy to select the box in error, and no warnings are provided for the AL, nor communications to module teams and/or Staff tutors, who might find the data informative for their module performance.

Student outcomes following L-markers

A zero grade for an assignment has the potential to disproportionately affect a student's overall grade for a module. However, it was important to understand what happened to students following receipt of a zero score for an assignment, due to application of an L-marker, beyond the impact on the module score. Figure 4 illustrates that for Stage 1 students, an L-marker may impact retention, with a greater proportion of students studying at Stage 1 not engaging with further study following their zero score, compared to students studying at Stages 2 or 3.
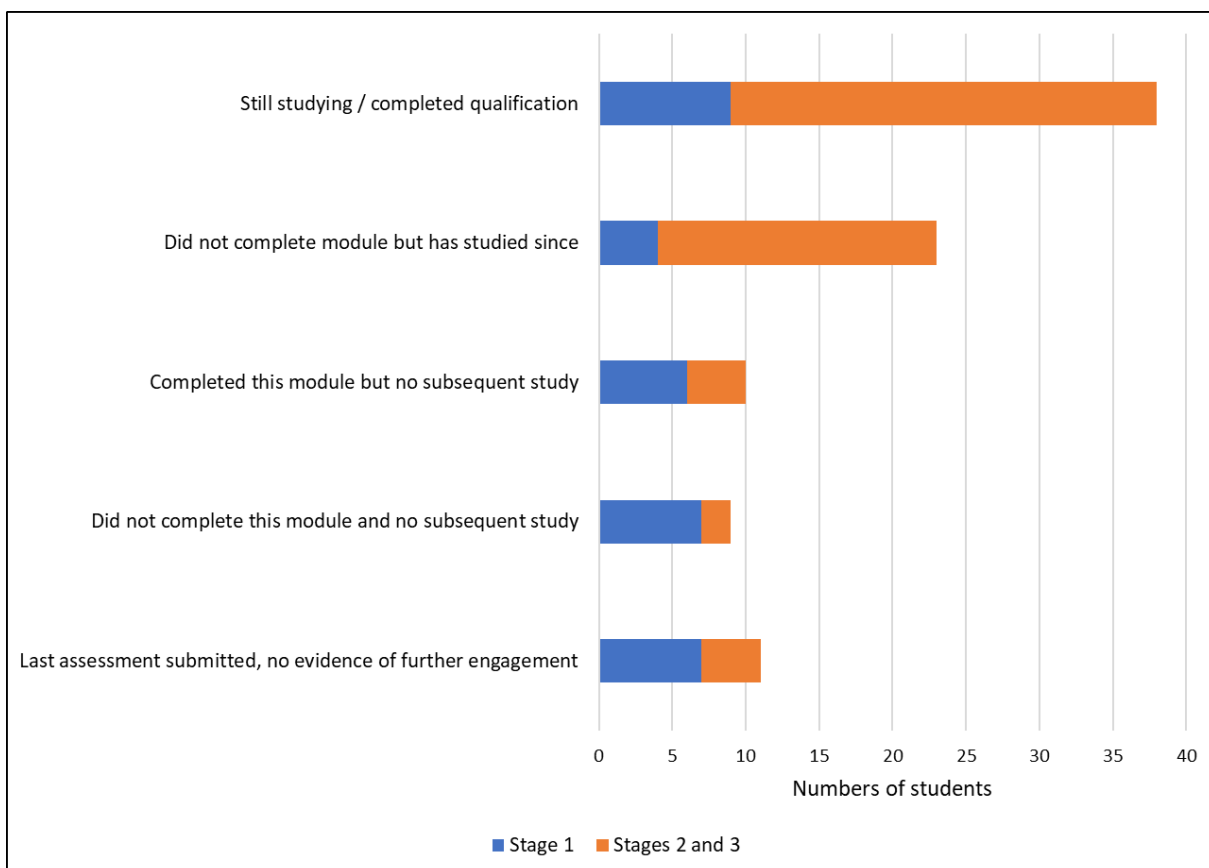

Figure 4: What happened to undergraduate students who received an L-marker

AL perspectives on L-markers

Before full exploration of the AL survey, it should be noted that it became apparent that this was a subject that ALs felt strongly about (if views were somewhat polarised at times). In total, the questionnaire received 103 responses and the free-text options of the questionnaire were populated by, at times, quite lengthy and carefully considered responses.

To gain a wide range of perspectives and perceptions of L-markers, we surveyed 1000 randomly selected ALs across the University. The majority of respondents (62%) had been an AL for greater than 11 years. 21% has been an AL under 2 years. 75% of ALs did not mark assignments at other HEIs.

52% of respondents were STEM ALs, 27% FASS (27%), WELS (24%) and FBL (6%) and Access 1%). The survey had respondents at all Stages of learning (Access through to post-graduate).

Interestingly, 19% of respondents had not been aware of the L-marker option, when returning work to students. Indeed, uncertainty with regards to process and guidelines was a recurring theme in the free text responses from ALs (Tables 5 – 8). ALs reported a lack of clarity over circumstances where an L-marker could be applied, and what might be considered 'significantly late'. Interestingly, respondents felt there might be the need for some mitigation for level of study, where Stage 1 students might need more leeway/support (Tables 3 and 4) – which contrasts the findings from within our school.

It was anticipated that, given the rarity of L-markers, ALs might discuss their use with their colleagues, before awarding one to a TMA. However, the results from

our pan-University AL survey indicated that although some 44% did discuss the matter with an ST first, 50% did not.

ALs also expressed some concern relating to L-markers being over-ridden. Those ALs who had reported not awarding L-markers explained that they had not done so in order to provide support for the student. Interestingly, 5 respondents reported concerns that any L-marker would be overturned by SST/TTM/LLMs. Since TTMs/LLMs/SST do not have direct oversight over grades (nor time to actively monitor) this suggests a lack of trust and perceived lack of AL authority over decision making.

Most survey respondents indicated that they considered that students were not aware of the potential to receive a late mark (Tables 5 and 6). Given the potential impact on a student's score, and on wellbeing, it was anticipated that an AL might discuss the L-marker and its consequences with a student, before applying to a script. However, some 50% of ALs who applied a L mark to a student's work did not do so, 16% did on occasion, and only 34% did as a matter of course.

ALs were asked their perception of potential student outcomes due to receipt of a zero grade; the majority of respondants indicated that it depended on the individual circumstances; an L-marker might reinforce academic rigour, teach life skills and encourage contact with a tutor. However, the majority of respondents reported more negative impact, e.g. negative effect on motivation and progress, and lower retention (Figures 5 and 6, Tables 9 and 10).

Detailed qualitative responses from AL questionnaire

The following tables outline results from the AL questionnaire.

Theme	Number of responses
Should never be used	11
Late/ significantly late (after original deadline or after agreed extension) without contact	54
Multiple late submissions	11
Not sure	1
Other	3

- Some responses spanned two themes

Table 3: Under what circumstances do you think a Late (L) mark should be applied: thematic analysis of free text (81 respondents)*

Should never be used
'I have never applied a late mark, as my priority is to support the students complete and overcome barriers. '
'At the OU I have never applied it'
'I wouldn't use it. If a student has had life issues that mean the work is both late and they haven't communicated it with me then they need help and understanding not a zero mark.'
'I would be very wary of applying an L mark under any circumstances'
'I never use the late mark'
'Never? I feel if it were to be applied the student would just go to student services and argue their case so I would be told to remove it.'
'It should not be applied.'

Late
'When the student submits late without an approved extension (and by late beyond the 12 hour grace period)'
'Maybe when a TMA is submitted late L in flagrant disrespect of tutor's communication'
'when the script is later than the cut off or agreed extension'
'Student submits past the deadline with no extension'
'A late mark should be applied if the students submits the assignment outside of the agreed time frame incl. extension'
'It should only be applied if the student has been made aware in advance that this will happen'

'If TMA is submitted without agreed extension, or contact from student.'
'If a student hasn't applied for an extension, hasn't had discussion with the tutor and doesn't excuse the lateness.'
'Only in the most exceptional circumstances.'
'If an assignment is submitted after the cut off date with no prior communication to the AL and no good reason why this has not happened'
'if something has been submitted after the cut off date without the knowledge of the tutor'
'only if the student agrees'
'When a student submits an assignment after the deadline (even by quite a short time) without having firstr sought an extension.'

Significantly late
'if the TMA is received substantially late and without permission or adequate reason for that'
'When a student is VERY late (over three weeks) and not gained permission from the OU or the tutor.'
Should be applied to a submission which is very late and no communication sought by the student i.e. no request for an extension or an explanation for the later submission.
'If it was excessively late with no discussion/extension'
'Where an extension has not been agreed, and the assignment is over three weeks late.'
'When a student sends in their Assignment weeks after the cut-off date and has had no communication with the AL or the OU'

Multiple instances of late submission
'I only apply it when I have given the student a written warning on a previous PT3 that they were late on their TMA, that I've accepted it this time, but that I won't accept it another time.'
'After repeated late submission without contact with an AL and following a couple of warnings.'
'Late without permission, explanation or good reason on more than one occasion'
'I have used it once when the student on a first level course persistently submitted late and would not adhere to requesting extensions'
'When no request has been made for an extension. However, as a level 1 tutor, I would not apply it for a first offence, concentrating on making sure they know the rules for next time.'

Table 4: Under what circumstances do you think a Late (L) mark should be applied: representative practitioner voices

Theme	Number of responses
Yes	20
No	43
Not sure/could not find	12
Don't need guidance/NA	2
Other	5

Table 5: Do you think there is adequate guidance for ALs concerning the use of Late (L) mark for a late assignment: thematic analysis of free text (82 respondents)

Yes
'Not an issue - I don't need guidance. ' 'Yes. However, I alert my ST and, essentially seek agreement on this action' 'Not sure - I don't feel like a struggle with applying it so I must have received some guidance about using it' 'Yes, in may case from a series of good line managers over the years, but it was from line managers so I can't speak for everyone's experience.'
Unsure / could not find
'Probably. The issue is knowing where to look.' 'unsure - haven't read it recently' 'Unsure. I haven't had reason to look for any guidance about it in a very, very long time.' 'Probably not, I haven't really engaged with it though as I tend to discuss with staff tutor and refer to student support if there are issues' 'don't know, never looked for any!' 'I don't recall any guidance.'
No
'No, probably not.'

> 'Not really - for example I am sometimes unsure what the impact on the possibility of passing the module might be.'
>
> 'I don't think I've ever seen any guidance!'
>
> 'No - it is very unclear to me when or if I should use this'
>
> 'I think the guidance is to use them where a student has not submitted on time or before the arranged extension. I don't think this is consistently applied because most ALs want to be as positive and encouraging as they possibly can be. In my opinion firm rules would be preferable.'
>
> 'No, I have never actually used it because I am unsure of when it is appropriate.'
>
> 'No, I have learned about it as I go along.'
>
> 'I am not entirely sure what the rules are, so it could perhaps be flagged more clearly.'
>
> 'I think we're all very reluctant to use it unless the student is clearly not making any effort to comply with rules. That probably means it is used very inconsistently.'
>
> 'No. Discussion with the student and Line Manager is preferable to hard and fast rules'

Table 6: Do you think there is adequate guidance for ALs concerning the use of Late (L) mark for a late assignment: representative practitioner voices

Theme	Number of responses
Yes	7
No	58
Not sure/some are	14
Other	2

Table 7: Do you think – in general – students are aware of the potential to receive a Late (L) mark: thematic analysis of free text (81 respondents)

Yes
'I think students are aware of the late mark but feel that ALs will not impose it and will mark it anyway. If the AL doesn't mark it the student complains to SST who then request the AL mark it.'

'Yes, I mention it in my intro letter'
'This depends on the AL- I inform my students to make sure they are aware'
Not sure / some are
'Many level 1 students are scared of missing cut-offs, so yes. But students at higher levels (and level 1s who use social media) are very aware that they are "allowed" up to 3 weeks automatically and will demand this, often after missing a cut-off.'
'Perhaps - the need to always ask in advance for an extension is something I emphasise in early communications and I make students aware that they risk scoring zero for late assignments if they haven't let me know in Advance.'
'Some students perhaps'
'I think most know there is a potential penalty but not sure they know what that is.'
'Some are, but my impression is that many are not. I think it should be highlighted on the cover sheet of every TMA.'
No
'No, students are quite unaware of our processes regarding submission'
'They should be, but it isn't really spelled out clearly.'
'No, they sometimes feel that AL and module requirements are counter to the marketing of the OU as being able to complete it when they want'
'Probably not - awareness is not a trait I see in my students!!'
'I don't think they look or this so will not know until it happens'
'No, I don't think so. I've had more students ask for extensions retrospectively this year than anytime before. I give them a warning of next time zero' and it serves as a warning.'
'No - I think this could be publicised more'
'Probably only if they've had one, or been told that their tutor has made an exception just this once.'
'It says it in the module handbook for my module so if they read that then they are aware but it depends on them reading it. I don't know what the interface looks like for submitting eTMAs so not sure if it says there as well.'

Table 8: Do you think – in general – students are aware of the potential to receive a Late (L) mark? representative practitioner voices (81 respondents)
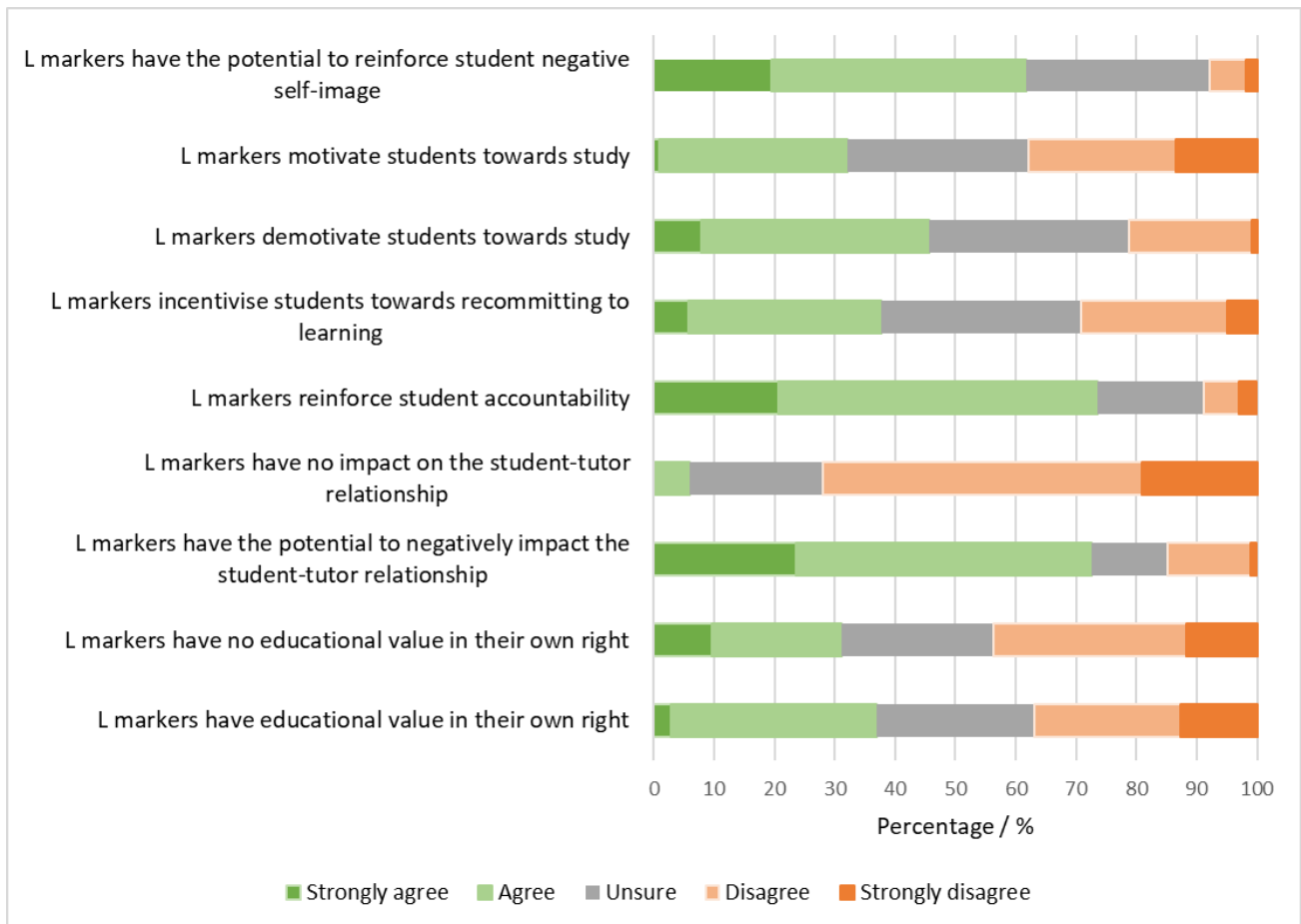
Figure 5: Tutor attitudes concerning impact of L marker on students (Likert analysis) between 100 and 103 respondents

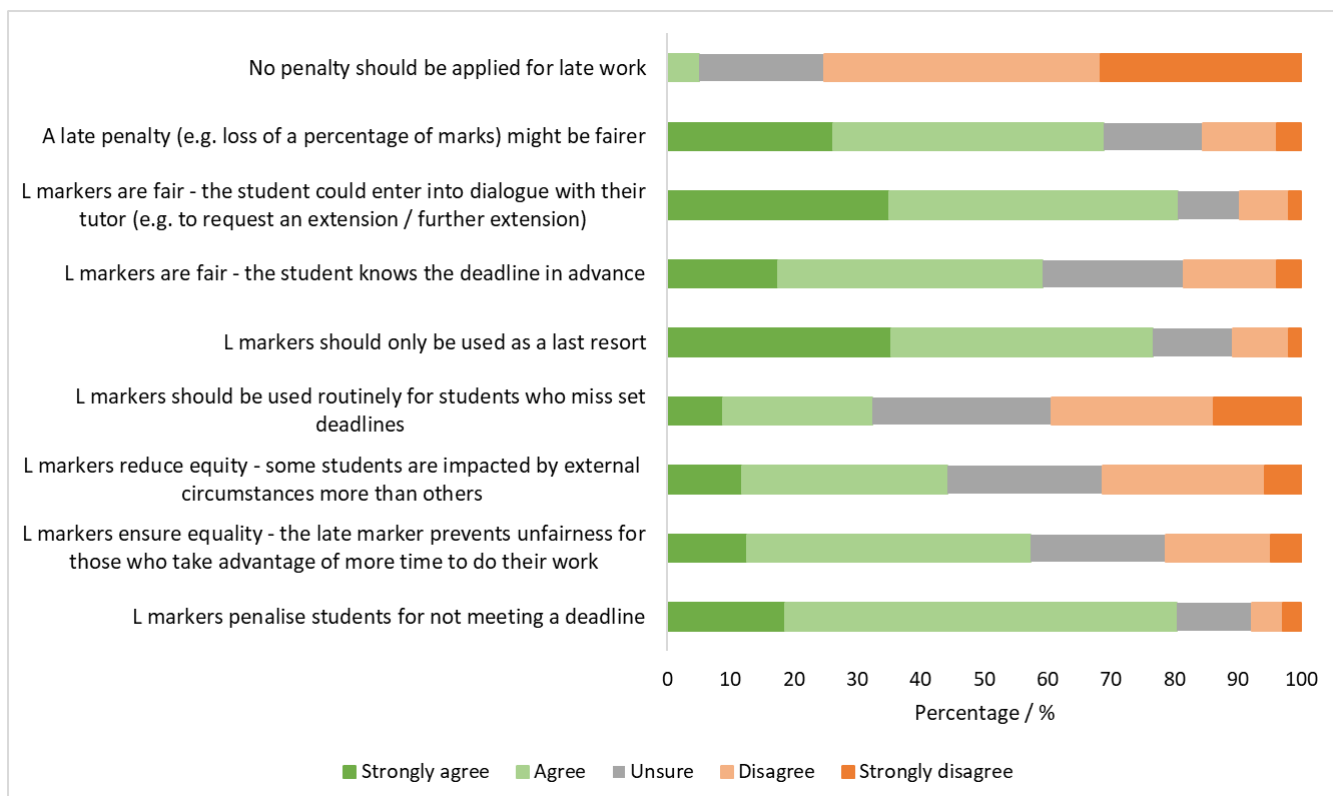Figure 6: Tutor attitudes concerning aspects such as fairness of L markers (Likert analysis) between 100 and 103 respondents

Theme	Sub theme	*Number of responses
Negative effect on motivation/progress		37
	Increased drop out of OU	9
Positive effect on progress/future study methods		27
	Better communication in future	4
Not sure		7
None		4
Other		10

Table 9: Beyond implications on module score do you think there is an impact on the student: thematic analysis of free text (91 respondents) *some responses covered more than one theme

Negative effect on motivation/progress
'Could be very demoralising and increase drop out rate' 'I was an OU Student and I once received a "L" from a NEW tutor (3 days late after an extension had been granted) who did not have a clue about person management! It made me say that I would NEVER do this to a Studnet!' 'Yes. They could fail a module and cease to study completely' 'Communication and trust always extremely important and some students may find a L mark upsetting or frustrating. I would never want to apply it without clear and supportive communication about the reasons and how to move forwards.' 'I think they would find it disheartening.' 'I think there certainly can be a demotivating effect. Generally students are in this position because they are struggling with the module or with an aspect of their life , and probably need help and support rather than Punishment.' 'I think any student in this situation has other issues in their life and it could make them drop out from the course or depress them further' 'Yes, they lose motivation and drop out. I can't see that it would help in any way.' 'I think some students might feel hurt/disappointed particularly if they haven't had any instruction from their AL that this could happen. I tutor student nurses and it could have a significant impact on them achieving their nursing registration.' 'Likely to withdraw… mental health impact… belonging feeling to the OU disrupted'

Positive effect on progress/future study methods
'I know I have never had a student submit a late assignment after using a L marker so evidence suggests they can have a beneficial impact.' 'For some students I think it makes them reflect on their study and prioritise their studies and communication with tutors' 'Learn from experience not to repeat' 'It gives them a reality check that time management is important and so are regulations surrounding assessment.' 'They will learn to keep to the rules of academia.' 'Hopefully it emphasises the importance that TMAs carry and that a fairness policy is applied'

'Message about academic discipline - whether they value that or not. Also, message about fairness and consistency' 'There will be some students who just don't appreciate the importance of deadlines, and receiving a penalty in some way might wake them up to This.' '.... an important lesson in need for time management and communication Skills.' 'I hope that the possibility of the sanction encourages them to engage with me to request an extension and discuss their situation and best route forward. Usually does...' 'I'd like to think it makes them realise that they do need to discuss extensions with tutors, that's really why I do it. It also impacts other students of course in that it makes the system fairer.'
Not sure / both negative and positive
'Probably some angst' 'Feeling discouraged but also aiming For better communication with tutor next time re extensions etc' 'I don't know, might help them to understand that they need permission to submit late' 'I don't know. They might reinforce the need for timely communication and accountability for deadlines - but the scale of the penalty seems excessive.' 'I think it is probably a bit upsetting to receive zero marks when students have at least submitted something, but they still get the feedback which is arguably the most useful part of TMAs for development. It probably does help to develop time management skills - I'm fairly benevolent with extensions but a lot of students need to develop time management skills and being late isn't generally tolerated in professional settings so for students not already in work it helps to build the soft skills beyond the subject content.'

Table 10: Beyond implications on module score do you think there is an impact on the student: representative practitioner voices (91 respondents)

Transparency for students and ALs: guidelines and information

It was also considered important to look at student information relating to extensions, to investigate whether there was any potential disconnect between what might be expected by tutors, compared to what might be expected by students. As illustrated in Figure 7, at the time of the project, the Assessment Handbook stated:

2.4.4 Requesting an extension for a TMA If you find that you are unable to submit your TMA before the cut-off date, you can consider requesting an extension. You should contact your tutor in the first instance when requesting an extension of any length. Try to avoid asking for an extension close to the deadline as your tutor may not be available to authorise this at very short notice. You must submit your request for an extension before the cut-off date. If you are asking for an extension on the cut-off date and you cannot contact your tutor, please contact your Student Support Team. Your tutor will decide if the extension can be authorised. If your tutor authorises an extension they will set a new deadline for you for that assignment

2.4.5 Non-scored TMA marking and ongoing difficulties with submission. Occasionally, even when it's too late to record a score that can contribute to your assessment, or if the extension request is not authorised, your tutor may still think it useful for your assignment to be marked so that you have the benefit of teaching comment

Figure 7: Extracts from Assessment Handbook at time of project

Whilst it can be seen that information is provided for students, these statements are found within large, formal documents, and unlikely to be visible or easily accessible to time-poor students.

Additionally, whilst the use of the word 'may' is important, since it facilitates consideration of different circumstances, from a tutor perspective, it introduces a lack of clarity and there is a lack of formal guidance provided to tutors with respect to awarding L-markers, beyond conversations with Staff Tutors and Module Teams on an ad hoc basis.

There were no university wide guidelines specifically aimed at ALs regarding L-markers.

Summary of findings

Our findings indicate that within LHCS, whilst L-markers are used rarely, there has been a lack of consistency with regards to their application, and hence raises concerns relating to fairness to students. Inconsistent application of late

penalties can confuse students and impact student completion and submission (Patton, 2000)

Our findings suggest that Stage 1 students may be most impacted by receipt of a zero grade, with loss of engagement/withdrawal from studies being a common outcome. At the time of data collection, whilst the student handbook explained that late submissions might not gain marks, the information was contained with a long and complex document which time-poor students were unlikely to access as a first port of call in times of difficulty, and hence communications to students could be improved. Additionally, there was a lack of transparency for ALs, regarding when L-markers should be applied, along with the process itself.

Alternative mechanisms to deal with late submissions might include:

- Fixed percentage deduction (e.g. 10%, in common with the penalties applied to late EMA submissions)
- Sliding scale deduction of marks, depending on 'lateness'
- Capped score
- No penalty

Although the final bullet point might seem controversial, removal of late penalties is not without precedent (Kruger, 2023). London Southbank University abolished penalties for work submitted late, and reported no change to numbers of late submissions, and a drop in extenuating circumstances cases. More flexibility with assignment deadlines – and automatic extensions – can support democratisation of learning, transferring power from lecturer to students, and reducing in equalities (Hills and Peacock, 2022). Reviewing our late-marker policy provides an opportunity to reflect on equity and support for our students.

Impact

Student experience (impact on student learning)

This project raises awareness of implications on student experience and completion and continuation, following receipt of an L-marker (i.e. zero score) for TMA work submitted late.

We anticipate that findings from this project, when disseminated, could improve awareness of best practice with regards to marking and grading work submitted late. Our analysis indicated a disproportionate impact of L markers on students studying at Stage 1.

AL experience (impact on teaching)

Providing clearer guidelines and outline of procedures will remove uncertainty for ALs and help support them, as they support their students.

Strategic change and learning design

Both project leads were invited to contribute to shaping the TMA and iCMA policy by participation in a focus group (May 2024) and commenting on the policy draft (March 2025).

Recommendations

- Student- and AL-facing guidance to be clarified to increase student and AL awareness of the L-marker policy.
- KMS guidance to be provided to raise awareness of the L marker policy with Student Support Team colleagues

The Open University

- Despite L-markers being part of current Assessment Policy, our project findings highlighted that most ALs may have a lack of awareness of how to use L-markers appropriately in their practice. We therefore recommend AL staff development so that ALs develop confidence about how L-markers could be sensitively applied to support students.
- We also recommend staff develoment for other key staff – including module teams and staff tutors - to ensure that everyone is aware of appropriate process and potential impact.

In such a way, the application of L-markers should be made more consistent, fairer and more transparent for all.

Dissemination

Outcomes of this project have been shared with the Associate Dean of Student Experience, ACQ colleagues, and with School colleagues (LHCS Scholarship day, March, 2024) Initial project findings were shared as a presentation (eSTEeM, 2022) and further findings and analysis presented in poster form (eSTEeM, 2024). An eSTEeM Scholarship Showcase STEMinar session is also planned (May 2025).

Figures and tables

Figure 1: eTMA PT3 summary screen, L-marker tick box

Figure 2: L markers applied to assignments within LHCS modules by presentation over the period 2018 -2021

Figure 3: 'Lateness' of assignment when L-marker applied

Figure 4: What happened to undergraduate students who received an L-marker

Figure 5: Tutor attitudes concerning impact of L marker on students (Likert analysis) between 100 and 103 respondents

Figure 6: Tutor attitudes concerning aspects such as fairness of L markers (Likert analysis) between 100 and 103 respondents

Figure 7: Extracts from Assessment Handbook at time of project

Table 1: LHCS modules during period of project

Table 2: Aggregated demographic data associated with L marker

Table 3: Under what circumstances do you think a Late (L) mark should be applied: thematic analysis of free text (81 respondents)

Table 4: Under what circumstances do you think a Late (L) mark should be applied: representative practitioner voices

Table 5: Do you think there is adequate guidance for Als concerning the use of Late (L) mark for a late assignment: thematic analysis of free text (82 respondents)

Table 6: Do you think there is adequate guidance for ALs concerning the use of Late (L) mark for a late assignment: representative practitioner voices

Table 7: Do you think – in general – students are aware of the potential to receive a Late (L) mark: thematic analysis of free text (81 respondents)

Table 8: Do you think – in general – students are aware of the potential to receive a Late (L) mark? representative practitioner voices (81 respondents)

Table 9: Beyond implications on module score do you think there is an impact on the student: thematic analysis of free text (91 respondents)

Table 10: Beyond implications on module score do you think there is an impact on the student: representative practitioner voices (91 respondents)

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University approval processes

- SSPP – Approval from the Staff Survey Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number **2022/317**.

- Ethical review – The HREC checklist was completed and submitted to Research-REC-review@open.ac.uk on 1 Feb 2022. **This project was classified as local evaluation research not requiring formal HREC review**.

- Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures

before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration number is

28-04-086.