

## Retention Guide: Online (Blackboard, Collaborate Ultra)

This is a guide to retention strategies for online courses using Blackboard and Collaborate Ultra.

The aim is to establish and maintain regular contact with students, adapted to suit their learning style, your teaching style, and the course itself. We suggest contacting students directly (via Blackboard/email) approx. once a week or fortnight, whether in the form of announcements, reminders about course content, video announcements, or more focused emails at key points in semester. Brief weekly announcements at the start of the week are useful in encouraging continuous engagement and helps ensure students aren't falling behind week-to-week. Be clear about each week's objectives.

### Key points to consider:

- Regular, personalised contact via Blackboard announcements, emails, and videos encourages students to feel accountable, puts a face to a name, and reminds them to reach out if they find themselves struggling during the course.
- In communication to students, emphasise self-direction, peer engagement, and the significance of students holding themselves accountable in an online course.
- Peer engagement: Emphasis on establishing a cohort amongst online students through weekly activities, that are adapted to meet the flexibility of the online cohort.
- Encouraging students to set up study groups, online or in person. You can also set up mini discussion forums on Blackboard for study groups.
- Contacting students who aren't attending or engaging in class discussion, reminding them of the importance of engaging in the course to perform well and understand the material.
- Using Blackboard tools to check student engagement – check in with at-risk students.
- Use the Discussion Board forums on Blackboard for FAQ, assigning a separate forum for student discussion, assessment questions, and course questions.
- Quick turnaround of marking with detailed feedback is important for retention. If your first assessment is due and returned before the census date, students may feel more confident of their performance in and understanding of the course.

### Sample Retention Timeline

Time	Action	Action Completed?
Prior to Course Beginning	Blackboard: Post clear directions on the expectations of the course, and how to access course content each week. Ensure contact details, course outline, assessment information is available on Blackboard.	
Weeks 1-2	Introduction and welcome to the course: everything students need to know. Remind students to check their student emails regularly.	

	Check student engagement in Blackboard and email those students who are yet to log on to Blackboard. Provide information on how to access the course, and remind them they can contact you if they have any concerns. You can check this in Blackboard by clicking Evaluation in the left menu>Retention Centre. You can also follow Evaluation>Performance Dashboard to view the last time students have accessed Blackboard.	
<b>Weeks 4-5</b>	Contact students at risk using templates below. Encourage to engage in class discussion and check in if additional support is required.	
	Reminders about upcoming first assessment (structure as appropriate for your timeline/due dates). Direct to additional resources, key information, and extension process through Adverse Circumstances if necessary.	
<b>Weeks 6-8</b>	Strong emphasis in lead up to key dates and assessment due dates: ensuring information is clear, issuing a FAQ for assessments. Regular reminders about due dates, assessment requirements, and directing students to additional resources.	
	After assessment due dates (ideally within 1-2 days), contacting any students who did not submit with personalised email checking in. Remind students how to apply for extensions through Adverse Circumstances if necessary. Remind students that for each day past the due date, they risk 10% of the total possible grade for that assessment being deducted from their mark.	
	After first assessment results are released, contact students based on results and engagement in the course. Emphasis is recommended to be placed on encouraging peer support and recognising strong engagement – e.g., encouraging ‘team leaders’ who can lead discussion and assist their peers’ engagement – and offering support for students who may be at risk or hesitant to speak up in online spaces. Consider how to best adapt your approach for your students – gentle support and encouragement may be best suited to some students, whereas a firmer approach may be more beneficial for others. See templates at the end of this guide.	
<b>Semester Break</b>	Use semester break as opportunity to encourage students to catch up on content they’ve missed, or to take a well-earned break.	
	Follow steps in Weeks 1-2 to check student engagement/retention; contact using templates below.	
<b>Weeks 9-10</b>	Reminders about upcoming assessments, resources, skills workshops available online through UoN library.	
<b>Weeks 11-13</b>	Continuing regular reminders and posts, touching base with students, particularly those at risk.	
	Emphasis on final assessments/exams, providing resources, additional information. Remind students to consider applying for Adverse Circumstances if appropriate.	

## Email Templates

Templates should be adapted and personalised to suit the context.

### **For students who were active initially, but have since lessened their engagement:**

Hi there,

I hope you're well! I'm writing to discuss your performance in **COURSE**. I've noticed you were quite active early on in the course, demonstrating strong engagement with some great discussion, but haven't necessarily been as active of late in online discussions. I wanted to reach out to make sure you were still on track – please contact me if you have any concerns with the course or your performance. It would be great to see you bringing your thoughts to our weekly discussions – it would be a real benefit to hear your voice in these spaces.

### **For students who've performed well in the first assessment, but haven't been active participants:**

Hi there, I hope you're well! I'm writing to discuss your performance in **COURSE**. I've noticed you performed well in the first assessment, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the concepts we've been exploring. It would be valuable to see you bringing your thoughts to our weekly discussions – it would be a real benefit to hear your voice in these spaces, as peer engagement is a key part of online learning.

### **For students who aren't active/attending (tweaked to suit particular students/modes of engagement):**

Hi there,

I'm writing to touch base with you regarding your engagement with **COURSE**. I wanted to reach out and make sure you were on track with the course and course content. In an online course, the onus is on you to keep up to date and make sure you are actively learning and working with the course. Engaging directly with material, and demonstrating your understanding of content in the discussions is vital to benefiting from the course. If you feel you're falling behind, or would like to discuss this further, please let me know. I encourage you to start actively engaging with the course material as you progress, which will have the added benefit of strengthening your final assessments.

If this is something you'd like to discuss further, or if you feel you may need further assistance, don't hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to seeing your voice pop up in the discussion!

### **For ideal students:**

Hi ,

I hope you're well! I'm writing to commend you on your performance so far in **COURSE**. You've been an active participant throughout the semester so far, and it's been great to see you engaging with the course content, as well as having many interesting discussions with your peers. We'd love to see you continue setting such a strong example as the course continues, encouraging others who've been more reserved to share their ideas and opinions.

I look forward to continuing to hear your thoughts in our class discussions!