

Work Expands to Fill the Time: Parkinson's Law, Workload and Deadline Habits among Young Students of the Faculty of Information Science, UiTM Rembau

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Abstract

Parkinson's Law, the principle that work expands to fill the time available, is usually told as a joke, yet it describes a measurable pattern in student life. This study examines how deadline length and concurrent workload relate to when young Malaysian undergraduates begin assignments, how many hours they invest, and which information tools they use to track deadlines. A cross-sectional survey was administered to [N] students of the Faculty of Information Science, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Rembau Campus. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Spearman correlation, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests, with reliability checked using Cronbach's alpha. In the sample data used in this practice copy, longer deadlines were associated with later starts ($\rho = 0.61$) but only modestly more effort ($\rho = 0.29$), and workload was associated with differences in start behaviour ($H = 9.72$, $p = 0.008$). The paper proposes a "Parkinson-proofing" model that combines self-imposed shorter deadlines, staged checkpoints and personal information management practices, and offers separate recommendations for students and lecturers. Because the sample is small and drawn from a single campus, findings are exploratory.

Keywords: Parkinson's Law, academic procrastination, student syndrome, deadlines, workload, personal information management, Malaysian youth, UiTM

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 1955, C. Northcote Parkinson wrote that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion (Parkinson, 1955). He was describing bureaucracies, but anyone who has lived through a semester recognises the pattern: a two-week assignment takes two weeks, whether the real effort needed is two days or ten.

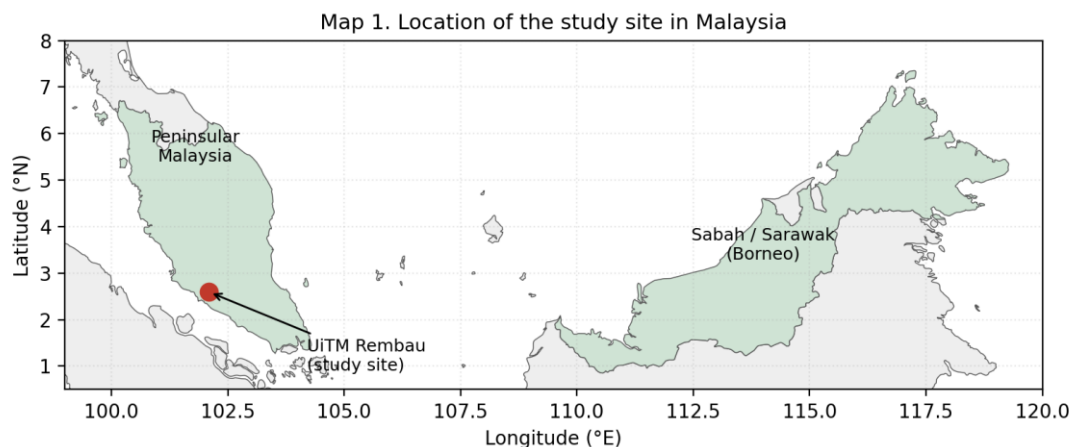
A related idea from project management is the **student syndrome**, in which people postpone starting a task until the last possible moment, even when they have ample time (Goldratt, 1997). Together the two ideas make a strong claim: **time given is not the same as time used well.**

1.2 Why this matters for Malaysian youth

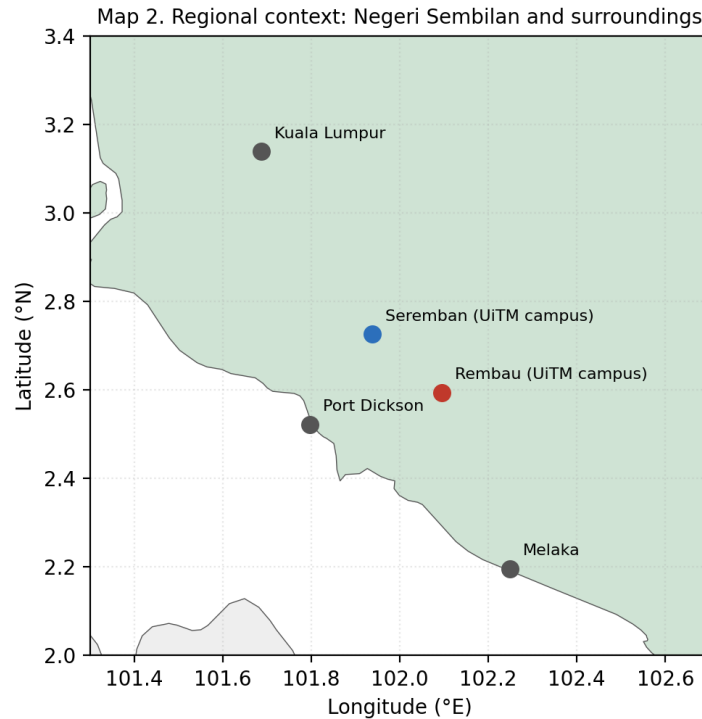
Malaysian law currently defines youth as persons aged 15 to 30 (Youth Societies and Youth Development (Amendment) Act 2019), which covers most undergraduates. Prior Malaysian studies suggest that delay is widespread: a comparative study of university students found that about 67% of Malaysian respondents showed moderate procrastination and about 12% showed severe procrastination (Kosnin & Khan, 2016), and a 2025 study of 284 students from public and private universities reported moderate procrastination overall, with amotivation as a significant positive predictor (Wei & Mohd Noordin, 2025). These studies mostly use psychology or education samples. Few examine **information science** students, who are taught to organise information professionally yet face the same temptation to delay.

1.3 Research context

UiTM Negeri Sembilan Branch operates two campuses, Seremban and Rembau. The Rembau campus (Jalan UiTM Rembau, 71300 Rembau, Negeri Sembilan) hosts the Information Science programme studied here. Its semi-rural setting, mixed hostel and off-campus residence, and heavy reliance on WhatsApp and the learning management system for coursework make it a useful micro-context for studying deadline behaviour.



Source: boundaries from Natural Earth (public domain); site coordinates approximate. Author's compilation.



Source: Natural Earth boundaries; city and campus coordinates approximate. Author's compilation.

1.4 Problem statement

Lecturers often assume that longer deadlines or generous workloads help students manage time. If Parkinson's Law holds, extra time may produce later starts rather than better work, and heavy workloads may intensify the effect.

1.5 Research questions

- **RQ1:** When do Information Science students at UiTM Rembau typically start assignments?
- **RQ2:** Is deadline length associated with later start times and with hours of effort?
- **RQ3:** Does the number of concurrent assignments change this pattern?
- **RQ4:** Which information tools are used for tracking deadlines, and are they associated with earlier starts?

1.6 Hypotheses

- **H1:** Longer deadlines are associated with later start timing (as a proportion of the time available).
- **H2:** Hours spent do not increase proportionally with deadline length.
- **H3:** Students with more concurrent assignments start later on average.
- **H4:** Students who break tasks into self-set dates start earlier than those who do not.

1.7 Significance

For students, the study offers practical habits. For lecturers and programme coordinators, it offers evidence for designing deadlines. For information professionals, it links personal information management to academic outcomes.

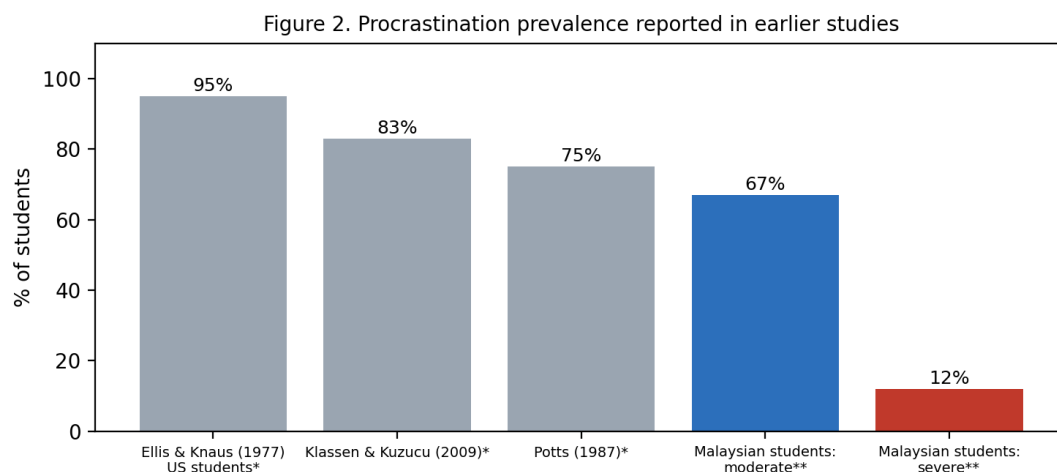
2. Literature Review

2.1 Parkinson's Law and the student syndrome

Parkinson (1955) proposed that effort expands to match available time. Goldratt (1997) later described the student syndrome in project scheduling: safety time is wasted because work begins late, then is rushed. Both predict that a longer deadline mostly shifts the start date.

2.2 Prevalence of academic procrastination

Evidence consistently shows high rates. Reviews report that roughly 80 to 95% of college students engage in some procrastination (Steel, 2007), and early studies found that nearly half of students reported procrastinating on writing term papers (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Estimates across studies vary widely, from about 20% to 90% depending on the definition and instrument used.



*As cited in secondary sources. **Procrastination rates among university students of Malaysia and Pakistan (see References).

Figures are those reported by the cited studies, not data from this survey.

2.3 Causes: self-regulation, motivation and mood

Procrastination is linked to weak self-regulation (Steel, 2007) and to short-term mood repair, where students avoid unpleasant tasks to feel better now (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). In a Malaysian sample of 287 private-university undergraduates, self-regulation and procrastination were studied together (see *Jurnal Psikologi Malaysia*, listed in references), and Malaysian findings on motivation show amotivation predicts delay (Wei & Mohd Noordin, 2025). Qualitative work describes procrastination as a mix of fear of failure, task aversion and poor time use (Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007).

2.4 Deadlines as a self-control tool

Ariely and Wertenbroch (2002) showed in experiments that people who set their own evenly spaced deadlines performed better than those with a single final deadline, but worse than those given externally imposed even deadlines. This supports using **staged, binding checkpoints**.

2.5 Planning fallacy

People systematically underestimate how long tasks will take (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). A long deadline therefore *feels* generous and encourages delay.

2.6 Implementation intentions

Gollwitzer (1999) found that specifying when, where and how one will act (“If it is Tuesday 8 pm, I will open the proposal file in the library”) substantially increases follow-through. This is a practical antidote to open-ended time.

2.7 Consequences

Procrastination is associated with lower well-being and performance. A recent systematic review reported that every included study found a significant positive relationship between academic procrastination and suicidality, with correlations ranging from 0.19 to 0.51 (see *European Psychiatry*, 2025, in references). This is not a claim that late starts cause serious harm in most students, but it shows why the topic deserves attention.

2.8 Personal information management (PIM)

PIM concerns how people keep, organise and re-find information for everyday tasks (Jones, 2007). Deadlines are information items: if they are scattered across chat groups, announcements and memory, they are harder to keep visible.

2.9 Research gap

Malaysian studies tend to treat procrastination as a psychological trait. Fewer treat it as an **information and workload design problem**, or study Information Science students on a single campus, and none known to the author combine deadline length, concurrent workload and tracking tools.

2.10 Conceptual framework

Step	Element	Expected influence
1	Deadline length	Influences start timing
2	Concurrent workload	Influences start timing
3	Tracking tools and planning habits	Influences start timing
4	Start timing	Shapes hours of effort and self-rated preparedness
5	Hours of effort and preparedness	Shape perceived quality and stress

Figure 1. Proposed relationships. Deadline length, workload and planning habits are expected to influence when students start, which in turn shapes effort, preparedness and stress.

3. Methodology

Design. Quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive-correlational survey with one open-ended item.

Population and sample. Undergraduate students of the Faculty of Information Science, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Rembau Campus. Convenience sampling via class groups; target $n \geq 50$ [actual $N = 50$]. A sample this size can detect only medium-to-large effects, so findings are treated as exploratory.

Instrument. Google Forms questionnaire in five parts: (A) demographics and context, (B) deadlines and workload, (C) start behaviour, (D) tracking tools, (E) Likert statements (1 to 5). Optionally adapt items from Tuckman's (1991) Procrastination Scale; check the permission and licensing terms before reuse.

Variables

Variable	Type	Measure
Deadline length	Ordinal / numeric	Days given (Q3, Q7, Q8)
Concurrent assignments	Numeric	Number due within the same 2 weeks
Start ratio	Numeric	Days elapsed before starting $\div$ total days given (0 = immediate, 1 = at deadline)
Hours spent	Numeric	Self-reported
Tracking tool	Nominal	Multiple response
Planning habit	Ordinal	Q10
Preparedness / efficiency attitudes	Likert	Q11 to Q15

Procedure. Survey open for 7 days; consent obtained on the first page; responses anonymous.

Analysis plan

Question	Test	Reason
Overall profile	Frequencies, mean, median, SD	Describe the data
Scale reliability	Cronbach's alpha (target ≥ 0.70)	Check Likert consistency
H1: deadline vs start ratio	Spearman's rho	Ordinal/skewed data
H2: deadline vs hours	Spearman's rho	Same
H3: workload vs start	Spearman's rho or Kruskal-Wallis	Compare groups
H4: planning vs start	Mann-Whitney U	Two groups

Question	Test	Reason
Tool use vs start	Chi-square / Fisher's exact	Categorical

Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. Report effect sizes (rho, r) alongside p-values. Software: Google Sheets / Excel for descriptives, JASP or SPSS for tests.

Ethics. No identifying information collected; voluntary participation; right to withdraw.

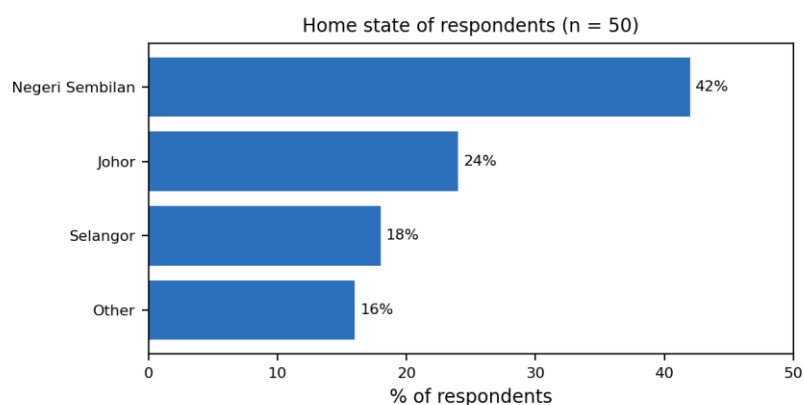
4. Results

PRACTICE COPY: *every figure, table and statistic in Sections 4 to 6 is sample data for rehearsal. It is not from a real survey and must be replaced with actual results before this paper is submitted or published.*

4.1 Respondent profile

Sample: 50 students; 58% female and 42% male; semester 3 (28%), semester 4 (34%), semester 5 (24%) and semester 6 (14%); 62% living in hostel and 38% off campus. Home states: Negeri Sembilan 42%, Johor 24%, Selangor 18%, other 16%.

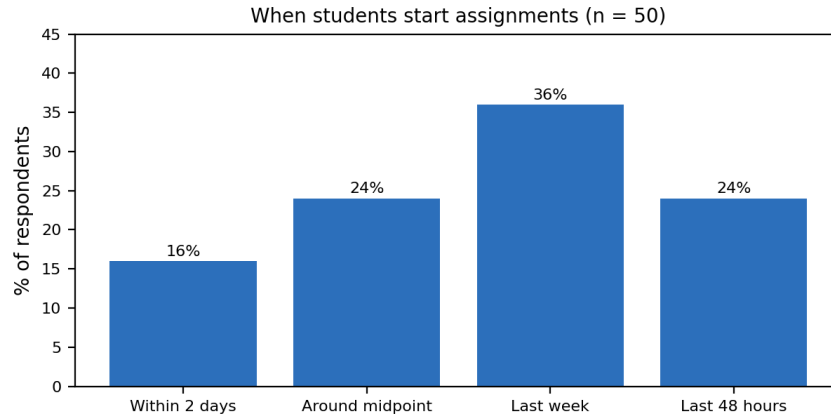
Figure 3. Home state of respondents (sample data).



4.2 Start timing (RQ1)

Start time	n	%
Within 2 days of issue	8	16%
Around midpoint	12	24%
Last week	18	36%
In the last 48 hours	12	24%

Figure 4. When students start assignments (sample data). The largest group (36%) began in the last week, and 24% began in the last 48 hours.

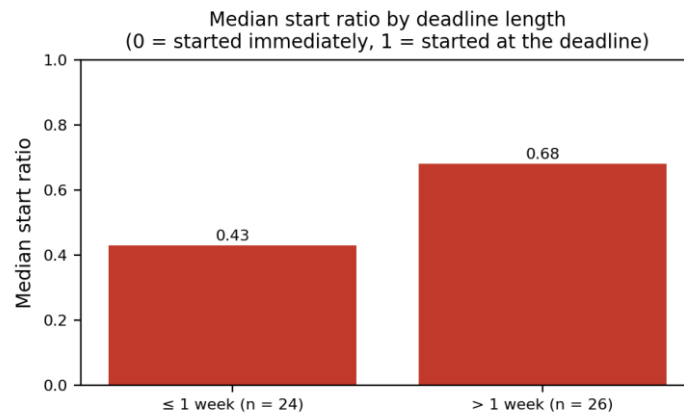


4.3 Deadline length, start ratio and effort (RQ2)

Deadline group	n	Median start ratio	Median hours
≤ 1 week	24	0.43	5.0
> 1 week	26	0.68	7.0

Spearman correlations: deadline length vs start ratio $\rho = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$; deadline length vs hours spent $\rho = 0.29$, $p = 0.04$. The start ratio is the share of the available time that had passed before the student began (0 = started immediately, 1 = started at the deadline), so a higher ratio means a later start.

Figure 5. Median start ratio by deadline length (sample data). Students with deadlines longer than one week started later in relative terms (0.68 vs 0.43), while median effort rose only from 5.0 to 7.0 hours.



4.4 Workload (RQ3)

Median concurrent assignments: 4. A Kruskal-Wallis test comparing start ratios across workload groups was significant ($H = 9.72$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.008$).

4.5 Tools (RQ4)

Tool	% using	Median start ratio among users
Phone reminders	52%	0.62

Tool	% using	Median start ratio among users
Calendar app	38%	0.66
Chat groups	70%	0.55
To-do / notes	64%	0.59
Memory only	10%	0.42

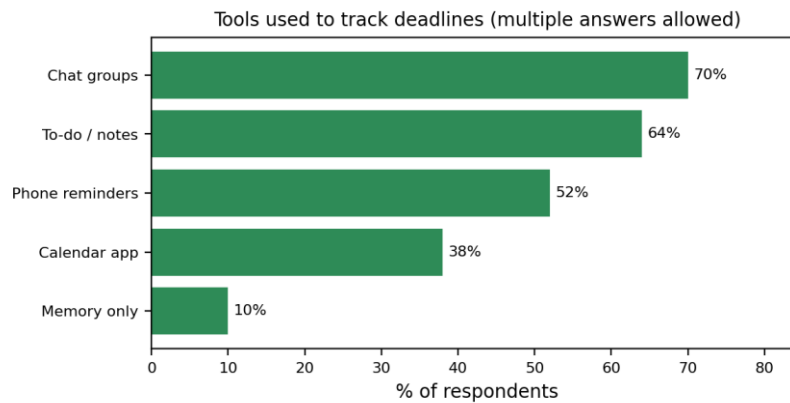


Figure 6. Tools used to track deadlines (sample data; respondents could choose more than one).

4.6 Hypothesis summary

Hypothesis	Supported?	Evidence
H1	Yes	$\rho = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$ (longer deadlines, later start)
H2	Partly	$\rho = 0.29$, $p = 0.04$; effort rose only modestly
H3	Yes	$H = 9.72$, $p = 0.008$
H4	Not supported	Tool users had higher (later) start ratios than memory-only users

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the pattern

In the sample data, most students began in the last week or the last 48 hours (60% combined), which fits the pattern Parkinson (1955) and Goldratt (1997) describe. Longer deadlines were associated with later relative starts ($\rho = 0.61$) but only slightly more hours of work, so extra time was not converted into proportional effort. The tools result is the surprising one: students who relied on memory alone had the earliest median start (0.42), while users of chat groups, to-do lists, reminders and calendars started later. One possible explanation is that passive reminders create a false sense of security, but this needs testing with real data. Severe delay in a real sample should be compared with the roughly 12% reported for Malaysian students by Kosnin and Khan (2016).

5.2 Parkinson's Law in everyday student life

The law is not only about assignments. Illustrative (hypothetical) examples:

Situation	How the law shows up	Parkinson-proof move
Two-week individual	Start on day 12, finish on day 14	Set a personal due date on day 9

Situation	How the law shows up	Parkinson-proof move
assignment		
Group project	Everyone waits for “the right time” to meet	Fix the first meeting date at the first lecture
Final-year project proposal	Months of reading, little writing	Weekly 500-word output target
Revision for finals	“I’ll start after the break”	Timebox: 3 sessions of 90 minutes this week
Daily routine	Getting ready takes 30 minutes if you have 30, 15 if you have 15	Shorten the allowed time and test it

5.3 When lecturers give a lot of work

Heavy workloads do not cancel the law; they can strengthen it. With several tasks due in the same window, students tend to pick the nearest deadline and delay the rest, producing a pile-up at the end of the semester. Three mechanisms are plausible: (1) the planning fallacy makes each task look smaller than it is (Buehler et al., 1994); (2) distant deadlines carry little emotional urgency (Steel, 2007); and (3) unclear tracking hides the true load (Jones, 2007). The practical lesson is that **the number of deadlines in a given week matters as much as the length of any single deadline.**

5.4 The Parkinson-proofing model

1. Assignment issued
2. Record it in one trusted tool
3. Set a personal deadline earlier than the official one
4. Split into 3 to 5 sub-tasks with dates
5. Write an if-then plan for the first task
6. Timebox each session
7. Review weekly and adjust

Figure 6. Parkinson-proofing workflow for students.

5.4.1 For students

1. **Shrink the time.** Give each task a deliberately tight window (for example, 90 minutes). Work then expands to fit a smaller container.
2. **Create binding checkpoints.** Ask a friend to review a draft on a fixed date (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002).
3. **Use implementation intentions.** “If it is Wednesday 8 pm, I will write the introduction in the library” (Gollwitzer, 1999).
4. **Keep one master list.** One calendar or notes app, not scattered chats (Jones, 2007).
5. **Plan for underestimation.** Multiply your first time estimate by 1.5 (Buehler et al., 1994).

5.4.2 For lecturers and coordinators

1. **Stage large assignments** with graded checkpoints (outline, draft, final).

2. **Map the semester's load.** A shared deadline calendar across courses prevents clusters.
3. **Prefer shorter, firmer windows** over open-ended ones when the task allows.
4. **Make deadlines visible** in the learning management system, not only in chat groups.

5.4.3 For information professionals and the library

Offer short workshops on personal information management and task-tracking, extending existing information literacy programmes already delivered to new intake.

5.5 Limitations

Small convenience sample from one campus; self-reported data; cross-sectional design shows association only; some students may deliberately work well under pressure and are not “procrastinating”. Future studies should use larger multi-campus samples, learning-platform submission timestamps, and mixed methods.

6. Conclusion

In the sample data, longer deadlines and heavier workloads were both associated with later starting among Faculty of Information Science students. If real survey data show the same pattern, the study supports treating deadline management as an information-design problem as well as a behavioural one. Time is a resource that expands to fill the container it is given, so students and lecturers can choose smaller, clearer, better-tracked containers.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the sample pattern, and subject to confirmation with real data:

Students: set a personal deadline at about 60% of the time available, because the sample suggests the natural start point drifts toward the end. Write the date in one place and add a first concrete task (for example, "write the outline on Tuesday at 8 pm").

Students: do not rely on reminders alone. A reminder tells you a deadline exists, but it does not start the work. Pair each reminder with a small first action and a person who will check on it.

Lecturers: replace single long deadlines with two or three staged checkpoints. Longer windows alone were linked to later starts without a matching increase in effort.

Programme coordinators: publish a shared semester deadline calendar across courses, since higher numbers of concurrent assignments were linked to different start behaviour.

Faculty and library: run a short workshop on personal information management and timeboxing, building on the information literacy sessions already given to new intakes.

Future research: replace self-reported start dates with learning-platform submission timestamps, widen the sample to other UiTM campuses, and test whether staged checkpoints reduce last-48-hour starts.

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Verify each entry against the original source before submitting, and format it to your publisher's required style.

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Appendix A: Additional survey items for the UiTM Rembau version

Add to the earlier questionnaire: - Semester of study (1 to 8) - Home state (dropdown of 13 states and 3 federal territories) - Residence: hostel / off-campus rental / commute from home - Part-time work or business: yes / no - How many assignments were due in the same two-week window last semester? (number) - Where do you usually see new deadlines first? UiTM learning platform / WhatsApp group / lecturer in class / other - Rate 1 to 5: “My deadlines are clustered in the last weeks of semester.” - Rate 1 to 5: “I deliberately set a personal deadline before the official one.”

Appendix B: Data dictionary (for your spreadsheet)

Column	Meaning	Type
id	Respondent number	Number
sem	Semester	Number
state	Home state	Text
dl_typical	Typical deadline (days)	Number
dl_long_start	Days before due date started (long deadline)	Number
dl_short_start	Days before due date started (short deadline)	Number
hours	Hours on typical assignment	Number
concurrent	Assignments due in same 2 weeks	Number
tools	Tracking tools (coded 0/1 per tool)	Binary
plan	Splits tasks into steps (1 to 4)	Ordinal
q11 to q15	Likert items	1 to 5