

## Making students AWARE: An online strategy for students given academic warning

Janet Taylor, Learning and Teaching Support Unit, University of Southern Queensland, Australia (taylorja@usq.edu.au)

Jill Lawrence, Faculty of Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Australia (lawrence@usq.edu.au)

### Abstract

Each year universities deal with large numbers of students who have unsatisfactory academic performance or who are asked to “Show Cause” why they should not be forcibly excluded. Although student and learning support sections of universities can assist students on an individual or group basis, most students are usually left to their own devices as to how they respond to such academic warnings. Few resources are available for distance or online students, or for students who do not want to be part of a formal interview process, if one exists. This paper describes the design, development and evaluation of AWARE, an online Academic Warning and Reflection Exercise, at the University of Southern Queensland. This resource allows students, through a series of focused questions, to reflect on the reasons for their poor performance, to investigate strategies for improvement from a bank of online resources and to develop a personalised action plan for success. Underpinning AWARE is a theoretical framework drawn from literature on retention in higher education and critical discourse and cross cultural communication theories. AWARE has been widely utilised by students over 2005–2006, and preliminary evaluations show that students appreciate its availability and anonymity. AWARE is now an integral part of the administrative and support processes to assist students who are on a pathway to withdrawal. The statistics gathered from AWARE provide the university with useful insights into students’ perceptions of why they have not performed and it is now one of the university’s key retention strategies. Although AWARE was initially designed as a last resort strategy, it also may also have a role in early intervention for distance education students.

This article has been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in *SLEID*, an international journal of scholarship and research that supports emerging scholars and the development of evidence-based practice in education.

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ISSN 1832-2050

### Introduction

The issues of retention and progression have been of concern both within Australia and elsewhere for many years, but have recently assumed critical importance within the Australian university sector with the expansion of performance-based funding of universities. These issues of retention and progression are complex,

encompassing academic, administrative, social and personal domains, and are not solved simply.

Significant research on attrition/retention has been conducted over several decades, primarily in the USA (Astin, 1997; Braxton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993, Seidman, 2005) and Britain (Yorke, 2000, Yorke & Longden, 2004; Simpson, 2003) but also in Australia (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000) and New Zealand (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003). Where the early research concentrated on prediction of factors related with failure or drop-out, more recent research has acknowledged the complexity involved in the social, personal and academic transitions to university (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Krause, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Lawrence, 2005; McInnis, 2003). Although there are some online early warning programs (Dietsche, Flether, & Barrett, 2001; Shiplee & Wilson, 2001), like many other initiatives these are directed at transition stages and are not designed for students who are experiencing failure. Consequently, as reported in recent First Year in Higher Education conferences (First Year in Higher Education, 1995–2006), the majority of interventions have focused on measures to prevent attrition and poor performance before they occur. Proactive preventative actions are of course the best strategy in the long term, yet despite these strategies many students fall through the nets and fail to perform. In reaction institutions then often implement strategies variously called academic warning, probation or “Show Cause”, whereby students are formally notified of their at risk status and advised of actions that they need to take. Damashek (2003), in a review of support programs for students on academic probation in the United States of America, indicated that such programs could be intrusive or non-intrusive and mandatory or voluntary and have varying levels of effectiveness. Damashek describes three levels of effectiveness:

Most limited—send students a letter notifying them of probation status and provide suggestions for how to improve their standing. Students are responsible for taking action.

Intermediate level—probation workshops are offered to students through which they receive technical information about policies and procedures and are able to ask questions. Students again are responsible for taking action.

Comprehensive approach—on-going advising and counselling sessions, where students receive technical information, transcript evaluation, assistance in identifying personal factors affecting their academic performance and referrals to appropriate resources. Their progress is also monitored. (Adapted from Damashek, 2003, p. 10)

In Australia, although some universities have structured counselling programs in place, it is rare for students who have been placed on academic warning to be given more than Damashek’s (2003) “Most limited” level of assistance. Most students who are identified as “at risk” are largely left to their own devices, directed to support centres or dealt with by remedial or add-on study skills/academic writing programs offered by student services or learning centres (Asmar, Brew, McCulloch, Peseta & Barrie, 2000). Few of these provide specialised support for distance education students. Further, full-time on-campus students are less likely to stay on campus than students in previous years and hence need specific off-campus assistance. In 2003 over 70% of full-time students worked while studying (Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, 2003) and hence had a reduced likelihood that they stayed on campus when studying.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a large multimodal regional university in eastern Australia with over 81% of its 26000 students studying by distance or online education. The special needs of USQ's student population meant that it needed a specialised solution in how best to assist students who had been placed on academic warning. AWARE (Academic Warning and Reflection Exercise), an online support process, has been designed to meet their needs. Although it has been purpose built for distance education students, it is also effective for on-campus students who have exhibited poor performance and may be on a pathway to withdrawal or exclusion.

This paper aims to provide the background to AWARE, the regulatory environment which fostered its development and its design and development, including the theoretical underpinnings which shaped it. The paper also traces AWARE's integration into USQ policies and procedures, its current usage and the results of students' evaluations of its effectiveness. In addition, the paper foreshadows future research directions and initiatives generated by the analysis of AWARE data.

## Background

### *Administrative background*

Attrition and withdrawal impact significantly higher education. Distance education universities traditionally have a higher level of failure and withdrawal than traditional on-campus universities. (See Simpson [2003] for a recent overview of retention issues in distance education universities.) USQ's policies in relation to academic standing and exclusion are documented in Academic Regulations 5.9.2, *Conditional Academic Standing (CAS)* and 5.9.3, *Academic Standing of the Excluded (ASE)* and are similar to policies in other Australian universities. Undergraduate students with a grade point average of at least 3.00, and postgraduate students with a grade point average of at least 3.50, are said to have "*satisfactory academic standing*". Undergraduate students with a grade point average of less than 3.00, or postgraduate students with a grade point average of less than 3.50, have "*conditional academic standing*". If a student has previously had at least one period of conditional academic standing and has not regained and/or maintained a status of satisfactory academic standing within an appropriate time, the Dean may institute proceedings to *exclude* the student from the program. In exceptional circumstances, a student may be *excluded from all programs* of the university. If students have unsatisfactory academic standing or are at risk of being excluded, they receive a letter from the university notifying them of their situation and in the latter case asking them to 'show cause' why they should not be excluded from their program of study for a period of 12 months.

At USQ, before the implementation of AWARE in 2005, the processes to deal with these students were dependent on individual faculty policies. Most faculties sent students standard letters explaining the procedures in relation to CAS and ASE. Some faculties included explanations about sources of assistance, referring them to the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, Student Services and program coordinators. Other students were left to fend for themselves about how best to respond to these academic warnings. Distance Education students were not specifically considered.

The design and development phases of AWARE were informed by literatures from higher education research, critical discourse theory (CDT) and cross-cultural communication theory (CCT).

## ***Theoretical foundations***

AWARE encapsulates the understanding that student retention and progression are complex processes that involve interactions among students' administrative, academic, social and personal domains. It incorporates the understanding that the interactions between institutional policies and practices and between student learning and support sections are crucial in assisting students who are on academic warning. Further, the designers drew on their lengthy experiences assisting at risk students and on the theoretical perspectives provided by CDT and CCT. CDT, by visualising pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1995), highlights the role played by discourses in higher education teaching and learning practices. Luke (1999, p. 67) argues that if the primacy of discourse is acknowledged then mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome. With this insight, failure, withdrawal and attrition can be seen as the students' lack of mastery and demonstration of mainstream university, discipline and course discourses. Secondly, the application of CDT reveals the presence of literacies or multiliteracies in the university culture (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). These include course, discipline and faculty literacies, academic literacy and numeracy, communication technologies and information literacies and administrative, library and research literacies as well as a multiplicity of personal (including time and stress management), social and financial literacies. This insight makes more transparent the crucial nature of the interrelationships between students' understanding and practices and institutional literacies, as well as the consequences for attrition, retention and progression (Burton & Dowling, 2005). Thirdly, CDT focuses attention on the discursive practices that can operate as power relationships in constructing and maintaining dominance and inequality in the university context (Fairclough, 1995). This understanding is critical in an academic setting where the power imbalances between institutional practices and students can affect student retention and performance, providing consequences for student attrition (Cox, 2003).

AWARE is also informed by CCT (Bandura, 1986; Ferraro, 2002; Hofstede, 1997). CCT suggests that, in order to reap maximum benefits from the institution, students need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream practices, academics and students. Integral to these learning processes is an individual's self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can successfully perform in academic and everyday situations (Bandura, 1986). Mak, Westwood, Barker and Ishiyama (1998) argue that key socio-cultural competencies assist students to succeed at university: those of seeking help and information, participating in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing disagreement and refusing requests. Whereas one research strand clearly indicates that the use of the competencies is critical for success (Lawrence, 2005), other strands demonstrate that those students who remain socially and academically isolated are more likely to fail or decide to leave (Evans & Peel, 1999). Underpinning AWARE is the understanding that students' use of key socio-cultural competencies can assist them to improve their academic performances.

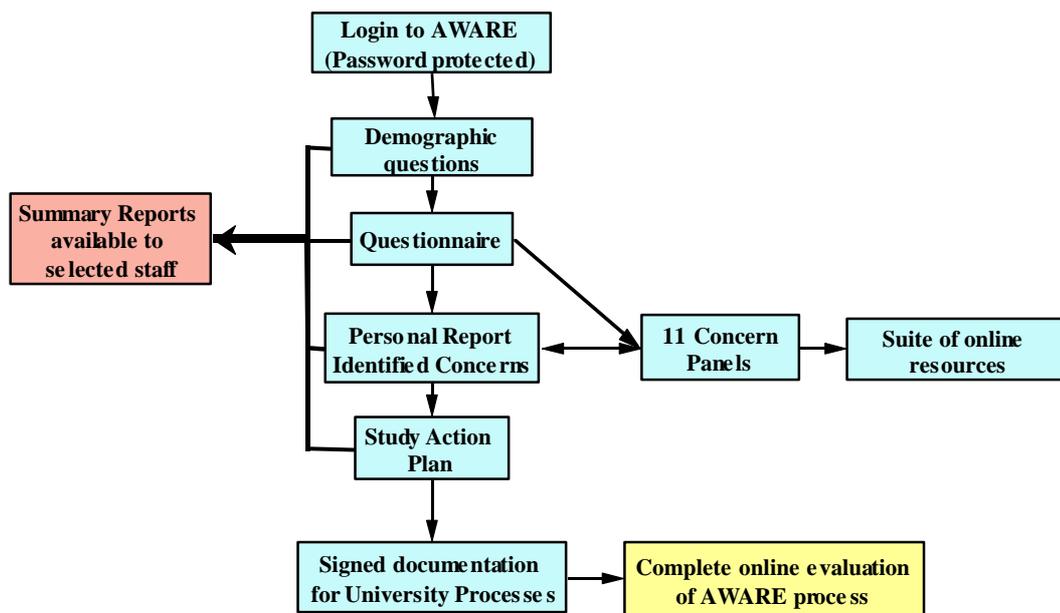
## The AWARE process

AWARE is designed to assist students to:

- reflect on the reasons why they are not doing as well as they might have hoped
- increase their awareness of specific areas of concern
- make some decisions about what to do and how to do it
- provide them with ready access to relevant university resources and services, through a focused array of online resources
- develop a personalised action plan for future study
- provide them with documentary evidence of their actions (if required by the university).

The web based application of AWARE is accessible for enrolled students for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When the student enters the web site they pass through 7 stages (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Stages of the AWARE process**



Students initially log in using their university login and password, thus allowing them to return to components of the process a number of times if necessary. The next screen collects brief demographic data to be used for later reporting. It should be noted that it was a specific design characteristic that the anonymity of individual students was preserved, mirroring a counselling practice. The next stage consists of the actual questionnaire (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Screen shot of question within AWARE** (note the progress through the questionnaire visible in top right hand corner)

Questionnaire		Progress: PersonalDetails 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16
<b>1. This section is on examinations</b>		
Response	Question	
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	I know what I will be examined on	
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	I revise regularly throughout the semester	
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	I have difficulty reading and making notes from the study materials and/or the textbooks	
<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	I take notes at lectures and/or make summaries of my study materials	

Here students are presented with a number of questions covering different categories (see Table 1) where they respond “yes” or “no”. Each question is linked to series of concerns (see Table 1). Each concern is in turn linked with an extensive suite of resources, the majority of which are located within *ALSONline*, the online academic learning support managed by the Learning and Teaching Support Unit. The background program built into AWARE tabulates the responses to all the questions that indicate that this is a problem for that student and presents these to the student as a list of areas of concern. Each student will have an individualised personal report of concerns particular to her or him (see Figure 3), and is encouraged to view the resources associated with each concern (see Figure 4). Once s/he has viewed these then s/he is advised to choose three to act upon. When a student clicks on three concerns, the next screen appears. This screen details the three chosen concerns and asks students to write about the actions that they have chosen in relation to the concern. A text box allows students to enter this in their own words (see Figure 5). Students may then choose to print out their action plan to use as documentary evidence within their Academic Warning Process (see Appendix A). This printed form allows for the students and selected staff members to sign as evidence of the actions that have been undertaken and completed.

**Table 1: Categories of questions and concerns incorporated into AWARE**

Categories of questions (number of questions)	Categories of concerns
examinations (11)	asking for help
assignment (15)	exam preparation
participation (14)	careers and study
computer competence (7)	computing skills
language/writing/reading skills (7)	doing mathematics
mathematics skills (5)	financial matters and employment
university administrative processes (10)	personal concerns
asking for help (16)	reading and note-taking
effective study (13)	study techniques and time management
stress and depression (7)	using the library
finance (6)	writing assignments
personal issues (7)	
goals (5)	
disabilities or medical conditions (7)	

**Figure 3: Screen shot of Personal Report**

### AWARE - Personal Report

for Demo Demo Student      Student number: t1111111      Date: 7/10/2006 5:52:59 PM

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You have identified the following topics as areas of concern.

Identify three concerns that require the most immediate action by clicking the checkboxes.  
(If you need assistance doing this, please contact [study assistance counsellor](#))

- [Study Techniques and Time Management](#)
- [Writing Assignments](#)
- [Asking for help](#)
- [Personal Concerns](#)

Take some time now to read alternatives offered. You need to think about what are the three most important concerns for you and what actions you will take.

You can print this screen or come back to it at a later stage if you need time to think about the alternatives.

If you need assistance doing this, please contact [study assistance counsellor](#).

**Figure 4: Screen shot of Concerns screen linking with specific resources**

### Asking for Help

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You have identified 'asking for help' as an area of concern.

To improve or develop strategies to do this investigate the following web sites:

- [How to ask for help](#)
- [How to contact my lecturer](#)
- [Getting help from the Library](#)
- [Using USQAssist to get help](#) (USQAssist can answer some questions or transfer your questions to specific academic staff)
- Understanding university administration:
  - [Enrolment Basics](#)
  - [How to use USQConnect](#)
  - [USQAdmin](#) (changing enrolment, personal details etc)
  - [Examinations](#)
  - [How to organise your degree](#)
  - [Appealing a decision](#)
  - [University Regulations](#)

Workshops and other information on [learning skills](#) are available at the Toowoomba Campus and online.

You are encouraged to make an appointment with a [study assistance counsellor](#).

Many other study resources are available on [ALSOnline](#).

Figure 5: Screen shot of Action Plan

### AWARE - Study Action Plan

for Demo Demo Student      Student number: t1111111      Date: 7/10/2006 8:34:44 PM

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You have selected the following concerns as requiring immediate action:

- [Study Techniques and Time Management](#)
- [Writing Assignments](#)
- [Personal Concerns](#)

List the actions that you will take to relieve each of your chosen concerns.

**Action 1**

**Action 2**

**Action 3**

<< Edit Concerns    Help    Print Action Plan >>

## Integration into university processes

AWARE was initiated and developed by an interdisciplinary team from USQ's Learning and Teaching Support Unit and Student Services in conjunction with the faculties and other support providers within the university. The AWARE process received the support of the university, principally Academic Board, prior to development.

The strength of online AWARE is that it was designed as an integral part of the administrative and support processes to assist students who are on a pathway to withdrawal. It was devised as a specific application integrated into Academic Regulations on academic standing. AWARE provides a concrete strategy that the faculties can present to students identified as having *Conditional Academic Standing* or who are asked to provide evidence in response to the "Show Cause" procedures. As such, AWARE was disseminated in a range of ways to students and staff. Staff were advised of its existence through Academic Board, a university-wide forum, demonstrations of AWARE and targeted emails to key staff members and course coordinators. Students are advised of its existence through:

- standard academic warning letters mailed to students each year from the Associate Dean of each faculty
- announcements on the student official electronic notice board USQConnect. Each semester when examination results are released an announcement is included advising students how to use AWARE to redress unexpected performance

- topics within the student electronic assistance platform USQAssist, where students are referred to AWARE in response to questions associated with the keywords “help”, “fail” and “Show Cause”.

## Reporting and monitoring process

Built into AWARE is a reporting and monitoring process that allows selected staff to gather summary statistics from AWARE. These data can be categorised in terms of the enrolment and demographics of the student and show numbers and percentages of students who have participated within AWARE, completion times, responses to specific questions, and identified and selected concerns.

Large numbers of data have been collected through this process. These data primarily indicate the areas of concern that students believe most affect their success at university. The details embedded in these data are significant in that they will enhance the university’s knowledge of reasons why students perform poorly as well as inform them about students’ knowledge of university systems and support structures. Information gathered from the data gathering process will be reported elsewhere.

## Use and evaluation of AWARE

In the first year of operation, 1744 students accessed the AWARE web site (2005–2006). Of these students, 1608 students (92%) commenced the questionnaire process and 1039 (60%) completed the process and prepared an action plan (see Table 2). The reasons for this varying participation remain unclear and warrant further investigation. On average students spent 14 minutes completing AWARE. Three students spent as little as 1 minute and obviously gave very little thought to the process while one student from the Faculty of Engineering and Surveying spent over 2.5 hours considering her or his options. 60% of students accessing AWARE were distance education students, while 20% were recent school leavers (17–20 years old). Numbers participating by faculty are in proportion to the numbers of students enrolled in each faculty.

**Table 2: Number of students accessing and utilising online AWARE (2005–2006)**

Group	Total students	Total surveys started	Total completed surveys	% completed (out of total commenced)
All faculties	1744	1608	1039	65
Distance education	1040	955	591	62
Young students (17–20 years)	312	295	206	70
All Arts	142	138	95	69
All Business	874	781	501	64
All Education	215	192	134	70
All Engineering	192	191	113	59
All Sciences	299	280	181	65

## **Online student evaluation**

Throughout 2006 an online evaluation was associated with AWARE. Although the response to this evaluation was small (40 students), it does provide an indication of students' beliefs about the initiative. The evaluation consisted of a series of survey questions as well as open-ended comments. The results showed that students who selected to use AWARE included both students who had unsatisfactory performance and students who were keen to improve their grades. Distance Education students in particular appreciated the existence of AWARE. Over 60% of students who commenced AWARE continued with the process to produce an Action Plan for future study and indicated that it allowed them to improve their grades. Student evaluation responses regarding the resources, usability and usefulness of AWARE were generally positive. 80% of students surveyed indicated that they would use AWARE again if they were failing. Interestingly, over 76% of respondents suggested that they would prefer using AWARE to seeing a study assistance counsellor.

Overall, the results showed that students who participated in AWARE were pleased with the process and agreed that it assisted them to improve their grades. One student wrote:

It helps students like me to plan study, weekly and every semester. It's a very good guide to a distant student like me!! Gives good strategies to manage time (which is very important for a distant student). And I will recommend this AWARE process to my friends!!!

One unexpected outcome was that students appreciated the effort that had been developed for Distance Education students and secondly that its anonymous nature was an important part of their contribution. Students commented:

It just shows you where you should apply yourself further. It shows you to be true to yourself because no one else is going to be reading it.

Easy and private.

Confidentiality in identifying the real problem.

In addition, students noted:

I liked that it put my already known concerns in black and white so I could read it for myself.

It gave excellent advice on how to overcome the problems I was having and it has made me feel confident that I can do better.

Simple, quick process with outcomes that you can see and are relevant to yourself and it provides the resources to assist with your problem areas.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Thousands of students across Australia and elsewhere are faced with the possibility of failing their studies each year. Accompanying this failure is reduced funding for the university as well as the personal and financial costs imposed on the individual student. Although it is clear that proactive programs designed to prevent failure are

preferable, AWARE has fulfilled a direct need to support those students who have already experienced failure or wish to improve their grades. AWARE has been a greater success than the authors anticipated. We know, however, that without an intensive research project tracking students after their use of AWARE, it is not possible to say categorically that AWARE has a positive effect on student performance. However, students' continued participation in AWARE, as well as their perceptions of its helpfulness, confirm that it is useful. This is especially the case for Distance Education students, who previously had little or no access to structured support.

AWARE's effectiveness stems from a number of reasons. The first relates to the theoretical assumptions underpinning AWARE. The integration of higher education perspectives with the theoretical perspectives, generated by critical discourse and cross-cultural communication theories, allowed the complexity and diversity of university study to be acknowledged by the AWARE process. AWARE accepts that university success depends on students' engagement and mastery of a number of literacies—faculty, discipline and course discourses, academic literacies and numeracies, and information, communication and administrative literacies as well as research and referencing literacies. Its open acknowledgement of the complexity of studying, working and living in today's society also enables students to reflect on all those aspects which might be challenging their academic performance, including financial, work and family demands. Further, its integration of the administrative and procedural components of study with academic, social and personal domains allows students to reflect broadly on why they have failed, looking both inward to themselves as learners and outward to support structures within and outside universities. The nature of the questions themselves encouraged this reflection even before students viewed the support or instructional materials associated with each question.

The program was designed to be an individualised approach so that students could reflect on and complete each question to develop a personalised profile, to which they could return a number of times if desired. Once developed, students could personalise it further by developing their own plan for action, returning the sense of ownership (or control) back to students. In many instances the process confirmed to students what they already knew, but it appears that seeing it in writing on the screen was an added stimulant for them to take charge. This personalisation of the process accompanied by its confidentiality appears to have encouraged students to participate.

AWARE's effectiveness may also lie in the simplicity of its online template: linking questions to areas of concern and to sources of help and information, allowing students to produce their own plans for action. This template has quite wide application within academic support for students and will next be used in preventative measures to address issues related to transition to university. Further, in terms of supporting students who fail, AWARE's strength is confirmed by these students' significant use of AWARE and their positive perceptions of its effects on their performance. The students' responses within the AWARE questionnaire also reveal issues that were perceived by students to be problematic. Of particular interest is the identification that "asking for help" was a problem for many students, especially distance education students. AWARE, its development and use are still evolving and further research will be undertaken to investigate these issues.

The evaluative process revealed a number of weaknesses in the AWARE process. These included the length of the questionnaire, the lack of usefulness of some resources and the limited scope of the demographic data. To rectify these issues,

the entire process was revised in late 2006. This revision resulted in the reduction and rewording of a number of questions and the redevelopment of the online resources that underpin AWARE. The resource section now has a stronger focus on study and time management techniques and strategies for asking for help. Collection of data has also been expanded to include additional demographic and evaluative data. These data will be important in ongoing quality control of AWARE and to monitor student experiences of study. Initiatives are also in place to embed AWARE further within the administrative processes and to raise the visibility of AWARE amongst students and staff. The future for AWARE therefore looks positive.

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## Appendix A

### AWARE - Study Action Plan

for Demo Demo Student

Student number: t1111111

Date: 7/10/2006 5:58:34 PM

You have selected the following concerns as requiring immediate action:

- Study Techniques and Time Management
- Writing Assignments
- Personal Concerns

List the actions that you will take to relieve each of your chosen concerns.

#### Action 1

see study assistance counsellor to help planning

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#### Action 2

Read section on writing sentences, see Learning Centre tutor

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#### Action 3

Read material on file management, to organise my computer files.

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I confirm that I have taken these actions.

Action 1. Signature:

Date:

Action 2. Signature:

Date:

Action 3. Signature:

Date:

Some students may want to discuss this with a staff member (eg Study Assistance Counsellor, Learning Centre tutor or course lecturer). If you require written confirmation of this discussion please get the staff member and yourself to sign below.

Student name:

Student Signature:

Date:

Staff name:

Staff Signature:

Date: