Practices and perceptions of online assignment submission, marking and feedback:

What's changed?

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Context

- Literature on online assignment submission, marking and feedback tends towards evaluations of certain systems and tools and highlights the benefits and challenges therein (Aravinthan, 2010; Barker, 2011). Some of the benefits that have been shown are linked to sustainability both financially (Arney, Jones, & Wolf, 2012) and environmentally (Roy, Potter, & Yarrow, 2008). As the higher education sector moves towards greater engagement with work-integrated learning and online delivery, the idea of online assignment submission marking and feedback becomes not only beneficial but compulsory.

- A research study of students' IT experience at Macquarie University identified that while some students were strongly in favour of online assignment submission, only 12% were using it and just 16% received assignment feedback online (Gosper, 2010). A research study was designed to follow up on these findings with the aim of exploring the broad concepts associated with online assignment submission. The three aims of the study were to investigate appropriate technologies and preferred methods of online assignment submission; possibilities and procedures for online marking; and possibilities and procedures for the feedback and return of assignments online.

- The mixed methods study included a substantial review of the literature, to highlight the benefits and drawbacks with respect to the three research aims. In addition, a staff survey was conducted to gather data on the processes and practices with online assignment submission, marking and feedback and Leximancer was used to extract common themes from the qualitative data.

- In 2012, after the implementation of a new Learning Management System (LMS), the study was repeated with a focus on identifying whether and to what extent practices and processes around online submission had changed from the initial study. The same methodology was used including an update to the literature review to identify changes in the literature in the two-year period as well as the staff survey to capture changes in perception and practice.

- There is a general trend in the literature to investigation of the pedagogical affect on electronic submission and particularly marking and feedback i.e. does it help students learn. Some of the earlier articles focused on whether it could work and the technology (Baillie-de Byl, 2004) whereas recent studies are more concerned with student learning (Lo, & Prohaska, 2011). The data collected from the surveys mirrored the literature with a range of benefits and challenges highlighted. The study concludes that staff perceptions have indeed changed and whilst more staff are using online systems for assignment submission, marking and feedback, many do not have a positive attitude towards it. This could be explained by the increased prevalence of available systems and tools alongside their mandated presence.

Background

2010

Research study at Macquarie showed many students were keen to use online submission but relatively few were doing so

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This highlighted the need for further development towards a more consistent, flexible approach across the university

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The broad trend towards online delivery in higher education was a driving factor

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Process

1. Literature review on benefits and challenges with respect to the areas below

2. Quantitative and qualitative Macquarie staff survey to capture current pracices and attitudes

3. Leximancer analysis of quantitative data

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A project was undertaken to explore practices and possibilities around online assignment:

Submission Marking

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2012

Study was repeated to identify whether and to what extent practices and perceptions around online assignments had changed since the initial study

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The second study took place after Macquarie's new Learning Management System, Moodle, was implemented

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The same methodology was used including an updated literature review and staff survey to capture changes

What's changed? Literature analysis

2010 - 2012 benefits

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While the literature from both years indicate an overall acknowledgement of the benefits of online assessment, 2012 demonstrates a growing acceptance of the fast pace and inevitable impact of technology on assessment practices. However, 2012 showed an increase in the adoption of online assessment tools and procedures at an institutional level and an increase in support both in hardware, software and to the users. Interestingly, data is raised as a benefit, as is administrative improvements across both years, as is the geographical benefits.

# What's changed? Literature analysis

2010 - 2012 challenges

While both years indicate issues with skill levels and adoption issues for staff and students, 2012 saw an increased acknowledgement of health concerns from increased time spent online. Costs, security and cultural change were indicated across both years. However, change fatigue and institutional demands were raised more in 2012 literature. Plagairism is mentioned across numerous articles in both years but in 2012 there is acknowledgement of products such as Turnitin.

Survey Results - Submission

Respondents indicated the type(s) of assignments for which they used online submission
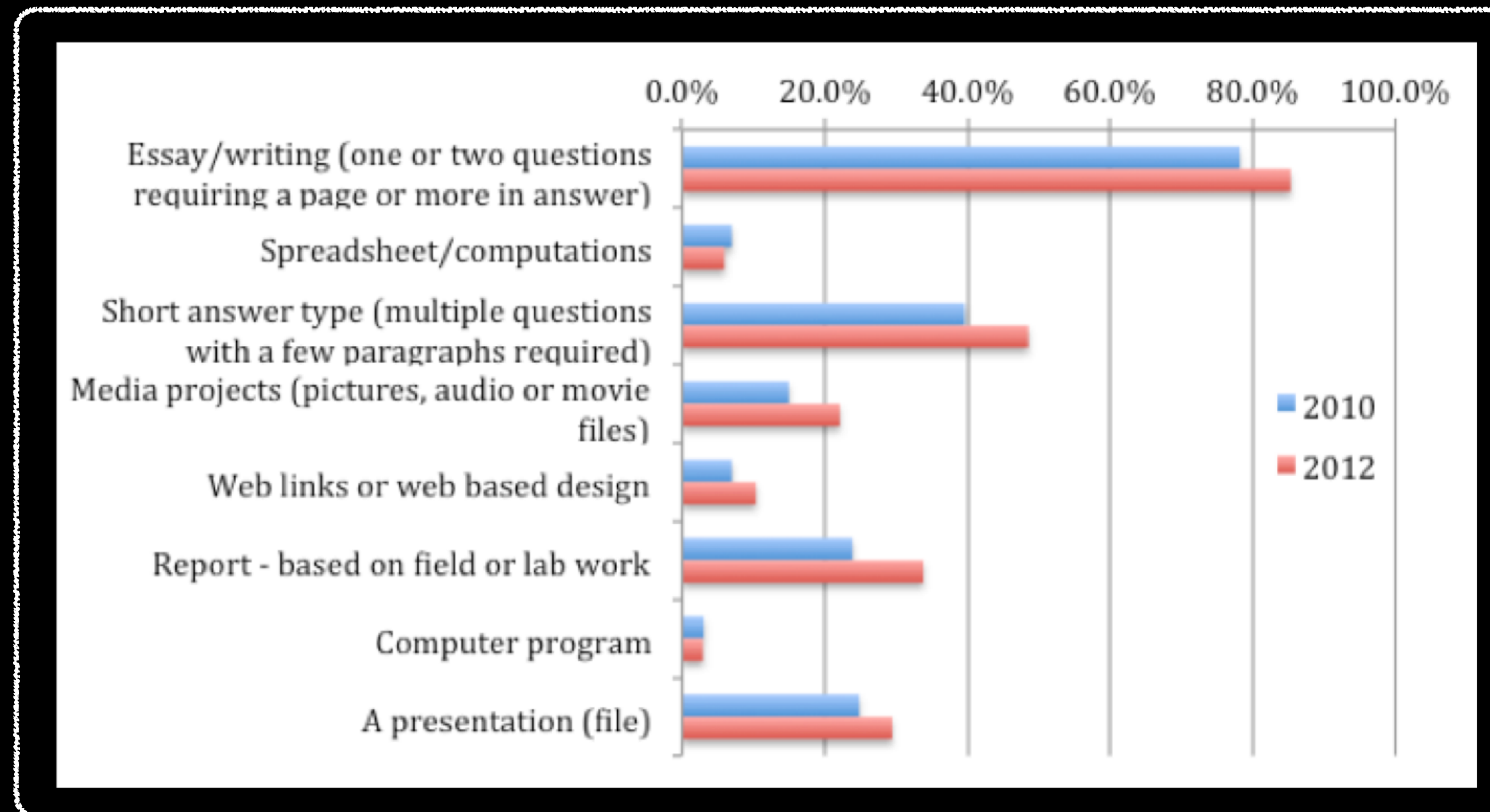

This **general shift towards the use of online submission** corresponds with the Moodle implementation and the assignment tools promoted to streamline submission processes. The trend is consistent with **gradual recognition by academic staff of student expectations** around online submission.

However, **the increase was relatively modest**. This may partly be due to timing - the second survey ran in Session 2 2012, when staff were still adjusting to Moodle. However, it may also be attributed to **ongoing concerns around online assignments**, as seen in survey comments.

Survey Results - Marking

Respondents indicated how they currently marked online submission
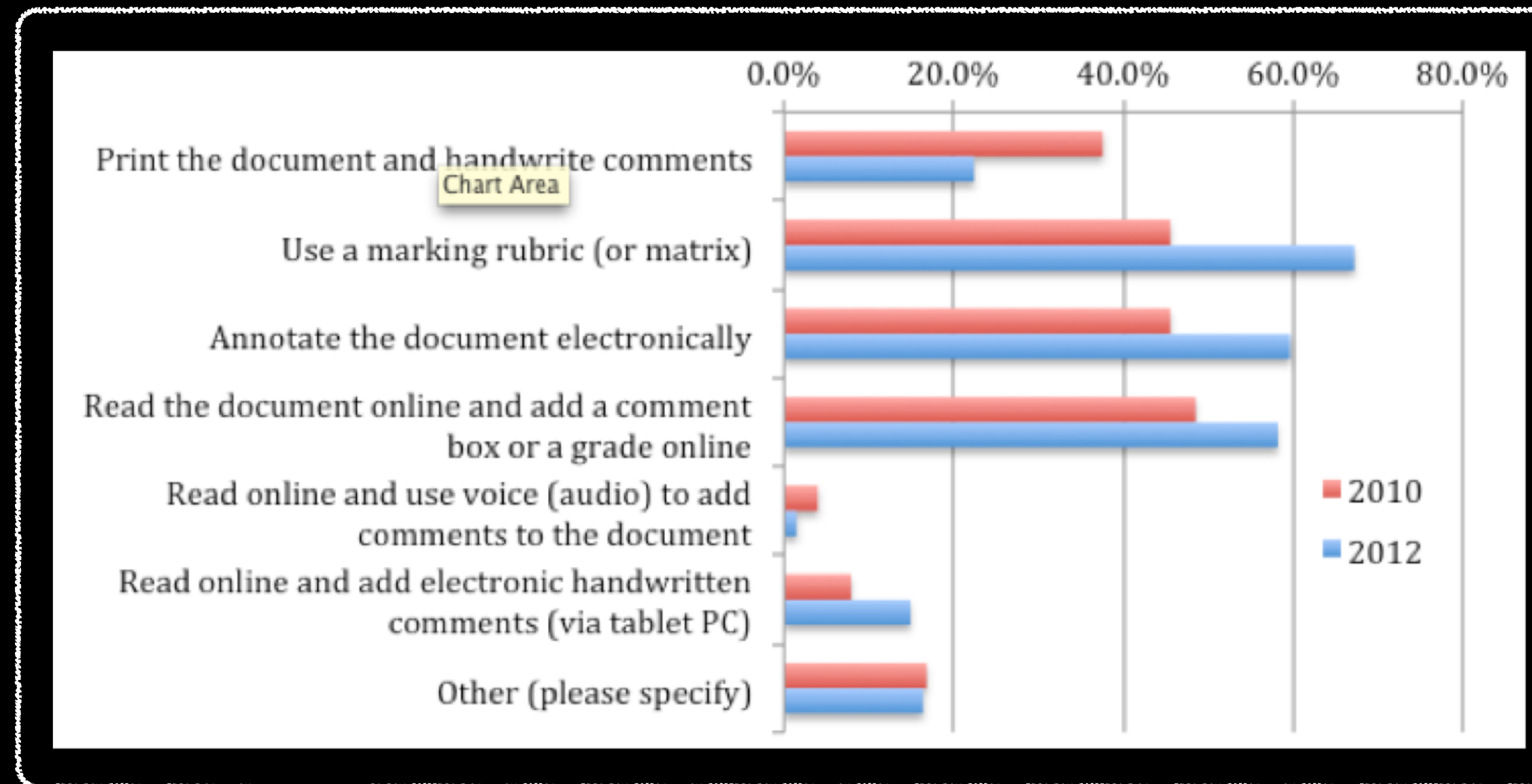
There was a **15% decrease in the proportion of staff printing hard copies to hand mark**, while **marking with online comments, grades and annotations (including by tablet) each increased between 10-15%.** This corresponds with the introduction of Grademark (through Turnitin), a fully online marking system. **Tablets became more popular as a marking tool**, as staff increasingly recognised the benefits of mobile marking.

The **proportion of staff marking with rubrics increased by over 20%,** as online rubrics through Grademark were introduced, and a broader institutional push occurred for staff to comply with Macquarie's Assessment Policy by implementing Standards Based Assessment.

Survey Results - Feedback & Return

Respondents gave feedback and returned assignments by the following methods
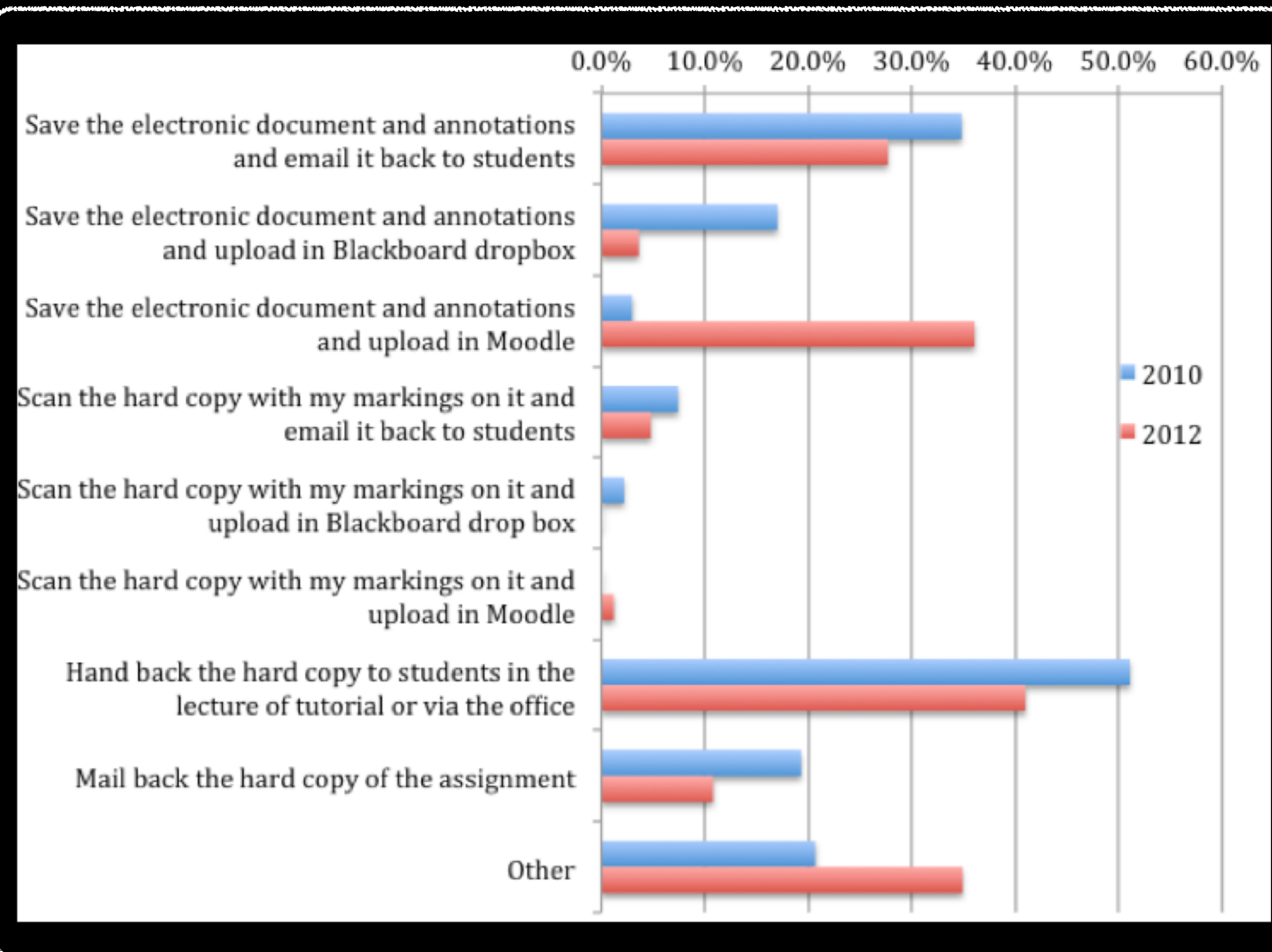
The most notable change in feedback and return practices was **the use of the LMS assignment dropbox, which more than doubled between 2010-2012.** At the same time, there was a **slight decrease in the proportion of staff using email** to return assignments. This suggests that staff increasingly saw the Moodle dropbox as more efficient than alternative methods.

Individual and institutional **sustainability concerns** may also partly explain this trend. For example, in 2012, the Arts faculty mandated that students could no longer collect hard copies of assignments from the office.

Conclusion

So What's Changed?

Much of the literature (2010 and earlier) investigated the efficacies and shortcomings of the technology for electronic submission, marking and feedback.
A general trend in the current literature is the pedagogical affect particularly in electronic marking and feedback i.e. does it help students learn?

Electronic submission of assignments: increasing reliance on online submission methods – staff still hesitant due to technology but students wholeheartedly in support.

Electronic marking of assignments: increased use of online marking and marking rubrics. Possibly as a response to assessment policy but also as tools become easier to navigate.

Electronic feedback and return of assignments: reduction in use of email to return assignments and of hard copy methods. Increase use of the LMS. Attributed to greater sustainability awareness and growing confidence in the stability of the technology.
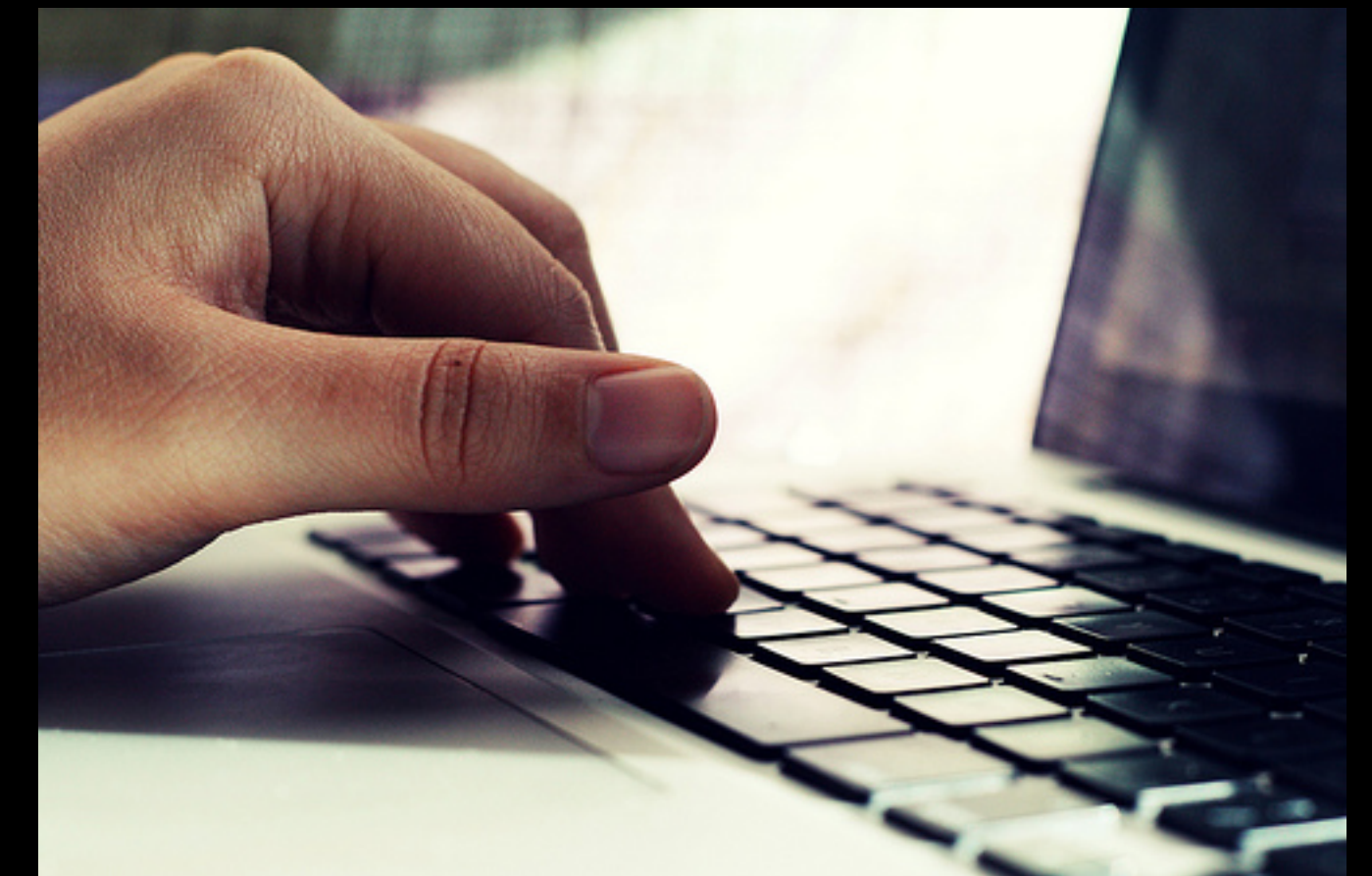

Image courtesy of a little tune, Flickr
http://www.flickr.com/photos/alittletune/4717710498/

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