

Addressing Attendance

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ABSTRACT

Within the School of Science and Engineering during the session 2000/2001 a policy was adopted of monitoring non-attendance as an early warning indicator and focusing action through the Advisor of Studies with reports to Programme Tutors, Personal Tutors, Student Services etc. as appropriate.

For practical purposes a sample of appropriate modules were used to provide information required as indicative of the overall student progress, constituting no less than two modules per course. Further checks could be made as required but absence of two weeks in two modules is taken as sufficient to warrant action by Advisor of Studies if no information about cause can be identified.

Where students have been withdrawn, regardless of the stated reasons, more meaningful information may be obtained if a follow-up letter is sent to request further information. Previously this has not been done but may be useful. Therefore the intention is to send a letter to all students withdrawn to obtain more meaningful information to help retain students.

A similar, but less rigorous approach was used the previous session (however, the university structure was different to the current session) and there is evidence that the pass rate rose from 67% to 77% for Level 1¹. However, it is impossible to identify any single attributable factor for the increase in course performance, although significantly better than other School progression rates. It is clear that from the data that there are likely to be problems in progression at Level 2. In order to address this, monitoring non-attendance and subsequent action should focus on Level 1, Level 2 and Direct Entry students.

Consideration and discussion on the issue of non-submission of coursework assignment as an additional measure to indicate poor performance is necessary within the School. I believe non-submission of coursework may be used as a formal indication of a problem requiring an interview. This is based on a general analysis of available module results with less than 70% pass rates. The analysis indicates that very few students that actually made submissions for all their assessments, subsequently failed a module.

The major problem with these systems is that the time available to take effective action is limited. This therefore concentrates workload between weeks four and twelve of teaching.

¹ School Annual Report for Session 1999/2000 5th February 2001 Table 4

1 RETENTION

Student retention is a high priority within the university. Within the School of Science and Engineering during the session 2000/2001 a policy was adopted of monitoring non-attendance as an early warning indicator and focusing action through the Advisor of Studies with reports to Programme Tutors, Personal Tutors, Student Services etc. as appropriate.

The following is an evaluation of the policy, relating to those students seen on set appointments by Mr Simpson, concentrating on Level 1. Level 1, Semester 1 is where the most significant effort can be sustained to identify and take action to retain students. This evaluation relates only to formal arranged interviews, set up due to identification of absence, where no information could be obtained readily to explain continued student absence.

2 ATTENDANCE MONITORING

For practical purposes a sample of appropriate modules were used to provide information required as indicative of the overall student progress, constituting no less than two modules per course. Further checks could be made as required but absence of two weeks in two modules is taken as sufficient to warrant action by Advisor of Studies if no information about cause can be identified.

The university stopped printing its own copies of registers on the basis that intranet versions of course lists could be obtained by staff. However, it is clear that staff have adopted a wide range of methods of recording attendance using spreadsheets, word documents or the intranet module or course lists. However, this variable approach does give rise to variations from what may be considered the “registered” course to which everyone should refer. One reason for the variations is the previous unreliability of information from the central system on module lists. At a meeting convened by the Advisor of Studies there was discussion with a view to getting everyone onto the same method and phasing out the duplication of student course lists that can cause confusion. This should also ensure that incorrect information is amended through feedback to central records and hence improve reliability of information for everyone.

In order to integrate the attendance monitoring with central records a database is being used that can incorporate the information from central records directly. The system has worked for IT101A and can be used easily. It also permits more staff to get enquiries resolved, and therefore has an incentive to input data.

Table 1 Breakdown of progress

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---------------|--|---|------------------------|
| Subject Group | Number of students where cause of absence unidentified (AOS had to take action to interview student) | Number of students continuing to end of session, action by AOS as per (2) | % of students retained |
| ENG | 49 | 27 | 55 |
| ICT | 18 | 7 | 40 |
| BE | 12 | 7 | 58 |
| L2* | 16 | 9 | 56 |
| L3* | 15 | 13 | 87 |
| L4* | 2 | 1 | 50 |
| Total | 112 | 64 | 57 |

*L2, L3 and L4 cover details for students interviewed for poor attendance but were not part of the concentrated effort for Level 1 students, hence account for a smaller proportion. The 15 students from levels 2, 3 and 4 seen for unexplained absence uncovered the fact that 7 were Direct Entry students. Although all these students continued to the end of their year, minor problems arose at the commencement of the year. Action needed to be taken at induction or early stages of the course of study for Direct Entry students to improve their understanding of the university procedures and systems.

Table 2 Breakdown of problems encountered (ENG Level 1)

| Nature of problem (as declared by student or main issue) | Number of students affected | Number of students retained | % of students retained relating to problem |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Not known, student did not respond | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Unsuited to course: changed course/withdrew | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Student misunderstanding of timetable/lab times/university system | 4 | 4 | 100 |
| Illness | 8 | 8 | 100 |
| Personal problems (confidential) | 7 | 4 | 57 |
| Part-time employment | 9 | 4 | 44 |
| Holiday | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Academic | 4 | 1 | 25 |
| Specialist, referred to Student Services for action | 7 | 5 | 71 |
| Combination of serious issues involving other university services e.g. accommodation/finance | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 49 | 27 | 55 |

Table 3 Breakdown of problems encountered (Other levels combined)

| Nature of problem (as declared by student or main issue) | Number of students affected | Number of students retained | % of students retained relating to problem |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Not known, student did not respond | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Withdrawn: (All 5 were Level 2 students) | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Motivational | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| Student misunderstanding of timetable/lab times/university system | 7 | 7 | 100 |
| Illness | 6 | 5 | 83 |
| Part-time employment | 7 | 4 | 57 |
| Academic | 4 | 3 | 75 |
| Specialist, referred to Student Services for action | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Total | 33 | 23 | 70 |

Having concentrated on Level 1 students some success in retaining students appears evident. However, it is possible to identify potential future problems in progression at Level 2² and attendance monitoring may also need to be concentrated on Level 2 next session in addition to Level 1 to avoid shifting problems rather than addressing them.

Where students have been withdrawn, regardless of the stated reasons, more meaningful information may be obtained if a follow-up letter is sent to request further information. Previously this has not been done but may be useful. Therefore it was agreed that during September of 2001 Student Services would send questionnaires to students withdrawn in order to obtain more meaningful information to help retain students in the future.

3 EVALUATION OF ATTENDANCE MONITORING

Evaluation of the system indicates the following advantages of using non-attendance as an early warning indicator:

- Where no reason can be identified assumption made that there is a problem for the student that needs to be addressed.
- Can resolve minor problems quickly and easily where otherwise student would not have gone to see a member of staff.
- Where a student has faced a serious problem but ignored the problem, the proactive approach does, sooner or later, result in the student addressing the issue.
- Can be adopted from the commencement of the course prior to any assessments being due to be submitted. Using submission of assessments as a measure of progress (or lack thereof) is too late to help some students.

² School Annual Report for Session 1999/2000 5th February 2001 Table 4

- Helps students that genuinely wish to continue on their course to address their problems and staff to assist in providing solutions at an early stage.
- Students with absence but not aware of the support to which they were entitled, for whatever reason, were given appropriate information and direction.
- Module analysis indicates that if a student attends satisfactorily and submits all assessments there is a very high probability of success. (Scope to use non-submission of coursework as a means of requiring follow-up interview?)
- Strengthens our reputation in student support.

However, there are limitations making the evaluation more complex:

- Attendance may not be an accurate measure to indicate problems e.g. students on part-time study, or carrying a module, staff requirement to take accurate record.
- Assurances made by some students that after their interview the problems were resolved or that progress would improve were sometimes unfounded and subsequent further action was required, but monitoring of attendance facilitated identifying this issue.
- A number of students refused to respond to any communications and therefore any action cannot be taken to help and withdrawal is the eventual outcome. Investigation of the reasons for loss of contact resulted in the following:
 - 7 returned as “not collected”,
 - 3 returned as “moved away”,
- Poor attendance is a symptom of problems, getting to the problem and resolving it satisfactorily has no easy answer. Resolving a problem satisfactorily requires co-operation by the student to deal with any action plan put in place, which may also involve a combination of agencies over a considerable time.

4 FUTURE ACTION

It is intended to adapt and develop An innovative in-house designed database used by another School that is flexible and will record absence in a practical manner. This should result in more detailed information on attendance and progress being available for next session. The pre-requisites for the proposed system were that it had to be simple to operate, staff had to have ownership (i.e. all can use enquiries but all need to put data in), reliable and not time consuming. Information on how the system currently operates for IT101A indicates that the system meets these criteria. It is believed that the proposed system being developed will be available for adoption in 2001/2002, being available via the intranet.

A similar, but less rigorous approach was used the previous session (however, the university structure was different to the current session) and there is evidence that the pass rate rose from 67% to 77% for Level 1³. However, it is impossible to identify any single attributable factor for the increase in course performance, although significantly better than other School progression rates. It is clear that from the above data that there are likely to be problems in progression at Level 2. In order to address this, monitoring attendance and subsequent action should focus on Level 1, Level 2 and Direct Entry students.

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Consideration and discussion on the issue of non-submission of coursework assignment as an additional measure to indicate poor performance is necessary within the School. Non-submission of coursework may be used as an additional formal indication of a problem requiring an interview. This is based on a general analysis of available module results with less than 70% pass rates. The analysis indicates that very few students that actually made submissions for all their assessments, subsequently failed a module.

5 CONCLUSION

The use of attendance to monitor potential progression problems and take action is useful. The major problem is that the time available to take effective action is limited, this therefore concentrates workload between weeks four and twelve of teaching.