

# Division of English & Cultural Studies: Attendance & Retention Monitoring Report Semester 2, 2010

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## **1 Divisional Attendance Policy**

Following the successful pilot of an attendance policy within the Division of English and Cultural Studies during Semester 1 2009-10, the project was continued during Semester 2, and extended to incorporate first-year students within the subject areas of History and Sociology.

At the start of the academic year, first-year students within the Division received the following policy statement:

Your tutors know from experience that there is a close correlation between attendance and achievement: the more sessions a student attends, the more likely he or she is to achieve high grades. Because we want all of our students to do well, the Division of English & Cultural Studies, which incorporates Media & Cultural Studies, Journalism, and English Literature and Language Studies, has an attendance policy that requires all students to attend all scheduled lectures and seminars. In order to be able to offer you timely advice and support should a situation arise which prevents you from attending one or more sessions, we take a record of your attendance: you will be required to sign a register that is circulated by your tutors in each session, and your attendance will then be recorded by the administrative staff in the Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts and monitored by me, the Divisional Year Tutor.

It is the divisional attendance policy that students fail a module if they incur more than two unauthorised absences in it. We do, of course, acknowledge that there are valid reasons for non-attendance (e.g. illness or serious personal problems), and in these cases your non-attendance will be recorded as 'authorised', without any further action (unless you are unable to attend a significant portion of the module). To have your absence authorised, you need to tell us which session you missed, when you missed it, and why. Please send your apology to us within six days of the missed session.

All module outlines within the Division, and now History and Sociology, contain details of this policy, which is in keeping with that which is set out in the University Student Handbook. The statement corroborates the wording in the introduction to Section 2: Academic Matters in the Student Handbook, which states that students should contact module tutor within six days of an absence (p.5). The divisional attendance policy is that

students fail a module on their third unauthorized absence. The University Student Handbook states that grades for students who fail to meet an attendance requirement in a module will be recorded as NA (non-attendance). The divisional attendance policy is therefore in keeping with the University regulations for all students, that is that a student who does not meet the attendance requirement of a module will be recorded as NA.

To implement the policy module tutors pass individual weekly attendance registers to the divisional office staff, who recorded attendance in module-specific spreadsheet files. These files are stored on the shared O-drive, which makes the module registers viewable for all tutors. This central record of student attendance allows straightforward cross-referencing between individual modules within the Division and subject areas monitored; this also demonstrates emerging patterns of student attendance, and, importantly, non-attendance. Students are asked to sign the attendance sheet in class and are therefore responsible for evidencing their attendance. There is a dedicated IHCA e-mail address for absent students to send apologies to. Students are contacted by e-mail after their second absence, and invited to attend a tutorial.

As there is no comprehensive set of attendance data for the previous academic year, it has not been possible to produce a comparative analysis of student attendance. However, anecdotal evidence, such as **feedback from module tutors during divisional meetings, has indicated that the attendance policy has improved attendance across the Division**, suggesting that the implementation of an attendance policy for first-year students, impacts on other students with improved attendance across second and third years. This suggests that there is **a growing culture of student responsibility emerging as a direct result of the attendance policy.**

## **2. Attendance & Achievement: A General View**

The attendance monitoring project appears to have confirmed what colleagues have know from experience for many years, namely that there is a **close correlation between regular the attendance of classes and the achievement of pass grades.** Data included in the report for Semester 1, 2009-10 demonstrated this correlation clearly in English Literature, MECS and Journalism.

Data for Semester 2, 2009-10 further substantiates this. Students failing assessments on the modules monitored, almost without exception, having poor attendance records, and students achieving first-class grades having either full attendance or only very limited absence. **By implication, this speaks highly of the quality of teaching and learning opportunities afforded to students within the Division and subject areas monitored.**

**Non-submission of work for assessment has fallen significantly** across the Division, in English Language, English Literature, Journalism and Media and Cultural Studies. This is detailed in the Comparison of Submission of Assessments for Modules Monitored data in Appendix 1. The data in this appendix is taken from the module-assessment receipts reports, therefore is not the same as the final non-submission rates that we see at the end of the academic year. Final non-submission figures for the year are compiled after resits, whereas the figures attached compare like-for-like data at first opportunity to submit. As this is the point that will be crucial to HEFCE funding, this will be in future a more important figure. The deadline for resubmission of resits this academic year is 19<sup>th</sup> August 2010, comparison of final non-submission figures for this academic year can be made after final results are published 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

In the table entitled the Comparison of Submission of Assessments in Appendix 1, the important figure is that in the final column. It is from this figure that we can judge the impact and success of the attendance policy and student monitoring. It is apparent that non-submissions have reduced significantly in all but two modules this year. The two modules that show a percentage increase are modules with small numbers of students, where variations in numbers impact disproportionately on the percentage figures.

At the stage to which this figures apply there were students who did not submit and subsequently withdrew. The table in Appendix 2 demonstrates this. These students remain on the module-assessment receipts reports as they were registered at the time. Students who withdrew will not be incorporated as NS in the final end of year figures. This list is included to illustrate the way in the non-submission statistic changes during the year, and therefore the importance of comparing like for like statistics.

Students who failed to submit assessments without exception were students who had come to attention through the monitoring process. At the Divisional Exam Boards, it was possible to account for all non-submissions. This evidences that the implementation of an attendance policy has not only reduced the level of non-submissions, but has enabled us to keep track of students and offer an improved level of care. The reduced number of non-submissions will impact significantly on departmental income. Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that student monitoring is likely to result in improved student retention within the division and subject areas by early identification and contact with students who are 'at risk'. It is possible that as a direct consequence of this, we may see reduced levels of attrition. Furthermore, improved student retention will impact on the income of the department.

### **3. Subject Area Statistics**

The overall module failure rates for individual subject areas in Semester 2, 2009-10, were:

English Literature: 11 module failures out of 204 module registrations = 5.39% (11.8%)

English Language: 31 failures out of 114 registrations = 27.19% (20%)

Journalism: TBA

Media & Cultural Studies 14 failures out of 105 registrations = 13.33% (31%)

\*figures in brackets are S1, 2009-10.

History TBA

Sociology TBA<sup>1</sup>

The reduction in the failure rate of English Literature and Media & Cultural Studies is sufficient to suggest that the continuation of the attendance policy and the reduction in non-submissions has had an ongoing effect. As noted in the report for Semester 1, there is no definitive formula as to why students fail. The failure rate for individual modules in English Literature mandatory modules for example varied between 0% (ENGL1114) and 4.9% (ENGL1112). However, the overall results for these modules show that the pass rate at first opportunity was higher on the latter module (ENGL1112) at 90.2% than on the former module (ENGL1114) at 82.7%. Statistics suggest that lack of attendance has

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<sup>1</sup> Data not available at time of writing

a significant negative impact on the number of submissions and student achievement (See Appendix<sup>2</sup>).

#### **4. Development and the way forward**

**4.1** Implementing the attendance policy appears to be encouraging students to take responsibility for their attendance, however implementation of the policy must be fair and equal across all modules.

A significant advantage of the implementation of the attendance policy is that students are now more likely to remain in touch with the university during periods of absence than they have been previously. To maximise the potential of this benefit, we need to achieve an integrated system of communication whereby a student contacting the university regarding one module is assured that this contact will be acted upon across all modules that s/he is taking for that day/week/period of time as appropriate. This is covered to some extent within the Division by the use of the student-absence e-mail address, which means that student apologies are received centrally, however receipt of this information is subject to monitoring and is dependent to an extent on the person(s) monitoring attendance. It has not necessarily systematically effective, for example during staff absence. It was agreed at the Divisional Meeting that next year (2010-2011) all administrators would receive training so that systems operate effectively in the case of any absences. Nonetheless, it would be appropriate to consider how this can be achieved using an integrated computer interface.

Furthermore, there needs to be an agreed level of contact between:

- a) Registry and the person(s) monitoring attendance. For example, notification from registry to person(s) monitoring attendance when a student has withdrawn, changed fields, withdrawn from a particular module.
- b) Tutors and the person(s) monitoring attendance. For example, there may be reasons why it is inappropriate to follow up a student's non-attendance.
- c) Module tutors should be advised when a student has withdrawn from that module.

**4.2** Although the Personal Tutor role offers some pastoral support to students facing difficulties with their academic work, the tracking of students at risk via attendance affords the opportunity of discussion with a member of staff outside the student's immediate teaching/learning experience and may provide a bridge towards re-engagement with study. However, there is a need to consider how data is stored so that is a) compliant with data protection, and b) accessible during unplanned staff absence. (This could be discussed with Student Advisors, such as Anne Lewis.)

**4.3** Amid increasing concerns regarding how universities address and communicate with students, it is important that the attendance policy is communicated and is easily accessible to students. This can be achieved via the SOLE pages, using the Blackboard Learning System with links to the Student Handbook. The wording of attendance policy requires standardization for course program specifications especially for audit 2010-11 as this was an area for concern in previous audit.

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix deleted for student confidentiality.

**4.4** Action on student compliance: in effect, this year students who complied with the attendance policy could pass a module without attending. While the link between attendance and achievement suggests that students who do not attend are unlikely to pass, this is nonetheless an area of concern as it remains a possibility and undermines the wider learning of higher education. Similarly, there are students who comply with the attendance policy and have very limited attendance. Again, this means that students have limited teaching and learning in the topic. While on occasion, there may be extenuating circumstances that might allow this, there needs to be a consistent approach to these students, for example, whether they should have to apply for mitigating circumstances to be taken into consideration. I am only aware of one instance when this occurred during Semester Two 2009-10 (see Appendix 3), nonetheless for a vulnerable student submitting documentation may not be straightforward.

**4.5** Evidence: there needs to be a consistent point at which students are required to produce evidence to support their non-attendance, otherwise there may be students who exploit the system that allows them to apologise for their absence without providing evidence. However, there are students who have genuine concerns, for example childcare, that they cannot evidence easily. I would suggest that a verbal/e-mail apology for the first week, with doctor's note or letter of explanation from the student being required thereafter. This letter or note could remain on the student's file for future reference.

**4.6** Focus: this year focus has been on first-year students. This appears to have had a repercussive effect across second and third years. The positive achievement of this year's pilot project suggests that the focus on first-year students has been beneficial to students and is likely to be financial beneficial to the Division as a consequence of the reduced levels of non-submission. Thus, it would be pertinent to maintain focus on first-year students during the coming academic year 2010-11. At the Divisional meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2010, it was agreed that second and third year students would not be monitored centrally in the same way as first years next year, but registers should be taken and absentees followed up by the module tutor. It would therefore be appropriate, at the end of the academic year, to collate comparative data with regard to second-year/level 5 students to evaluate whether the students' first-year experience has continuing impact, fostering good practice among students with regard to attendance.

**4.7** Action: the implementation of an attendance policy requires both administrative and academic input. While records are maintained at an administrative level, contact with students has parity with the role of the personal tutor, providing support at pastoral level and being able to advise students on how to manage their studies. The role requires familiarity with the University and its procedures, and in accordance with the University of Worcester Student Charter set out in the Student Handbook requires 'trained and qualified staff who are sensitive to the need for confidentiality where appropriate' (p.13).

**4.8** Within the Division of English & Cultural Studies, in which an attendance policy has been implemented throughout the 2009-10, the benefits are evident as it is possible to make a like-for-like comparison from the year's data compared with the previous year. As History and Sociology were monitored only in the Second Semester, and modules do not necessarily run in the same semester from year to year, it is less possible to be precise about the outcomes of the pilot scheme. Nonetheless, preliminary data suggests a beneficial outcome.

#### 4.9 Feedback from course leaders is as follows:

English: Jill Terry has noted that feedback from colleagues suggests improved attendance; however, tutors find it problematic that students do not contact them, but contact admin.

Media: Barbara Mitra commented that the attendance policy had improved attendance and thought that the contact from someone other than the module leaders had made a difference. The follow up provided contact with students who did not attend, and felt that the attendance policy had had a definite impact on student attendance and submissions.

Journalism: while not initially keen on the implementation of the attendance policy, both Sean Dodson and Claire Wolf have commented enthusiastically that they now feel the attendance policy has had a beneficial effect.

Sociology: Mike Webb would like to revert to the previous Sociology scheme of attendance records, where students signed a sheet that is monitored by the module tutor, feeling that this enables tutors to see students' record of attendance, and note any emerging problems at a glance. MW felt that this system maintained the personal link between students and their tutors. However, he did feel that it was positive to have someone to follow up and talk to students about why they were missing sessions. He would like to keep this referral aspect of the scheme.

History: Sue Johnson felt that student attendance had improved slightly and that an attendance policy of some sort is essential as it gives a definite message to students that it is not possible to succeed if teaching sessions are constantly missed.

While response is positive overall, there are concerns among staff about a centralised attendance system. While it is possible to operate a centralised system at divisional level, this appears less effective at a wider level. However, as HEFCE funding is dependent on students submitting work in all modules taken, it is imperative to maintain an overview of students' attendance and submission. While it is probably not appropriate for the Division to regulate for the whole Institute, it is essential that consistency in approach to attendance be maintained. Individual tutors may wish to keep records of attendance at their classes; however, it is essential that a central database or record of student attendance be maintained if there is to be an overview of students' attendance from which to identify students at risk and likely not to submit assessments.

## 5. Conclusion

The initiatives taken across the Division, including compulsory attendance, have had a real impact with an average of more than 50% reduction in non-submission rates demonstrated in the comparisons between the submission rates of last year and this year at first opportunity to submit. The pilot project has been a key development in the approach to addressing the issue of student non-submission. While the maintenance of attendance records is largely an administrative task, the follow up of individual students requires an academic tutorial approach. The numbers in this task are potentially large, and following up students and tutorial work is time consuming. It would be realistic for this work to be undertaken by a dedicated member, or members, of staff.

Changes in regulations next year mean those students who do not submit at first opportunity, and do not have mitigating circumstances, will no longer be able to submit at resits. With this change, the first submission point will be more significant than it currently is as students who do not submit may be hampered in their progression to the next level of study.

In increasingly straightened times, with funding predicated on student submissions of assessments at first opportunity, it is crucial to be vigilant with regard to these submissions if we are to maintain, and maximize, departmental income.

Preliminary quantitative data is promising, suggesting that the Retention and Attendance Monitoring Project has been successful in helping to reduce student non-submissions. Furthermore, there is a qualitative aspect to this project that improves not only divisional results, but also the student experience of first-year Worcester University undergraduates.

## Appendix 1: Comparison of Submission of Assessments for Modules Monitored

Semester Two 2009-10

Module	Students 2008	Non- subs 08: Ass. 1	Non- subs 08: Ass.2	NS of total assessments due	NS as % of total due	Students 2009	Non- subs 09: Ass.1	Non- subs 09: Ass.2	NS of total assessments due	NS as % total due	Percentage points change +/-
ELAN1002	29	3	11	14/58	24.1	49	7	7	14/98	14.2	- 9.9
ELAN1004	23	6	6	12/46	26	22	3	3	6/44	13.6	- 12.4
ELAN1005	16	3	-	3/16	18.75	25	-	5	5/25	20.0	+ 1.25
ENGL1003 <sup>3</sup>	--					33	10	10	20/66	30.3	na
ENGL1007 <sup>4</sup>	33	7	8	15/66	22.7	33	11	3	14/66	21.2	-1.5
ENGL1111	66	20	16	36/132	27.2	85	9	13	22/170	12.9	-14.3
ENGL1112 <sup>5</sup>	68	Exam	10	10/136	7.35	83	Exam	8	8/166	1.8	-5.5
ENGL1113	66	18	19	37/132	28.0	84	14	14	28/168	16.6	-11.4
JOUR1002	51	18/NA	21/21	60/153 <sup>6</sup>	39.2	48	6	4	10/96	10.4	-28.8
JOUR1003	39	13	16	29/78	37.1	17	1	3	4/34	11.7	-25.4
JOUR1004	22	9	-	9/22	40.9	10	5	-	5/10	50.0	+9.1
MECS1003 <sup>7</sup>	33	-	-	- /99	na	31	4	7	11/62	17.7	na
MECS1011 <sup>8</sup>	45	24	20	44/90	48.8	38	5	7	12/76	15.7	-33.1
MECS1012 <sup>9</sup>	46	15	19	34/92	36.9	36	7	6	13/72	18.0	-18.9
MECS1014 <sup>10</sup>	25	11	9	20/50	40	32	4	6	10/64	15.6	-24.4

<sup>3</sup> ENGL1003 did not run 2008-9

<sup>4</sup> ENGL1007 ran in S2 2008-9, S1 2009- 10

<sup>5</sup> ENGL1112 ran in S2 2008-9, S1 2009-10

<sup>6</sup> JOUR1002 ran four assessments in 2008-9. Receipts report data only available for three

<sup>7</sup> MECS1003 2008-9 three assessments; receipts report data not available

<sup>8</sup> MECS1011 2008-9 ran in S1, 2009-10 in S2

<sup>9</sup> MECS1012 2008-9 ran in S2, 2009-10 in S1

<sup>10</sup> MECS1014 2008-9 ran in S2, 2009-10 in S1



**Comparison of Submission of Assessments for Modules Monitored in Division of History and Sociology  
Semester Two 2009-10 LF**

Module	Students 2008	Non- subs 08: Ass. 1	Non- subs 08: Ass.2	NS of total assessments due	NS as % of total due	Students 2009	Non- subs 09: Ass.1	Non-subs 09: Ass.2	NS of total assessments due	NS as % total due	Percentage points change +/-
HIST1006	34	3	4	7/68	10.29	48	4	10	14/96	14.58	+4.29
HIST1008	36	2	5	7/72	9.72	53	7	11	18/106	16.98	+7.26
HIST1009	34	4	6	10/68	14.70	54	6	11	17/108	15.74	+1.04
HIST1010 <sup>11</sup>	65	10	11	21/130	16.15	83	15	20	35/166	21.08	+4.93
SOCG1001	47	10	14	24/94 <sup>12</sup>	25.53	52	9	11(Ass2); 11(Ass3)	31/156	19.87	-5.66
SOCG1006	22	7	8	15/44	34.09	31	7	10	17/62	27.41	-6.68
SOCG1021	42	12	-	12/42	28.57	43	7	-	7/43	16.27	-12.30

<sup>11</sup> HIST1010 ran in S1 2008-9, in S2 2009-10

<sup>12</sup> SOCG1001 has three assessments (141), data only available for two (94).