Student Attendance Monitoring, Retention and Achievement: Some Preliminary Results

Dr. John Fagg
(j.fagg@worc.ac.uk)

In recent years lecturers in the Institute of Science and the Environment (ISE) have become increasingly concerned with two trends: a rising level of student withdrawals and an apparent tendency for students to attend fewer classes. In the latter case fears have recently arisen that such absences not only waste resources spent on laboratory and field work but also reduce the value of interactive activities for other students who *do* attend classes. Repeated absence, moreover, implies some sense of disengagement from either the course or the university, and a distancing (literally in the case of students living at home) from sources of academic or personal support.

In an attempt to locate and advise persistent absentees ISE staff agreed to introduce a simple method of registering attendance during the 2008-9 session. Lecturers would circulate a class list for students to sign and then submit the details to an administrative assistant for inclusion on an Excel spreadsheet. Staff could view the updated records for all undergraduate modules on the institutional VLE, Blackboard. In addition, and on two occasions in each semester, the present author would supply course leaders and personal tutors with aggregated (cross module) information.

Although a full evaluation the new system awaits the arrival of retention figures in September, an interim assessment is possible based on a survey of permanent staff conducted at the close of semester 2. 'Teething troubles' included an initial failure to brief hourly-paid staff adequately and to take on board the difficulties faced by teams taking parallel sessions of two or three groups. Incomplete records also occurred when students studied off campus, when guest speakers addressed the class, or when timetabled slots were used for optional tutorials. Nevertheless, the mechanics of the monitoring system generally worked well and students co-operated fully.

Follow-up procedures were less successful, however, even though some students improved their attendance after counselling. More commonly, however, students either did not read or did not respond to emailed requests for meetings and, because they were absent, could not be spoken to in class. The greater availability of mobile phone numbers should help this process in future, but many tutors were convinced that - by the time contact was sought - such students had already (albeit unofficially) withdrawn.

A by-product of attendance monitoring has been the ability to relate attendance to performance, a positive - if not always linear - relationship that has recently received much support in the research literature. Early indications, however, based on a small number of modules with relatively modest cohorts, indicate that the removal of students who *never* attended and/or failed to submit assignments greatly reduces the explanatory power of the attendance variable. The widespread use of Blackboard and the relative dearth of formal, timed examinations in most ISE courses may be additional factors here.

In summary, then, the system has monitored attendance fairly effectively and has encouraged further research into the relationship between attendance, retention and achievement. Evidence from staff suggests, however, that it is difficult to contact regular absentees before their decision to leave has been made. So, while attendance monitoring is not a panacea for solving retention problems, it is a useful tool and encourages new approaches to personal tutoring and PDP.