Understanding Student Attendance

When considering the issue of student attendance and potential interventions, it is helpful to think through the following steps in order to come to a conclusion on action:

1. Is there an issue with attendance?
To begin with it is important to establish the evidence (attendance data vs. anecdotal evidence) of an attendance problem in order to move beyond the vague assertion that there is a ‘problem’. What is the evidence to suggest that student attendance is poor? And in what context is attendance a perceived issue?

For example, is it a school-wide problem, or isolated to particular programmes or modules? Is it lectures at particular times of the day or term that are seeing poor turn-out, or is the problem replicated in seminars and/or tutorial groups? Is there a cohort problem, or is the issue largely restricted to specific individuals?

2. Why are students not attending contact hours?
Establishing why students are not attending contact hours is important for understanding how best to improve attendance:

   a. Are any reasons revealed in the learning community forum?
   b. Have individual students been asked directly?

In establishing the causes of poor attendance, a school might choose to work with a cohort to explore reasons for absenteeism in an open, non-threatening and exploratory context e.g. through focus groups, or anonymous surveys. In addition, published literature in this field might give some useful indications on the personal reasons or institutional reasons why students might not be attending contact hours.

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<th>Examples of Personal Reasons</th>
<th>Examples of ‘Institutional’ reasons</th>
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<td>Illness (physical/mental health)</td>
<td>Perceived lack of value to the course</td>
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<td>Employment</td>
<td>Perceived issues of content and delivery style</td>
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<td>Family commitments</td>
<td>Competing deadlines</td>
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<td>Apathy/‘Laziness’</td>
<td>The content is ‘missable’ for later catch-up</td>
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<td>Emergencies</td>
<td>Stress with workload</td>
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Establishing the causes of non-attendance will help the school decide on the appropriate course of action, rather than risk an intervention that does not solve the ‘problem’.

Finally, schools might be interested in establishing what students are doing when they are not attending contact hours. For example, are students passing up contact time for time in independent study/visiting the library/viewing materials online? Alternatively, are students missing contact in favour of paid employment?
3. Is non-attendance a problem?

On establishing the data around attendance and the causes for it, the school might then consider the question ‘is non-attendance a problem?’ For example, is there evidence for a decrease in attainment amongst the cohort where non-attendance has been observed? Is there any evidence of a causal relationship for this change?

If there appears to be a problem with instructional style, content or competing deadlines then it might suggest an intervention is required to work with the teaching staff and students to find a solution to the problem of non-attendance by looking at assessment load, content suitability and perceived value of the course and content itself.

However, there may be some cases where absenteeism is occurring but there is no evidence of impact on attainment and the reasons for poor attendance remain clear or inconsistent. In this scenario a school will need to decide if there is an acceptable degree of absenteeism that can be tolerated given an ever increasing move to blended learning environments where students are independent adults who are capable of managing their time and using the range of university resources available to them. It may also recognise the competing pressures on students and move towards an acceptance that ‘students will be students’. Conversely, it may decide that attendance needs to be improved because it might undermine the attainment outcomes for students based on certain predictors (as suggested in the published literature) or because there is an issue of professionalism that is important for the course e.g. some professional/vocation programmes may require minimum attendance. Where attendance is an issue on small group teaching, attendance may also need to looked at more closely where there might be an impact on peers and peer learning.

Attendance vs. Engagement

Attendance might be viewed as a predictor of attainment, and there is evidence that there is a positive correlation between attendance and attainment in e.g. Final examinations. (Gatherer and Manning, 1998; Colby, 2004; Cohen and Johnson, 2006) There may also be a link between attendance of ethnic minority students and attainment (Gatherer and Manning, 1998). A further study found that consistent attendance coupled with students working together in the same group also resulted in higher examination results (Sharma et al. 2005). A more recent statistical study (Newman-Ford et al. 2008) showed a positive correlation between attendance and attainment, however they encouraged caution at overstating causation; emphasising that attendance alone doesn’t guarantee academic success, and that attendance is more likely an indicator of motivation, which might be the reason for success. Unmotivated attendance does not necessarily lead to engagement with content (‘Hollow attendance’). In this respect, McCarey et al. (2006) point to the success of mature students who attend and value their learning because they are motivated by the sacrifices made to re-enter education.

However, other studies have found that the effect of attendance on attainment was not notable. For example, Rogers (2002) incentivised students to attend classes and compared the results with a control group. He found that the impact on overall marks was not clear. Furthermore, Grabe (2005) looked at the use of online notes as a replacement or supplement for attendance at contact hours and found no difference in...
examination results between the two groups. Interestingly, and despite the positive correlation they found in their study, Gatherer and Manning (1998) suggest that there might be psychological benefits to the occasional absence, suggesting that most absenteeism is for no more than one day and falls within a pattern where the mostly commonly missed lecturers are on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons.

By understanding the picture of attendance and its outcome on e.g. attainment or other group members, a decision can be made on whether to focus on improving attendance or improving engagement. Assuming that motivators such as ‘laziness’, ‘apathy’ and ‘personal issues beyond any school’s control’ have been ruled out, the school may consider two approaches to any identified ‘problem of attendance’.

Option One: Improve Attendance through Monitoring

Direct attendance monitoring can be conducted in various ways, from low-key paper registers through to swipe card entrances on teaching spaces and physical checks including finger printing. The compulsion to attend might be a minimum completion of contact hours before an assessment can be undertaken.

The key considerations for implementation of such a strategy might include (but is not necessarily an exhaustive list):

- Consistency of enforcement and penalties
- What constitutes a justifiable reason for absenteeism?
- How will the benefits of the scheme be communicated to students?
- The quality of system will need to be assured to ensure that the system cannot be bypassed by savvy students determined to not attend.
- Administrative lead.

Risks

1. Attendance monitoring (beyond the UKBA requirements) is deeply unpopular with students and the National Union of Students, and as such is not likely to be supported with the Students Union at Nottingham, or by students locally within schools.
2. By forcing attendance there is a risk that more stress is placed on students, exacerbating the underlying problem that manifests itself as absenteeism.
3. Attendance monitoring is treating a symptom and not solving the underlying problem, if indeed the problem is not ‘laziness’ and ‘apathy’.
4. Attendance does not require engagement, and hollow attendance may be disruptive to those who wish to be there.
5. Reopen questions of respect and trust, undermining partnership work where students wish to be treated like knowledgeable and independent adults.
6. Increase in negative scoring of learning experience in SET, SEM and NSS.
Option Two: Improve Engagement

Instead of focusing on enforcing attendance, resources might be invested in improving student engagement as a corollary to increased student attainment, thus avoiding the issues of hollow attendance.

In order to do this the school would need to look at curriculum and assessment across the programme to identify areas that might be causing a drop in engagement. If students are strategically choosing which contact hours to attend based on how e.g. valuable and ‘unmissable’ the sessions are, time spent on grounding these qualities in teaching would be well spent by the educator, and peer observation could be used to good effect.

- Can we reconsider assessment load and timing to take pressure off students at the times which correlate with attendance issues?
- To what degree is blended learning offered as an option for course content? Is the classroom the only place to deliver course content?
- Can academic development in the school be improved such that students understand the value of attendance and engagement together?
- Is there a relevant programme of peer observation of teaching that might proactively support staff who are experiencing poor attendance in their contact hours?
- What does the module content look like in terms of the following:
  - Are the objectives of the session clear?
  - Where is value and importance communicated?
  - Is the content delivered in a positive manner?
  - Are the sessions interesting?
  - Is the environment of delivery respectful, inclusive and conducive to learning?
  - Does the content connect back to the ‘real world’?
  - Is the content challenging enough? (not patronisingly simple)
  - What are the competing assignments?

In addition, the school may consider alternative approaches to monitoring such as Letters of Concern to students who staff know are missing contact hours. Likewise, all tutors could be encouraged to discuss attendance and engagement in their tutorial groups to explore issues of engagement, and what would improve it.

Risks

1. Understanding engagement is more complex than attendance monitoring as a direct action. As such, improving engagement is a longer term initiative that might not show quick improvements to attendance relative to attendance monitoring
2. Staff may not be receptive to the perceived ‘scrutiny’ of their teaching style and content.
3. More work is likely to be required in making the curriculum more conducive to engagement, than would be needed for monitoring attendance.
Additional Discussion

To understand the value of attendance monitoring it is important to be clear on the purpose of monitoring and what the University is looking to achieve, from which it is possible to look at the alternative interventions more specifically.

In terms of UKBA requirements, Universities that hold a Trusted Sponsor Status for T4 visas are required to monitor the attendance of international students, but are asked to do this by their own means. In this respect, Universities may choose different routes to monitoring from physical checks to personal tutor sign-off that contact has been made and sustained. Which route to take is the responsibility of the University and will likely be governed by the context of each institution, and whether there is a problem with international student non-attendance.

If there is a desire to offer more tailored pastoral support then there are other routes to support that outcome which are more collaborative and positively framed than monitoring attendance. Working with existing systems such as support through increased peer-mentoring (from 2014 onwards) and a reinforced personal tutorial system should also provide the information needed to tailor interventions. An opportunity for learning analytics might be to help us understand better the learning behaviours of students, asking the essential question for teachers: if they're not learning in my lecture, then what educational activities are they involved in?

Whilst the University wishes to increase attendance in order to ultimately benefit students academically though increased attainment, and timely pastoral support, it might be mindful that a university in the British education system has underpinning (and perhaps tacit) values of liberalism, freedom, and independence, where an individual takes part through choice and desire for a higher level of education. In this light, attendance monitoring (beyond the professional courses where there is a requirement to confirm minimum attendance) may be viewed by key stakeholders as invasive and mistrustful. It may well be met with suspicion and a question as to why fee-payers are being forced to attend classes they ultimately pay for.

A closer look at what is preventing meaningful engagement in contact time is likely to be more useful in the long term, than rules to force students to attend for fear of lowered marks. In the short term, students may well increase their attendance but student satisfaction may fall, a degree of trust may be lost that is crucial to the success of student partnership initiatives, and with this brings a risk that NSS scores might be negatively affected in the future.

For schools that are concerned about student attendance at contact hours there is an opportunity through the Teaching Transformation Programme to look at the issue in more depth by engaging with the Academic Development agenda, or by undertaking a review of assessment or examination of programme structures and activities.
References


