



## An analysis of student absenteeism in first year biology students

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### Summary

*An analysis of student absenteeism in first year biology students at the University of Plymouth has indicated that most students agree that attendance at lectures and practical sessions affects their overall academic performance. The study showed that the most common reasons given for absence were the timing and content of lectures followed by illness or the after effects of alcohol or drugs. Issues such as social, domestic and financial factors were found not to be important factors as far as attendance was concerned. The attendance data also indicated that lectures that were not mainstream biology modules were poorly attended.*

### Project aims

Student absenteeism in higher education is a matter of concern because it can result in inadequate learning on the part of the student and there is often a clear correlation between student attendance and overall performance. Little information on research into the causes of absenteeism in higher education has been published or is readily available and it is anticipated that this study, to look at absenteeism in stage one students within the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Plymouth, will shed some light on this matter.

### Methodology

The study involved a questionnaire with questions related to reasons for absences at lectures, practical sessions and tutorials, student's perception of the effects of absenteeism and remedial measures undertaken. This was distributed to stage one students during personal tutorial sessions. It was intended to contact students missing from tutorials by post. Unfortunately lack of cooperation from colleagues and timing prevented this happening. Instead, students at assessed practical sessions were asked to fill in a questionnaire had they not already done so. The overall attendance of stage one students at lectures during one week of the semester was monitored.

### Project outcomes

See <http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/tdf/pearce.htm>

The findings of the research are being written up and submitted to a peer reviewed journal.

### Project review

The project on the whole was successful in achieving its projected aims and outcomes. Overall the attendance survey was successful in measuring actual student attendance at lectures during the chosen week. There was some the difficulty in obtaining information via the questionnaires from the whole student group, as originally planned, due to the problems outlined in the last report, but overall 60% of the students returned completed questionnaires. This did, inevitably, lead to some bias in the results as some persistent absentees could neither be identified, nor contacted to fill in a questionnaire. The attendance survey identified patterns of attendance related to several factors. The study showed that the most common reasons given for absence were illness or the after effects of alcohol or drugs, followed by time tabling issues. Issues such as social, domestic and financial factors were found not to be important factors as far as attendance was concerned. The attendance data also indicated that lectures that were not mainstream biology modules were poorly attended. The information gained from this research could potentially be used when planning policies concerning the

effectiveness, timing and frequency of taught sessions and tutorials. The timetable appears to have the biggest influence on whether students choose to attend lectures or not and this, realistically, is not an easy issue to resolve. Students who are keen and motivated will attend lectures whenever they are. Perhaps the aim should be to increase motivation in the students and thus their eagerness to attend lectures rather than trying to make difficult changes to suit those who choose not to attend because of how lectures are time tabled.

#### Evaluation

This research has indicated that, most but not all students agree that attendance at lectures and practical sessions affects their overall academic performance. The majority of students claimed to attend 75% or more lectures and practical sessions, a figure not borne out by actual attendance figures generated by this research. Over 75% of students who missed lectures took some remedial action to make up for missing lectures, which indicated that they thought lecture material was important. The impact of this project on student learning is a little difficult to assess. It appears that with the exception of illness, which is not under the students control, factors such as time tabling issues appear to have the biggest impact on whether students attend taught sessions. This is largely under the control of the student and whilst lecture times may not be convenient for everyone time tabling issues are difficult to control in a large institution such as a University because of centralised timetable arrangements. Therefore it is difficult to see what individual tutors can do to overcome the problems associated with absenteeism as far as student learning is concerned.

#### The future

It was not possible within the time frame of this project to conduct interviews, as originally planned, with individual students who have been identified as persistent absentees. It is hoped that this can be completed sometime in the future and the information gathered will then be added to this research. Bearing in mind that the main attendance issues with the students sampled seems to be time tabling it seems that there is little to be gained from expanding this project as it stands to a wider audience. If changes can be made in the way in which the data is collected this might target a more comprehensive sample of the student population. This could then provide further insight into additional problems affecting attendance in the more persistent absentees who might not have been reached by this survey. This study looked at the negative aspects of attendance; the reasons that students do not attend taught session, rather than looking at the positive aspects; why students do attend these sessions. It would be useful in any further study to include these positive aspects as well as the negative. The preliminary findings of the research were presented at the LTSN Representatives Forum in September 2003 and it is proposed to submit a paper based on the work to a peer-reviewed journal for publication.

#### Feedback to LTSN Bioscience

I feel that the Teaching and Learning Development Fund has a very valuable role in teaching and learning research, particularly in funding small-scale projects such as this. The LTSN Bioscience team have been particularly supportive and extremely helpful to me in my research.