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Student absenteeism: whose responsibility?

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Internationally there is concern about levels of student absenteeism. Research underpinning this article consisted of a survey of academic staff and 25 interviews with first year students in a well regarded 'new' university in Britain. The article explores the issue of poor attendance and why a significant number of students seem to have difficulty in engaging fully with their studies in order to become critical and autonomous learners. We look at the role of government policy, institutions, educators, students, schools and parents.

Keywords: absenteeism; responsibility; attendance policies

Introduction

The international literature shows considerable interest in student absenteeism: its effects and implications for the individual learner, for university lecturers, and for institutions. Absenteeism is not a new occurrence: Romer's (1993) seminal study in the USA reported absences of one third of the students, and Pithers and Holland (2007) have summarised the results of more recent studies of attendance rates in a range of countries. A number of studies have aimed to identify the reasons for student attendance behaviour, including Gump (2006), Hunter and Tetley (1999), Kottasz (2005), Longhurst (1999), McInnis (2001), Pithers and Holland (2007). Several articles report evidence of a relationship between attendance and academic achievement (Burd & Hodgson, 2006; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Halpern, 2007; Paisey & Paisey, 2004; Woodfield, Jessop, & McMillan, 2006). Other studies have correlated attendance with data on retention and attrition, using it as an indication of 'silent withdrawal' (Bowen, Price, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2005; Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2008). Cleary-Holdforth (2007) has provided an overview of published research in these areas, covering both traditional and post-1992 universities in the UK and Higher Education (HE) institutions abroad.

Our aim is to explore the question why student attendance is an issue for institutions, teaching staff and students, and to ask: whose responsibility is it? Across the range of disciplines, there is evidence of widespread concern at casualness on the part of students about turning up to class, not just in Britain (Burd & Hodgson, 2006; Halpern, 2007; Paisey & Paisey, 2004; Woodfield et al., 2006) but also in Europe (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2005; Cleary-Holdforth, 2007; Hofman & Van den

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Berg, 2000), Australia (Lockwood, Guppy, & Smyth, 2006; Pithers & Holland, 2007), and North America (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Romer, 1993).

We write from the perspective of a successful and well regarded 'new' university in Britain, where there is concern on the part of academic staff about absenteeism and its implications. We define absenteeism as a failure regularly to attend timetabled sessions such as seminars, lectures, practical or laboratory classes. We acknowledge that attendance does not ensure that learning will take place, but we know that there is a proven relationship between entry points, attendance and success (Walker, Fleischer, & Winn, 2008).

It is a matter of debate whether attendance should be compulsory in higher education (Lockwood et al., 2006). In our own institution there is frustration and concern on the part of academic staff when students fail to take advantage of the tuition and support available. Brauer (1994, p. 206) highlights the damaging effect of absenteeism on the dynamic of the teaching context: 'absences create a "dead", tiresome, unpleasant classroom environment that makes [students who come to classes] feel uncomfortable and the professor irritable.' Longhurst (1999, p. 61), writing from a Further Education(FE) context, defines the problem succinctly: 'Student absenteeism is a matter of concern because it can result in inadequate learning on the part of those missing, and a degree of disruption to the conduct of classes for those students who are present.' This is especially the case where students are required to undertake collaborative learning (Tinto, 2003; McInnes, 2001).

The scope for individualised learning has been much greater since the advent of online facilities such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), which provide a practical way to offer 24-hour access to lecture notes and supplementary learning material. This allows students to be more flexible with their time and potentially to replace lecture attendance (Barrett, Rainer, & Marczyk, 2007; Latreille, 2008). Grabe (2005) reported no variation in academic performance between students who attended sessions and those 30% of students who relied on online lecture notes. Students are entitled to make a strategic decision if they feel that attending a taught session may not be worthwhile (Clay & Breslow, 2006), but there is naturally concern that students may mistakenly assume that relying on the notes designed to accompany taught sessions will be sufficient (Barrett et al., 2007). There can be a false sense of security on the part of students in having access to the background material while failing to engage with its meaning and to integrate it into their learning.

We see university education as providing the environment for students to develop into critical and autonomous learners. McInnes (2001, p. 3) articulates the type of concern we feel:

> Student disengagement and apparent lack of commitment presents itself as a problem on a daily basis for academics. This is manifested in, for example, declining numbers in classrooms.

He uses the term 'negotiated engagement' to describe the modern relationship of students to their university education, and he provides an insightful analysis of the challenges this presents to universities. He stresses that universities need to act judiciously and strategically in order to maintain the essence of university education.

Brighton-based research

A university-wide email questionnaire sent to academic staff invited comments about their level of concern about absenteeism, the action they take, and how they feel the problem might best be addressed at the level of the individual student and at department and institutional level. It yielded a total of 33 responses from staff in 11 departments.

The student sample comprised 25 students, who were selected on the basis of attendance and VLE usage on two first year core modules, one in each semester, on the undergraduate programme in the School of Applied Social Science. This produced a sample of students with different levels of attendance and engagement with their degree. All 25 interviews of this recent study were conducted on campus in the spring and lasted 30–45 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews, conducted by one of the authors (SF), started with general questions about the students' academic and social experience of their first year at university and then focused on key areas of academic engagement such as attendance, VLE use and independent study in two compulsory modules.

Findings

The following section links the data from these two pieces of research.

Attendance policies and rules

Our staff survey revealed a variety of policy and practice in different parts of the university, which is consistent with its devolved approach. On professional courses, such as nursing, attendance was a specific requirement linked to professional body recognition:

> We need to stick to the guidelines in the course handbook. If they do not attend 80% of the taught module then they should not be allowed to submit their assignment but this is not kept to. (staff, nursing)

There were also problems of inconsistency in applying the rules in other disciplines.

> It's discretionary. Some staff have registers, some don't. But with lectures of 200 it's impossible to check. You just end up with 50 students attending. In first year seminars I keep a register and complain to the Course Leader. For seminars a register can be helpful if you follow up. [Measures such as registers are] Not very useful unless students know they will be severely penalised. But they are not – until it comes to the exam (if any), when they fail – deservedly in most cases. (staff, business)

There is no over-arching policy on attendance in our institution and no use of a commercial attendance monitoring system. On courses with large numbers of students we have no effective way of following up absenteeism, but some individual staff went to considerable lengths to ensure that students attended:

> I know one course leader who has been known to call undergraduate students on their mobile phone numbers at 7 or 8 am in the morning to remind them that they have a class at 9 am, which can be remarkably successful. (staff, business)

Students who respond to such drastic measures may attend out of respect for the lecturer. They may also respond when they know that their absence has been noticed by the lecturer:

> [I'll] talk . . . to a student informally when passing them in corridor. It unnerves them sometimes when they know you spotted them missing in the crowd. (staff, service management)

Staff attitudes to absenteeism ranged across a spectrum, but the predominant concern expressed by staff was the effect on students' chances of success. It was felt that students often fail to realise the implications of missing classes.

> I try to include a discussion on the importance of attendance to lectures at the start of each module and link it with some recent research findings and stress how it can improve student performance and confidence. . .. I have no real issue with non-attendance as the choice ultimately rests with the students, but I think it is important for me to highlight how important the social interaction can be and how I value their attendance (and implicitly their performance on my modules). (staff, pharmacy)

According to Moore's (2005) study, attendance rates improved through repeated emphasis on the proven relationship between attendance and success. Furthermore, attendance was seen as particularly crucial in the first year:

> Students who do not attend are more likely to drop out, particularly in year 1. (staff, business)

In many schools attempts were made to monitor attendance for retention purposes and students were contacted to ask why they had not been attending and were offered support to reintegrate them in the course.

Student choice

Several respondents felt that it was up to students whether they chose to attend, for example:

> I worry that we are infantilising the students and removing responsibility for their own engagement. (staff, computing)

> There is an unhealthy move towards university becoming an extension of school and we should resist it strongly. (staff, pharmacy)

This view places the responsibility on the students. However, '[they are] young adults and do not always act maturely' (staff, sport science).

Student responses when asked why they did not attend included lack of confidence, illness, being disorganised, lacking motivation, lacking interest in the subject, 'not prioritising university work over everything else' (female student, 20), and 'just being lazy I guess' (male student, 19).

Students often started with good intentions to do well but stopped engaging and lacked motivation. Students who attended infrequently often fell behind with their

studies and did not know what academic work they were expected to do. This meant that any attempts they made to reverse their pattern of poor attendance tended to be unsuccessful:

> When I do attend it just gives me a headache. … Everyone was so far ahead and it didn't make any sense to me. (male student, 23)

On the other hand some students were highly motivated and treated their degree like a job and therefore attended classes:

> I think, if you don't attend, the more you miss, maybe being a mature student, it's you know having been in the world of work, I almost treat going to university as a job. You need to be there. If I am not there I am wasting my time. (male student, 43)

The challenges of being a student

First year students vary in their capacity to deal with the far reaching changes they face during their transition to university. Young students who move away from home for the first time can find learning to live independently very challenging:

> I have had a lot of things going on outside [the course] you know, organising my money and my finances, doing all my washing and stuff like that, basically living on my own. (male student, 19)

Colleagues took account of the current climate in HE and respected genuine reasons for absence.

> Students have a lot of external pressures on their time – employment etc. However, there can also be a failure to engage with study that leads to absenteeism… (staff, computing)

The majority of our students need to work during term-time to cover their living expenses (Fleischer, Chalkley, & O'Connell, 2008). But often students developed a poor attendance pattern whilst coping with the new demands of independent life and study.

> In my experience absences due to illness or bereavement are redeemed – the student catches up. It's the students who don't turn up for other reasons (or, in a sense, for no reason) who are the ones who tend to fail assignments or get very poor marks. (staff, education)

Difficulty in adjusting to an independent approach to learning often led to poor attendance.

> When I was at school somebody made sure that I sat down and did the work, but here I just have got so much of a free rein. If people don't knock at my door and get me out of bed at 9 am, God knows what time I will be up. (male student, 23)

Peer support can help students to adapt to university level study and to establish the necessary routine and organisation.

Some lecturers distinguished between attendance at lectures and attendance at interactive sessions, where students have a responsibility to each other, such as laboratory sessions, seminars and group-based work.

> My attitude is they are adults, unless it's a group activity and others' learning will be affected, then I get more proactive and insist on attendance. Really otherwise, it's up to them. (staff, mathematics)

This was confirmed by students, who reported that they were more likely to attend if groupwork was involved.

Learning technologies and teaching quality

For taught modules tutors can provide learning material such as lecture notes on the university's VLE. One lecturer saw electronic learning environments as having great positive potential for students in the current HE context:

> I think that e-learning could have a big part to play here, and I am quite comfortable, for example, with the idea of running my modules on a parallel basis (taught and e-learning), so that students who are unable to attend for a while (for whatever reason) can opt out of the taught part, but keep going via the e-learning route. (staff, business)

We found that students' independent study patterns and VLE usage were linked to attendance and confidence. Some students relied heavily on the VLE as a resource:

> My attendance is really, really poor. I just get the lecture notes and just work from there. (male student, 19)

> When I have gone [to lectures] it's knocked my confidence back, it's made me more confused ... I'd rather read the lecture notes than go to the lectures. So I am just doing the work in my own time and I go and get the notes off [the VLE]. (female student, 21)

Some students make a strategic decision not to attend some sessions, particularly when the material is available in other ways. Teaching quality was acknowledged as a factor in both surveys in such decisions:

> Timetabled sessions are only part of the learning experience. The assessment measures the attainment of learning outcomes ... attendance is a means to an end not the end in itself. If lecturers provide vibrant and worthwhile sessions then students will attend. If students do not attend then as a School we need to wonder what WE are doing poorly not just what the student is doing wrong. (staff, sport science)

Hunter and Tetley (1999) indicate that if students feel they will derive important learning, especially with complex and difficult subjects, they will be determined not to miss taught sessions.

Discussion

Taking our findings, and seeing them in the wider context of the literature on student absenteeism, we explore where the responsibility lies for the problem of student absenteeism.

Government

Recent government policy in Britain has aimed to give '50% of 18 to 30 year olds an experience of higher education' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 7), and institutions have been awarded premium funding according to their contribution to widening participation. The introduction of tuition fees and the replacement of grants with student loans in the late 1990s led to contradictory tensions, and it is ironic that in spite of tuition fees needing to be paid by students (or their parents), teaching rooms in universities are often only partly occupied. UK higher education is subject to firm central control of student numbers in each university, with funding dependent on recruitment and retention. Institutions are penalised if they over-recruit, and also if they lose too many students (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2009). This creates a paradoxical situation in which there is selectivity but also pressure to retain students, even when they are not performing adequately.

Institution

Many institutions have placed increasing emphasis on adopting a 'nurturing approach' by extending their academic and personal support for students with online resources for transition, induction, personal and academic development (University of Bradford, 2009; University of Central Lancashire, 2010) and peer-assisted learning (Ody & Carey, 2008). Recent developments at our own institution have included Student Support and Guidance Tutors within departments, and centralised provision for academic skills development. Widening participation has increased the diversity of students, and it is now more difficult to provide appropriate support for individuals.

Some institutions use technology to monitor attendance (Newman-Ford et al., 2008). 75% of students in Bowen et al.'s survey (2005) said that the university should monitor student attendance, and most felt that the university should contact the students if attendance was insufficient. It was important to them that the institution cared about their progress. This indicates a desire on the part of students for the university to take responsibility for their learning by ensuring attendance.

Universities may be failing to make their expectations of students clear, so students may be unaware of what they need to do to fulfil their obligations as members of the academic community.

> While the role of student responsibility in their learning and development cannot be overlooked, universities also have an obligation to ensure that students are obliged to engage and understand the significance of the need to commit. (McInnes, 2001, p. 14)

The often tacit contract between teachers and students needs to be more explicit. We do not mean at a box-ticking level, but at a qualitative level of reciprocal respect and mutual effort. Students need to know what is required of them, and staff need to be supported in implementing rules on attendance. It should be possible to

devise clear policies which incorporate flexibility by providing for different options, circumstances, eventualities and contexts.

Teachers

Teaching staff show real concern that students may not realise the dangers of non-attendance, and many clearly make strenuous efforts to impress on students the proven link between attendance and academic success. Data from students testifies to the way they flounder when they lose touch with their courses. We maintain that there are limits to the extent to which staff can take responsibility for student engagement with their studies. Shortcomings of teaching are acknowledged as a potential factor, but poorly motivated students may not even give themselves the opportunity to find out how inspiring their teachers may be. Lecturers in most institutions are now required to enhance and update their teaching approaches.

Learning technologies, especially the widespread adoption of Virtual and Managed Learning Environments (V/MLEs) have added new dimensions to student learning, such as the provision of resources, methods of managing learning, support for learning, procedures for assessment and provision of feedback. This has represented a challenge to many academic staff, and their different levels of engagement and expertise in using its potential has created uncertainties which could be addressed in institutional policies. These could clarify the role of VLEs and the ways in which they may be used as a legitimate alternative to attendance.

Students

Our data suggest that a significant number of students have difficulty in taking responsibility for their own learning at university. By this we mean doing what is needed to enable themselves to develop into critical and autonomous learners. Academic staff feel frustrated when students do not fulfil their side of the academic contract, and they sense that higher education is being devalued.

Students' expectations and preparedness are key factors. The provision of induction to support students in their transition is vital. However, students can be unappreciative of such efforts and opt out of engaging with it, and there are limits to what the staff of the institution can do. There are well established initiatives in America, Europe and Australia such as 'The First Year Experience'. These are designed to help with transition, integration and participation. (National Resource Centre, 2009; Purnell & Foster, 2008).

The ease with which students adjust and form new attachments, particularly ones which foster their academic progress, is a strong factor in their successful integration into university life (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Yorke highlights a specific link between students' ability to 'persist' in their studies and 'the importance to a student of feeling that they are a member of an academic community' (Yorke, 2004, p. 26).

Schools and parents

Our data show that the challenges of adjusting to a more independent approach to studying and the need for students to look after themselves can be overwhelming. The ability to be independent is not easily acquired. Ideally it needs to be

developed in stages throughout the process of growing up. We suggest that the difficulty some students experience when they come to university could be related to a lack of development of self-reliance. Martin (2002) writes about 'academic resilience' and the role of schools in enhancing this:

> In a perfect world, students would not only be energised and driven to achieve to their potential but also equipped to deal effectively with academic setbacks, study pressures and stress in the school setting. (Martin, 2002, p. 1).

The expectation in HE is that students should take responsibility for themselves. Motivation, responsibility and autonomy are Humboldtian values (Pritchard, 2004), but a common dilemma is how to encourage students to engage with their studies, and indeed to attend. Barefoot (2007) describes today's students as consumer and entertainment orientated, multitasking and expecting immediate gratification with minimum contribution. She has also coined the term 'helicopter parents' for people who hover over their teenage children, playing a dominant and assertive role in trying to foster their education and well-being, but thereby undermining their offspring's ability to make their own decisions – and mistakes (Barefoot, 2007). Often parents expect the university to support their children academically, physically and emotionally. Parents could also make a conscious effort to prepare their offspring in practical terms for university by ensuring that they know how to cook basic nutritious meals, do their own laundry, and manage their money. The picture that emerges from our research seems indicative of the consequences of recent changes and the challenges now faced by students.

Conclusion

We recommend that universities provide clearer policies to help students understand the framework within which they are operating: the fact that the principal mode of study is self-directed; their obligations in terms of preparation and participation; and the efforts they will be required to make in order to establish themselves academically and socially. Students need reassurance that support will be available, and to know that the aim of this support will be to point the way for them to develop independence and the ability to work productively with their peers.

This paper has used student and staff voices to open up the issues associated with poor attendance, but it cannot give a full account of the diverse student population, as it has not considered students' ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds or their academic ability and has only included student data from one department.

Further research could be done into what is involved in preparing students in terms of taking responsibility for themselves and developing independence in the range of aspects of living and studying in the university environment. The vitally important roles of parents and schools need to be clarified and defined as part of this. An area of enquiry could be how to help students develop the ability to make appropriate choices and to commit themselves to acting on those choices.

Notes on contributors

Joyce Barlow has now retired from the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Brighton, where she led the Postgraduate Certificate for new academic staff for over a decade.

Stephanie Fleischer is a lecturer in research methods in the School of Applied Social Science at the University of Brighton.

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