

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES

Executive Summary:

The Language Cluster (LC) has noticed that student engagement has been weak during this online semester. Lacking the normal means of attendance tracking through ICE, LC staff made strong efforts to track student engagement this semester through various means. However, this was time-consuming and the data collected was incomplete. As a result, the LC was unable to identify students with low engagement consistently and follow up in order to provide support (e.g. by contacting Academic Advisors or sharing information with the Student Affairs Office, XJTLU Global, or Departmental Progress Committees). The only means of follow up (email) with students who did not attend live class sessions proved relatively ineffective.

For next AY, the School of Languages (SoL) is considering implementing or already planning on various measures, some that have been used previously (contacting other staff and units within the university, out-of-class support for students) and others that are new (improvements to Year 1 EAP, adding digital literacy to the curriculum). Long term, the School plans to investigate further measures: making expectations clear to students, revising the EAP curriculum further (in Year 2), empowering the Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) to tackle this issue, and incentivizing student engagement.

Outline:

0. Background
1. Previous measures relating to student engagement
2. Reasons why the previous measures are now ineffective and student engagement levels are lower
3. Measures to be taken:
 - a. Measures for Semester 1 2020-21
 - b. Long-term measures and strategic approach

Main Body:

0. Background: As the online teaching period progress during Semester 2 of 2019-20, the E-learning Coordinator became aware that low student engagement is an issue across the Language Cluster. This concern was raised to the Centre Management Teams and noted in the quality assurance reports for online education, which led to the issue being raised to the Dean of Learning and Teaching. This report is intended to record the discussion that has been taking place around this issue within the emerging School of Languages.

1. Previous measures relating to student engagement undertaken within the School of Languages (under normal working conditions / pre-pandemic)

- When **on campus**, all tutors would use the ICE attendance activity tool to record attendance. Attendance would be taken in the first 20 minutes of class. Tutors would log into ICE and open the attendance activity on their module ICE page (being careful to select the correct class section). They would then simply need to click a button to generate an attendance code for that session. Students could then either scan the attendance QR code or manually type in the number. This would then record their attendance on ICE for each session. This also meant that it was easy for the LC to download the attendance data from ICE and identify students for follow-up. Previously, tutors would talk to students in class in person, if the students came to class, in addition to other measures described below.
- Using this student attendance data from ICE, the LC had the following procedures in place for follow-up:
 - **Attendance issues in credit-bearing modules**
 - At the end of Weeks 4, 9, and 14, ICE-generated warning emails were automatically sent to students whose attendance has fallen below 80%.
 - At the end of W9, attendance data across each year were collated by the LC admin team. This was to allow for follow-up by:
 - Academic Advisers (Year 1 Semester 1 only)
 - *Academic Advisers were required to check a spreadsheet to see if any of their advisees had attended less than 80% of classes in their Y1S1 Language Centre module(s) and to email or meet with these students to discuss their attendance.*
 - Student Affairs Office (all cohorts)
 - *It was anticipated that Student Affairs Office would share information with their team of Development Advisers, who might then follow up with individual students.*
 - Departmental Progress Committees (all cohorts except Year 1 Semester 1)
 - *Departmental Progress Committees could deem that a student's absence was unacceptable and, having taken into account all relevant aspects of the case such as Mitigating Circumstances, decide that a student would not be offered an opportunity to resit any modules they might fail.*
 - XJTLU Global (all international students)
 - *International student visa policy required the University to report international student attendance to the local Entry and Exit Bureau which issues Residence Permits to students.*

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2. Reasons why the previous measures are now ineffective and student engagement levels have fallen (during the online education period / the COVID-19 pandemic)

- **Attendance tracking** this semester is being done very differently compared to previous semesters. It was announced very early on that teaching staff would not be using the ICE attendance activity to track attendance. Instead, each department was told to track attendance in whatever way they felt was most suitable. In the ELC, individual module leaders were told to choose one to three activities to track completion on as a way of monitoring student engagement. However, issues emerged:
 - Tracking completion of such a **small number of activities** does not necessarily give an accurate picture of overall student engagement. A student could, for example, be completing some supplementary activities instead of the "tracked" activities.
 - Tracking attendance in this way added a **significant administrative load** to module leaders, in particular those working on the largest EAP and LAN modules. It also meant that they were responsible for identifying and following up with low-engagement students. As this was no longer centrally done, the ELC could not be certain that these students were being regularly identified and followed up with.
 - Module leaders were asked later on in the semester to start recording participation statistics that module managers would then use to get a more accurate picture of student engagement within modules. In hindsight, had the ELC started doing this at the beginning of the semester we might have been able to identify non-participants/the extent of the problem sooner.
- **Emails:** Tutors or module leaders currently follow up on students with low engagement by emailing them.
 - However, many students do not respond to emails, likely for a variety of reasons.
- **Departmental Progression Committees:** It was also suggested that the Language Cluster follow up on students with low engagement through Departmental Progression Committees and Academic Advisors. However, the LC does not have a Departmental Progression Committee, and DPCs elsewhere in the university are inactive in terms of attendance standards because the decision has been made to not track attendance this semester.
- **Academic Advisors:** The Language Cluster would have followed up with Academic Advisors (who are all staff from other departments in S2 this AY), but it was until recently inconvenient to request AA data for non-engaging students, as the LC had to email Registry on a case-by-case basis. Registry later set up a centralized searchable AA database available to staff on E-bridge so that they can match AAs and students quickly and easily.
- **Student motivation:** According to the report from the Y2+ Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC), at least some students recognize that their behavior also needs to improve. Poor attendance from some students has a demotivating effect on the rest of the class. Some students see the need for improving their own self-discipline and avoid procrastination. Comments from the report suggested that students do not know how to study online effectively, and the university could do more to address this need.

3. Measures to be taken:

a. For Semester 1 2020-21

- **Contacting other responsible parties:**
 - **Academic Advisers:**
 - When a student's engagement is low (evidenced by poor attendance and/or class participation) or there are other concerns noticed by the language teacher, that teacher can bring this to the attention of the academic adviser.
 - For Y1 students, our understanding is that SoL language lecturers will be academic advisers for most of the year from next AY, so SoL will follow up internally for Y1 students.
 - For Y2-4 & PG students, staff now have the ability to look up who a student's adviser is through E-bridge. (We are glad to see that Registry has recently added this function.)
 - **Student Affairs Office**
 - I believe that we have shared attendance data with SAO before, and we have followed up on individual cases before. However, we have not been able to do so in S2 2019-20 because there has not been systematic recording of attendance. Since at least some students will continue studying online next semester, we hope that SAO can put in place follow-up mechanisms for students who are failing to engage. This is understandably more difficult online. We would like to hear more from SAO about how they follow up.
 - **Departmental Progress Committees**
 - If we are able to systematically share attendance data with them, we will do so. However, the wider issue is that there is no consistent standard across the university.

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- **XJTLU Global**
 - International students would normally be held to the standards required by their visa, and SoL staff will remind students with low attendance of these government requirements. However, if they only study online, these standards are not enforced.
 - Even when international students are on campus, it is obviously unfair for them to be held to a different standard than local students: the standard for attendance should be the same for all students or at least consistent within different levels of study (i.e. it may be appropriate for Y1 students to be held to a higher standard than Y4 students because they are less mature and therefore less able to regulate their time and prioritize).
- **Improvements in Year 1 EAP**
 - Y1 EAP modules are mandatory from 2020-21, so students will not be able to progress without passing them (as compensating for failure in EAP will no longer be allowed). This rule should help students realize the importance of EAP and focus on it in Y1. The changes to other aspects of the Y1 curriculum across the university hopefully will also encourage students to focus on and engage better in EAP provision.
- **Out-of-class support to students**
 - Both the ELC and MLC have had additional support available to students (a.k.a. Continuing Support/CS).
 - The ELC will be relaunching its CS provision next AY, and this will include activities targeted at students with low levels of engagement.
- **Increase digital literacy levels** (as a way of indirectly increasing student engagement)
 - Using the Learning Mall, assistance from EDU, etc., we could seek to increase the level of student digital literacies. Although we assume that all of our students are tech-savvy, many actually are not. They have essentially been thrown in at the deep end this semester too and have had to learn as they go. For some students, it must be overwhelming as it has been for some teaching staff.
 - As a preliminary measure, we can include a modicum of instruction in ATLAS Week for our new Y1 students (e.g. characteristics of a good online learner).
 - We are glad to hear that there are also plans at the university level to offer students with further guidance on how to improve the technical skills they need to study online.
- **Improved engagement monitoring**
 - As part of the roll-out of the Learning Mall (LM), EDU has told E-learning Coordinators that teachers will be able to monitor student engagement on module pages compared to what was previously possible with ICE. We look forward to learning more about these enhanced features and seeing how they might support our teaching.
 - EDU has also said that attendance tracking through technical improvements (i.e. dynamic QR codes) will also improve the accuracy of attendance records across the university. For on-campus teaching, this will be helpful for SoL.
- b. **Long-term measures and strategic approach**
 - **Expectations for students when learning online**
 - We are considering developing a student-facing online learning/engagement code for the SoL, with the goal of serving to clarify expectations in relation to engagement and participation.
 - **Improvements to Y2 EAP**
 - We are planning to overhaul the Y2 ELC modules for 2021-22 as a natural progression of the changes being made in 2020-21 to Y1. One key consideration is increasing student engagement in Y2 EAP. Part of the overhaul will be based on detailed needs analysis in order to ascertain exactly what our provision can do to best equip students for success in their disciplines. This will hopefully result in more meaningful and engaging content being provided which in turn should increase interest, motivation and therefore engagement - essentially increased discipline specificity.
 - More details will be shared about this as planning progresses.
 - **Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC)**
 - We will look into ways that these committees can serve as a channel of communication on the issue of student engagement, e.g. by making this issue a standing agenda item.
 - **Incentivization**
 - Incentivization of student engagement is another possibility. We are planning to consider measures such as awarding student prizes, employing techniques of gamification, appoint students as engagement officers for a group of their peers, and leveraging the influence of the Student English Association.