

ATTENDANCE AND ATTAINMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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There has been a substantial body of research that has investigated the factors affecting students entering higher education and the impact these may have on retention and absenteeism. The purpose of this study was to design, implement and evaluate a curriculum innovation based on the notion of action research. In particular, to investigate student attendance patterns and explore the effectiveness of an intervention designed to influence attendance.

The study took place during the second semester of the academic year and involved monitoring the attendance to seminar or practical sessions of a group of eighty-six second year students. The students were divided into two cohorts; one cohort of 49 students attending seminars and another cohort of 37 students attending practicals. Attendance of each student in both cohorts was recorded for the first 6 weeks of the semester. According to number of sessions attended, students' attendance was categorised as excellent (6 out of 6 sessions), very good (5 out of 6), good (4 out of 6), poor (3 out of 6) and very poor (2 sessions or less). The intervention consisted of a letter written by the lecturer to every student whose attendance was studied. The letter outlined the attendance category and either commended the student on their attendance or, in the case of poor attenders, recommended that the student attend more sessions in the second half of the semester. Attendance was then recorded in the same manner throughout the second half of the semester. The students' attendance score prior to the intervention was compared to their respective score following the intervention.

Results showed that the attendance score of the poor and very poor attenders improved significantly following the intervention for both cohorts, whereas the attendance score of excellent to good attenders was kept at the same level. This difference was more pronounced in the cohort attending practicals. This was mainly due to practicals being tied to assessments. These results suggested that a simple caring approach by the lecturer positively influenced student attendance levels. Also, in absence of attendance rules, students will attend sessions that are directly linked to their assessment, as was the case with practicals in this study.