

# LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: How can we improve the attendance of 16-20 year old students?

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## LSIS Research

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### Background

Bromley College of Further and Higher Education is situated on the outskirts of Bromley on the edge of the greenbelt. Bromley is the largest London borough and although there are areas of affluence within the borough there also some pockets of deprivation. There are a number of very good schools in the area and a large proportion of Bromley students' progress onto the sixth form within their schools. The students at Bromley College are drawn not only from Bromley. Nearly half (48%) of the students involved in this study (20 out of 38) were from out of the borough and travelled in from neighbouring boroughs such as Croydon, and inner London boroughs such as Lewisham and Southwark. Bromley College has a good reputation and many students choose to travel to Bromley College

rather than attend their local college.

The group I studied consisted of 38 students aged 16 to 20 years who were studying a BTEC Level 2 Diploma in Business Studies. The admission criterion for this course is four grades A-D passes at GCSE including English and mathematics. Of the 38 students, 47% had progressed from a Level 1 course and 37% had progressed from the Level 1 Business Studies course at Bromley College. The percentage of male students on the course was much higher than female (29 male students and nine female).

### Starting point

I was aware that the attendance of the Level 2 students was erratic. This was reflected by college figures: at the end of the second term

before the Easter break, the average attendance for the course was 77%. This was 10% below the minimum attendance required by the college (87%). I decided to find out the possible causes of the erratic attendance and to use the information to identify strategies that may improve the students' attendance in the future. I started by analysing the attendance of different conceptual groups of students within the cohort.

- **Personality.** There were two groups of students studying the course, each with a seemingly different personality: group A was a very lively group who enjoyed discussions, but found it hard to settle down to independent work. This group had an average attendance of 74% at the end of Term 2. Group B was a quieter group who

listened rather than discussed, and worked well independently. Despite some individuals with very poor attendance, the average attendance of the group was 81%.

- **Entry routes.** When I looked at the attendance rates of progressing and new students I found that there was only a 2% difference between them, with progressing students averaging 76% attendance and new students 78%.
- **Gender.** The male students had an average attendance of 81% which was higher than the average attendance of female students which was 65%. There appeared to be a considerable lack of commitment amongst the nine female students. I do not think this was due to them feeling uncomfortable with the large number of male students as this was not highlighted as an issue when the female students completed questionnaires on their attendance. However six of the female students were affected considerably by external issues during their time at the college.

Aware that students on the course may have a large number of issues outside of the college that are likely to have a considerable impact on attendance, I moved on to investigating these.

- **Students who were carers for either a parent or younger siblings.** Five of

the students were regularly called upon to care for members of their family and their average attendance was 72%. All five of these students were male.

- **Students in the care of social services.** Five of the students were 'looked after children': three of these were female and had an average attendance of 71%; two were male with an average attendance of 88%. Three of these students were living independently. This however did not appear to have an adverse effect on the average attendance, in comparison to the remaining students, as this remained at 78%.
- **The impact of deprivation on a student's commitment.** I referred to the Multi-deprivation index and identified that 82% of students in the study group were in the lower half of the income domain index. However, these students had a relatively high average attendance (76%). Although low income had an impact on some students' attendance, for others in this category, their work ethic and commitment to the course was still very strong.
- **Young offenders.** We had a higher than usual proportion of students who had been involved in court cases and issues with the law. One student spent two months in a young offender's institution. He completed course work whilst he was

there and worked hard on his return. Unfortunately, he was charged with a second offence and disappeared after failing to attend a court hearing. Two other students were charged with criminal offences which had a subsequent impact on their attendance (51% on average for the last half term).

- **Involvement in street violence.** Three students were affected by street violence during the college year. The average attendance for these three students was 62%.

## Teaching and learning process

We had four systems in place designed to help promote attendance.

- **Sanctions.** The college disciplinary system consisted of a 'cause for concern' being issued for poor attendance and if this did not have an effect then a Stage 1 disciplinary meeting was organised with the Curriculum Coordinator of the course. If the student did not abide by the college rules following this meeting then a Stage 2 disciplinary meeting was organised with the Curriculum Manager.
- **Pastoral care system.** A weekly one-hour tutorial took place to support each group of 18 students on the Level 2 course. Some of the tutorials focused on

students identify issues that they might have in these areas. Praise and encouragement was given to students whose attendance improved and positive comments were included on the subject reviews sent out to parents for these students. Students were also shown how to calculate the points they had achieved from their current grades so that they could identify whether or not they would have enough points to progress to the Level 3 course.

- **Multi agency approach.** A considerable amount of liaison involving parents, key workers and social workers took place throughout the year. Where students are over the age of 18 we are not able to contact parents unless the student has given us permission to do so. Lecturers also liaised with the 'Student Liaison Team' who manage the Student Common Room. Timetables were made available to the team so that students who remained in the common room when they should have been in lessons could be identified and asked to leave the common room.
- **Learning support.** Three students in Group B had statements of educational need and were supported by a Learning Support Assistant (LSA). The LSA provided one-to-one support for the students and helped them to break the assignments down into

manageable segments. They also took notes during lessons and helped the students to draw up mind maps for the assignments using these notes. The LSA encouraged the students to work independently on assignment work to prepare them for lessons where they were not supported.

## Impact

Whilst the attendance of some students improved considerably after a Stage 1 or 2 meeting, the average attendance did not improve overall. When we assessed attendance levels at the end of the first half term, we found that the attendance of group A had fallen by 3% whilst the attendance of Group B had improved by 3%. Questionnaires and discussions with the students revealed that students generally had little respect for the disciplinary systems within the college. There was a feeling amongst the Level 2 students that we would not allow them to fail. Students were aware for example, that although four students had been asked to leave the course within the first six weeks due to their poor attendance, three of the students appealed against this decision and were allowed to stay on. The sanctions did not appear to be harsh enough to deter such students from missing classes – all three of the students who were allowed to continue on the course continued to have low attendance with an average attendance of 58%. To try to dispel the myth that we would not allow them to fail the

course, students were reminded during the discussions that there was no guarantee that they would pass the course.

The weekly tutorials had a positive effect on student attendance in some cases. In particular, requiring students to calculate the points they had achieved encouraged some students who were borderline to improve attendance and to work for higher grades than previously achieved. One student, who had previously been a young carer for his mother and found it hard to be motivated to attend when his mother required less support, was helped to identify achievable short and long term targets through discussions (which involved both the mother and the student). The student's attendance improved as a result and he was offered a place on the Level 3 course for the following year. However, with the complex issues that students experience outside of college and the substantial support required by some individuals, the time required often significantly exceeded the one hour per week that was allocated, putting personal tutors and lecturers under considerable pressure. The result was that some students who were initially doing well started to miss lessons and were not identified quickly enough, with the result that their attendance started to drop, and the delay in taking action further impacted on their attendance.

The multi-agency approach was successful for individual students who we particularly focused on. By adopting a multi-agency approach to the student's education, all those concerned worked together to enable the student to reach their end goal. For example, one student who was living independently under the care of social services had erratic attendance at the beginning of the course. The personal tutor, who was made aware of issues that could have an impact, was able to liaise closely with the student's key worker and social worker in order to encourage the student to attend and to help the student to catch up with outstanding course work. The cohort included three students with statements of educational needs. Pleasingly, each of these students had 100% attendance. I believe the support provided by the Learning Support Assistant (LSA) was instrumental in this achievement. The individual attention she was able to give to these students had a noticeable impact on their commitment to the course and all three exceeded expectations in their course work. They all progressed from Level 1 and subsequently went on to prepare to progress to Level 3. At the time of writing, all three students were expected to achieve a Distinction grade overall. The involvement of a very good LSA also benefitted the whole group; the attendance in that group exceeded that of the other group by 12% despite the presence of some challenging students within the group.

## Conclusion

When I started writing this report, my overwhelming feeling was that whatever we had tried to do, the attendance figures had not improved. However, when I considered individual students, I realized that there had been success stories and that there were students who were achieving because of the work that we had done to focus on their attendance. The emphasis now needs to be on how we are going to approach the issue for the next academic year and what we can learn from this year.

I have always believed that providing good pastoral care, that really getting to know the students and trying to understand their individual issues, would be the key to improving attendance. I have come to the conclusion this year that this alone is not sufficient and that a more structured approach to target setting and discipline is required. I found Ann Horsley's research on Assertive Mentoring very interesting as she started from the opposite standpoint by using Assertive Mentoring and then concluded that she needed to adopt a more empathic approach with Post-16 students. I feel that a combination of both methods is probably what is required.

For the next academic year, I think we need to draw up strict guidelines in the early part of the year so that students are aware of their boundaries from the very beginning and we

should work with the Student Liaison Team in order to identify students who will require mentoring. The Personal Tutor system is going to be changed so that each tutor will only be responsible for one class (i.e. a smaller number of students). This will enable the tutor to spend more time with each student and therefore raise the quality of pastoral care provided. We hope that this will have a considerable impact on the level of attendance for their group.

I also intend to keep a very close watch on student attendance from the beginning of the year so that we can start contacting parents and carers and put strategies into place as soon as a student's attendance starts to drop.

## Further reading

Ann Horsley (2011) Assertive mentoring: An effective method of supporting post-16 students? Summary available from: [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/24873](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/24873). Full report available from: <http://actionresearch.farnborough.ac.uk/files/ARP/file/anne%20horsley.pdf>

## Contact

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