

## ***It wasn't my fault, my alarm didn't go off!***

An understanding of the perception of strategies to improve attendance and punctuality within a Further Education setting

An LSIS RDF funded project

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I have explored the perceptions held by educational managers, tutors and students about attendance and punctuality and the barriers it may create within a vocational further education institution. Much is made of the connection between attendance and success and whilst this belief is widely accepted, there is little research into this within the post-compulsory education sector. Student and tutor definitions of what good attendance and punctuality are have been explored and compared. Perceptions about barriers to attendance and punctuality are explored alongside a discussion around the evaluation of the impact of teaching and learning strategies on student motivation. It is argued that in order to begin to address the issue of attendance and punctuality perceptions held by senior management, tutors and students must be aligned in order to devise effective improvement strategies. The final section of the paper provides suggestions of how these findings might support further development in the exploration of achieving outstanding attendance and punctuality and its effect on improving learning.

### **Key Words**

Attendance. Punctuality. Perception. Barriers. Motivation.

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*“Everyone knows the elephant in the room”*

## **Introduction**

Monday morning and as you look around the familiar faces you mentally prepare for the latecomers. Despite the fact that class began five minutes ago, you're missing five students. You look down at your lesson plan, of course - presentations today. Students look at you. Several tell you they're missing a group member. You have a choice to make. Do you wait and hope the rest will arrive so you can assess the presentations or do you move on? You know this will put the class a week behind but your students who are present are keen to get the assessment over. So where do you start?

As a newly qualified tutor it's a question I ask myself every time I sit down to plan lessons. How do I avoid planning for lateness or absence when the problem limits the amount of time and teaching and learning I can have with my students? How do you pair students for assessment when your students know which ones are the habitual latecomers or absentees and refuse to work with each other? Perhaps it's an unnecessary question: to you it must be obvious.

So then...*where do I start?*

You might argue it's with the Ofsted inspection report that tells me *“attendance rates are improving and are satisfactory for adult students, but low for students aged 16 to 18”* (Ofsted, 2009) or my managers who want to understand why I have low attendance and punctuality. Perhaps it's with my course review where my attendance targets have gone up to 95%; up from the previous year – that's when the sinking feeling hits you, you averaged 83% last year and even that was an optimistic figure for this year.

Why are some students consistently late? What are the reasons behind the decision to be absent?

Three years ago I was involved in a steering group that started to look more closely at attendance and punctuality. It was led by an Assistant Principal and comprised of teaching and non-teaching staff from across the college. The group looked to understand the following objectives around lateness and absenteeism

- college policy
- transfer of best practice
- views of stakeholders (namely staff and students)

Despite improvements with attendance and punctuality, it was highlighted as an area for further development by Ofsted and I think it relevant to add that they acknowledged the college had “73% [enrolments] from inner city wards which have high levels of deprivation” because I believe this links to the discussion held by Petty (2006) about the motivations of learners and their economic background (p.42).

As a reflective practitioner, working for a large inner-city vocational FE college, the level of disruption I and my students experience as a result of poor attendance or lateness, is exasperating. Feedback from the steering group analysis highlighted that students found lateness by others disruptive and habitual absence equally distracting. Biesta (2010) talks about “*the time available to step back from the flow of everyday practice in order to ask why we are actually doing what we are doing*” (p4). As a new teacher I was trained to reflect on my practice and so when considering the proposal for this research project, I wanted to take the time to understand more about the reasons and the barriers to improve my practice. In the context of action research, I wanted to understand if the strategies I used might be causing the issue or whether the concern rested with inconsistent practice with different departments / tutors or in a bigger context i.e. strategic approach. In short were we as an institution exacerbating the problem?

Whilst there continues to be a need for more studies on attendance and punctuality within the FE setting, there has been a variety of work undertaken into the links between student achievement and retention and the impact attendance and punctuality has had. Although the Davies report (1999) looked at student retention in terms of quality of teaching or finance, it raised questions I wanted to explore further in terms of student perception. Namely I thought it important to explore the idea of student motivation and its influence on attendance and punctuality. It was possible that the outcomes from my research would raise questions about how we motivate students and that the issue of attendance and punctuality was a by-product of a greater concern. Did our students know what was expected of them in terms of attendance and punctuality? Although Davies proposed “*rigorous early follow up of absence from class, improvements to induction programmes and tutorial support, and student mentoring schemes*” as a mechanism to reduce student withdrawal rates (Davies, 1999, p10; Martinez, 1996) was this also the reason why the issue persisted with continuing students.

Petty (2006) discusses motivation within the expectancy-value theory of motivation. Here “*a student’s motivation is determined by how much they value the goal(s) you or they are setting, and whether they expect to succeed*” (p.41). Could it be that low levels of attendance or punctuality are an outward display of a student’s value that they attach to their own success. Davies (1999) has suggested induction as a mechanism to improve retention

and Petty also refers to the induction process as a means to “*sell the value of our courses to our students*” (2006, p42). Although induction has passed it would be worthwhile to look at whether student perceptions of their course changed after they learnt the value it would add to their future earnings; using the exercise provided by Petty may be an avenue to pursue in induction, following this study.

Petty also discusses Dweck’s theory of motivation and it raises a question of the level of insight we as practitioners have about our students prior to their course start and the on-going support we offer our students (Petty, 2006 p45-50; Dweck, 2000). Whilst agreeing with Petty that it was obvious that “*learning is worth the effort*” (2006, p46) I wondered if as a provider that “*attracts large numbers of students with poor prior experience of education*” (Ofsted, 2009), perhaps the reason attendance and punctuality strategies require more improvement with younger students is due to their own beliefs about their ability. Hattie (2003) discusses the impact of the teacher in his paper *Teachers make a difference; what is the research evidence?* and writes “*we need to direct attention at higher quality teaching, and higher expectations that students can meet appropriate challenges – and these occur once the classroom door is closed and not by reorganising which or how many students are behind those doors...or by bringing in more sticks to ensure they are following policy*” (Hattie, 2003, p3). If the answer lies with expectations – is this communicated in the most inspirational and achievable way?

Perhaps the strategies we are using that Ofsted said “*have been more successful in raising attendance levels for that of adults than for 16 to 18 year olds*” are ineffectual because we are looking at the problem from the wrong angle. It would be encouraging to see the outcomes of investigation into where our students would place their ability and subsequently their motivation with attendance and punctuality. Perhaps Dweck’s questionnaire (as cited in Petty, 2006, p49) could offer this information before they began their course and then be used to enhance both the induction process and the way we support students within the initial weeks of their studies.

There is another possibility put forward by Patrick Hayes (2007) who refers to a quote from Stephen McNair in a Guardian newspaper article on the outcomes from his research into mixed-age learning. McNair is quoted as saying students believe “*being in an adult environment made us behave better than if we had been on our own. We learned better and performed better*” (Hayes, 2007, p77; Kingston, 2004, p17). This raises questions around whether it would be beneficial for young students to mix with adults and could this raise attendance and punctuality figures amongst 16-18 year olds. Looking at the timetabling of courses and the enrolment of cohorts could hold potential answers to the issue.

As a practitioner I feel there tends to be a lot of discussion about the importance of raising attendance and punctuality but little to help sustain the improvement once the problem has been identified; sometimes the pressure can feel too much. A recent newspaper article refers to a headteacher's lack of full disclosure to Ofsted Inspectors; so concerned was she that an accurate account of the amount of absenteeism during inspection would result in a notice to improve (Chadwick, 2011). Published in 2011 Ofsted outline in their guidance, in relation to schools not FE, that the judgements relating to attendance and punctuality are made in terms of the outcomes for students – so how well they are doing compared to national figures and how effective the school's provision is, including interestingly "*the extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their economic wellbeing*" (Ofsted, 2011, p8). Ofsted are clear within the guidance, absence is unacceptable because they argue "*there is a clear link between attendance and achievement, since if pupils are not attending school they will be unable to access the opportunities available to them*" (Ofsted, 2011, p2).

Within my institution success rates indicate that students are achieving despite inconsistent attendance or punctuality. Therefore, should the issue of absence or lateness matter if students are achieving; after all this would be a positive reflection on the quality of teaching that students are receiving and the learners we have recruited. Going back to what Ofsted say about a student's economic wellbeing, developing students who possess good discipline in relation to attendance and punctuality helps them secure employment.

A research study, commissioned by LSIS, was undertaken into the FE sector's ability to prepare students for employment (Fletcher, 2010). Given the current economic climate and high unemployment figures amongst young people the link between education and employment is a strong feature of government rhetoric. Fletcher (2010) discusses the merits of the aspersions made of the FE sector in Fran Abrams (2010) *Failing to Learn: how society lets young people down* and a BBC radio programme. Amongst the detailed discussion about the sophistication of data currently gathered about FE student progression, he adds "*it is clear that colleges see an important part of their role as preparing young people for the world of work*" (Fletcher, 2010, p9).

Vocational colleges aim to produce students who can progress within their careers, either through continued further or higher education or through apprenticeships and employment. As practitioners, we understand the importance of attendance and punctuality in relation to employment but more so in relation to achieving qualifications and the impact those qualifications can have on a student's economic future. If our students arrive late to classes or are habitually absent, how are they developing this quality or gaining an appreciation of why it matters after college? Fletcher adds "*typically young people at the less skilled end of*

*the labour market progress erratically, moving between jobs, between employment and unemployment and in and out of contact with education” (Fletcher, 2010, p6).*

Taking forward the idea of preparing students for work, I would like to explore some of the ideas raised from Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (2008). Here he discusses the origins of craftsmanship and its meaning within modern practice. His account posed several thought provoking questions for me that I wanted to explore with students during our focused discussions. I wanted to hear how students regarded themselves as learners. Do our students regard their course as a means of accessing a career and developing as craftsmen in their own right? As an individual I hold great pride in the skills and knowledge I have honed and developed throughout my adult life; and I wanted to know if our students felt the same.

Spours et al (2007) in their study of the impact of policy levers on teaching and learning activities, state *“in attempting to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers, colleges have to negotiate the challenges of national policy, translate policy levers and, at the same time, respond to local ecologies”* (Spours et al, 2007, p4). The findings discussed in the paper present the question of how colleges respond to changing government priorities and the impact this has on consistency of strategies used to support the student and tutor. I think this is a question worthy of further reflection. I also think the discussion in Hattie’s paper on the *Influences on student learning* would be worth exploring further, especially feedback and *“the degree that students and teachers set challenging rather than “do your best” goals relative to the students’ present competencies”* (Hattie, 1999, p13). Target setting is a facet of our practice, usually through Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) but to what extent do these really reflect the students’ ability and how much do they help them move forward. It would be interesting to discuss this with students in conjunction with the points raised in Coffield’s *All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask* (2009).

## Methodology

Having an understanding about our student's perceptions is the bridge to implementing a successful strategy and I wanted to take forward some of the insights gained from the former Steering Group.

I used a combination of predominantly focus group interviews with cohorts, tutors and mentors as well as written surveys. During the discussions I used a series of "probes" to elicit further information (Vaughn et al, 1996, p82).

Vaughn et al. (1996) discussed at length the value that focus group interviews provide within educational research. They stated that much like the contribution made to marketing and advertising, "*it is becoming increasingly clear that researchers and practitioners in education [sic] need to ascertain the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as clients, parents, tutors, and students*" (p.3). The focus group has offered me the opportunity to connect with my sample audience and discuss what they thought about the topic within the sphere of their daily practices. It has provided me with access to their personal opinions; details about the feelings they hold about their experience. This was far more useful because I wanted to understand the underlying reasons to enhance our knowledge of the issues. Gathering the written responses has provided the opportunity to read the perceptions of those who were not comfortable with voicing their feelings out loud.

The questions on the surveys were designed to obtain feedback around themes based on my research. The themes related to aspects of teaching and learning, namely student motivation and course selection; relationships with tutors and impact of feedback; outcomes from absence and lateness finally perceptions about what learning is, based on questions asked by Coffield (2009).

I also wanted to test a statement and questions posed to students taken from Coffield (2009, p6-9). This was to ascertain the level of understanding students had about their own learning styles and what they considered to be a good student.

### The participants

I worked with three different cohort groups and the majority of tutors who were timetabled to come into contact with them. (Not all colleagues wished to participate within the sample). This covered predominantly personal and vocational subject tutors.

The participants involved in the action research paper consisted of the following:

- tutors from Level 3 Business, Foundation Learning Tier Business Admin and Entry Level ESOL



- students enrolled on the courses (from a variety of ethnicities and ages)
- senior managers survey responses
- learning mentors allocated to “at risk” students

There were a total of 53 participants in this research; 39 of whom were students enrolled and actively studying at the college; the majority were 19 or older, 12 students were aged 16-18 years. Sixteen students were on the second year of their programme preparing for university or full time employment.

#### Method used to analyse data

Having asked teaching colleagues to volunteer their groups, I use data from the focus group discussions, survey responses and student attendance statistics from our management information systems for thematic comparisons. The written survey questions for participants were trialled prior to use; this was to confirm appropriate use of language, clarity and understanding but also, in the case of the teaching survey, to measure its pertinence. They were then coded according to question type and analysed looking for themes in feedback.

#### Current Practice

A variety of strategies to improve attendance and punctuality are currently being trialled within the institution; some are outlined below. The research aimed to gather feedback from participants on certain strategies (indicated by an asterisk).

- A4 posters on classroom doors with messages about attendance and punctuality\*
- Allocation of Learning Mentors for students identified by curriculum as being at risk\*
- A working party proposal on attendance and punctuality to draw up teaching and learning resources to support improvement
- Use of the disciplinary process where attendance/punctuality is adversely affecting achievement
- Calls from tutors to students and/or parents/guardians for absence\*
- Meetings with parents/guardians about attendance/punctuality and impact on progress of learning
- A dedicated Attendance Officer who tutors report any absence to for follow up

#### Ethical Considerations

It was important the research did not breach the confidentiality or rights of the students or the staff involved. Therefore prior consent was obtained from both the student and (where appropriate) parents / guardians. Staff were asked to volunteer for the project with permission from their manager thereby inferring consent. Where senior managers have replied with written feedback, inference was taken that they provided consent also.

Participants were not required to provide names in order to complete surveys. Where participants have been quoted pseudonyms chosen by participants, have been used. Participants were given advance viewing of this report to ensure accurate interpretation and feedback.

### Limitations

It should be noted that this research paper used a small sample size within the college. This will limit its cross-sectional value but it is hoped that its findings and recommendations might hold interest and merit for others as a case study irrespective of institution/delivery type or student context.

## Findings and Analysis

Survey responses from senior managers outlined a broad agreement about the value of attendance and punctuality and the factors that influence absence or lateness, but lacked a consistent definition of what the two aspects meant.

One manager defined attendance as “being present in lesson” and whilst a second manager agreed with this definition they included “special circumstances” that might affect a student’s ability to attend. Another manager made no reference to a formal definition but cited the need to “meet either local or national benchmarks” and included the college’s current benchmark “set at 95%”.

Senior managers and students were asked whether attendance and punctuality was intertwined with success. The majority of senior managers agreed that success would not be possible without attending lessons. However, one manager asked for proof that there was a connection; a point acknowledged by another manager who comments on the “people who can be successful without this equation, but these are very few and an exception to rule”. This relates to a question I asked earlier in this report about whether attendance and punctuality was relevant to learning if students achieved. This was also reflected in some of the feedback from participants.

A couple of managers made reference to the level of commitment a student had to learning and attainment of a desired goal; one describing good attendance and punctuality as a “*discipline*”. This connected with a point made earlier about the link to employability. They also discussed the idea of not letting others down or being “selfish” presumably because of the impact their absence and/or lateness has on the entire class. One manager made reference to consequences. It is interesting that both these comments feature as a theme in all the focus group discussions; though more heavily with staff than with students.

Learning mentors, as support for students identified as *at risk*, are relatively new roles; part of the college’s strategy to support student retention and attainment. The term *at risk* is here considered as vulnerable students in need of additional pastoral support, particularly those liable to drop out of college.

We began the discussion by exploring two questions. Firstly the reasons why students had chosen the college and secondly, the number of students who they considered to be on a course appropriate to their ability. Most of the mentors agreed that the campus’ city centre location was an asset and that many of the students had chosen the college because of its good access to local transport and overwhelmingly this was the top answer from all the

students. Several students commented on the influence of friends and family – one student said their “uncle had chosen the college because they liked it”.

The mentors also raised the point about the influence of family and friends on the student’s choice. A mentor commented on “family pressures”, whilst a different mentor added a student had chosen a subject because they “thought it’d be easy”; having realised the level of work required subsequently. However this wasn’t a uniform view. A couple of mentors reflected those on level 3 programmes and in the second year of their courses, were more motivated because it related to career aspirations. Here still there was a disparity. One mentor felt curriculum approach to managing the learning process meant that some of their level 3 students were not focused.

To clarify the role of the mentors, I asked participants for feedback on their experience of the curriculum referral process for students considered at risk. The referral process indicated a predilection to refer a student with attendance and punctuality issues; suggesting a correlated perception held by tutors between likelihood of completion and rate of absence or lateness; although a mentor said the majority of their referrals were to do with “housing, behaviour, anger management and other issues like time management”. One mentor said they had referrals because a student received “[Teaching Assistant] support”. All the mentors agreed that the way in which ‘students at risk’ were referred was inconsistent between different curriculum divisions. They also said that the referral process was initially open for 16-18 year old students but had since become available for all students.

The mentors discussed the impact of inconsistent strategies to manage student behaviour, including absence and lateness. One mentor said this inconsistency occurred within lessons from student to student. Many of the mentors discussed respect as a consequence of the inconsistencies students experience; a point also raised by senior managers. A mentor, when discussing the impact of absence and lateness said “it’s a cycle...a lot of students say I don’t know what I’m doing but a lot don’t turn up so it’s not the tutor’s fault”.

The discussion moved onto their caseloads and what the mentors had discerned as the potential reasons underlining the issue of attendance and punctuality. They said the main reasons related to:

- Expectations of students. One mentor said they outlined the terms of expectations (detailed on the student’s learning agreement and issued at enrolment) to a student and the student responded “oh yeah, I signed it but I didn’t read it”. Mentors felt students were not always clear about what was expected of them and that this expectation was not clearly communicated which links to the discussion offered by Hattie (1999). They

referred to student knowledge of the college's need to perform well when measured against National Rates. Some students considered it the college's responsibility to ensure that they achieved, regardless of the commitment of the student, because they knew the impact that their failure would have on success rates. One mentor commented that students say "you'll get money and don't realise they are gaining a qualification". This was reflected in a comment made by a student in their written response though not raised in group discussion. They wrote "tutors should help students as much as they can because they are getting paid to do it". The impact of success rates resonates with much of what is discussed by Spours et al (2007) and raises the question about processes that support when, as one tutor put it, "students know how to play the game".

- Consequences. There was widespread agreement that there was a lack of consequences within the college and little follow through with regards to disciplinary issues. A further concern highlighted amongst the participants was the lack of consistency. One mentor commented on this inconsistency, saying "if you were friends with other [students] in different departments, you would see it".

When tutors were asked about the actions they undertook with students who were absent or late many said that they challenged lateness in the classroom; a few said they did this after the lesson had finished in order to reduce disruption. A student suggested this was preferable because "most [of the] time the class becomes silent when [they] ask you and [it] might be too much for some people"; suggesting students are sensitive to the way lateness is handled. They also said they would call the students. In Business all the tutors said they would either call the parents or they would inform the personal tutor, who would call parents. It was interesting that the actions tutors said they undertook, was not reflected in the feedback given by students.

Many students reflected on the impact their absence would have on their own learning; several said "I miss work"; "miss vital teacher notes"; "won't be able to do [the] work"; "fall behind on work". A couple of students wrote about the need to have a "valid reason" for absence. Furthermore when asked about lateness almost all the students commented on the impact they had on peers, "I disturb others"; "waste [the] lesson"; "feel embarrassed" being some of the comments made. Several talked about informing the tutor beforehand if they were going to be absent or late. Hardly any students commented on what the tutor did as a consequence of their absence or lateness although one student wrote "nothing" happens when they are absent.

The mentors reflected on the potential barriers to good attendance and punctuality. There was broad agreement that it was a lack of "basic skills linked to confidence,

assertiveness and being proactive”. A mentor expressed that students were “allowing things to pass them by”. Several mentors considered this could be linked to previous educational experiences; including school. They agreed this wasn’t always positive, one saying students had “floated through” which could link to what Petty (2006) discusses about the expectancy-value model.

- Recognition for good attendees. The mentors commented on the impact that poor attendance and lateness was having on those students who were on time and always in class. One mentor explained “it comes down to a respect thing” and interestingly respect was a word several students used in their description of a “good” student. It is also worth adding that a number of students commented, during discussions, on the irritation they felt when peers were late to class because of the level of disruption caused. Jasma wrote “when you are not here you miss the chance to learn”. Another student considered the role of the tutor so important in this regard they considered a good tutor to be one who could “manage their classroom” so that students were not interrupted. The students felt strongly about the disruption caused through lateness which echoes the question of consequences. Furthermore when students were asked to comment on how they felt when late, the majority said they felt “sad”, some said they felt “angry” and one student said they felt “okay” because they knew they could catch up.

The focus group discussions with tutors centred on their perceptions about the students they taught who were involved in the research. Tutors were asked to provide their “working” definitions of attendance and punctuality – that they used when in the classroom.

Of the tutors surveyed, all agreed the definition for attendance was the presence of students in their timetabled sessions. One tutor extended this definition to include “participating in the lesson”. Tutors were also asked to define punctuality. Again many agreed punctuality meant being in class at the time outlined on the timetable; which followed what senior managers said. One tutor however defined it as “students to arrive prior to the session starting” (with the word prior underlined).

Participants were also asked to provide a description of what a “good” student would look like to determine whether attendance and punctuality were relevant factors. A strong theme that came out of tutor descriptions was the student’s commitment to learn; “one who tries hard, applies themselves and someone who wants to achieve”; “tries to improve and challenges himself to become better”; “someone who is motivated to succeed”; “someone willing to try”. Effort and motivation is an important factor and resonates with what senior managers had said. Interestingly the mentors regarded a good student as having good attendance and punctuality and achieving good grades; a couple commented on a student’s ability to

manage their time effectively and meet deadlines; which bore greater similarity with what students described a good student to be.

Tutors agreed they had a good working relationship with students. One student described the relationship with the tutor as one of mutual learning “learn from the tutor as well as the tutor from the student” (Mr Deszoush); another student said “without them [tutors] I wouldn’t be in the position that I am today” (Zara).

Tutors agreed students would ask for assistance if they were struggling; though one tutor said “as a tutor it is not always easy to spot the more subtle signs when the emphasis is on achievement”. The majority felt their students were on the right course; mostly because of interest and career progression. When asked about the quality of pastoral care tutors commented that they did not have enough time. One tutor, during discussions, said that it was difficult to see all students individually in an hour tutorial, especially as class sizes grow; adding the needs of individuals was often greater than the time allocated. Tutors perceive time to be a premium resource and a few reflected on the difficulty they have discussing with learners their progress during tutorial times (Hattie, 1999). When asked about the impact this had on student performance, responses were mixed.

Some tutors felt student performance improved following pastoral discussions; another reflecting that although it brought about “some” improvement it needed to be “reinforced constantly”. One tutor said improvement came when “you talk to them like adults and explain the consequences”; this reaffirms what the mentors said about the importance of consequences in relation to student performance.

Tutors and students were also asked to give feedback on a statement written from Coffield (2009); as described in the methodology. All but one tutor agreed it was a valid statement; with one adding “but maybe prepared to learn as well?”. Two tutors commented on the importance of a reciprocal relationship between the tutor and the student, with one having described it as “the importance of 50-50 and the concept of what you put in is what you get out!”. The tutor who tested the questions prior to use said this was a message we needed to convey to our students more readily. Clearly the statement registered with tutors and mentors, one of whom revealed “the reality is very different...the students don’t realise they should compromise”. This certainly relates to the discussion about responsibility and learning presented by Biesta (2010) and by Coffield (2009).

When students were asked about the Coffield statement, almost all of the students agreed with the principle of it; with comments such as “both tutors and students have to help each other to achieve the same goals” (Fazzy), “you can’t rely on them to spoon feed you”

(Osama) and “there’s only so much a tutor can do, the student needs to want to learn” (Chantelle), being typical. Two students disagreed with the statement one saying that “tutors put you under a lot of pressure”.

As with tutors and mentors, students were also asked to reflect on what qualities they thought made a good student. Overwhelmingly the majority of students said that of foremost importance was hard work, followed by good attendance and punctuality. These were the top responses from all the students. Several students talked about “good behaviour” and a “good attitude” where they are “keen to learn and motivated”. A number of students also said meeting deadlines was evidence of being a good student. Clearly then, attendance and punctuality are important facets of learning and yet the average attendance across the three cohorts was 77.9%; which was reflected in the feedback from tutors too. It is also worth mentioning that student attendance and punctuality is considerably better on their vocational subjects as opposed to literacy or numeracy courses that they were also studying. In one group the attendance on GCSE subjects was almost 17 points higher than on functional skill subjects.



## Conclusion

Poor attendance and punctuality is a complicated matter. The underlying reasons that bear influence cannot be revealed simply through the percentages expressed in reports from statistical figures alone nor sufficiently through discussion with this small sample size. Attendance and punctuality concerns are not discrete problems in themselves but symptoms arising from a number of circumstances that effect it.

One theme that came across was that the current strategies used to improve attendance and punctuality are largely ineffectual. This was predominantly due to inconsistent approaches in relation to what is considered acceptable levels of absence and/or lateness as well as inconsistent approaches between tutors and curriculum.

This was then compounded by a “lack of consequences” for poor attendance and/or lateness which affected the behaviour of students, including those considered “good” attendees. Furthermore feedback called for more recognition of the efforts of those who did attend and arrive punctually.

Overwhelmingly students strongly disliked the level of disruption caused by latecomers. The impact of inconsistent follow through, and in some cases, not tackling the students who are “habitual” absentees or late-comers has a negative impact on student and tutor relationships, as well as an impact on peer-to-peer relations.

## Recommendations

Going forward there are several suggestions offered throughout the paper worth testing.

- Establish what your institutional message about attendance and punctuality is and verify how successfully you communicate this message to your stakeholders.
- Determine the extent to which your IAG/admission process and induction processes give practitioners the opportunity to learn information about student motivations and enable you to communicate shared expectations. Could Dweck’s Questionnaire on student motivation help improve attendance?
- Consider surveying learners who drop out or withdraw to determine whether processes established to follow up on absence and lateness were effective.
- Consider using focus group discussions with staff and students to determine the strategies used within departments and establish the level of consequences you deploy. Are consequences consistently applied, meaningful and enable improvement in student behaviour? What mechanisms are used to reward student behaviour and boost motivation so that students attend and are punctual?

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## **APPENDIX 1 – SURVEY QUESTIONS**

### Questionnaire on Attendance and Punctuality for SMT

To support my LSIS funded research project, I would be grateful if you would complete the following set of questions in relation to yourself. Feel free to continue writing on the back.

**Please note this is confidential and I do not ask for your name unless you provide it. However you should be aware that your responses may be cited in the report.**

1. What definition do you apply to attendance and punctuality?
2. If you were to see attendance and punctuality in another individual, describe what you would see?
3. Do you think attendance and punctuality is important? Please state why
4. Attendance and punctuality = Success; do you agree? Please state why

### **Reflection on your learning experiences...**

5. Please list the factors that might influence **your** decision to attend or be punctual.
6. Please list the factors that might influence your decision NOT to attend or be punctual

## Questionnaire on Attendance and Punctuality for Learning Mentors

**Your name: (this doesn't have to be your real name but the name you would like to be known by)**

Thank you for participating in this small research project. The project I am working on is looking at what staff and students think about attendance and punctuality. I will be writing my project up as a report and this will be published online through the Learning and Skills Improvement Agency (LSIS). The report won't contain your name. The answers you give will be confidential and they will give insights, I hope, that help our college improve and other colleges, who might read the report.

<b>The College</b>	
What do you think drew students to this college? What reasons do you think might explain why they have chosen to study the courses they are on?	
How many of the students do you think are on the right course?	
How well do you think students have been prepared for the courses they are on?	
How much do you think these helped you feel prepared (out of 100%);	
<b>Initial Advice and Guidance</b>	%
<b>Induction</b>	%
<b>Prior learning experiences</b>	%
<b>Feedback from work</b>	%
<b>Attendance and Punctuality</b>	
What definition do you apply to the word "attendance"	
What definition do you apply to the word "punctuality"	
If you heard a person being described as a "good" student – what would you expect to see?	
<b>How relevant do you think attendance and punctuality is to this description? (Grade from 1 = Highest Importance --- 4 = Least Importance)</b>	
Do you think a student needs to have good attendance / punctuality to pass?	
Do you think there are there moments when it is "acceptable" to be absent or late? When might these be? Have students expressed these to you?	
From your discussions with students, what do you think happens when students are	
<b>Absent</b>	
<b>or Late</b>	
<b>How do you think students react to this?</b>	
<b>Frank Coffield</b>	
Frank is a well known academic who writes about teaching and learning. He wrote "All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask" which he wrote for students with students. In it he asks questions that I would like to share with you and learn what you think about them.	
This statement is taken from the aforementioned booklet.	
<b><i>"Tutors have a professional duty to work in the interests of each and every one of their students and your job [the student] is to come to meet them half-way, to be prepared to be taught by them".</i></b>	

Do you think this statement is true? (Please state <b>why</b> )
Do you think our students know how to learn?
Do you think they know their strengths and weaknesses as a learner?
From discussion with learners what do you think their experience of learning has been? Do you think they left school keen to go on learning throughout their life?
How much time outside class, per week, do you think students are spending on studying?
Do students ask for help if they are struggling? How would you describe their relationship with peers and lecturers?
What do you think the college should do to improve student attendance and punctuality?

## Questionnaire on Attendance and Punctuality for Tutors

<p>What definition do you apply to the word "attendance"</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>In relation to your class how many fit this description? %</b></p>
<p>What definition do you apply to the word "punctuality"</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>In relation to your class how many fit this description? %</b></p>
<p>What do you do when you have <b>Absent Students</b></p> <p><b>Late Students</b></p>
<p>What is a good student?</p> <p><b>If you had to grade the relevancy of attendance and punctuality to this description what would you give it? (1 = Highest Importance --- 4 = Least Importance)</b></p>
<p>How would you describe your relationship with your students?</p>
<b>The Course</b>
<p>Why do you think students have chosen your course?</p>
<p>How many of your students do you think are on the right course?</p>
<p>Do you get time to discuss pastoral issues with your students? Has this discussion improved student performance?</p>
<p>How do you communicate deadlines to your students?</p> <p><b>How many on average meet deadlines first time round?</b> <b>What proportion of these students would you say had more than 90% attendance?</b></p>
<p>How much work do you give your students to prepare for sessions or outcomes each week?</p> <p><b>How many complete this work?</b></p>
<p>How do you respond to feedback given to you from students?</p>
<b>The Students</b>
<p>How would you describe your students' overall approach to learning?</p>
<p>The following statement is taken from Frank Coffield's "All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask". The booklet is intended for students and he discusses teaching and learning in relation to student case studies and their experiences.</p> <p><i>"Tutors have a professional duty to work in the interests of each and every one of their students and your job [the student] is to come to meet them half-way, to be prepared to be taught by them".</i></p> <p><b>How valid do you think this statement is? (Please state why)</b></p>
<p>Do students ask for help if they are struggling? (If not, what mechanisms might you use?)</p>
<p>How well prepared do you think your students were for this course?</p>

What percent do you think the following contributed to this			
<b>Initial Advice and Guidance</b>			<b>%</b>
<b>Induction</b>			<b>%</b>
<b>Prior learning experiences</b>			<b>%</b>
<b>Feedback from work</b>			<b>%</b>
What percentage do you have overall on your course for			
<b>attendance</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>punctuality</b>	<b>%</b>
What do you think the college should do to improve student attendance and punctuality?			



## Questionnaire on Attendance and Punctuality for Students

Your name: (this doesn't have to be your real name but the name you would like to be known by)

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Thank you for participating in this small research project. The project I am working on is looking at what staff and students think about attendance and punctuality. I will be writing my project up as a report and this will be published online through the Learning and Skills Improvement Agency (LSIS). The report won't contain your name. The answers you give will be confidential and they will give insights, I hope, that help our college improve and other colleges, who might read the report.

<b>The College</b>	
What drew you to this college?	
Why did you choose to study this course?	
Do you feel you were well prepared for this course when you started it? Please state why	
How much do you think these helped you feel prepared (out of 100%);	
<b>Initial Advice and Guidance</b>	%
<b>Induction</b>	%
<b>Prior learning experiences</b>	%
<b>Feedback from work</b>	%
<b>Attendance and Punctuality</b>	
If you heard a person being described as a "good" student – what would you expect to see?	
<b>How relevant do you think attendance and punctuality is to this description? (Grade from 1 = Highest Importance --- 4 = Least Importance)</b>	
Do you think a student needs to have good attendance / punctuality to pass?	
Do you think there are there moments when it is "acceptable" to be absent or late? When might these be?	
What happens to you if you are <b>Absent</b>  <b>or Late</b>  <b>How does it make you feel?</b>	
<b>Frank Coffield</b>	
Frank is a well known academic who writes about teaching and learning. He wrote "All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask" which he wrote for students with students. In it he asks questions that I would like to share with you and learn what you think about them.	
This statement is taken from the aforementioned booklet. <i>"Tutors have a professional duty to work in the interests of each and every one of their students and your job [the student] is to come to meet them half-way, to be prepared to be taught by them".</i>	
Do you think this statement is true? (Please state <b>why</b> )	
Do you know how to learn and do you know your strengths and weaknesses as a learner?	

Are you prepared to take the risk of making a few mistakes and learning from them?
Did you leave school keen to go on learning throughout your life?
Are you prepared to challenge yourself to improve?
<b>and Finally...</b> Do you spend your own time to do college work? How much time per week would you say you spent?
If you knew at the start of your course what you know now, would you still enrol on the course? Please state why

## Questionnaire on Attendance and Punctuality for ESOL E2 Students

**Your name: (this doesn't have to be your real name)**

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Thank you for participating in this small research project. The project I am working on is looking at what staff and students think about attendance and punctuality.

<b>The College</b>				
Why did you choose the college?				
Did you want to be on this course?		<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	
<b>At the beginning of the course how useful were these</b>	<b>Very Useful</b>	<b>Useful</b>	<b>Not Useful</b>	<b>Didn't have one</b>
Information about the course				
Induction into course				
Schooling helped me				
Feedback my teacher gives me				
<b>Attendance and Punctuality</b>				
List the reasons why someone might be called a "good" student.				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>				
Is attendance and punctuality important too? (Please circle)				
<b>Very important</b>	<b>A little Important</b>	<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Doesn't Matter</b>	
Do you need to come to all your classes and be on time them to pass?				
<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>		
Are there times when it is okay not to come to college or be late? <b>When?</b>				
What happens to you if you are				
<b>Missing from Class</b>				
<b>Late to Class</b>				
How does it make you <u>feel</u> ?				
Do you think a teacher should work hard for all students in the class?				
<b>YES</b>		<b>NO</b>		
Do you think as a student it is your job to "meet them half-way" by wanting to learn?				
<b>YES</b>		<b>NO</b>		
Do you know what you can do well (strengths)?		<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	
Do you know what you need to work on (weaknesses)?		<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	
If you make a mistake do you feel ...				
<b>Good</b> about it because you can make it better next time?				
or				
<b>Sad</b> because you didn't do it right the first time?				
When you left school did you want to carry on learning?				
<b>YES</b>		<b>NO</b>	<b>Didn't go to school</b>	

### **APPENDIX 1 – LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Dear Parent/Guardian

**RE: Parental Consent for Involvement in Research on Attendance and Punctuality**

I would like to invite your child to take part in a study being undertaken by the College. This study is being funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The aim of the study is to understand what students and staff think attendance and punctuality and what the college can do to improve it. Part of this study will include focus group interviews with your child and their peers and written survey responses.

The focus group interviews will last no more than one hour during one of your child's timetabled classes. What is said during this interview and written on surveys will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your child's name will not be used when reporting the results.

I believe your child will be a valuable contributor to the group, and I would like to include them in this study. If you are happy for them to be involved please sign the consent form below; returning it to your child's teacher as soon as possible.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me at the College on [ ] or via email on [ ]

Thank you for your cooperation.

Yours Sincerely

Mahfia Choudhury

**INFORMED CONSENT**

Please tick one of the following

\_\_\_\_\_ **Yes, I AM** willing to have my child participate in the study described above concerning how students and staff perceive attendance and punctuality and what the college can do to improve its practice

\_\_\_\_\_ **No, I am NOT** willing to have my child participate in this study

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of parent or guardian 1**      **Parent/Guardian signature**      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of parent or guardian 2**      **Parent/Guardian signature**      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of student**      **Telephone number**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Teacher's Name**

**PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER**