

“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.

“There’s only so much a tutor can do, the student needs to want to learn”

Chantelle

Purpose

This action research project was intended to help identify the potential reasons that lead to student absence and lateness.

There were 3 objectives:

- ♦ establish “working” definitions of attendance and punctuality throughout the tiers of the College
- ♦ evaluate the impact of current strategies used on student motivation
- ♦ outline potential barriers to good student attendance and punctuality

Process

Volunteers were invited from within the College. Three subject areas participated with a total of 53 participants, including SMT and 39 actively enrolled students.

The approach incorporated a combination of focus group interviews, written survey responses and one-to-one discussions.

The questions on the surveys were designed to obtain feedback around themes based on the research; 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). Surveys were trialled prior to use to establish pertinence for users.

Permission was sought from all parties, including parental consent for those under 18 years. Pseudonyms are used in place of actual names.

Strengths and Limitations

A project undertaken in one college campus with a small sample size and therefore a limited cross-representational value, it is hoped it will offer some insight as a case study irrespective of educational context.

“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”.
Coffield (2009)

Analysis

Responses from SMT 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. Discussion with tutors outlined similar agreement with attendance but not so with punctuality; one tutor expected students to have arrived before the lesson start time. When students were asked almost all learners ranked it amongst the top 3 features of what made a good student; and yet many were absent or late themselves according to College registers.

When participants were asked whether attendance and punctuality was intertwined with success, the majority of staff agreed that success would not be possible without attending lessons. One manager asked for proof that there was a connection.

Feedback on the referral process for learners considered “at risk” highlighted 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.

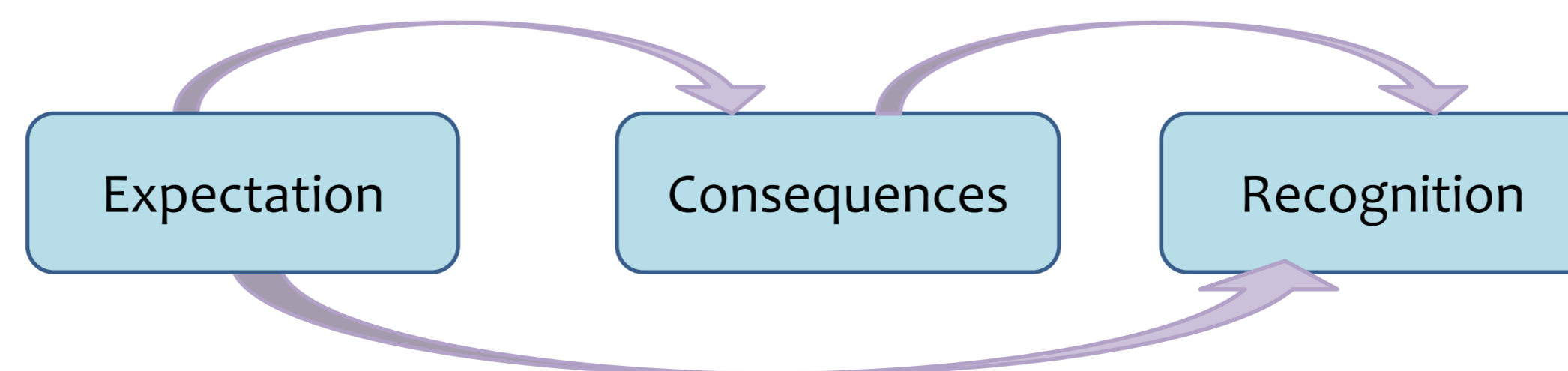
The mentors discussed the impact of inconsistent strategies to manage student behaviour, including absence and lateness and respect as a consequence of the inconsistencies students experience; a point also raised students. One student comment suggests they are sensitive to the way lateness is handled within the classroom.

Staff discussed the level of commitment students have to learning; one manager describing good attendance and punctuality as a “discipline”. They also discussed the idea of not letting others down or being “selfish” presumably because of the impact the absence and lateness has on the entire class, a point raised by several students who considered the disruptions to be frustrating. A lack of consequences or reward was a strong feature throughout the feedback from teachers and mentors and the impact of this was noted in feedback from students.

Student expectation was also discussed and reference made 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 their commitment to learn because they knew the impact their failure would have on success rates. This was reflected in a comment made by a student who wrote “tutors should help students as much as they can because they are getting paid to do it”.

Findings

Feedback from participants presented three consistent themes. Findings suggest current strategies are ineffectual when tackling attendance and punctuality due to inconsistent follow up and practice.



Conclusion

Poor attendance and punctuality is a complicated matter. These concerns are not discrete problems but symptoms arising from a number of circumstances that effect it

Overwhelmingly students 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* has a negative impact on student and tutor relationships, as well as an impact on peer-to-peer relations.

Recommendations

- ♦ Undertake focus group interviews with stakeholders, including former students.
- ♦ Review the institutional message and verify how consistently this message is reflected in feedback from stakeholders.
- ♦ Establish what mechanisms you have in place after students are absent or late – are they consistent, relative and followed up?
- ♦ Can you measure the impact of consequences / rewards on student motivation.
- ♦ Consider the extent to which your IAG prepares students for courses chosen and outlines clearly expectations

Key Readings

Biesta, G. J. J. (2010) *Good education in an age of measurement; Ethics, Politics, Democracy*

Coffield, F. (2009) *All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask*

Davies, P. (1999) *Student retention in further education: a problem of quality or of student finance?*

Dweck, C. S. (2000) *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation Personality and Development*

Hattie, J.A. (1999) *Influences on student learning*

Hattie, J.A. (2003) *Teachers Make a Difference: What is the research evidence?*

Martinez, P. (1996) *Student retention: case studies of strategies that work*

Petty, G. (2006) *Evidence Based Teaching*

Spours, K. Coffield, F. and Gregson, M. (2007) *Mediation, translation and local ecologies: understanding the impact of policy levers on FE colleges*