

## *Editorial*

### **Attendance at classes: what is the real situation?**

In my travels to higher education establishments around the UK, one of the most problematical issues that is frequently raised is that of lack of attendance at classes: particularly those classes that are not deemed to be compulsory so that students can legitimately choose whether or not to attend. This issue is frequently discussed but the evidence for the various arguments that are made to explain the situation is usually anecdotal at best. However, it does seem that attendance, particularly at lectures, has suffered significantly within recent years as judged by most lecturers' experience: however, since it is frequently deemed unacceptable to take registers of attendance at higher education lectures, the available data are scarce. Based upon my own experiences, attendance often falls to around 50% within a few months of a first year course, although this is highly variable depending upon the institution, the topic, the timing of the lecture within the day, the lecturer, the competing attractions (often the night before) and the weekday; for example, Friday afternoons are noticeably poorly attended due to the desire for long weekends. Given the restrictions of timetables and curricula, and the inevitable conflicts with student's need to take on employment, we need to re-think the role, and the style, of lectures and other class activities? Is this all a good reason to focus on the development of VLEs? Is blended learning the optimal approach given the diverse learning styles of the student population?

I feel that although lack of attendance is clearly a complex and multifactorial problem, there is much scope for useful research on both the reasons for reduced attendance, the strategies that students adopt to cope with lack of regular attendance and the impact such strategies have on the actual performance of the students. Does missing lectures work for truly independent learners but result in surface learning for the weaker learners due to dependence on externally provided (or copied) notes? PowerPoint use (discussed in this volume) is often cited as a significant contributor to lack of attendance (the "I've got the notes" syndrome). However, I have found that courses not using PowerPoint have suffered equivalent reductions in attendance. Poor lecturing and poor use of PowerPoint no doubt make students reluctant to attend what they often perceive as 'boring' classes and this is then not a student issue as such – we have a major influence here since a lecture that merely regurgitates what is often better expressed in a textbook cannot be justified. In a world of sophisticated audio-visual imagery (a la David Attenborough), a traditional lecture can seem a poor alternative and this requires staff to seriously consider the alternatives to the 'chalk and talk' and information transmission approaches to teaching life sciences classes.

There seems to me to be a lot of scope for action research on the facts and attitudes on both sides of this issue and yet I feel the topic is dominated by largely anecdotal information at present. I hope that the above questions might lead to some submissions to BEE-j focused around the issues outlined above

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