

**LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE**

**GUIDANCE TO DEPARTMENTS ON MONITORING UNDERGRADUATE  
MODULE PASS RATES**

**1. Introduction**

The following guidance relates to practical measures which the Learning and Teaching Committee has endorsed as good practice, in relation to undergraduate module pass rates. It is essential that departments are alert to the point at which the failure rate for a module could be regarded as more than a co-incidence of poor performance by individual students. The guidance gives approaches by which such instances of 'systemic failure' in modules might be avoided or addressed. This requires preventative, monitoring and responsive actions.

**2. Practical Measures**

***2.1 Understanding the nature of school teaching***

There is evidence to suggest that students now face a greater transitional hurdle to the independent learning environment of the University than before. Departments need to understand the prior knowledge which they can expect from their students, even if they have studied relevant A-level subjects. Understanding is also needed of the types of skills which new entrants possess (regardless of their A-Level points score), in the light of the opportunities that they have had to develop these skills in the school curriculum.

This needs to be borne in mind in programme design and content, particularly at Level 1. For example, some departments undertake diagnostic testing of their students' mathematical ability on entry, supported by supplementary teaching.

***2.2 Student Learning***

Departments are reminded of the guideline that each unit of credit should represent approximately 10 hours' work by a student (including personal study time). It is important that this is also appreciated by students, to ensure that the work needed to meet the demands of a degree programme is not underestimated.

The view has also been expressed that some students respond to modular programme structures by viewing the content as discrete units of learning. Departments need to be aware of the assumptions which are made in programme design regarding the application of knowledge and skills across component modules, and articulate these explicitly to students.

***2.3 Student Workloads***

Departments need to ensure that unit (and thus programme) content is consistent with the guideline of 10 hours' work per credit, to avoid overloading students. It is recognised that this can not be monitored directly, and that students will work at different speeds. Nonetheless, careful consideration needs to be given to the demands of a teaching programme, particularly the volume of work associated with recommended reading lists and the accessibility of material.

#### **2.4 Attendance at scheduled classes**

Departments which do not monitor attendance at lectures and tutorials should consider introducing this process as a means of encouraging commitment and identifying under-performing students. It is accepted that some students do not welcome such monitoring and that the procedure is open to an element of abuse, but nonetheless it provides valuable information and identifies persistent non-attenders.

#### **2.5 Stressing the Implications of Failure**

Students need to be aware of, and consider at an early stage, the implications of failing modules. These include the capping of resit marks at a bare pass, or perhaps the non-availability of a resit in laboratory work until the following year. Departments need to ensure that policies are clearly communicated, both orally and in their written documentation such as student handbooks and other such publications. This may include reference to web pages on University policies and procedures that are provided by central support services. At Level 1, students should understand the Faculty conventions for the recommendation of a 'conceded pass', in particular the minimum performance required in the failed unit(s).

#### **2.6 Formal Monitoring of Student Progress**

Departments need to monitor students' progress, and be prepared to identify as early as possible those whose performance is a cause for concern, in order that they can be contacted by a personal tutor or other member of staff. This can be achieved by monitoring attendance, as above, and also through scrutiny of assessed work.

It is important that meetings with students who perform poorly in the Autumn Semester examinations take place as early as possible in the Spring Semester, to provide the best opportunity to encourage improvement. The scope for progress interviews before Christmas may be limited, but if problems are identified at a very early stage then these could provide valuable and timely advice for some students. Departments might emphasise the words of warning given in face-to-face meetings on the implications of poor performance, through a follow-up letter, particularly if it is not the first meeting with the student concerned.

Many departments have the opportunity to refer students, whose progress is a cause for concern, to an informal 'Progress of Students Interview' with the Sub-Dean for Undergraduate Affairs. This could avoid the need for, or could precede, a meeting of the formal Faculty Student Review Committee. Departments should bear in mind the options of referring cases to informal Faculty progress interviews or to the Faculty Student Review Committee itself. The latter may be particularly appropriate for students who do not respond to advice at departmental level.

#### **2.7 Analysis of Pass Rates by Module**

Departments give attention to the pass rates of individual modules and these are investigated where appropriate.

It is recommended that departments check their module results prior to their internal examination boards and, where feasible, produce information on the distributions of marks, such as profiles and standard deviations. This would enable modules with an apparently high failure rate to be highlighted at a very early stage, allowing marking procedures to be evaluated and external examiners

consulted where appropriate. In turn, this would inform the recommendations to the Faculty by internal examination boards, in a similar way to the existing process in which individual student cases might be highlighted for special consideration. Any 'systemic' problems would thereby also be highlighted for subsequent analysis by the department.

## **2.8 Academic Standards**

Staff are, quite rightly, reluctant to lower academic standards in response to disappointing results. However, there may always be some modules in many subject areas which students find particularly challenging. If a significant number of students are resitting examinations, departments need to be confident that the module syllabus is appropriately defined and that it is offered at an appropriate Level in the programme structure.

More generally, whilst it is important that academic standards are maintained, it is also necessary for departments to be conscious of their expectations of students and to ensure that these are realistic in the context of the level of individual modules and programmes of study.

LeTS  
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