

The background of the cover is a photograph of a beach. The top half shows a vast expanse of sand dunes with fine, parallel ridges and valleys, illuminated by soft, low-angle light. The bottom half of the image is a darker, more textured view of the sand, possibly a close-up of a different part of the dunes or a different lighting condition. In the bottom right corner, a portion of a starfish is visible, its arms extending towards the center of the frame.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

Biomedical Science Tutorials

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Biomedical Science tutorials.

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SUMMARY

In response to increasing numbers of students leaving early and failing academically, a school policy of attendance monitoring and small group tutorials was implemented. In the first year of implementation the tutorials addressed study skills issues. They were poorly attended but did elicit positive responses from those students who did attend. The retention of students in 2004/5 was higher than that in 2003/4. Students complained however, of the tutorials being too drawn out and unchallenging since they duplicated areas already experienced. In 2005/6 the tutorial scheme was revised and re-run. In this year it was shorter giving timetable space to address subject related and career issues. In addition it was linked to a module and contributed 30% of the assessment for that module.

Keywords: First year teaching, tutorials,

INTRODUCTION

In 2003/4 courses in the School of Biomedical Science had an unacceptable number of students who did not progress to year 2.

Student group	% proceeded	% early leavers	n
Biology	48.5	15.2	33
Dietetics	94.1	5.9	17
Biomed/mol	56.6	11.3	53
Food & Nut	66.7	14.3	21
Hum Nut	63.2	15.8	19
Optometry	94.6	2.7	37
Total %	64.3	11.0	180

Table 1. Progression statistics for each student group in (2003/4). The groups are determined by the tutorial groups instituted in 2004/5. % proceed – the percentage of those students enrolled (n) who

proceeded to year 2 in 2004/5. % early leavers- the percentage of those students enrolled (n) who withdrew without failing.

The proportion of early leavers and of those who failed to progress after year one caused concern, as did the proportion of those who had one or more modules to resit in the autumn.

The courses in the School of Biomedical Science share some of the same modules; in particular a human physiology and an introductory chemistry modules are common across the school. The Biology course has an individually tailored skills module, but the other courses have skills delivery implicitly embedded in the subject-based modules.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are:

- 2.3 Induction activities should support the development of those independent study habits suitable for higher education.
- 2.4 Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.
- 2.5 Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.
- 3.1 The curriculum should be relevant to and inform students' vocational aspirations early on in the course.

Cook et al (2005)

THE PRACTICE- FIRST SEMESTER 2004/5

Four problems were identified and solutions put in place. The first was with a single module – Human anatomy and physiology. Many students failed both the coursework and the examination. A range of remedial measures was instituted. These included:

- a key word booklet that contained a simple account of the essential factual material;
- additional tutorials following each lecture;
- reducing the size of practical groups so that more one to one support could be given;
- a modified summative assessment strategy so that a larger proportion of the coursework and all of the examination was based on multiple-choice questions; and
- the distribution of an e-MCQ tool which allowed students to check their own progress during private study time (voluntary formative assessment).

The second problem was with the introductory chemistry module the modifications to which have been reported elsewhere (McClellan, et al 2006)

A third problem was perceived to be a lack of attendance. This cannot be quantified since no attendance monitoring took place. An attendance monitoring policy was instituted which entailed taking registers at each teaching session and contacting students with a record of unexplained absences.

The fourth problem was related to student study and assessment skills. Analysis of the entry qualifications of the cohorts showed that many who had failed or who required resits had offered AVCE as their prime entry qualifications. It was concluded that these, otherwise well-qualified students, were not familiar with teaching and assessment styles being deployed in year 1. A tutorial system was therefore introduced for all students. The objectives of the system were

1. to make students more familiar with the learning and assessment requirements of HE
2. to encourage students to work together – to develop a more collegiate approach to learning
3. to provide a more friendly environment in which students could work with staff (most modules have in excess of 150 students).

Tutors volunteered to take student groups from the degree programme with which they were most closely associated. Tutors varied from experienced members of staff to relatively inexperienced research staff. The programme was discussed with all and opportunities for regular meetings provided.

Staff in the STAR project provided source materials with which tutors could work. Tutorial materials were either original or adapted from the GNU project (Geography for New Undergraduates funded by the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 2). The tutorial programme is provided at Appendix 1.

EVALUATION -FIRST SEMESTER 2004/5

Attendance

Tutors were asked to complete an attendance record for each session so that attendance could be recorded. Of the 91 possible sessions there are no records for 31. This may indicate that the tutorial was cancelled, that no students attended or that the tutor failed to submit an attendance record. The percentage attendance for each session is shown below in Table 2.

Week	Topic	% students absent	% students present	% no record
2	Reading	30	51	18
4	Plagiarism	43	26	31
5	Referencing	35	41	24
6	Graphics	45	40	15
7	Marking	39	33	28
9	Examinations	23	23	54
11	Evaluation	21	17	62

Table 2: The attendance record for each session.

There is considerable variation between groups both in the number of sessions that were reported and the percentage attendance at those for which there is information.

Course		Attendance		Progression statistics		n
Group no		No of sessions recorded	% Attendance	% Progression	% early leavers	
1	Biology	2	6	77.1	0	35
2	Biology	4	31			
3	Dietetics	6	93	96.0	0	25
4	Dietetics	4	94			
5	Biomed	5	31			
6	Biomed/ Mol	2	59	61.7	17.0	47
7	Biomed	6	50			
8	Food & Nut	6	31	72.4	3.5	29
9	Food & Nut	6	22			
10	Hum Nut	6	61	56.3	12.5	16
11	Hum Nut	5	44			
12	Optometry	3	25	96.8	0	31
13	Optometry	5	68			
Total				76.5	8.6	183

Table 3. Records and outcomes from the tutorial groups in 2004/5. There were 13 tutorial groups of up to 15 students. 2 students in Molecular Biology were included in tutorial group 6 with Biomedical Science. Tutors were poor at keeping attendance records.

Seven sessions were organised and the greatest number of recorded attendances by any one student was 6. This was often because the final evaluative session was not reported. As can be seen in Table 3, one group only reported two meetings. There was no simple relationship between the number of sessions reported and the attendance or between the progression to year 2 and attendance. Improvements were seen in both progression and early leaving statistics compared with 2003/4. In particular, the biology and food and nutrition courses, which were amongst those with the poorest progression records, showed considerable improvement. With many changes taking place at the same time and the small number of students, however, it would be unwise to attribute cause.

Student opinion

The monitoring of students' opinion of this scheme took two forms. First a questionnaire was administered during the last week of term. Two different questionnaires were produced, one to be completed by those who attended most sessions and the second (printed on the reverse side) to be completed by those who were absent for most of the sessions. The second method used was a student focus group and was organised in the second semester (after the examinations were completed). The questionnaire is appended as Appendix 2

Student Questionnaire

Attendees. 37 students returned the questionnaire for those that attended. The questions were designed to discover whether the tutorial materials had been useful and to examine some attitudes towards the tutorial scheme. Over half the respondents agreed with positive statements about all the tutorial sessions. Over three quarters of the students agreed with the following statements.

The information on referencing is a useful resource for later.

I now have a clearer idea of what type of graph to draw.

If I have to resit anything I will only get a maximum mark of 40%.

I have no trouble balancing my academic work with my part time job and my social life.

Concerns that students had not become familiar with aspects of the University assessment system and had experienced trouble with balancing out the various demands on their time are probably unfounded.

Students disagreed with the statement "*I did not have time to complete the exercises between tutorials*", indicating that the workload involved was probably not too great or that the work was not completed for reasons other than lack of time.

The free response questions asked for the best and worst aspects of the scheme. Most positive comments referred to the commitment of the staff and the assistance given to processes of adjustment to University life. The worst features most commonly mentioned were the timetable, with the sessions either being too early or too awkward or too long for the materials being completed and the repetition of material that had been done at school. Several students complained about the lack of emphasis on attendance with

the implication that there was a minimum group size that is needed for a worthwhile tutorial. Although a school level attendance policy had been instituted it did not apply to the tutorials since they were not linked to a module.

Non-attenders Only 16 students returned the questionnaire designed for non-attenders. Non-attenders were self-selecting since full records of attendance were not available. All the questions tested possible reasons for non-attendance. Those that these students agreed with included:

My timetable was too full for me to attend all the tutorials as well.

The tutorials covered things I already knew about.

I concentrated my time on those aspects of the course that are being assessed.

Statements with which students disagreed included:

I did not think it worth attending after I could not complete the preparatory work.

Many tutorials coincided with assessment deadlines for modules.

I feel intimidated by academic staff.

The interpretation of these responses is coloured by half of the responding non-attenders being from the biology course that has a parallel skills module covering some of the same material. The implementation of a blanket school level policy resulted in some duplication of content and subsequent disillusion. The non-biology students agreed even more strongly that their timetable was already full, that the tutorials were not compulsory and that they were more focused on the subject specific modules.

The free response section of the questionnaire indicated that many felt that the content was too basic and was covered elsewhere, that "*the lecturer did not turn up most of the time*" and that the timetable caused problems.

Students were also asked what would encourage them to attend. Where positive responses were received, they mentioned a more relevant and challenging content, a more sympathetic timetable and the need for assessment.

Student focus group

The focus group largely confirmed the findings of the questionnaire. Students were broadly supportive of what was being attempted but complained of long sessions on comparatively trivial aspects; e.g. graphs

"There were a couple of weeks that were quite relevant but they dragged it out for so long. They could have done something in five minutes about it, but they dragged it out for the full hour and by the end you're dying to rush out the door. We did "how to draw graphs", and I thought, "we are at university so that we can draw a graph?" For a full lecture?!"

One aspect for concern was an observation that the tutorials were largely delivered as lectures. This is clearly an aspect that needs to be addressed through appropriate staff development.

Course statistics

Student progression statistics at the end of 2005 showed that improvements had been made in student performance. Table 4 shows the progression data for the year before and the year after the introduction of the tutorial scheme.

	Year	total number of students	% with resits	% early leavers	% fail	% repeating the year	% proceeding to year 2
Before	2003/4	104	36.5	9.6	6.7	12.5	34.6
After	2004/5	110	27.3	2.7	9.1	3.6	57.3

Table 4. Aggregated progression statistics for courses that continued to participate in the tutorial scheme (i.e. the original set given in Table 1 less Optometry and Biology which made other provision). 2003/4 was before the introduction of the retention policy and 2004/5 after its introduction.

It is not possible to associate cause and effect over a single year and with other simultaneous changes taking place. The school was nevertheless encouraged to persist with the changes.

CONCLUSIONS- FIRST SEMESTER 2004/5

1. Attendance was poor. Sometimes only a few students attended but this varies with course and, within courses, between tutors. The causes of poor attendance were a lack of perceived relevance, a lack of assessment, some duplication of content with the biology course and, sadly, occasionally, a lack of staff commitment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some staff had told students that the tutorials were voluntary since they lay outside the modular system.
2. Timetabling, but not time, is seen as a problem. Thus tutorials encroaching into lectures, being immediately before assessments (particularly in physiology) or at times which meant that students either had no free time between teaching sessions or too much, all present problems. On the other hand, no one complained about the amount of work expected.
3. All sessions were seen by most as useful. Positive statements about the sessions rarely elicited strong responses except for those related to learning styles and referencing. No student complained that anything was too difficult. Indeed the complaint was that the material was not challenging enough. (The only comment received about the material being too difficult was from a tutor.) Sessions were perceived as drawn out and this is associated with tutors using a lecture style delivery rather than exploiting the benefits of small group teaching.
4. The social aspects of the process worked well as far as student-to-student contact was concerned but the students did not identify with their course group because of these activities.
5. Progression statistics improved with fewer students withdrawing and a greater proportion progressing to Year 2.

A REVISED SCHEME

The outcomes of the 2004/5 tutorials were used in 2005/6 to revise the scheme. In summary, the following changes were made:

1. The number of tutorials was reduced and the vacated time slots used to present materials that were related to specific topics and careers within the subject groups. This was in an attempt to relate a component of year 1 teaching directly to the vocational aspirations of student groups within an otherwise fairly homogenised diet of BioSciences semester 1 modules.
2. The tutorials were linked to modules (Biostatistics and study skills for life sciences (BMS110) and Biostatistics and study skills for nutrition (BMS111)). Neither Optometry nor Biology students take these modules and were therefore not included in the revised scheme. The Skills for Biologists module (BIO102) was supplemented with tutorials unrelated to this scheme but which addressed the introduction of a personal development plan. The revised tutorials focussed on the production of a poster on a subject specific topic. The product (the poster) as well as the process (group work) were assessed and contributed 15% of the module mark. In addition a short piece of written work was required (500 words) and contributed a further 15%. The poster was peer assessed against an agreed set of criteria but the written work was tutor assessed. Incorporating the tutorials into a module also had the effect of formalising the attendance requirements such that there was now no doubt that the tutorials were a compulsory part of the course. Students who failed to attend for more than three sessions (in all modules) are contacted and explanations sought.
3. A workbook was produced which contained paper based exercises as well as outlines of the topics covered in the tutorials. Additional advisory material was included. Areas that had been heavily criticised by students were removed from the tutorial scheme. In particular, graphics was moved to the statistics component of the module where it was contextualised and separately assessed. The tutorial scheme is outlined in Appendix 2 and the contents of the booklet is given in Appendix 3. The booklet is available at http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/links/Workbook_Final.doc.
4. The groups were slightly smaller than in 2003/4 with the maximum size being 15 and the average 11. Within each tutorial group, students worked on the production of a poster in groups of 3 or 4.

EVALUATION 2004/5

Evaluation of the scheme used course statistics, and a student questionnaire. Overall attendance increased from 34% in 2003/4 to 74% in 2004/5. All but two students passed the module at the first sitting. It is noteworthy that the group work and its assessment depend critically on attendance and the two poorly performing students also had a poor attendance record. There was no obvious difference between attendance at the tutorials and the subject specific

lectures. The progression statistics in Table 4 show that student performance has improved since the retention policy was adopted in 2004/5.

year	total number of students	% with resits	% early leavers
2003/4	104	47.1	8.7
2004/5	110	27.3	2.7
2005/6	123	13.8	3.3

Table 4. The student outcomes at the end of semester 1 for those student groups participating in the 2005/6 tutorials.

No changes were instituted between 2004/5 and 2005/6 other than the modification of the tutorial scheme. It appears likely therefore, that measures to improve student focus on the tutorials such as the introduction of the link to assessment in a specific module has had an affect on student performance in the modules taken at the same time.

An open ended questionnaire showed that students identified first with their course group (57%) and second with the residence hall (33%). This is an important change from 2004/5 during which students felt that the tutorials had not assisted them to identify with their course group. It is clear that working together engenders greater coherence than attending together. Where students stated a preference for small group teaching they cited the following types of reasons:

“The smaller group made it easier to ask questions and have the answer explained.”

“I enjoy face to face sessions with the lecturers and watched their guidance given at tutorials where it is easier to ask questions ”

“In tutorials the lecturer explains things more clearly and answers questions in simpler language. ”

“The tutorials are in smaller groups so there is a lot more teacher/pupil interaction, thus questions are asked frequently”

There were few negative responses other than those related to the timetable (25% still wanted changes). 22% of students were not clear about assessing the role of their peers in the group work element of the assessment.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The scheme will continue since it has been demonstrated that it has engendered greater class coherence and greater awareness of key aspects of study in higher education such as team working, referencing and plagiarism.

Further, both retention and student performance has improved over the period in which the retention policy has been in operation. Nevertheless there are aspects that will evolve. In particular, the timetable will be revised with the possibility of moving one of the subject specific sessions nearer to the beginning of the term. With this set of vocational courses it is important for students to reinforce their understanding of the professional roles for which they are preparing early in the course. In addition, a minority of students were uncomfortable with the peer assessment that was integrated into the assessment of the group work. More detailed support for this aspect of their work will be prepared for future iterations. Finally the average class size of 11 is still too large and further tutors will be sought to support the programme.

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

<p>University of Ulster</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 campuses • 24,389 students • Undergraduates: 19,796 • Postgraduate 5593 • Full time: 16,821(15,397 UG, 1424 PG) • Part time: 7,568 (4399 UG, 3169 PG) • >3500 staff
<p>The School of Biomedical Science</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 580 FTE students in 8 major undergraduate largely vocational courses • 74 academic staff • Intake requirements vary with the course. Optometry requires AAB at A level, Biological Sciences requires BC at A level. • 8.6% early leavers (2004/5) compared with HESA (2003/4) data of a benchmark of 9.8% and an institutional performance of 12.9 (HESA 2006)

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Appendix 1

Summary of Biomedical Learning and Teaching Scheme (2004/5).

	Topic	Scale / type of activity	Led by
0	Registration week	Course cohort/ course induction	Course Director
1	Welcome	School/ presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify their tutorial group and tutor • Purposes of these tutorials • Introduction to learning styles • Introduction to PDP 	Head of School/ STAR project team
2	Critical Reading	Tutorial group / tutorial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning styles • Practise the skills required to read effectively and critically • State and understand the characteristics of a deep and surface learning • Appreciate the advantages of taking a deep approach to reading 	Group tutor
3	Meeting with Advisor	Individual/ interview <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance • Results • Careers • PDP 	Advisor of study
4	Plagiarism	Tutorial group / tutorial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define and identify examples of plagiarism. • Discuss appropriate ways of taking notes both in lectures and from texts. • Exercise on plagiarism 	Group tutor
5	Referencing	Tutorial group / tutorial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cite references within text correctly • Write a bibliography correctly • Exercise – correcting reference lists 	Group tutor
6	Graphics	Tutorial group / tutorial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw graphs correctly • Exercise- graph drawing, format selection • Interpreting graphical presentations 	Group tutor
7	Writing/ Marking schemes	Tutorial group / tutorial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticize work constructively • Construct model answers to assessment questions • Exercise- Drawing up a mark scheme 	Group tutor
8	Personal Development Planning	Individual / interview <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss form 1 of the PDS 	Advisor of study

9	Examination preparation	<p>Tutorial group / tutorial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a revision timetable • Examination technique. • Exercise- preparing model answers to past exam questions. 	Group tutor
10	Course review	<p>Course group/ presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • The possible outcomes of the assessment process • Economics of failure. 	Course Director
11	Evaluation	<p>Tutorial group / tutorial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the first term's tutorials. • Questionnaire/ focus group discussion of the tutorial scheme. 	Group tutor

Appendix 2

Biomedical Learning and Teaching Scheme.

We wish to gather student opinion concerning the Tutorial Scheme which has been operating this term. This is so that we can modify it to better meet student needs. I would be grateful therefore if you could complete the questions below. There is space at the end for you to add any comments you wish. This is an anonymous questionnaire.

Tony Cook

What degree programme are you registered on?

Estimate your average mark for the assignments you have completed so far.....

If you attended less than half the tutorials (3 or fewer) please complete the questions overleaf.

Rate the extent of your agreement with the following statements (where **1 is agree strongly**, 2- agree, 3 disagree, **4- disagree strongly**).

	1	2	3	4
1 Determining my own learning style has changed the way in which I study.				
2 My note taking improved after the critical reading exercise.				
3 I did not have time to complete the exercises between tutorials.				
4 Understanding about deep learning has helped me reorganise my learning materials.				
5 Learning about plagiarism has influenced the way I prepare assessments.				
6 I have not been able to apply what I have learned so far in the tutorials				
7 The information on referencing is a useful resource for later.				
8 I now have a clearer idea of what type of graph to draw.				
9 I was told that the tutorials were not compulsory.				
10 I have not done much work on my own other that which is required for assessments.				
11 If I have to resit anything I will only get a maximum mark of 40%.				
12 I have no trouble balancing my academic work with my part time job and my social life.				
13 A session on time management would have helped me.				
14 I have trouble focussing on any long term career goals at the moment.				
15 I cannot see the relevance of the tutorials to what I am expected to do for the modules.				
16 The tutorials were useful to get to know fellow students.				
17 Getting to know my tutor has help me feel part of the School.				

In one sentence, what was the best feature of the tutorials?

In one sentence, what was the worst feature of the tutorials?

If you were unable to attend most of the tutorials please complete the questions below.

What degree programme are you registered for?

Estimate your average mark for the assignments you have completed so far.....

Rate the extent of your agreement with the following statements (where **1 is agree strongly**, 2- agree, 3 disagree, **4- disagree strongly**).

	1	2	3	4
1 My timetable was too full for me to attend all the tutorials as well.				
2 Since I thought that tutorials were not compulsory I did not think that they were worth my time.				
3 The tutorials were too early in the morning for me to get to the University				
4 The tutorials covered things I already knew about.				
5 I did not think it worth attending after I could not complete the preparatory work.				
6 I came here to learn about my subject, not to fiddle about with study skills.				
7 Many tutorials coincided with assessment deadlines for modules.				
8 The tutorials addressed issues which were of no direct benefit to me.				
9 I concentrated my time on those aspects of the course which are being assessed.				
10 I do not like the style of teaching involved in tutorial work.				
11 I just need to learn the facts so I can complete the assessments and get through to the more interesting parts of the programme.				
12 There was nothing in the tutorials I could not read about elsewhere.				
13 None of my friends went, so I decided not to go either.				
14 I feel intimidated by academic staff.				

In one sentence state the single most important factor that influenced your decision not to attend most of the tutorials.

In one sentence state what would encourage you to attend more of the tutorials.

Weekly sessions (1-hour) incorporated into BMS 110 and BMS 111 (2005/6)

	Topic	Format and follow-up	Led by
1	Studying at University (teaching assessment methods and; attendance monitoring; time management; introduction to PDP.	Introduction by tutor. Ice breaker and a discussion of student expectations. PDP	Study skills tutor
2	Learning styles (Knowing how you learn best and developing appropriate learning strategies; reading with understanding; working in groups)	Discussion led and facilitated by tutor Divide into groups for poster presentations; topics for poster given out (both BMS 110 & 111) Deadline for poster: week 9. Deadline for written assignment week 10	Study skills tutor
3	Searching for information, plagiarism and referencing	How to search for scientific information in journals and on the internet; how to avoid plagiarising and how to reference your material	Study skills tutor
4	Library tour II (This is subject specific and assumes basic library tour has already been undertaken)	<i>Library quiz to be returned in week 5 during tutorial classes</i>	Library staff
5	Preparing posters	Tutorial on preparing posters Discussion on chosen topic for the poster presentation	Study skills tutor
6	Writing skills (Sentences, paragraphs, essay structures, punctuation, ambiguity); assessment criteria	Discussion on format of the written assignment and what assessment criteria mean. Writing short essays in examinations	Study skills tutor
7	Optional lecture week – subject specific lecture or professional issues topic – at discretion of course team		Course specific
8	Optional lecture week – subject specific lecture or professional issues topic – at discretion of course team		Course specific
9	Poster assessment and assessment feedback (Both BMS110 & BMS111)	Peer assessment to agreed assessment criteria	Study skills tutor

10	Optional lecture week – subject specific lecture or professional issues topic – at discretion of course team	Submit written assignment	Course specific
11	Preparing for examinations	Overview: format of exam papers, course regulations, consequences of failure, re-sits, condonement, timetable for appeals.	Course Director
12	Optional lecture week – subject specific lecture or professional issues topic – at discretion of course team	Results of written assessment and assessment feedback	Course specific



Study Skills Programme (2005/6) Workbook

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Complete version available at http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/links/Workbook_Final.doc