
Turning Them Back from the Brink...

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A. STUDENT		
1st Semester 2010		
1001 Maths	Tuesday 8:00 - 10:00	Friday 8:00 - 10:00
1001 Professional Practice	Monday 9:00 - 11:00	Thursday 10:00 - 12:00
1001 PC Maintenance	Monday 10:00 - 12:00	Thursday 8:00 - 10:00
1011 Programming 1	Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	Friday 10:00 - 12:00

For how long should we keep enrolling failing students?

When a first year student has failed all papers in their first semester, should they be allowed to re-enrol?

These students present a high risk in terms of course completion, but should they be excluded after only one or even two semesters?

In the Bachelor of Information Technology programme at Otago Polytechnic in 2010, a contract system has been introduced for students who are identified at high risk of failing their course. The students are interviewed individually and terms of their enrolment is laid out in a formal letter from the Head of School:

- Enrolment is for one semester only,
- Further enrolment is dependent on successfully completion of current semester,
- The student must ask each lecturer at every class to sign their Attendance Register,
- The Attendance Register must be handed to the First Year Coordinator at the end of each week,
- The Polytechnic may withdraw a student who fails to meet these requirements. This would mean an immediate stopping of Student Allowances.
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The Contract system explicitly addressed our concerns for success for a small group of students. It allowed a

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constructive discussion with students about improving their pass rate, and accentuated that attending class is the first and critical step for successful learning. The comment section encouraged lecturers to discuss and write about positive characteristics of learning practice. The weekly meeting with the First Year Coordinator reiterated the need for attendance and encouraged confirmation of changed behaviours as they emerged.

By the end of the semester, it was apparent when students had not met the terms of the Contract. They will not be enrolled in the next semester. The system worked for half of the at-risk students. For these students, attendance at classes had a profound effect on their engagement in the course, the relationships they developed with other students and their success within the course.

Student 1: *It got me in the habit of coming to class.*

Student 2: *It helped to find someone else in the same boat. I didn't know X before and now we work together all the time.*

Student 3: *I thought that I could skip classes and be OK. But I never knew what the class was doing. I didn't want to appear stupid so I just said I was OK and kept failing.*

Lecturer 1: *The greatest comeback since Lazarus!*

Lecturer 2: *It seems so simple, just to insist and check on attendance.*

Lecturer 3: *Accountability fostered responsibility which in turn facilitated achievement.*

Lecturer 4: *It gave them the chance to redeem themselves, yet provided a structure for everyone to work within.*

Lecturer 5: *I really don't have words to describe the difference. It is like having two totally different students.*

Lecturer 6: *I am so proud of student X. He got the top mark for the paper (70 students) this semester.*

Lecturer 7: *It is reassuring to see such increased confidence and overall enjoyment in learning.*



Head of School
formal contract