

PROBLEM

Courses across UK increasingly require online interaction even though many of these courses are not technically "online" course. SACS defines [distance education](#) as "a formal educational process in which the majority of the interaction between students and instructors and among students occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place". Courses that have some online interactions (e.g., some online lectures, discussions, or quizzes) but not a majority of interactions are called "[hybrid](#)" courses.

Many of our Senate Rules were written when all instruction, all quizzes, and all assignment submissions occurred in "class". Some of these rules need clarity as more courses at UK become "hybridized"). Three of these Senate Rules are SR 5.1.8.3, SR 5.2.4.2, and SR 9.1. These three rules together deal with excused and unexcused absences from "class". There are three problems with these rules.

First, the "presence" or "absence" of a student is simply not assessed for some online activities (e.g., watching a pre-recorded video lecture) even though those online activities often "count" towards the total contact hours/minutes required for the course (SR 10.3). In traditional lecture courses, all activities that "count" as "contact hours" are or can be assessed for "presence" or "absence" because those activities all occur in a physical classroom where "presence" or "absence" can be easily assessed.

Second, the quantity of contact hours associated with some online course activities (e.g., for online discussions) are not traditionally specified and therefore hard for students to know. Whereas, in traditional lecture courses, the quantity of contact hours that are associated with any in-class activity (e.g., an in-class discussion) are easily known; the number of associated contact hours is simply the amount of time spent on the activity while in a physical classroom.

Third, SR 10.3 defines "What is a credit hour" for different types of courses, but the specified number of required minutes (usually 2,400 minutes for a three credit course) are not attainable in many traditional courses given current semester calendars. For example, a 50 minute MWF course in the fall semester will have a maximum of 2,320 contact minutes and a 150 minute Monday only course will have a maximum of 2,220 contact minutes. To fix this problem, we need to modify SR 10.3 or the Registrar's calendar.

But, even if the third problem is fixed, the first two problems remain. It's not reasonable to expect that all distance learning course activities that count towards a course's required contact hours/minutes will be (1) assessed for a student's "presence" or "absence" and (2) will have a known number of associated contact hours/minutes. Number (1) is an unreasonable expectation (e.g., all pre-recorded lecture videos would have to track whether any particular student watched them or not). Number (2) is probably feasible, but in practice it would look arbitrary and contrived (e.g., "Your required participation in this online discussion assignment counts as one contact hour").

PROPOSAL

Thus, if we can't sensibly resolve the first two issues above, another option (proposed here) is to measure the level of absences using some metric other than contact hours. In 2016, the Senate Admissions and Academic Standards Committee (SAASC) attempted this, resulting in the current language that uses "participation activities for an online courses" (sic) along with a definition of what those activities are. However, the definition at SR 5.2.4.1.A was never approved, so this reference that the current rule points to doesn't exist. The current rule is confusing because it is incomplete (i.e., it has a broken reference).

We propose to use “required interactions” rather than “contact hours” as a better way to measure whether a student’s excused absences in a course are so numerous that the student should be allowed the option of a late withdrawal or receipt of an “I” grade.

NOTE: Wording that is ~~red with strike-out marks~~ is existing wording this is proposed for deletion. Wording that is underlined in blue is new proposed wording.

SR 5.1.8.3 Permissive Withdrawals

A student may withdraw from a class, or from the University, after the withdrawal period in Rule 5.1.8.2.A but through the last day of classes for the semester/session/term upon approval by the dean of the student’s college of a petition certifying urgent non-academic reasons including but not limited to:

1. Illness or injury of the student;
2. Serious personal or family problems;
3. Serious financial difficulties; or
4. Having excused absences for the dates and times associated with more than ~~in excess of~~ one-fifth of the ~~class contact hours~~ required interactions in a course ~~where attendance is required or is a criterion for a grade~~, pursuant to SR 5.2.4.2.

* “Required interactions” (SR 5.1.8.3, SR 5.2.4.2, and SR 9.1) are interactions that, if not completed at or by their specified date and time, would penalize a student in a course. Interactions may include, but are not limited to, student engagement with other students (e.g., participating in an in-class or online discussion), engagement with the instructor (e.g., attending class), or engagement with an instructor’s proxy (e.g., attending a guest lecture or uploading a file to the course management system).

Before acting on such a petition, the dean will consult with the Instructor of Record of the class. The dean may not delegate the authority to approve or deny a petition to withdraw to the University Registrar or to any other agency external to his or her college. If such a petition is approved by the dean of the student’s college, the dean shall inform in writing the Instructor of Record of the class of his/her action, and the student shall be assigned a grade of ~~W~~ “W”.

SR 5.2.4.2 Excused Absences

~~If an attendance policy is not stated in the course syllabus and attendance is~~ If the course syllabus does not require students to interact with other students, an instructor, or an instructor’s proxy and if such interactions are not a criterion for a grade in ~~a~~ the course, then the Instructor of Record shall not take any account of a student’s excused or unexcused absences from ~~class~~ such interactions when assigning a grade.

If the course syllabus ~~defines either policies that require class attendance or a grading standard that determines a student’s grade based in part on class attendance,~~ requires students to interact with other students, an instructor, or an instructor’s proxy or if such required interactions are a criterion for a grade in the course, the following rules apply:

1. Excused Absences: If a student has excused absences for the dates and times associated with more than ~~in excess of~~ one-fifth of the ~~class contact hours~~ required interactions for ~~a~~ that course ~~(participation activities for an online courses, as defined in 5.2.4.1.A),~~ the student shall have the right to receive a “W”, or the Instructor of Record may award an “I” for the course if the student declines to receive a “W”.

* “Required interactions” (SR 5.1.8.3, SR 5.2.4.2, and SR 9.1) are interactions that, if not completed at or by their specified date and time, would penalize a student in a course. Interactions may include, but are not limited to, student engagement with other students (e.g., participating in an in-class or online discussion), engagement with the instructor (e.g., attending class), or engagement with an instructor’s proxy (e.g., attending a guest lecture or uploading a file to the course management system).

2. Unexcused Absences: The Instructor of Record shall define any course policy relating to unexcused absences in the course syllabus. If a policy is not stated in the course syllabus or the policy does not allow for a penalty to the student, the Instructor of Record shall not penalize the student for any unexcused absences.

SR 9.1 Definitions

Absence: failure to ~~be present for a scheduled class~~ participate in a required interaction at or by a specified date and time.

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COMMENTS

1. Senate Rule 6.1.1 (“*Information about Course Content*”) requires instructors to inform students “*whenever factors such as absences or late papers will be weighed in determining grades.*” To comply with SR 6.1.1 and our proposed rule changes, instructors would have to identify (usually in the syllabus) each required interaction and its associated completion date and time. For a traditional course, the instructor may accomplish this simply by stating in the syllabus, for example, “*Required Meeting Schedule: MWF 10:00am – 10:50am*”. For hybrid and online courses, the instructor simply needs to indicate what the required interactions are and the dates and times when students must complete those interactions. For example, an instructor could write:

There are 50 required interactions for this course. Students must attend 44 class meetings scheduled on MWF from 10:00am to 10:50am and submit six online homework via Canvas by noon on Wednesdays of Weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13.

2. The biggest impact of this proposed rule change would be that the so-called “twenty-percent rule” (SR 5.2.4.2) would be more easily triggered for courses that have fewer required interactions. For example, consider an online course that has only four required interactions (e.g., four on-campus exams). If a student has a valid excused absence for one of these four exams, the twenty-percent hurdle (i.e., “excused absences for the dates and times associated with more than one-fifth of the required interactions for a course”) would be breached, and the student “shall have the right to receive a ‘W’, or the Instructor of Record may award an ‘I’ for the course if the student declines to receive a ‘W’.” (SR 5.2.4.2).

3. Hand-delivering or uploading three documents to a single location on or by a single completion date/time would suggest one required interaction. But, if these three documents had different completion dates/times or required delivery or upload to different locations, it would suggest separate required interactions. A requirement on a single date to attend class over an uninterrupted period of time (e.g., Monday, January 22 from 10:00am to 10:50am) would suggest a single required interaction, even if the instructor required multiple interactions during that single period (e.g., turn in an assignment, take a quiz, and respond to a discussion prompt). Interactions that cannot be assessed for participation generally could not be “required interactions”.