How should we treat repeating students?

JOHN HANNAH AND ALEX JAMES
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Keywords: Repeating students; engineering mathematics; transferable skills

Usually repeating students simply join the next occurrence of the failed course. They attend lectures and read handouts which assume they have never seen the material before. Often they are set the same homework, tutorial exercises and assignments that they were supposed to do the first time round. Unfortunately, by repeating the entire course experience like this, such students often drift towards a repeat of the failure too. This talk looks at a small group of students repeating a first-year engineering mathematics course. For political reasons, rather than educational ones, the repeat version of the course was restricted to students who had failed the course in the previous semester. But educationally, this meant that the course could be tailored to their common background. Thus the lecturer could take advantage of their prior experience of the course content while at the same time focusing attention on generic and transferable skills, such as time management, study habits and applying mathematical ideas in new contexts. All the students passed the repeated course, and the lessons learned seem to have persisted since, as a group, they have performed significantly better in their second year mathematics course than might have otherwise been expected.