

Factors influencing student non-attendance at formal teaching sessions

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Abstract

Motivated by falling levels of attendance at classes, this paper explores student reasons for non-attendance within Undergraduate Programmes at a post 1992 UK university. Questionnaires collected demographic profiling information and factors students thought influenced attendance. Closed questions established how important attendance was in influencing grades and how motivated students considered themselves to be. Findings reveal variables including age, gender, level of study and work commitments had no significant impact on reported attendance, levels of interest and motivation were important. Students identified lectures as the session they were least likely to attend and unseen exams the assessment type most likely to encourage attendance. Unprompted reasons for non-attendance included illness, tiredness, socialising; with institutional factors such as the impact of other university work, timetabling and topic. Key interventions include attendance monitoring, marks for attendance, alignment of lecturer style to content delivery, and establishing an explicit link between lecture content and assessment.

Keywords: student attendance, motivation; intrinsic and extrinsic factors

Introduction

Relatively little research in the UK higher education field has focused on student attendance rates or reasons for non-attendance, with key sources emerging from the United States (Clair, 1999); Australia (Massingham and Herrington, 2006); China (Chen and Lin, 2008); and Finland (Lukkarinen et al., 2016). Within the United Kingdom Kottasz, (2003), Baderin, (2005), and Clifford et al. (2011) comment on the need for lecturers to better understand why students miss classes. Gbadamosi, (2015, p.

196) states, “*There is growing general concern about the levels of students’ attendance, both at lectures and seminars in Higher Education (HE)...*”.

This study contributes to the UK based literature on the reasons for student non-attendance at formal teaching sessions. Staff within the Departments of Geography, and Accounting and Finance in a post 1992 University¹ had begun to express concern about low and falling attendance at some formal teaching sessions. Reasons for this trend proposed by staff and students through staff-student liaison committees, and corroborating the literature review below, relate to: technology - notes are placed on the university electronic learning platform so attending lectures is deemed unnecessary; assessment - no point in attending sessions that do not relate directly to assignments or no exam; pedagogy - more could be obtained from reading books in the library than attending teaching sessions; quality of lectures and lecturers; time could be more usefully spent working on pending assignment deadlines; perceived timetabling problems – too many lectures in one day, long inconvenient gaps between lectures; and paid work commitments meaning absence was unavoidable.

The aim of this study was to explore these and other factors to identify which are most likely to influence student non-attendance at formal teaching sessions.

Literature Review

¹ A former polytechnic institution in the United Kingdom that was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Impacts of non-attendance

The political context of higher education in the UK is changing rapidly. Institutions are experiencing significant changes, including the new undergraduate funding system, policy decisions reducing public funding for higher education, economic downturn, visa control restrictions and the Teaching Excellence Framework (Dept. Education, 2016). The implications and effects of these changes will only become apparent over the next few years but in respect to the latter, which focusses attention on the quality of educational provision, the agenda is “... *to ensure all students receive an excellent teaching experience that encourages original thinking, drives up engagement and prepares them for the world of work.*” Johnson, (2015).

While causal links are difficult to establish, within the sector anecdotal evidence suggests that attendance levels may be declining (Paisey and Paisey, 2004). This continues to be a cause for concern for educators, who sense that attendance at teaching sessions is strongly linked to student performance, with research suggesting a positive correlation between lecture/tutorial attendance and student performance (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996; Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Woodfield et. al., 2006; Halpern, 2007; and O’Sullivan et. al., 2015). There are some ambiguities however, as Kroon, (2004) for example, found weak negative correlations for some assessment questions and Eisen et. al., (2015) found no statistically significant relationship between class attendance and student performance. Lukkarinen et al., (2016) found that for some students, participation in teaching is a significant predictor of performance while for others it is not. Halpern (2007) notes that few studies finding a positive relationship between attendance and achievement test causality. He found, through regression analysis, that students who attend are predisposed to academic achievement, and that their propensity

to achieve is largely influenced by other factors such as entry qualifications, maturity and cultural background.

It is not necessarily only performance that is important, as attending teaching sessions provides more than just a better grade. Within the context of employability, internationalization and the move towards research rich learning, session attendance is an integral component of a student's overall learning experience, with the development of skills and acquisition of knowledge that may not be directly assessed. Employers want "... *business schools to equip graduates with skills, as well as knowledge. While knowledge of management theory is important, managers need a host of other skills, including communication, self-awareness, people-management and problem-solving abilities to be effective in practice*" (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2014 p 5). Paisey and Paisey, (2004 citing Kuh 1995 and Sorlin, 2002) suggest that without attendance, students may pass examination and coursework assignments, but their educational experience would be incomplete and call for further research on the wider benefits of attendance. Furthermore, students may miss peer support and require additional staff time.

Additional factors of concern include the morale of Faculty members that may be adversely affected (Gump 2004, citing Wyatt 1992) and the learning of students who are present disrupted. Longhurst (1999), with Mearman, (2014, p 1) capturing the impact on all stakeholders by stating that "*Students skipping class appears to be an increasingly common phenomenon, and its prevalence is worrying due to potential negative impacts on not only the student, but also their peers, teachers and even wider society.*"

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors Influencing Attendance

While the relationship between performance and attendance has received wide research interest, an evident gap in the literature is the relatively little research undertaken to determine students' perspectives on attendance and their reasons for poor attendance. Studies undertaken to date suggest a complex interplay between intrinsic (individual) and extrinsic (institutional and external) factors.

A study from the US (Fleming 1992, cited by Kottasz 2003) found assessment pressures, poor lecturing, timing of lectures and poor-quality lecture content to be contributory factors to poor attendance. Similarly, O'Sullivan et.al. (2015) note that absence is "*often facilitated by curriculum and assessment structures.*" (p23) and Woodfield et. al., (2006) found the timing of sessions to be of importance, noting higher absences before 10am or after 4pm. Massingham and Herrington (2006) report that one of the main reasons posited by students for not attending lectures is the availability of materials online. When asked why they did not attend lectures, 68.3% of students surveyed at an Australian university reported that they could learn as effectively using digital audio recordings as they could by attending the corresponding lecture in person.

While these factors place the emphasis (and the onus of responsibility) upon higher education institutions and their staff, factors emerging from Morgan's study at Bradford University (2001, cited by Paisey and Paisey, 2004), coalesce more around student-centred reasons. The most important reasons for absenteeism were; going out the night before, early lectures and having to catch up upon backlogs of work, suggesting poor time management, apathy and alternative priorities of the student are important factors. In Woodfield et al's (2006) study, 10.5% of absenteeism was attributed to socialising.

Of more significance, Woodfield et al (2006) found illness accounted for 26% of reasons for non-attendance, a rate similar to the 23% found by Paisey and Paisey (2004)

at Glasgow Caledonian. What is considered as illness, and the extent to which illness is considered a valid excuse for absence, may vary considerably from person to person. Longhurst (1999) hypothesises that young people who are less attached to the student role are more likely to stay away from college if suffering from a minor ailment and stay away longer than other students. Notably Woodfield et al (2006) found tiredness to account for the same level (26%) of absenteeism as illness.

One of the key areas to have gained considerable attention in the literature to date is the effect of work commitments on attendance and university education more broadly. According to The Guardian (2001, cited by Kottasz 2003), two fifths of students in the UK claim that their university education is suffering because they have to work part time. However, while Longhurst, (1999) found that 22% of students missed classes because of work commitments, students with jobs were no more likely to be absent than those without jobs. Similar discrepancies are highlighted by Paisey and Paisey's (2004). They cite Cooper et. al., (2002) as having found that considerable numbers of students missed lectures and tutorials because of the demands of part-time employment, but cite Morgan, (2001) as having found that work commitments had little effect on attendance. In Woodfield et. al.'s (2006) study, only 2.8% of students cited paid work commitments as a reason for their absence.

Studies have also examined the effect of paid work on performance. Hunt et. al., (2003) found that for three of the seven subject groups investigated, students who worked achieved significantly lower grades than their non-working counterparts (by an average of 3%). This corroborates Humphry's (2001) study, cited by Paisey and Paisey (2004), where working students also gained on average a 3% lower mark than non-working students. This difference in performance was attributed, at least in part, to lower attendance. Anecdotal evidence from within the disciplines studied in this

research suggests that while some students acknowledge that work commitments may impact upon their performance, they would be unable to attend university at all if they did not engage in paid employment.

There is little research that considers the impact of gender on attendance. However, Woodfield et. al.'s (2006) and Clifford et. al., (2011) in their studies found that female students were significantly more likely to attend classes than their male counterparts. Gump (2006), however, found that while females had fewer class absences than males, the difference was not significant.

Student Commitment and Motivation

Longhurst (1999) suggests that the degree of commitment to education may be the most important factor influencing attendance while Gump (2006) similarly suggests that lack of inherent motivation may be a key factor in absenteeism and found a statistically significant relationship between actual rates of attendance and the importance student attached to attendance.

Kneale, (1997) argues that there has been a rise in the prevalence of the 'strategic student' who devotes more time to sport, leisure and cultural activities or part time work than their degree and exhibit poor attendance in class. In contrast, Winn (2002) although identifying 'strategic students', also identified a group who value "*their academic experience to such an extent that they go to great lengths to fit their studies into lives which are already demanding*" (p.450) and have high levels of intrinsic motivation. Fazey and Fazey (1998) suggest an environment which increases the likelihood that students will enjoy, be interested in and value their studies and where teachers are skilled, enthusiastic and student-centred and, where possible, involve the student in the decision-making around the learning process, will encourage self-

sustaining intrinsic motivation. Students must be offered intellectual experiences that ‘stimulate, challenge, satisfy and promote curiosity’ (Fazey and Fazey 1998 p.71). Baderin (2005) found that 62% of students indicated that they were motivated by the tutors’ approach, yet lecturers had not appreciated this as a factor affecting tutorial attendance. Thus, tutors themselves, as well as institutional flexibility facilitating choice, can also potentially influence attendance positively in an indirect way through enhancing student motivation.

O’Sullivan et.al. (2015) highlight the need to understand better the contextual nature of student attendance. They note a cultural acceptance of non-attendance amongst the student body with attendance perceived as optional. They also observe that student attendance behaviour is “*selective and fluid, with students attending some classes regularly and others sporadically or not at all.*” (p.23).

To summarise, there is an emerging discourse in the literature encompassing government, sector and institutional concerns on the impacts of low student attendance. Despite conflicting findings with regards to impact on grade, there are undoubtedly impacts on those wider educational experiences that may not be measured by assessment grade.

With regards to the causes of non-attendance, the literature suggests a multitude of factors with intrinsic and extrinsic factors intertwined. For example, uninspiring lecturers may create apathy among students and as Kottasz, (2003) suggests, ‘work overload’ causes stress and absenteeism at university. Similarly, Devadoss and Foltz (1996) suggest that level of self-financing, timing of class, quality of teaching and level of difficulty of subject material are important factors. Added to this, student motivation, commitment to learning and attendance culture makes disentangling specific ‘causes’ somewhat problematic.

In response, this research will investigate, from the student perspective, the key factors impacting on their attendance. It will investigate student self-reporting attendance, motivation and subject interest levels, and gather student views on a range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in attempting to identify reasons for non-attendance.

Methodology

This study focuses on undergraduate students from two Departments at a post 1992 UK university; the Department of Geography, Faculty of Engineering and Environment and the Department of Finance and Accounting, Faculty of Business and Law. Teaching in the Department of Geography uses a wide range of class types including lectures and seminars alongside laboratory and field classes. Assessment is mainly via coursework of various types with more limited use of formal examinations. In the Department of Finance and Accounting, teaching is more focused on lectures, seminars and tutorials while assessment includes a balance of coursework and formal examinations. Students in the Department of Geography are predominantly from the UK and have entered their programme straight from school, with a high proportion from the local region. The cohort from the Department of Finance and Accounting includes a higher proportion of international students. Thus, these two groups of students facilitate access to a broad cross section of the student body and enable differences to be explored.

A questionnaire was distributed to the study group during the early weeks of Semester 2. Students completed the questionnaire at the start of the class and returned it to maximise response rates. The questionnaire used was ostensibly the same as that used in an earlier study (Jones and Manns, unpublished) conducted with Geography students.

The questionnaire first sought to establish background variables of level (year) of study, programme, gender, age group, mode of transport and travel time into

university, hours of paid work and current degree classification. Students were then asked to identify and rank (*1 most important, 6 least important*) factors they thought influenced their attendance. Next students were asked to indicate the average number of sessions attended per twelve-week module (self-reported attendance), to indicate their level of motivation (*higher, average, poor*) and level of interest in their subject (*interested, average, disinterested*) and to state the extent to which they felt attendance influenced grade (*extremely, moderately, slightly, not at all*). Other questions explored the effect of different types of teaching sessions (lecture, seminar, tutorials etc.); and modes of assessment (exam, essay, presentation etc.) on their attendance. Finally, students were presented with 26 attitude statements based on factors that had emerged through informal discussions with staff and students, through staff-student liaison committees, and from the literature (refer to Table 3 for statements) and were asked to highlight their strength of agreement/disagreement using a standard 5 point Likert Scale.

Statistical analyses were conducted depending upon the type of data being analysed; T-tests where continuous (ratio) data were being compared between two groups (for example, male and female's reported attendance out of twelve teaching sessions); and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for similar types of data among more than two groups (e.g. age groups). Mann-Whitney U tests compared 'scores' allocated to the likelihood of attending different types of class or classes with different types of assessment, as a non-parametric alternative to the T-test.

Results and Discussion

Sample Profile

In total 373 students completed the survey; 56% of respondents were from Geography programmes and 44% from Accountancy and Finance programmes. The majority of respondents (85%) were aged between 18 and 22 while 51% were male and 49% female. Across the three levels of study, 24% were studying at Level 4 (Year 1), 42% Level 5 (Year 2) and 32% Level 6 (Years 3 and 4) of their undergraduate programme. The sample demonstrates a good gender balance and broadly reflects the characteristics of the profile of the departments in terms of programmes and age groups but slightly over represents Level 5 students.

Data revealed that students spend on average 32 minutes travelling to university. Although the median was 30 minutes, nearly 24% of students travelled for an hour or more to reach university. The survey revealed that 42% of our students were engaged in outside paid employment, working between 1 and 40 hours a week and an average of 13.6 hours a week (median 12 hrs/week) (Chart 1).

(Chart 1. Hours worked by students in employment.)

Self-reported attendance levels

The mean self-reported attendance level was 10 sessions out of a possible 12 teaching sessions (Chart 2) with no significant difference found between students from Geography and Accounting and Finance ($T = 0.81$ $p = 0.420$). Only 14 Geography respondents (9%) reported an attendance level of 7 or fewer sessions out of 12. However, analysis of data collected in the Department as part of the Faculty attendance-monitoring system suggests that in fact only 7 out of 12 monitored sessions on average are attended, indicating that students either deliberately report a higher level of attendance or are unaware of how low their attendance actually is.

(Chart 2. Self-report Attendance.)

Student characteristics and their effect on attendance

Analyses undertaken to explore whether any background variables affected the level of self-reported attendance found that while females report on average better attendance than males (at 10.2 sessions compared with 9.9), the difference was not statistically significant ($T = -1.31$ $p = 0.191$), thus supporting Gump's (2006) findings.

No difference was found in the reported attendance levels of those who work and those who do not ($T = -0.05$ $p = 0.961$), which supports other studies where a weak or ambiguous relationship between paid employment and attendance has been found (Longhurst, 1999; Morgan, 2001). Similarly, while reported attendance is highest in the first year (10.2 out of 12 sessions), lowest in the second year (9.9), and intermediate in the final year (10.1), ANOVA did not reveal a statistically significant difference between year groups ($p = 0.404$). The same was true of age group with ANOVA revealing no significant difference between respondents in the different age groups ($p = 0.176$) and no significant difference between students with different degree classifications ($p = 0.111$). There was also no significant correlation between the time taken to travel into university and reported attendance (*Pearson* $r = 0.062$, $p = 0.235$) or between students from the two departments studied ($T = 0.81$ $p = 0.420$).

It is clear therefore that for the range of background variables tested, none significantly influence self-reported attendance rates amongst the study group.

Motivation, interest, and their effect on attendance

Students were asked about the extent to which they considered attendance to affect their grade, whether they felt that their attendance was more affected by their level of motivation or ability to attend and how interested they considered themselves to be in their degree subject. Only 3% of students thought that their level of attendance had no effect on grade; 16% felt that the effect was slight; 49% felt that level of attendance had a moderate effect on grade and 31% felt that it had an extreme effect on grade. ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the self-reported attendance rates between these four different response categories ($p < 0.001$) with students who considered attendance to have an extreme effect on grade reporting much higher attendance levels (10.9 out of 12 sessions compared to just 9.2 out of 12 for those believing it has only a slight effect).

Seventy-four percent of students felt that their attendance was more affected by their motivation to attend than their ability to attend. Most students seemed to be relatively well motivated. Only 7.1% of students considered themselves to be poorly motivated (and reported to attend an average of 8.7 sessions); 56.6% considered themselves to be of average motivation (and said they attended an average of 9.7 sessions); and 36.3% considered themselves to be highly motivated (reporting attending an average of 10.7 sessions). ANOVA again revealed there to be a highly significant difference in self-reported attendance between these groups ($p < 0.001$). This would seem to support the students' own view that their motivation is more significantly affecting attendance levels than their ability to attend. No statistically significant differences in motivation levels were found between genders or levels of study.

The level of interest students claimed to have in their subject showed a similar pattern to motivation. Only 2.5% of students considered themselves to be disinterested in the subject (reporting attending an average of 7.6 sessions); 45.8% were of average interest (reporting to attend 9.6 sessions) and 51.8% were interested in the subject

(reporting to attend 10.5 sessions). ANOVA revealed this association between interest and attendance also to be significant ($p < 0.001$). Again, there were no statistically significant differences in interest levels between genders but Level 6 (third/forth year) students report lower interest levels than other years ($p = 0.018$). Results suggest that maintaining student interest in their studies and developing high levels of motivation could have a significant effect on attendance levels and thus support the findings of other studies (Winn, 2002; Gump, 2006).

Module characteristics and their effect on likelihood of attendance

Students were asked to compare different types of teaching sessions by rating their likelihood of attendance at on a scale of 1-5 (1 being not very likely and 5 being very likely). Mann-Whitney U tests (Table 1) revealed a statistically significant difference between likelihood of attendance at each type of teaching session except between laboratory and fieldwork sessions and tutorial and seminar sessions. Lectures were the least likely session type to be attended across the sample, supporting the findings of Woodfield et. al. (2006). Field trips were the most likely type of session to be attended by Geography students, although no distinction was made between compulsory residential field trips and day field trips. Finance and Accounting students generally identified fieldtrips as not applicable to them but otherwise showed the same pattern as Geography students with laboratory followed by seminar, tutorial and then lectures in order of likelihood of attendance. These findings point to interactive and immersive teaching approaches as being more likely to inspire attendance.

(Table 1. Impact of Session Type on Likelihood of Attendance Mann-Whitney U-Test Results)

Students were also asked to compare likelihood of attendance at modules with different types of assessment (using the same scale as above). Mann Whitney U tests (Table 2) revealed that the likelihood of attendance was significantly higher for modules with an unseen exam or seen exam compared with all other types of assessment, but there was no significant difference between essay/report style assessment and presentations. There was however, some difference noted between subject groups with Geography students significantly more likely to attend presentations than Finance and Accounting students (Mann Whitney $p=0.000$). The reasons for this need further exploration by considering how these forms of assessment are used across the two disciplines.

(Table 2. Impact of Assessment Type on Likelihood of Attendance, Mann-Whitney U-Test Results)

Stated reasons for non-attendance

In the case of self-reported reasons for non-attendance (Chart 3), some interesting results emerge. Students were asked to list in order of importance the six most significant reasons for missing classes. A wide range of answers were given but these have been grouped into broad categories.

(Chart 3. Reasons for non-attendance)

Illness emerged as the most frequently stated reason for non-attendance (in which we included having dentist/ doctor/ hospital appointments) being identified by 227 respondents and accounting for 17% of total responses. Thus, the finding here, although slightly lower, aligns with findings reported in other studies (Paisey and Paisey, 2004 (23%); Woodfield et. al. 2006 (26%)). It may be that illness is perceived to be the most 'acceptable' response to give for non-attendance.

Students were honest in highlighting the extent to which failure to get up in time, general ‘laziness’ and being too tired affected their attendance level with this category being the next most frequently cited reason for non-attendance (12.2%, 162 respondents). The reasons for such a prevalence of tiredness are worthy of further investigation; they could, for example, be the result of long hours of studying, late nights socialising or late shifts at work. Explicit reference to social factors (hangover, late night) accounted for 6.2% (82) of responses, a lower figure than found in previous studies (Woodfield et al, 2006).

The third most frequently cited reason for non-attendance was other university work (this included other assessment deadlines and not having done the preparation work for the session in question), accounting for 9.4% of responses. This reason featured more highly in Paisey and Paisey’s (2004) study (at 24%) and Woodfield et al’s (2006) study (at 24.9%). Every effort is made within the programmes studied to minimise the clustering of assessment deadlines that may be why this factor, though important, is more significant in other studies.

Timetabling has often been a source of complaint among students in the disciplines studied and accounted for 8% of the reasons cited. Issues highlighted included sessions being ‘too early’ with 9am sessions frequently identified as problematic; at an ‘awkward time’; there was only ‘one hour of formal teaching all day’; there was a ‘long gap’ between sessions. In Paisey and Paisey’s (2004) study, timetabling issues account for 6% of absences while Woodfield et al’s (2006) study, similarly found sessions prior to 10am to account for a high level of absenteeism. A further 8.5% of absences related to the ‘topic’ (not being of interest; not relevant; not linked to assessment; or repetition). Lecturer related factors (teaching style; guest lecturers; poor lecturing) accounted for 5.9% of absences.

Factors cited which are outside the control of the university, included transport problems (including metro problems, bad traffic, no money for bus, too far) (6.1% of the responses) family-related problems (including children's illness, school holidays, collecting children from school) (4.6% of responses) and the weather (4.4% of responses). Undertaking paid work, accounted for only 4.1% of responses. Significant differences emerge here compared to other studies, where engaging in paid employment accounted for 2.8% of stated reasons at the University of Sussex in Woodfield et al's (2006) study and a very high 37% (the most frequently cited reason) at Glasgow Caledonian University reported by Paisey and Paisey (2004). The variation could be related to socio-economic differences between the universities' student intakes or reflect a reduction in student term time working in the intervening years. Other commitments and miscellaneous factors accounted for 12.2% of absences.

This component of the research reinforces findings from earlier studies, suggesting that attendance is impacted by a complex interplay between factors personal to the student (intrinsic) and extrinsic factors (some within the University's control).

Responses to attitude statements

Table 3 summarises the statements to which students were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement. The possible responses to each statement were then allocated a score from 1-5 such that the higher the score the more positive the approach to learning.

(Table 3 Responses to Attitude Statements)

The strongest response to a statement to emerge demonstrating a positive approach to learning, with a mean score of 4.17 was disagreement that their social life was more important than their degree (statement t) (82% of students). Only 14% of

students agreed with this statement, conveying an overall high level of commitment to education.

The next strongest response reflecting a positive attitude to learning (mean score of 3.74) was student agreement that they enjoy learning or knowledge acquisition for its own sake (statement p), (68% of respondent agreeing and only 8.3% disagreeing), closely followed by disagreement with statement x '*The higher number of contact hours in a week, the less likely I am to attend*' (mean score of 3.68 and 67% of respondents disagreeing). Taken alongside stated reasons for non-attendance, this would suggest that it is the pattern of delivery not the total amount of contact that impacts on attendance. It is notable that statement b '*The number of classes I have in one day does not have any impact on my attendance*' produced a more or less even split between students agreeing (48.3%) and those disagreeing (48.9%) with the statement. This reinforces our observations of a general lack of consensus amongst the student body about what constitutes a good timetable with some students demanding few concentrated days of study and others asking for a more dispersed timetable. Statement e '*The length of time between classes during a day has no influence on my likelihood of attendance*' generated a more negative response with 54% of respondents disagreeing with this statement and only 33.9% agreeing.

Sixty three percent of respondents disagreed that certain types of sessions were purposely missed (statement i) and only 17% agreed (mean score 3.65). Taken with the significant differences, which emerged in the levels of attendance for different types of classes noted earlier, the implication here is that the type of class is not the first criterion used in attendance decision making. It is notable that 44.6% of respondents agreed with statement h '*I purposely miss classes by certain lecturers because I do not like their*

teaching style'. Future research could ascertain what aspects of teaching and learning styles encourage and discourage student attendance.

In contrast to Massingham and Herrington (2006), it was encouraging that 58.7% of students disagreed that when notes were put on Blackboard (electronic learning platform) it is not important to attend (statement a) but a fifth of students (20.1%) agreed with the statement. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring value added activities take place in class, such as more detailed explanations, demonstrations and interactive activities, rather than simply a presentation of lecture slides.

While 63% of students disagreed that their education suffered because of work commitments (statement k, average score of 3.61), 14.3% agreed with this statement. While this figure is significantly less than the figure reported in the Guardian of 40% noted earlier, it is still a relatively high proportion. It seems that the effects of paid work are more important than merely affecting attendance (as only 4.4% of students cited paid work as a reason for non-attendance). It may be affecting their studies by reducing the amount of time they have to conduct background reading and work on their assignments, for example.

At the other end of the scale were the responses demonstrating a more negative attitude to learning (lowest mean scores). The lowest mean score (2.41) was to the statement '*I am more likely to attend classes when a register is kept*' (statement f) with which 63.3% of students agreed and only 19.6% disagreed, illustrating that extrinsic motivators can influence attendance. This is one simple measure that staff who are concerned about attendance levels on specific modules could adopt easily to improve attendance, which has proved effective elsewhere (see for example Shimoff and Catania 2001).

Results presented earlier highlight the potential impact of assessment type on attendance and stated reasons for non-attendance demonstrate the importance of topic. Attitude statements related to assessment reinforce the need for learning to be related to assessment for a high number of students. Forty one percent of respondents agreed that *'once the assessment for the module is complete there is no point attending the lectures'* (statement m), while more than a third (35.8%) agreed that *'there is no point in attending classes that do not relate to the assignment'* (statement c), results that would seem to be at odds with the early strong positive response to enjoying learning or knowledge acquisition for its own sake. It is notable also that half of the respondents (49.6%) disagreed that they never missed classes due to other assignment deadlines (statement q); this highlights the importance of spacing out deadlines.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the factors which most influence student non-attendance at formal teaching sessions and in so doing to extend the currently limited UK evidence base on a topic which is of growing concern in higher education. This study also contributes to the existing literature and discourse through the unique research lens of presenting the students' own self reporting on attitudes to attendance. Like previous studies, this study highlights the complexity, multi-faceted and interconnected nature of factors affecting attendance with a range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors identified.

Corroborating the work of O'Sullivan et.al. (2015), the impact of module characteristics revealed that laboratory, seminar, tutorial and then lectures emerged in order of likelihood of impact on attendance. These findings point to the need to design modules embedding interactive and immersive teaching approaches as more likely to inspire attendance. Additionally, analysis reveals that student attendance is likely to be

significantly higher for modules with an unseen exam or seen exam compared with all other types of assessment, but there was no significant difference between essay/report style assessment and presentations. This finding again aligns with what O'Sullivan (2015) identifies as absence linked to '*assessment structures*'. We would not advocate that all modules move to exam based assessment but these findings, coupled with responses to attitude statement *m* and *c*, suggest that many students are motivated to attend by how relevant they feel the teaching sessions are to their assessment and so careful consideration and promotion to students of how teaching and assessment are linked is important, at least for 'strategic' students (Kneale, 1997; Winn, 2002).

The study reveals that recognition of the impact of attendance on grade is associated with higher levels of attendance so one useful strategy for tutors might be to present evidence to students to demonstrate this link. Use of registers mapped to student performance profiles could be used, although the lack of consensus on the causal relationship between attendance and grade would suggest that any approach would need to draw upon a wider set of performance measure than simply grade.

Motivation and interest levels seem particularly important factors and are likely to mediate a whole host of other variables. The results of this study show that students who report high levels of motivation and high levels of subject interest also report significantly higher levels of attendance. These findings support those of earlier studies (Winn, 2002; Gump 2006), and suggest further exploration into how to develop and nurture intrinsic motivation amongst students would be valuable. Work could for example, explore the value of some of the approaches noted by Fazey and Fazey (1998) and Baderin (2005) highlighted in the literature review.

Several classic, widely held beliefs about causes of poor attendance, for example the impact of paid work, gender difference, and the posting of materials on e-learning

platforms, are not strongly supported by this study. Instead, many of the self-reported reasons for non-attendance are personal to the student, suggesting that there are no simple solutions to encourage better attendance that can be implemented. However, the study highlights numerous measures over which universities, or departments within them, may have control and which may together positively impact upon attendance.

These interventions could include, taking registers; ensuring that pedagogic teaching styles are congruent with those preferred by students; co-ordination of assignment deadlines to minimise clashes and stress points; reviewing the traditional lecture format to ensure that the content and delivery of the sessions add value for the student above and beyond lecture notes (electronically or otherwise) and finally reviewing timetabling to avoid scheduling long gaps between sessions.

A number of areas for further study have been noted already. Additionally, although this study purposely selected study groups to achieve a diversity of participants, we did not seek to compare UK and international student views. With growing numbers of international students in the UK education system and O'Sullivan et.al.'s (2015) view that there is a cultural element to attendance, further work to explore differences may be appropriate. One of the key limitations of this study may be the use of self-reported attendance rather than actual attendance data, particularly as evidence in this study suggests that students are poor at accurately estimating their attendance levels. If students consistently overestimate attendance, then this would not significantly alter the findings here. However, if estimates are more inconsistent then it would throw doubt on the findings. Further research to understand self-reported versus actual attendance would be useful.

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