Reasons for Student Non-Attendance at Lectures and Tutorials: an analysis

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Introduction

Recent QAA/HEFCE policy documents have shown that student non-attendance at lectures is an area for concern (Morgan, 2001). However, an analysis of the literature appears to indicate that little research has been completed to determine the fundamental reasons as to why this might be the case. Student attitude and behaviour relevant to this matter has been the subject of some considerable investigation by those working in Higher and Further Education. Students' learning experiences (Zhongqi, 2000), their attitudes to different methods of teaching (see for example Bennett and Kottasz, 2001) and their skills and competencies (Kremer and McGuiness, 1998) have all been subject to analysis. The present research seeks to add to the educational literature in the area of student attendance at lectures via an empirical study of the factors underlying non-attendance in a sample of 155 undergraduates at London Metropolitan University.

The question inevitably arises: does non-attendance, in fact, affect students' success in a course? The answer according to Longhurst (1999) is "yes", although it is generally recognised that not all students learn best from a 'lecture-type' scenario. There seems to be some concern moreover that non-attendance is indicative of lower levels of motivation amongst students. The importance of the issue can be seen in reports and articles such as that recently presented by Longhurst (1999) who noted that "figures of the order of one quarter of all students absent on any given day are not unusual". Longhurst noted that absenteeism resulted in poor learning for those absent.

Reasons for non-attendance
Absence can be viewed as a very personal decision based on both the *ability* to attend and the *motivation* to attend. The individual decision to come to lectures will be influenced by many factors. At one extreme, there will be those conditions which make attendance virtually impossible, while at the other extreme there are circumstances where managers or lecturers would say that there is no justification whatsoever for non-attendance (cf. Huczynski and Fitzpatrick, 1989). A large number of students are not *able* to attend due to employment commitments. Two-fifths of students in the UK

claim that their university education is suffering because they have to work part-time (Guardian, 2001). Half of the students interviewed in a survey of 782 third-year undergraduates for the National Institute of Economic and Social Research had to work while studying at university. Four-fifths of these said it meant they miss out on lectures and on using library and computer facilities. Ford et al (1995) also studied the impact of casual work on students' academic performance, and noted that various surveys had shown the large number – between about 27% and 57% - of students taking up some form of part-time work. This seemingly caused absence. Longhurst (1999), on the other hand identified that in a study of FE college students "22% had missed classes at some time because of work commitments", but added that those with jobs "were no more likely to have been absent than those without jobs".

Although work may be affecting student attendance at lectures, there are some more fundamental reasons as to why students choose not to turn up for lectures. A study at Lincoln University in 1992 (Fleming, 1992) found that the major reasons given by students for non-attendance at lectures were competing assessment pressures (24% of reasons given), poor lecturing (23%), timing of the lecture (16%) and poor quality of the lecture content (9%). Students, Fleming surmised, choose to miss a class in order to work on an assignment because they think they will gain more (marks) from doing the assignment. A 1995 replicating study at Lincoln University (Fleming, 1995) found that 40% of the reasons offered for non-attendance at lectures involved "the pressure of other learning tasks". No comment was made on the absence of any significant reference to poor lecturing and/or lecture content compared to the earlier survey.

Motivation as a construct is an important issue in relation to the study of absence. It has been extensively studied both in the organisation behaviour and in the educational literature. There is, for example, a distinct difference between the motivation of those who want to learn, and those who have to learn. Race (1998), for instance, states that "wanting to learn is the most satisfactory state for students to be in".

Human learning is allegedly motivated by a combination of two kinds of rewards: extrinsic and intrinsic (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). Learning is extrinsically motivated when the anticipated rewards come from outside the activity. In a university setting extrinsic motivation can be sparked off by a drive to get good grades or wanting to win a prize for a given task (Kelly, 1993). A person learns for the sake of intrinsic rewards when the performance itself is worth doing for its own sake, even in the absence of external rewards. Most learning in schools is extrinsically motivated (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). Arguably, the acquisition of knowledge is rarely enjoyed for its own sake, and relatively few young people would continue to learn in schools in the absence of parental and social pressure. Students who are intrinsically motivated tend to have higher achievement scores (Hidi, 1990; Lepper and Cordova, 1992; Gottfried, 1985). Factors influencing intrinsic motivation include students' interest in the subject, an overall wish to succeed, a desire to prove themselves, their attitude towards the tutor, the satisfaction they gain from resource materials, and the

amount of tutor encouragement present. It is not known whether extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated students are more likely to attend lectures, but one of the aims of this study is to investigate this matter.

Writing from an educational perspective, Entwistle (1998) noted that staff did not always see it as their responsibility to motivate students. In looking at students' motivational levels (be it extrinsic or intrinsic), he found that, according to student comments, part of the reason for downward movements in motivation and non-attendance were the staff themselves. Indeed, Bennett (2001) argued that lecturers with poor opinions of contemporary students, lecturers with low levels of regard for their students' motivation, competence and behaviour might not feel as committed to their teaching duties as others. Also, Bennett noted, such lecturers might adopt teaching methods and technologies different to those employed by lecturers who hold their students in high regard.

Lessons from the business world
Numerous lessons concerning absenteeism can be learned from the business organisational literature. A number of studies have been carried out in the commercial world to discover whether people with certain types of personality are more absence-prone than others. These studies have suggested that there is evidence to relate rates of absenteeism to certain personality traits. Such studies have involved the use of personality tests, and fairly consistent findings have been reported on this topic. The personality profile of the absentee is the person who is "characterised by manifest anxiety" (Sinha, 1963), and who "is more tense, and less emotionally stable" (Stewart, 1965). These observations are further supported by the results of an Eysenck Personality Inventory Test. A study using this instrument concluded that those who were in the "never absent" category, were characterised by "introversion and stability" (Taylor, 1968). These findings support the distinction between illness *behaviour* and illness *as such*, the emotional and personality factors being particularly relevant to illness reporting (Thurlow, 1967).

Another factor causing absenteeism indicated by the organisational behaviour literature, is stress. According to research approximately 40 million working days are lost each year in Britain due to stress at work (Confederation of British Industry, 1987). Stress has been defined as "an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and/or psychological demands upon a person". A factor relevant to the absenteeism in the university environment has been identified as work overload on students. Work overload seemingly causes stress and absenteeism (Margolis *et al.*, 1974; Gupta and Beehr, 1979). The student could have too much work to do or could find the work too difficult. Accordingly, overload manifested itself in low self-esteem and work motivation (Cooper *et al.*, 1982). All of these have consequences for absence.

Methodology

A two-stage research procedure was adopted, beginning with an exploratory qualitative analysis of student absenteeism, followed by a further quantitative enquiry. Hypotheses were developed based on the secondary literature review and the qualitative interviews. The paucity of information as to the underlying reasons as to why students are absent from lectures and the lack of knowledge about the nature of relevant issues meant that an initial qualitative exploration was necessary involving in-depth interviews with undergraduate marketing students. This was undertaken to increase the researcher's familiarity with the issue at hand and to formulate problems for more precise investigation (see Kerlinger, 1964; Creswell, 1998; Churchill, 1999). A judgmental sampling approach was applied to the selection of interviewees (12 students in total), who were chosen not on the basis that they were *necessarily* representative, but rather because they could offer a contribution to the fulfilment of the study's research objectives (cf. Churchill, 1999).

Interviews with Students

Twelve semi-structured interviews (about 40 minutes) were conducted, recorded and analysed to establish the presence or absence of particular variables as identified in the literature. As well as answering the set questions (based around the constructs identified within the literature) the students were encouraged to speak about their own experiences and provide any additional relevant information on the topic.

Rather than asking students to estimate how many lectures they missed in general, the students interviewed were asked how many they had missed in the previous week. Only two students out of the 12 attended all their lectures in the previous week with a further four missing only 2 or 3. The major reason why these 12 students had missed lectures was because they needed to work on assignments. Thus, Fleming's (1992) proposition that assessment pressures gave rise to absenteeism (based on a minute sample) seemed to hold true, at least so far as this group of students was concerned. Most of the other reasons for missing lectures were linked in that they all related to the lack of perceived value of attending lectures. The students who had missed a lecture because they did not "think it was worth going to" were asked why. Six of the 12 students explained that they could get the notes from somebody else or from the U drive. Eight students claimed that lecturers normally only went through the handout (already provided) or that the information was available in the textbooks. Other reasons why some lectures were not considered worth going to were that they were "boring", "a waste of time" and "unnecessary". These attitudes indicated low motivational levels and perhaps a lack of interest in the subject students were studying.

All 12 students interviewed worked part-time, but on average, this phenomenon did not seem to interfere with their lecture attendance (they were mostly offered flexible working hours to fit in with their university timetables). All adopted an extrinsically motivated style of learning, but motivation was not really sparked off by a drive to

obtain good grades but rather to get the bare minimum pass grades for their examinations. When students were asked if there were any lectures that they would never miss and why, only one student claimed that she would never miss a lecture purely for the reasons of interest and enjoyment (intrinsic motivation). The other 11 students explained that they would only not miss a lecture if the subject area was very difficult and if they did not know peers to copy handouts from. Therefore, stress about workloads can equally cause people to attend rather than not attend. There was no evidence from the interviews to suggest that personality factors and traits (as observed by the interviewer - albeit somewhat casually) correlated with absence-prone behaviour.

An unexpected, but nevertheless very interesting finding from the qualitative data analysis was that 8 of the 12 students continuously differentiated between attendance at lectures and attendance at tutorials, even though the subjects were informed that the focus of the investigation was the lecture scenario. It emerged from the discussions that students were more worried and stressed about attending tutorials than lectures mainly because *participation was an integral part of those sessions.* Subsequently, students taking part in the semi-structured interviews claimed to miss more tutorial sessions than lecture sessions. Although the academic literature on non-attendance at tutorials was not initially examined and reviewed for the current research purposes, the logical conclusion from the qualitative findings was to devise two identical questionnaires, one focusing specifically on tutorials, the other specifically on lectures only.

Hypotheses Development

The proposed hypotheses were informed by the works of Taylor (1968), Margolis et al (1974), Longhurst (1999), Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984), Entwistle (1998) and the qualitative data analysis.

H1:   Lower levels of motivation result in non-attendance at lectures (tutorials).
H2:   The motivation to attend lectures (or tutorials) is influenced by the lecturer's (or tutor's) attitudes towards the student.
H3:   Students do not attend lectures (or tutorials) due to work commitments elsewhere.
H4:   Stress is a cause of absenteeism.
H5:   Low self-esteem is a cause of absenteeism.

For operational purposes:-:

H6:   Intrinsically motivated students are more likely to attend lectures (or tutorials) than are extrinsically motivated students.
H7:   Introverts are more likely to attend lectures (or tutorials) than are extroverts.

Quantitative Analysis and Results

The questionnaires were handed to approximately 190 students, of which 155 usable. 74 questionnaires focusing on tutorial and 81 questionnaires focusing on lecture attendance were received back from students. The questionnaires were pre-tested with a number of senior lecturers and a handful of undergraduate students at London Metropolitan University. Few minor modifications had to be made to the structure and wording of the questionnaire for comprehension purposes.

Descriptive Analysis

The most prominent reasons given for missing lectures were illness, transport problems and inconvenient lecture times. Sixty-one percent of students also claimed to miss lectures because they were working on other coursework assignments. Students did not attend tutorials for very similar reasons (see Table 1). It was also suggested that students were much more likely to miss a tutorial rather than a lecture, if they had work commitments elsewhere. About one-third (38%) of students claimed that they would miss a lecture if they were able to get the lecture handouts and materials in other ways. Thirty-two people respondents claimed to feel obliged to go to lectures only because friends or peers attended as well. On the other hand, over 50% respondents agreed that they practised a similar conformist behaviour when it came to tutorial attendance. In total, a third of the students claimed that they were only at university to improve their job prospects in the future.

TABLE 1.

Reasons for missing:-	TUTORIALS: % agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements	LECTURES: % agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements
I can get the tutorial/lecture material in other ways	15%	38%
Tutorials/lectures are not worth attending	4%	6%
Times are not always right	38%	50%
Illness	45%	72%
Transport problems	44%	61%
Work commitments elsewhere	26%	14%
Poor content of tutorial/lecture	20%	23%
Poor tutor/lecturer	19%	23%
Tutor/lecturer has disregard for the student	10%	14%
Have to work on other assignments	28%	61%
Cannot be bothered	9%	15%

On average, 15-20% of respondents claimed to feel either nervous or stressed before attending tutorials. Only 5% of students claimed to miss lectures as a result of stress and nervousness. Extrinsic motivation (e.g. wishing to get good grades and intrinsic motivation (e.g. genuine interest in the subject matter) were the most important reasons for not missing either a lecture or a tutorial (see Table 2). Thus, students tended not to miss tutorials if they liked the tutor, if the subject was deemed too difficult to address without guidance or help from academics. Interestingly Sixty percent of first year students claimed that their parents were a great influence on whether or not they attended lectures.

Another key result showed that students were less likely to miss a lecture than a tutorial due to the large amounts of information handed out in such sessions. Lecturers do indeed hand out more information regarding the course structure, assignments and other assessment-related material during lectures (especially if the unit carries large numbers), simply because it is easier to address the student body in such a formal setting.

Fifty-seven percent of students claimed that they never miss a tutorial, while 35% miss on average 1 tutorial per week and only 8% claimed to miss 2 per week. At the same time, 59% of students claimed never to miss lectures, while 41% claimed to miss 1 per week.

TABLE 2.

Reasons for NOT missing:-	TUTORIALS: % agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements	LECTURES: % agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements
Attendance is vital if I want to achieve good grades	93%	97%
The subject is difficult and complex to learn without help and guidance	65%	73%
Tutor/Lecturer is good	77%	76%
Lot of material is handed out and it would be difficult to catch up	69%	82%
Parents / family put pressure on me to attend tutorials/lectures	8%	20%
I am genuinely interested in the subject	81%	82%

Hypotheses Testing

Using statistical techniques,[**] the same regression analysis (one specifically testing for affects on tutorial attendance, the other testing for affects on lecture attendance) was carried out to test four of the hypotheses. These were:

H1: Lower levels of motivation results in non-attendance.
H3: Students do not attend due to work commitments elsewhere.
H4: Stress is a cause of absenteeism.
H5: Low self-esteem is a cause of absenteeism.

A number of significant results were found. Students attended tutorials regularly if they were intrinsically motivated to study their chosen degree pathway. Also, students who did not feel stressed and nervous before attending tutorials attended them regularly. However, low self-esteem was another factor causing students to attend tutorial sessions. Perhaps students with low self-esteem were more likely to attend because they may feel that they need more guidance and support through their studies. "Work commitments elsewhere" did not cause students to miss tutorials. Therefore, in relation to tutorial attendance, hypotheses 1 and 4 were accepted, while hypotheses 3 and 5 were rejected.

In relation to lecture attendance only hypothesis 1 was accepted. Extrinsic motivation was a significant causal factor on the dependent variable "I always attend lectures unless there is a special reason (e.g. illness)".

Hypotheses 2, 6 and 7 were tested via correlations.

H2: The motivation to attend lectures is influenced by lecturers' attitudes towards the student.
H6: Intrinsically motivated students are more likely to attend lectures than are extrinsically motivated students.
H7: Introverts are more likely to attend lectures than are extroverts.

In the case of tutorial attendance all three hypotheses were rejected, as there was no evidence to support them. With regard to hypothesis 6, the results showed that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation played a vital part in tutorial attendance.

In the case of lecture attendance, only hypothesis 2 was accepted. Students attended lectures if the lecturer was not seen to have disregard for the student body. Thus, in relation to hypothesis 6, the reverse was true. The correlation matrix showed that extrinsic motivation was strongly and positively correlated with lecture attendance, whereas intrinsic motivation did not correlate with regular attendance at lectures. There was no evidence whatsoever to support the statement in hypothesis 7.

Data on Tutorial Attendance - Findings from the Correlation Analysis

Students who were not introverted and felt comfortable about their communication skills were also more likely to attend tutorials regularly. Individuals with low self-esteem were likely to attend tutorials because of conformist behaviour and to feel nervous before attending a tutorial session. Intrinsically motivated students did not show low self-esteem. The statement "I rarely enjoy the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake" was strongly and positively correlated with the following statements "I tend to miss tutorials because of transport problems" and because of "illness". It is indicative from these results that illness and transport problems are really used as excuses for low levels of motivation in general and a lack of interest in the discipline being studied.

Attending tutorials was a major priority for students who were intrinsically motivated. Extrinsically motivated students were also highly motivated to attend tutorials on a regular basis. Extrinsically motivated respondents agreed that they would never miss a lecture if they considered the tutor to be good at his/her job. There was also a significant correlation between extrinsic motivation and the belief that the subject was too difficult and complex without help and guidance. Extrinsic motivation was highly and positively correlated with intrinsic motivation. Students who regularly attended tutorials did not feel nervous or stressed about their studies.

Data on Lecture Attendance - Findings from the Correlation Analysis

There was a strong positive correlation between the statements "I cannot be bothered to go to lectures" and "I have several times given up doing things because I thought too little of my ability". Therefore, although students with low self-esteem attended tutorials frequently, it was not necessarily the case that they attended lectures as well. Students who agreed with the statement "I rarely enjoy the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake" also tended to agree or strongly agree with the statements "lectures have poor content" and "the lecturer is poor".

Once more, these results could indicate that the student body is somewhat in denial as to their negative attitudes to academics, academia and attendance. On the other hand these results might betoken that students are not getting the type of training and educational development that they need. They may perhaps have lecturers' learning styles imposed on them, which do not fit with their own. Students who did not enjoy acquiring knowledge for its own sake were also more likely to miss lectures. Again, respondents who could not be bothered to go to lectures were also highly likely to feel nervous and stressed prior to attending the lecture session. Students who agreed with the statement "I miss lectures because the lecturers have disregard towards the student body" also agreed that they missed lectures because of bad quality lecturing and poor material content.

Implications

The current investigation has identified some important aspects of student behaviour in relation to lecture and tutorial attendance. Motivation - extrinsic and intrinsic alike - is the major factor causing students to attend either lectures or tutorials. Unfortunately, not all students are motivated to study and learn, let alone attend classes. Results indicated that some students found lectures boring and not worth attending. This may of course be due to low motivational levels, but there is a possibility perhaps that the teaching and learning styles of London Metropolitan University students and lecturers are just simply not compatible. New styles of teaching may need to be looked into. This needs to be further investigated, especially in the context of "widening participation". Also, results suggested that there were indeed significant differences between the reasons why students attended a lecture versus a tutorial. For example, it appears that lectures were important for obtaining information and handouts, and tutorials for the opportunity of participation. Further research will need to address this issue.

Although the "other work commitments" thesis is not supported, another conclusion from this exploratory investigation is that students are bad time managers. They have the tendency to miss classes simply because they are working on other assignments. Perhaps time management should be taught at the outset of the programme. The results also imply that if lecture or tutorial material were not easily obtainable, more students would turn up for sessions. Academics could perhaps indicate that student are only entitled to handouts if they attend the class. However, this may be unfair treatment towards people who have a genuine excuse for not attending.

** Editorial note

Detailed statistical tables were included in the draft paper, but have been omitted for reasons of space. However, they may be obtained from the author.

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