Factors Influencing Student Attendance and Engagement

Abstract

Undergraduate student researchers assisted with the design, delivery, and analysis for a project investigating low attendance at timetabled teaching sessions. Data was gathered from 208 students representing all four faculties on three Anglia Ruskin University campuses (i.e. Cambridge, Chelmsford, and Guild House, Peterborough), and comparison data was gathered from University Centre Peterborough.

Results show that, contrary to anecdotal evidence, poor attendance is not the result of content hosted on the VLE, financial decisions made by fee-paying 'consumers', disaffected 'tap-in' system users, or employment, but is in fact a complex combination of factors based around an unevenly distributed timetable.

Keywords

Attendance, Engagement, Timetabling

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Introduction

At numerous events held by Anglia Learning and Teaching in 2013-14 we were made aware of the perception that fewer students were attending taught sessions across all faculties. This drop in attendance coincided with several potential variables which might be expected to impact on student attendance including the introduction of the TAP system, higher student fees, and our greater emphasis on the use of the VLE. This research set out to establish whether these variables were affecting attendance, and also whether there were any other influences over which we might have some control.

With funding afforded by her University Teaching Fellowship, Dr Jaki Lilly decided to design a project which, she hoped, would facilitate honest feedback from students, by enlisting students as primary researchers. The project was also designed to offer the student researchers considerable experience in the research processes of research design, data collection and analysis, reporting and presenting with extensive support from Anglia Learning and Teaching.

During the course of the research we identified some differences in practice with regard to the management of student attendance, along with some inconsistencies in our messages to students about attendance. Some of the findings are concurrent with the extensive literature on student attendance and engagement but others provide some insight into the behaviour of our students, and what we might consider in order to improve attendance.

Current practice at Anglia Ruskin

A preliminary investigation was conducted into current practice regarding non-attendance at our University to avoid repeating any measures currently in place to identify reasons for non-attendance. This investigation revealed considerable variation between faculty approaches.

Attendance data is available via the Tap System and therefore can be used to contact students to determine the reasons for any non-attendance. One faculty has extensive and detailed records of contact attempts and follow-up action. Students are contacted three times and reasons for non-attendance are recorded from those students who respond. This has revealed that, in addition to issues relating to health and travel, students frequently attend a different seminar session to the one recorded on SITS:Vision, or have problems with lost or faulty ID cards.

Two other faculties keep similar records and make contact with students and keep records or responses, but these appear to be less focused and sophisticated than the process described above.

One faculty, however, only maintains summary records of absences at module level and makes no attempt to contact non-attenders. The reason given for this is that the lack of a clear policy on absenteeism, and the perceived reluctance of our University to consider absence as a disciplinary matter, means that intervention has no impact on student behaviour.

The Student Charter states the following:

Attendance

To make sure you get the most out of your course, we ask you to attend all timetabled lectures, seminars and other activities that are part of your course.

We will:

- monitor your attendance at timetabled classes and contact you if you do not attend

- start classes within two minutes of the scheduled time and teach for the full time of the class

- reserve the right to refuse entry to students who are more than 10 minutes late for a class

- stop timetabled sessions at 10 minutes to the hour so that you can arrive on time for your next class.

We will expect you to:

- attend every session that is part of your course

- prepare well and arrive on time for classes and stay for the whole of the teaching session. (Arriving late or leaving early is unprofessional, impolite and disrespectful to other students and members of staff)

- not try to come into class if you are more than 10 minutes late

- tap in and note that tapping in for others and tapping in, then leaving is not acceptable.

(2014: 9)

The first bullet point in the 'We will' section states clearly that our University will contact students who do not attend. Unlike the Student Charter, however, the 'We will expect you to' sections of the Student Charter for Distance Learning Students and the Student Charter for Research Students include the phrase, 'report any unavoidable absences… as soon as possible' (2014: 9).

The Rules, Regulations and Procedures for Students (17th Edition, July 2014) include the following entry:

1   Attending university

[…]

b   You must attend all lectures and so on regularly and on time.

c   If your behaviour, attendance or academic record is not satisfactory, we may take disciplinary action against you under our disciplinary procedure.

(2014: 7)

This treats unsatisfactory attendance as a disciplinary offence which can lead to expulsion.

The Academic Regulations (7th Edition, July 2014) include the following paragraphs:

(D) General Requirements for Students

3.37   To qualify for the conferment of an Anglia Ruskin award students must…

either

- regularly attend those taught elements as may be prescribed in Student Handbooks and/or Module Guides (for modules delivered by standard delivery methods);

or

- fulfil the learning requirements prescribed in Student Handbooks and/or Module Guides (for modules delivered by flexible and distributed learning including e-learning);

- undertake and successfully complete in accordance with Section 6 of these Academic Regulations the assessment and, where applicable, re-assessment processes for the course for which they are registered and its associated modules;

- satisfy the credit requirements of the course for which they are registered in terms of the volume and level of credit, as prescribed in the Academic Regulations;

- have paid the appropriate tuition fees for their studies and met all their financial obligations to Anglia Ruskin University.

(2014: 41)

And,

(C) Student Responsibilities

5.6   Students have the following responsibilities:

- to attend regularly those taught elements as may be prescribed in Student Handbooks and/or Module Guides published by the Faculty, unless sickness or other valid circumstances pertain;

(2014: 54)

Thus, while the Student Charter instructs students to attend everything, both the Rules, Regulations and Procedures for Students and paragraph 5.6 of the Academic Regulations downgrade this requirement to 'regular' attendance, and paragraph 3.37 implies that attendance is optional providing students meet the learning outcomes, pass assignments, and pay their fees.

A review of attendance policies at other HEIs resulted in over 30 examples from the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia (see References: Websites). Apart from the University of Cambridge which 'does not officially set rules on the hours of attendance' (2013: online), the majority of institutions reviewed stated a minimum proportion of attendance with a range of penalties for absences without officially sanctioned reasons. The list of possible sanctions ranges from withholding marks and grades, to possible expulsion. The University of New South Wales, for example, states that, 'If students attend less than eighty per cent of their possible classes they may be refused final assessment' (2013: online). Similarly, the penalties stated by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney are:

> Attendance below 80% of tutorials/seminars without written evidence of illness or misadventure may be penalised with loss of marks. Local conditions and penalties are publicised in unit of study outlines, or on the unit of study Blackboard site.

> Attendance at less than 50% per cent of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences, will automatically result in the student's case being referred to a department examiners' meeting. Non-attendance at 50% or more of classes without due cause is likely to result in a student receiving an Absent Fail grade for the unit of study (2013: online).

Attendance at most institutions reviewed is monitored, either manually or electronically, and students are contacted, generally via email, and action is escalated only in cases where students are unable or unwilling to provide a satisfactory explanation for their absence. The University of Bolton, for instance, advises that:

11. Sanctions in the event of non-attendance

Where a student's attendance is unsatisfactory, one or more of the following actions may be taken.

This list is not exhaustive.

a. Seek an explanation from the student for their unsatisfactory attendance, discuss how their attendance must improve and recommend appropriate support.

b. Issue the student with a verbal or written warning about their attendance.

c. Require those students who fail to respond to warnings about their attendance to enter into a Formal Attendance Agreement…

d. Inform the student that Assessment Boards may take into account a student's attendance in relation to progression and awards.

e. Advise the student that staff, when writing references, may take a student's attendance into account.

f. Inform the student that a formal report on the student's attendance may be made to the student's sponsor including an employer and the Student Loan Company.

g. Inform an international student holding a Tier 4 visa that the University is required to notify the UKBA of withdrawal resulting from unsatisfactory attendance.

h. Inform an international student on a Tier 4 visa that attendance is taken into account when applying for a Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies (CAS)

i. Withdraw the student from their programme of study if they fail to respond to warnings or breach the terms of their Attendance Agreement.

(undated: online)

In the light of the approaches taken by other institutions, we may wish to consider the creation of consistent approach at an institutional level which includes:

- a clear and unambiguous definition of the minimum acceptable level of attendance;

- the introduction of a consistent approach to contacting absentees (when and how frequently); and

- the introduction of a system of penalties to be administered by faculties on a student-specific basis depending on individual circumstances.

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Aim of the project

A lack of systematic research into our students' attendance has resulted in a number of speculations as to the cause of absence. Anecdotally, various explanations have been put forward by academic colleagues including:

- the VLE is now so comprehensive that students feel that it is unnecessary to come to class;

- the Tap system has de-personalised the relationship between students and lecturers so students do not feel a moral obligation to attend;

- the prioritising of employment over study;

- payment of fees resulting in students making financial decisions about attendance.

This project aimed to:

- approach a wide variety of undergraduate students in order to gather qualitative, quantitative and demographic data from those who sometimes do not attend lectures;

- engage students in actively reflecting on their experiences and motivations; with a view to participating in the improvement of service delivery and practice through policy change;

- better understand the situations, experiences and motivations of students, in relation to attendance;

- address anecdotal evidence from lecturers;

- provide feedback via Anglia Learning and Teaching with recommendations for possible changes to increase student engagement and attendance.

Literature Review

A review of 140 journal articles spanning the period 1983 to 2012 revealed that educators have investigated the issue of student non-attendance at all levels of education (compulsory (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 1997), further (Longhurst, 1999), and higher education (Cleary-Holdforth, 2007)) and that this is a phenomenon that exists in a number of countries (including the UK (Bowen, Price, Lloyd and Thomas, 2005), the US (Westerman *et al.*, 2011), Canada (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd and Thomas, 2008), Australia (Brew, Riley and Walta, 2009), Kuwait (Al-Shammari, 2012), Denmark (Bingley, Myrup Jensen and Walker, 2005), and so on), and disciplines (e.g. Medicine (Arcidiacono and Nicholson, 2005), Economics (Adair and Swinton, 2012), Computer Science (Barrington and Johnson, 2006), Engineering (Purcell, 2007)).

Many of these studies, however, focused on small or restricted samples, such as a group of students studying one subject, in one module, over the course of semester. In addition, many studies developed sophisticated statistical models and, while this information defines the nature and extent of the issue, statistics do not satisfactorily reveal the motivations for student behaviour. As Dolnicar (2005) points out, '[t]he procedure of averaging is likely to cover heterogeneity between individuals or like-minded groups of students thus not capturing the full picture' (2005, p. 5).

In addition, many of the studies are constrained by narrow foci, such as a single faculty, a single subject, a single semester, a single module, and so on. This does not replicate the student experience at universities that operate a modular system under which a student, amongst other things, will:

- take a number of different modules;

- be taught by an array of teachers (including full-time, part-time, and hourly paid lecturers, plus visiting, and external speakers);

- learn a range of topics (which may be more or less easily understood by the student and which may or may not form part of a coherent course);

- be required to complete assessments other than their preferred method;

- sit in different physical environments (i.e. different classrooms on different campuses with different furniture and all the attendant 'hygiene factors' (i.e. non-teaching related issues such as heating, lighting, external noise, and so on (Herzberg, 1968)) that go with this);

- mix with several groups of students, some of whom will overlap with other modules while others will not; may include a mix of full- and part-time students; may include disruptive students;

- possibly have differing experiences as a result of being a combined honours student.

Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010), for example, suggest that,

> class attendance is likely to be substantively influenced by contextual factors, such as attendance norms at the university, perceived difficulty of the class, characteristics of the instructor, and whether students can obtain lecture material online. *An examination of within person variability in class attendance may help shed light on the influence of some of these contextual variables* (2010, p. 288 – emphasis added)

The above factors relate solely to the interactions between the students and the institution and do not take into account external factors.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that studies differ when reporting the relationship between attendance and performance. Some studies suggest that performance is improved for students who attend, while others find no correlation. Even in those studies where a positive impact is identified, this is frequently a weak correlation at best (cf. Baldwin, 1980; Gatherer and Manning, 1998; Van Walbeek, 2004; Marburger, 2001; Moore, Armstrong and Pearson, 2008). No evidence exists in the literature of a causal relationship between student attendance and student achievement.

According to the literature, the factors listed in Table 1 influence student attendance.

Student-based Factors	Institution-based Factors
Student Profile	**Institutional Factors**
Gender	Fees
Age	Lack of institutional concern
First in family to attend university	Reduced teaching / contact hours
Mode of study (Full- and part-time students)	Time of lectures
Year of study	Boring lecturers
Entry requirements / academic ability	Academic role models
Conflicting internal and external demands (i.e. family)	Use of VLE to provide online notes / lecture recordings
Unfamiliarity with concepts and responsibilities of the independent learner	Learning agreement
Paid work	Module choice
Accommodation	Combined honours
Clearing	Class size
	Hygiene factors
	Mode of instruction
	Methods of assessment
	Professional requirements

Student Personality	Institutional Responses
Personality type	Mandatory attendance
Motivation (general)	Electronic monitoring
Motivation to engage	Punctuality punishment
Motivation to go to university	Attendance without engagement
Motivation to succeed	
Time management	
Peer group / cohort behaviour	
Attending lectures solely to obtain assessment guidance	
Replacing attendance with effective alternative forms of study	

Table 1: Factors influencing attendance

Methodology

Undergraduate student researchers were recruited for the project as the project team believed that students would be more likely to be forthcoming with their responses if they were talking to other students rather than to members of staff. The student researchers participated in the design of the project, collected and analysed the data, drafted and delivered interim findings at our annual Learning and Teaching Conference, and drafted the final paper for publication.

A mixed-methodology was used to gather data. Initially, surveys were used to gather preliminary data and demographic information from undergraduate students at each campus using a convenience sampling method. The researchers approached students in spaces where they gathered on each of the two main campuses (i.e. Cambridge and Chelmsford), plus Guild House, Peterborough. Data was also collected at University Centre Peterborough (UCP) for comparison purposes.

The surveys were completed on a tablet computer via an online questionnaire tool, Survey Monkey. The surveys were comprised of category, multiple-choice and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). A list of 'trigger' categories had previously been identified for further investigation, such as the common response 'Couldn't be bothered', and the availability of lecture materials on the VLE. Participants, who responded to trigger categories, were asked to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group to discuss the issues surrounding their attendance. The interviews were semi-structured, focused on gaining deeper understanding into non-attendance and pre-identified 'trigger' issues, whilst allowing participants to voice their own issues and suggestions. Participant interviews were recorded using software on the researchers' tablet computers. Participation in the surveys, interviews and focus groups remained anonymous in order to allow students to speak freely in the knowledge that they would not be identified.

The questionnaires were administered in Weeks 11 and 12 of Semester Two of the 2013-14 academic year (Cambridge n=77, Chelmsford n=65, Guild House n=10, UCP n=56). Some respondents were interviewed immediately following the questionnaires, while others were arranged for a later, mutually convenient, date and time.

Focus groups took place on all sites in weeks 13 and 14 and were also recorded on the researchers' tablet computers while participation was again anonymous. The focus groups were comprised of volunteers to the project, either from the initial surveys or in response to an email circulated around the campuses. Participants were rewarded with a £15 voucher and a lunch voucher.

Qualitative data gleaned from the open-ended survey questions, the recordings from interviews and focus groups were then analysed using NVivo software. This data was coded using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in order to identify trends in non-attendance.

An alternative approach would have been to identify a random sample of non-attenders through a review of the Tap System and SITS records. A representative sample of regular non-attenders could then be

identified from the data and contacted via email. This approach could be employed in further studies if sufficient resources became available. However in view of the time and resources available for this project, we considered that personal approaches to students would ensure a better response.

Demographics

The demographic composition of survey respondents is shown in Table 2.

| | | Overall % | Cambridge % | Chelmsford % | Peterborough | |
					Guild House* %	UCP %
Gender	**Female**	58	56	54	100	64
	Male	42	44	46	0	36
Age	**18 – 21**	61	62	65	0	57
	22 – 34	33	33	27	100	36
	35 +	6	5	8	0	7
First in Family	**Yes**	49	44	54	100	50
	No	51	56	46	0	50
Faculty	**ALSS**	28	26	8	0	52
	FHSCE	15	12	27	100	4
	FST	42	52	38	0	30
	LAIBS	15	10	27	0	15
Year of Study	**Foundation**	6	13	0	0	0
	1st	24	27	8	100	33
	2nd	34	31	54	0	22
	3rd	35	29	38	0	44
Mode of Study	**Full-time**	98	100	96	100	96
	Part-time	2	0	4	0	4

Table 2: Demographics of survey participants
* Data collected from only one respondent

The gender split was weighted towards females, and approximately two-thirds of participants were between the ages of 18 years and 21 years, a third were aged between 22 years and 34 years, and there were a few over 35 years.

Some previous studies have indicated that being the first in your family to attend university and the year of study have an influence on attendance. Participants in this study were evenly divided between those who were and those who were not.

While FHSCE appears to be proportionately underrepresented (see Table 1), a large number of FHSCE students were approached. However, demographics were not recorded for respondents who indicated that they attended regularly and, since many students in Health and Education have stricter attendance requirements than other subjects, it is reasonable to suppose that a smaller proportion of FHSCE students declared themselves to be regular non-attenders. All students approached at Guild House, for example, were FHSCE students, three of whom were postgraduate students and therefore were not questioned further. Of those remaining, only one student stated that they regularly missed sessions citing family commitments as a reason. Six of the other students who stated that they had never skipped lectures for reasons other than genuine sickness offered comments on fellow students who regularly skipped classes. An additional approach in Cambridge at the Young Street site resulted in similar findings.

Participants were fairly evenly distributed between years of study (especially when the small number of Foundation students was combined with first years). The only exception to this was Chelmsford where a small number of first years and a large number of second years responded to the survey.

There were so few part-time students approached that no meaningful interpretation could be made of this data.

Space restrictions for this publication prevent exploration of similarities and differences between and within the various groups but these will be reported elsewhere.

Findings

The reasons for non-attendance offered in the survey were primarily consistent with those from the literature. Table 3 lists the proportion of responses given by students in order of the most to least frequent responses combined across the four sites.

	Overall %	Cambridge %	Chelmsford %	Peterborough	
				Guild House %	UCP %
Sickness	18	16	18	22	15
Other external commitments (i.e. family, etc.)	16	8	11	33	10
Boring Lectures	14	12	11	17	18
Couldn't be bothered	13	14	12	11	15
Employment (Paid or unpaid)	9	7	7	11	10
Timing of sessions (too early / too late)	7	9	9		8
Content on VLE anyway	6	10	8		5
Session too long	5	4	6	6	4
Hangover	5	8	4		6
Content not relevant to career	4	4	6		4
Sessions spread out over the week	2	2	6		1
Lack of personal relationship or feel anonymous	2	4	3		1
Financial / Fees	2	2	2		3

Table 3: Reasons given for non-attendance from the survey

The final question on the survey asked students to suggest one thing that we could do to improve attendance. The comments were brief and to the point and as can be seen from Table 4, the most frequent comments related to Boring Lectures (i.e. 'Make lectures fun and interactive') and Timetabling (i.e. make lectures later in the day and not too late in the evening'). These issues are addressed in detail below.

Theme	Total n	Cambridge n	Chelmsford n	Peterborough Guild House n	UCP n
Boring lectures	34	9	4		21
Timetabling	29	9	10		10
Carrots & Sticks	24	13	9	1	1
Other	10	3	1		6
Parking	8		8		
Importance of lecture content	5	5			
Support materials	5	3			2
Childcare	4		1	3	
Rapport	4	4			
Tap-in system	4	2		2	
Commuting	3	2			1
Student social interaction	2	1			1
Assignment support	1	1			
Content relevance	1	1			
Personal motivation	1	1			
Working	1				1

Table 4: Student suggestions for improvement

The third most frequently made comments, however, referred to introducing some form of penalty or reward (i.e. 'Carrots & Sticks) to help motivate students to attend. Some students made general comments about monitoring attendance and contacting non-attenders (although two of them stressed the need to avoid using patronising or threatening language). In the main, students preferred employing a Stick (n=12) rather than a carrot (n=7). Suggested penalties included, 'Make attendance compulsory', and have an 'Emphasis on punishment for non-attendance from day one' and 'Have a consequence for a certain amount of missed lectures-get kicked off course' or 'restrict VLE to those attending'. Students also asked for the 'ten-minute rule' on lateness to be extended and more rigidly enforced. The rewards suggested by students included both 'Financial incentives' (suggested by three students) and extra marks for attendance (suggested by two students). One student suggested a prize of some description with another asking for a 'Vending machine in class so not tempted to leave during breaks'. Any form of reward or penalty, however, is dependent upon an amendment to current policy.

A related issue raised by Cambridge students is the 'importance' of lecture content. Students noted that they considered some lectures to contain content that they judged to be more important than others (i.e. 'Each lecture should be as important so you can't miss it – some, you can tell you don't need to go'). One student suggested that lecturers should spend time 'emphasising how important it is and how it all applies together, otherwise you learn what you need to then forget the rest'.

Table 5 lists the top three reasons for non-attendance from the survey (both quantitative and qualitative), the interviews, and the focus groups, for each site.

	Survey Quantitative	Survey Qualitative	Interview	Focus Group
Cambridge	• Sickness • Couldn't be bothered • Boring lectures	• Lack of discipline • Commuting • VLE	• Boring lectures • Lecture vs seminar • VLE	• Social spaces • Consequences for non-attendance • Timetabling
Chelmsford	• Sickness • Couldn't be bothered • Other external commitments	• Timetabling • Parking • Travel	• VLE • Boring lectures • Timetabling	• Boring lectures • Timetabling • VLE
Guild House	• Other external commitments • Sickness • Boring lectures		• Tap system	
UCP	• Boring lectures • Sickness • Couldn't be bothered	• Better teaching experiences • Timetabling • Childcare	• VLE • Commitment to course • Boring lectures	• Relevance to assignment • Boring lectures • Seminar structure

Table 5: Top three reasons for non-attendance

For this project, 'Sickness' refers to genuine sickness (as opposed to 'Hangover', for example) and was treated as an unavoidable reason for non-attendance. As this was not regarded as a trigger response it was not followed up and therefore only appears in the quantitative responses to the survey, where it was the most common reason given for non-attendance.

Although the second most frequent response was 'Couldn't be bothered', further investigation revealed that this reason for non-attendance acts as shorthand for a complex interplay of reasons which are explored below.

As noted above, anecdotal evidence from lecturers suggests that, in their opinion, students do not attend lectures due to the scope of resources on the VLE, a feeling of de-personalisation due to the Tap system, employment, and fees. Our findings show, however, that students do not feel disconnected from our University, nor do they make attendance decisions based on financial matters such as fees. Also, as explained below, employment and the availability of lecture content on the VLE are not primary motivating factors for non-attendance.

Boring lectures

We found that students highlighted boring lectures as the main reason for non-attendance. The findings show that lectures need to be more interactive and engaging. Students expect lecturers to elaborate on PowerPoint slides rather than simply reading out a list of bullet points for 50 minutes (i.e. 'death by PowerPoint'). Students also noted that where lecturers do nothing more than read out PowerPoint slides that are available on the VLE then there is no point attending since nothing of value is added and they are better able to use the time in self-directed study.

Many students praised their lecturers and acknowledged that content can be difficult to make interesting. A few mentioned that the opportunity to choose from a wider range of modules to make their learning more relevant to them would be a motivating factor. Student opinion on lecture content was ambiguous, with some students asking for more elaboration on the PowerPoint information, while others reported that

lecturers sometimes bring in too much additional content, going off track with information students see as 'irrelevant'.

Often students reported not getting the full value of an hour lecture plus an hour seminar. Students felt that seminars should be properly structured and interactive, in order to practice applying the theory from the related lecture. Seminars were said to have generally low attendance, but were considered a better way of learning compared to lectures. They were found to offer the opportunity to interact and engage more easily with lecturers and fellow students.

Other related topics included:

• Repeated information

• Style of teaching

• Relevance to course and/or assignments

• Advantages of seminars (e.g. discussion of and contextualization of theory)

Employment

Students indicated that they try wherever possible to arrange work around timetabled teaching sessions and will work evenings and weekends as far as possible. However, while employment is not a primary factor for non-attendance, when faced with the choice between a full days' pay or a one-hour lecture, students frequently have no alternative other than to work. This is particularly true where lecturers only read out hand-outs that are available on the VLE

In Cambridge some students work unsociable hours as the types of jobs available to them are often evening jobs such as working in bars, cinemas, or at the bowling alley, where shifts finish late. Students miss early morning lectures due to fatigue from working into the early hours.

Other external commitments

The factor 'Other External commitments' consists of commitments outside our University other than employment. External commitments highlighted by students included childcare, family commitments, and social engagements. This was an issue for students across all sites, and did not apply to specific faculties or subjects.

Childcare in particular was a commitment raised most often as contributing to non-attendance. Students with children need to be able to drop off and pick up their children from school or childcare and therefore find it difficult to attend sessions before 10am or after 4pm. Parents of both nursery- and school-aged children may require out of school or occasional childcare. Many students who had children of school age reported difficulties finding occasional Ofsted registered childcare during school holidays, when they do not coincide with university breaks. Childcare often needs to be booked in advance for set days and it is more expensive to arrange ad-hoc childcare. One student in Chelmsford, for example, explained that,

I need two to three hours maximum… my children are at school but have half-terms that we don't have… I am unable to find Ofsted registered childcare that will do ten days a year.

A few students, however, reported that early lecture times put them off as they did not want to get up to attend an early lecture. Quite a number of students accepted that the responsibility for this was theirs, and that the 'Couldn't be bothered' attitude was down to their own poor time management, sleeping patterns, and so on.

VLE

Availability of lecture content on the VLE does not directly affect student attendance. Students acknowledged that while it was helpful to be able to access the lecture notes on the VLE, they pointed out that there were other sources of obtaining lecture notes, either in the form of recordings or notes from friends, or direct from the lecturer. Students stated that the availability of lecture notes on the VLE made no difference to their decision whether to attend or not.

Students indicated that the VLE is not a sole or primary reason to skip sessions, but in fact acts as a safety net for those who are absent to ensure they are able to engage in the subject material.

Complexity

Many students expressed the view that a complex and interrelating set of factors influenced their attendance. Students' decisions to attend taught sessions often involved the student weighing up the pros and cons of attending and comparing the value of attending against the cost. When students were presented with a choice between a one-hour lecture and a full day's employment, for example, many chose employment.

Commuting and travel distance further added to the complex decision-making process. Some students felt that travel into university could be subsidised, through the provision of a mega-rider to get the bus or a discount on the Park and Ride service, or subsidised parking. Others felt that it was not worth making a long commute for a one-hour lecture, particularly when the lecturer did not expand on the notes available on the VLE.

This supports the view that there is a complex set of factors influencing a student's decision whether to attend taught sessions, including employment, financial issues, travelling, and timetabling. This complex set of factors often led to a student feeling as though they could not be bothered to attend, resulting in the high occurrence of 'Couldn't be bothered' responses in the survey.

Site-specific Factors

Cambridge

Social spaces

Students raised two issues relating to the provision of social spaces on the Cambridge campus. Firstly, a number of students noted a lack of provision of social spaces other than cafeterias making it difficult to meet new people.

Other students felt that, despite being subsidised, prices at the refectory remain expensive compared with local off-campus venues. Students noted that if they left the campus at lunch time they might choose not to return for afternoon lectures.

Employment

Employment was highlighted as an important factor affecting attendance which may be related to the high cost of living in Cambridge. As noted above, some students referred to working unsociable hours which affected their attendance the following morning.

Other students commented that shift-patterns often coincide with their scheduled lectures affecting their attendance, either the student prioritises a full shift's wage over a one-hour scheduled lecture, or they feel forced to work in fear of losing their job if their employer demands that they attend their shift.

Chelmsford

Childcare

Childcare was a primary concern for students in Chelmsford, which may be related to the predominance of female students in Nursing and Education.

Travel

The attendance of participants in Chelmsford was more prominently affected by travel and parking issues when compared to the other sites. Students frequently reported restrictions on parking availability and the cost of parking as reasons for their absence.

Throughout the interviews and the focus group, students also discussed commuting, highlighting several issues, particularly problems with public transport (including Park-and-Ride), and driving in rush hour traffic.

However, these issues with parking and commuting were often linked to timetabling where, as noted elsewhere, students deemed it not worth travelling into campus for a one-hour lecture in the middle of the day.

Peterborough

Childcare

As with Chelmsford, childcare was the most popular suggestion from students when it came to improving attendance, especially when combined with its availability on campus. It was noted that Guild House has no on-site childcare available at all, and the majority of students approached there cited this as something that could be offered to improve attendance.

Combined with UCP, childcare issues appeared to be more prominent in Peterborough than other campuses as a reason for non-attendance. This could be attributed to the large number of local students with young families.

Seminars

UCP students reported that felt that seminar attendance would improve if they were properly structured and lasted for the full duration of the timetabled session. While the Anglia Ruskin Student Charter, states that scheduled sessions will take place for the full duration of the class, some students complained that many sessions finished early.

While many comments from UCP students reflected the wider opinions of Anglia Ruskin students that lectures can sometimes be boring, they viewed seminars as being more interactive and engaging, allowing them to apply the theory learned in lectures and enhancing their learning experience.

The Tap System

Comments from Guild House students on the Tap System concerned a perceived penalisation of those students with genuine reasons for absence / lateness. Some students reported that if they are more than ten minutes late, they are automatically marked as absent for the entire session and have to make this time up. Therefore, if a student is running late for a genuine reason, the knowledge that they will be required to make this time up may deter them from coming in at all.

Students also pointed out that after being present for a couple of hours, they can leave early and not have to make the time up. It was suggested that a system which showed accumulated minutes, similar to flexible working systems, would be an improvement (i.e. tapping in and tapping out). UCP does not use the Tap System.

Key Factors Impacting on Student Attendance

Three key areas of concern that affect all sites were highlighted by students: Boring Lectures; Timetabling; and Childcare. In addition, provision of social spaces was a topic of concern for students in Cambridge, and parking caused problems for students in Chelmsford (although the extent to which these issues are experienced could be reduced by changes to timetabling).

Boring Lectures

Teaching styles were found to greatly influence student's motivation to attend sessions. Therefore, we still have work to do in ensuring that all teaching staff use a more up to date, engaging and interactive style of delivery rather than simply reading out PowerPoint content that is available on the VLE. More interactive lecture styles that bring in student discussion to clarify points could increase attendance and motivation.

Lectures and seminars should be adequately planned and carried out in order to fill the allotted time on the timetable. In the case of seminars, students feel that a more structured session which allows the opportunity to apply the theory, clarification of the subject matter and active learning would improve attendance.

Timetabling

Timetabling is an issue that intersects with employment, childcare, and commuting in to university, and was the reason behind many of the 'Couldn't be bothered' responses. Investigating the possibility of more accessible timetabling – such as consolidating sessions to full days – would make it easier for parents to attend, and for working students to arrange employment. This would also address the issues raised by those students who cited long commutes for short teaching sessions as being a problem.

Childcare

Childcare arrangements were of considerable concern to many respondents due to a variety of reasons. Whilst it is not possible for us to solve this issue by providing care facilities ourselves, an adjustment to timetabling may also aid this issue, as discussed above.

Social Spaces (Cambridge)

Students report that the lack of diversity on provision of social spaces and the cost of on-campus food and drink forces students off campus and they are then less likely to return for later sessions. Therefore, improving social areas and facilities could encourage students to stay on campus and aid the meeting of new people.

Parking (Chelmsford)

Parking is a significant issue for students on the Chelmsford campus and onsite parking has been suggested as an improvement which will aid attendance. Once again, this is not something we can provide, but perhaps we could investigate offering subsidised Park-and-Ride fares for students. Again, parking is a more prominent issue when combined with other factors such as timetabling.

Conclusion

Previous research on student attendance was mainly focused on single subjects and used statistical modelling to analyse student behaviour which suggested single cause explanations for non-attendance. This research attempted to delve deeper into, and understand the complexity of student non-attendance. Anecdotal evidence associating non-attendance with VLE content, employment, fees and the Tap system is not supported by the student voice. It is clear that students' decisions for non-attendance are based on a complex set of inter-relating factors. Nevertheless, complexity notwithstanding, the most frequently cited reason for non-attendance is boring lectures, and fractured distribution of timetabled sessions is the underlying cause of non-attendance for many students.

Examination of various policy documents has revealed that Anglia Ruskin's policy on attendance is unclear and there is disparity between faculties in the monitoring of student attendance. Clarification of expectations on students and the possible repercussions of non-attendance may also go some way to motivating students to attend.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

1. Would you be prepared to answer questions about attending classes?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

2. Are you a postgraduate?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

3. Have you ever been regularly absent from classes?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

4. Do you know anyone who is/has been regularly absent from classes?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

5. Reasons for skipping class (tick all that apply)

Reasons for skipping class

- ☒ Couldn't be bothered
- ☒ Sickness
- ☒ Hangover
- ☒ Employment (Paid or unpaid)
- ☒ Other external commitments (i.e. family, etc.)
- ☒ Financial / Fees
- ☒ Session too long
- ☒ Content on VLE anyway
- ☒ Content not relevant to career
- ☒ Timing of sessions (too early / too late)
- ☒ Sessions spread out over the week
- ☒ Lack of personal relationship or feel anonymous
- ☒ Boring Lectures

Please give any details

6. Any other reasons?

7. If there was one thing the university could do to improve attendance, what would it be?

Self / friend

8. Talking about friend?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

Demographics

9. What is your gender?

- ☒ Female
- ☒ Male
- ☒ Other
- ☒ Prefer not to reply

10. What is your age?

- ☒ 18 to 21
- ☒ 22 to 34
- ☒ 35 to 44
- ☒ 45 to 50
- ☒ 50+

11. Are you the first in your immediate family to attend university?

- ☒ Yes
- ☒ No

12. What is your Faculty / Subject?

- ☒ ALSS
- ☒ FHSCE
- ☒ FST
- ☒ LAIBS

Subject

13. What year are you in?

- ☒ Foundation
- ☒ 1
- ☒ 2
- ☒ 3

14. Are you full- or part-time?

- ☒ Full-time
- ☒ Part-time

15. Interview / Focus Group

- ☒ No
- ☒ Interview
- ☒ Focus Group

Contact details