

# Understanding Student Attendance Decisions: The Role of Learner-Centred Factors in Higher Education

Neil Ralph

Paula Ainsworth

Nonhlanhla Dube

# What's the issue?

- Student attendance is a key factor influencing retention and academic success. (Mearman et al, 2014)
- Non-attendance is increasingly becoming the norm (Oldfield et al, 2018)
- Anecdotal reporting indicates declining in-person attendance at Lancaster
- Much work has been done to understand institutional and educator-related factors (Alvarez-Hevia et al, 2020)
- How learner-centred factors like students' lives, individual preferences, and agency drive attendance are less well understood.

# What did we do?

- Mixed-methods research design
  1. Comparison of digitally recorded student check-ins with physical headcounts and module enrolments
  2. Online qualitative questionnaire exploring factors affecting attendance decisions.  
267 UG and PG respondents  
232:35 split between attendees:non-attendees
  3. Intern-facilitated Focus Group Discussions
- Thematically analysed to identify patterns in relation to learner-centred factors and student perceptions

# Five key factors

Instrumental  
and  
consumption

Teaching and  
learning  
experiences

Social  
dynamics

Personal  
circumstances

Timetabling  
factors

# What did we find?

- Attendance is part of a transaction which must add value
  - Richer or deeper learning opportunities or outcomes
  - Social interaction
  - Skills development
  - Employability aspects
  - Cost benefit of attendance versus self-study
  - Digital and blended learning approaches support flexible approaches to learning required by some students but may discourage attendance

# What did we find?

- Educators who are engaged and engaging are preferred by students!
  - Interactive and participative sessions
  - Contextualised content with clear, coherent, relevant and topical examples or case studies
  - Clear, comprehensible delivery at appropriate (slow) speed
  - Not limited by presentation materials

# What did we find?

- Timetabling is a hygiene factor
  - Sessions scheduled at inconvenient or unpopular times (early or late in the day) deter
  - Spaced out sessions with fallow periods or in hard-to-reach locations deter
  - Preference for core hours (10am to 3pm)
  - Prioritisation of paid work, mental health, forthcoming exams and assessments are key factors

# What did we find?

- Students seek a sense of belonging and community
  - Meaningful interaction with peers and faculty
  - Lecturers who are welcoming, inclusive and create a supportive learning environment
  - Personal and personable engagement
  - Supports good mental health



# What can we do?

- Clearly communicate the value to the student of in-person attendance
- Focus on added value and leverage social connections
- Re-think what in-person sessions are for and the value proposition of different session types
- Enhance digital integration and develop the value of blended learning approaches
- Ensure a welcoming and supportive environment that encourages attendance and engagement
- Enhance belonging and consider the whole student experience

# Conclusion

- A complex picture within which students' attendance choices are made
- Need to recognise and respond to the interaction between factors
- Learner-centred factors must be prioritised in educational design and delivery.
- Future research opportunities
  - Extend and expand the research within and across institutions
  - Hear from more students who choose to not attend
  - Greater clarity on belonging and what is valued in peer and educator interactions

jsime

Journal of  
Scholarship and  
Innovation in  
Management  
Education



- The findings are further discussed in our journal article due to be published in May 2025

[\[View a pre-publish copy\]](#)

- Subscribe to discover other Innovations in Management Education



[tinyurl.com/scholarshipjournal](https://tinyurl.com/scholarshipjournal)

# References

- Alvarez-Hevia, D.M., Lord, J. & Naylor, S., (2021) Why don't they attend? Factors that influence the attendance of HE students of education, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45:8, 1061-1075, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1851664>
- Forsgren, S., Christensson, T., Rudolfsson, G., & Rejnö, Å. (2021) To Attend or Not—The Reasoning Behind Nursing Students' Attendance at Lectures: A Qualitative Study, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 65:3, 500-509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1727004>
- Harris, P. J., Campbell Casey, S. A., Westbury, T., & Florida-James, G. (2016) Assessing the Link between Stress and Retention and the Existence of Barriers to Support Service Use within HE. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 40 (6): 824–845. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2015.1014316
- Laurillard, D. The processes of student learning. *High Educ* 8, 395–409 (1979). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01680527>
- Mearman, A., Webber, D.J., Ivlevs, A., & Rahman, T., (2014) Understanding student attendance in business schools: An exploratory study, *International Review of Economics Education*, Volume 17, Pages 120-136, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iree.2014.10.002>.
- Moores, E., Birdi, G.K., & Higson, H.E., (2019) Determinants of university students' attendance, *Educational Research*, 61:4, 371-387, DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2019.1660587
- Morgan, J. and O'Hara, M. (2023) Belonging, Mattering and becoming: Empowering education through connection, *Belonging, mattering and becoming: empowering education through connection | Advance HE*. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/belonging-mattering-and-becoming-empowering-education-through-connection> (Accessed: 09 January 2025).
- Oldfield, J., Rodwell, J., Curry, L., & Marks, G., (2018) Psychological and demographic predictors of undergraduate non-attendance at university lectures and seminars, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42:4, 509-523, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1301404>
- Tomlinson, A., Simpson, A. & Killingback, C., (2023) Student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university: a systematic review, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:8, 1054-1073, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2023.2212242