



Research

Class attendance and academic achievement of pharmacy students in a European University[☆]

Mariana Landin, PhD^{a,*}, Jorge Pérez, PhD^b

^a *Departamento de Farmacia y Tecnología Farmacéutica, Facultad de farmacia, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain*

^b *Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain*

Abstract

Objective: To establish the relationship between class attendance and academic achievement in a History of Pharmacy course at Santiago de Compostela University (Spain).

Methods: The study was conducted with four consecutive cohorts of students on the History of Pharmacy course within Santiago University ($n = 342$). Correlations between attendance and academic performance of the students were established. Additionally, results from different degrees of lecture attendance were compared. In the last cohort, the academic qualities of the students were controlled.

Results: Positive relationships between attendance and academic performance were observed. Correlations were statistically significant in all cases. Students with high attendance got higher grades than those with low or no attendance. There was no relationship between quality of students and attendance.

Conclusions: Results were conclusive for the four cohorts. Lecture attendance was associated with a better student academic performance. Our results from a European University agree with other studies from American Universities. Actions to reduce absenteeism have been suggested.

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Keywords: Absenteeism; Attendance; Academic achievement; Pharmacy students

Introduction

Absenteeism is a problem that has troubled the educational authorities of numerous universities^{1–3} and in particular, in pharmacy programs.^{4,5} This problem strongly affects many universities, especially in health science studies. Nowadays, it is common in many courses that a significant number of students do not attend the long

lectures, devoting their time to individual study or other activities.⁶ Non-attendance has negative consequences for administrators, teachers, and students; the social resources are underused,³ the teachers are unmotivated,^{4,6} and the student–teacher relationships become difficult, negatively affecting professionalism.^{7–9}

Several reasons for academic absenteeism have been proposed. Fjortoft⁸ found that immediate tests, the attitude of certain teachers who limit their activity during the lectures to reading text, and free periods between classes were the most important variables explaining the absenteeism. Cornelius and Owen-DeSchryver^{5,10} considered that thorough prior information might reduce attendance. This theory agrees with some European studies that attributed an important percentage of absences to the existence of

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* Corresponding author: Mariana Landin PhD, Departamento de Farmacia y Tecnología Farmacéutica, Facultad de farmacia, Campus Vida, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela 15782, Spain.

E-mail: m.landin@usc.es

commissions organized by students allowing them to access all notes without attending classes.^{11,12} In addition, new technologies have been identified as a cause of academic absenteeism since they allow access to the information without requiring attendance.^{4–6}

A review of the literature on the relationship between class attendance and academic performance shows that many authors have noted a positive relationship between both factors in pharmacy programs^{13,14} and in other health sciences.^{3,6,7,15} However, doubts about the role of class attendance on academic success have been reported.^{4,16}

The objective of our study focused on establishing the possible relationship between attendance and academic performance in an elective course with the pharmacy program at Santiago de Compostela University (Spain). We believe that our study could be useful for several reasons. Firstly, available results on this subject are primarily from American Universities. It is necessary to conduct studies in other countries with different sociological characteristics.¹⁴ From a methodological point of view, our study has added value as compared to other studies in this field. Together with the involvement of a large number of participants (four consecutive cohorts), it should be noted that the attendance record is completely objective as attendance was taken every day throughout the whole elective course. This avoids a limitation found in other studies based on students' memory recall.^{9,14} Moreover, as has been suggested by Khan et al.,⁷ the relationship between student quality and attendance will be studied as the previous academic records of students of the fourth cohort are available.

Methods

Setting

This study was conducted with students enrolled in an elective course within the pharmacy program at Santiago de Compostela University (Spain), "History of Pharmacy." Results for four successive cohorts (2004–2005, 2005–2006, 2006–2007, and 2007–2008) were included.

"History of Pharmacy" is an elective course worth 4.5 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The subject includes 30 hours master lectures (three hours per week) and 15 hours of other classroom activities focused on introducing different humanistic aspects among students¹⁷ using movies,¹⁸ literature,^{19,20} and a visit to the local Pharmacy Museum.

In the first class, students were informed about the syllabus and the activity plan. Attendance was not compulsory but students were informed about its advantages with regard to academic results. The evaluation of knowledge gained was performed using a final written exam graded between 0 and 10 points. The students passed the course with a grade of 5 or higher out of 10, regardless of their attendance.

Students could elect to develop reports of critical analysis of work from within literature or cinema, present these reports orally, and have them evaluated by the teacher. Participation in the optional educational activities provided extra bonus in the final course grade.

Participants

Although any student of the University could have been enrolled in the course, the vast majority were pharmacy students (85.9%) from different program cohorts. Those pharmacy students were mostly women (75%).

By law, in Spanish universities, the enrollment in a specific course provides the student two opportunities of examination (first call and second call) to pass the course. The relationship between attendance and academic performance was established only with those students who participated in the final examination of the elective in the first call. A total of 342 students were involved: 81 from the 2004 to 2005 academic year, 101 from the 2005 to 2006 academic year, 82 from the 2006 to 2007 academic year, and 78 from the 2007 to 2008 academic year.

Variables

In order to obtain the independent variable, the teacher, the first author of this article, systematically recorded the attendance of every single student on a daily basis. Thus, the lecturer had the exact attendance for the elective for each student.

We have used two parameters as dependent variables, the grade of the final exam and the final grade for the course, where together with the final exam score, students whose participation in the different activities were taken into account. For the students who never attended class, the final grade of the subject was the same as the final grade of the exam.

Additionally, we requested the previous academic records from the University authorities for each student of 2007–2008 cohort, and we have used them as a variable measuring the "quality of the student performance."

Data analysis

Pearson correlations between the number of attendances to lectures and the exam grade and the number of attendances and the final course grade were carried out using IBM SPSS statistical package, version 19.

The students were categorized into four groups depending on their attendance at the classes: very high (>75%), high (50–74%), low (<50%), and nil (non-attendance). The average score of groups were compared using ANOVA.

A Chi-square test was used to compare the percentage of success or failure among students of very high (>75%) and nil attendance.

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