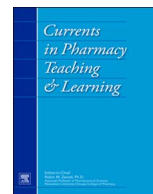




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## Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning

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Experiences in Teaching and Learning

## Association between attendance and overall academic performance on a module within a professional pharmacy degree

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and purpose:** As the higher education (HE) classroom begins to adopt newer internet-based technologies, the relationship between attendance and performance needs to be re-evaluated, particularly for professional degree courses such as pharmacy. In the present study, we aimed to establish if an association exists between attendance at all timetabled classes and academic performance, in a Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics (CPT) module, as part of the Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) degree course at Ulster University.

**Educational activity and setting:** Data on attendance, final examination and coursework performance were collected over two academic years (2013–14 and 2014–15) of the CPT module at Ulster. In total 67 students were analysed. The MPharm degree at Ulster University implements an attendance policy, both as a pastoral support tool and to reinforce the need for professional conduct as a pharmacist.

**Findings:** Student (2013–14 and 2014–15,  $n = 35$  and  $32$ , respectively) attendance on the module across both year groups was approximately 80%. We observed positive, and statistically significant relationships between attendance and performance on the examination, and especially in the coursework elements of the module. Student failure (below 40%) in the final examination was linked to attendance below an 80% threshold in nine of 12 cases. Reasons for not attending class varied, but illness was unquestionably the most commonly cited extenuation.

**Discussion:** Taken together, these data confirm a convincing association between student attendance and academic achievement.

**Summary:** Our studies promote the use of attendance monitoring policies for professional degree courses such as pharmacy.

## Background and purpose

The opinion that student attendance at higher education (HE) courses correlates positively with enhanced academic performance is a matter of continuous debate. As such, there is some evidence to suggest a reasonable positive correlation between the two factors,<sup>1–3</sup> although others would argue against this relationship.<sup>4,5</sup> In addition to potential negative effects of non-attendance on academic performance, there are also further consequences including extra workloads for administrators, negative impact on student and staff morale, underuse of resources especially in relation to practical sessions and breakdown of student-student and faculty-student rapport.<sup>6–8</sup> Breakdown of rapport can be of particular importance within a degree course such as pharmacy where continual face-to-face interaction promotes professional attitudes and behaviour, and help students to successfully integrate into the working environment.<sup>8–10</sup>

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At Ulster University, we believe it correct to employ an attendance monitoring policy for all Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) students. Ultimately, we aim for students to have a holistic view of the expectations of a competent pharmacist. Further to this, regular attendance can provide students interaction with course material, each other, and staff over a specified period, rather than studying in short bursts immediately prior to assessments. This type of intensive transient revision, colloquially known as cramming, has been shown to have a negative impact on longer-term retention of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> However, cramming prior to assessments is likely to occur with all students to a certain degree, independent of attendance profiles.

Whilst many academics will openly discuss issues of student attendance, and believe that there is more than just circumstantial evidence linking attendance to academic performance, there is limited information describing this effect in a pharmacy degree course. This essentially underpins the primary motivation for the current study. Moreover, as the modern-day HE classroom begins to adopt newer technologies, such as recorded lectures, online interactions and various other internet tools, attendance and performance associations may need to be re-examined.<sup>10</sup> The importance of regular lectures and face-to-face contact in higher education, despite the many notable advancements in technology, is a matter of debate.<sup>1</sup> The current study, therefore, examines the relationship between attendance and performance during a two-year period of a second-year Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics (CPT) module within the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Ulster University, where a school attendance policy is implemented. It should be noted that student numbers per year group for the pharmacy degree at Ulster are capped at approximately 35, and that the CPT module in its current form has only been active since 2013.

### Educational activity and setting

The MPharm at Ulster is delivered exclusively as a four-year, full-time, on-campus course with average attendance hours of 22 hours/week for the program. The course offers an integrated Master's degree level education in pharmacy that meets the requirements of the university and the standards of initial education and training for pharmacists set by the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In total, 120 credits are delivered per year, generally 60 credits in semester one and 60 credits in semester two. The CPT module, which is the focus of the current study, contributes 20 credits to the MPharm programme, being delivered in semester two within the second-year of the course. We have examined academic achievement in both coursework and a final sessional written examination on this module. Importantly, the use of recorded lectures has been adopted within the delivery of CPT modules at Ulster University to supplement traditional subsequent face-to-face lectures. Students received no face-to-face traditional lectures on the material covered within recorded lectures, but content was considered during tutorial sessions. Tutorial sessions usually consist of an interactive problem-solving session with the concept of teaching by example. We also assess some of the reasons for non-attendance at CPT classes.

This study used two separate datasets from the undergraduate CPT module (PHA312) on the MPharm degree programme at Ulster University over a period of two academic years (2013–14 and 2014–15). In both academic years, the same faculty members taught the module over a 12-week period. The module included 36 h of lectures, 18 h of practical classes and five hours of tutorials. In addition, every student had a one-week hospital placement. Appointed hospital-based teacher-practitioners and placement supervisors monitored attendance during hospital placement. We were informed that over the two academic years, Ulster MPharm student attendance at hospital placement was exemplary (100%), and attendance during this week was not analysed within the current datasets.

Assessment in the module was as follows: coursework consisted of five written practical reports (4% each of module total), two class tests (10% each of module total), objective structured clinical examinations (OSCE) related to hospital placement (20% of module), with the final written sessional examination accounting for the final 40% of the module (60:40 split in terms of coursework and exam). Coursework assessments were evenly distributed across the 12-week semester, with all practical reports submitted two weeks after completion of the practical class. Class tests and OSCEs were assessed on the day that they were undertaken. The examination element consisted of a mixture of multiple-choice style questions (50%) and essay style questions (50%), and marked in a blinded fashion. During the same semester, second-year MPharm students also took classes in two other modules, namely Pharmacy Practice and Physical Pharmacy, where they were assessed and graded independently from PHA312. These three modules collectively, and equally, contributed to the entire assessment of the second semester within the second-year MPharm degree at Ulster.

Only students taking the module for the first time were included in the analysis, to avoid confounding factors of repeating students who may have attended a class more than once. Data were taken from the first student attempt at the written examination to avoid issues relating to extra tutorials in preparation for second or third sittings at the written examination, as not all students passed this element on their first attempt. As per policy for undergraduate courses at Ulster, students were required to score 40% or above in both coursework and examination elements of the module to pass, irrespective of attendance (note that this threshold increases to 50% in year four of the degree). A total of 67 students were involved: 35 in 2013–14 academic year and 32 in 2014–15 academic year. The Ulster University institutional ethical review body approved this study.

The Ulster University School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences Attendance Policy is given in [Appendix 1](#). Essentially, students who miss two or more classes per week would be notified by email highlighting poor attendance. For persistent offenders, this could escalate to interviews with the school attendance monitor co-ordinator and/or course director and head of school, letters pertaining to attendance posted to home and term-time addresses and ultimately potential withdrawal from the course [[Appendix 1](#)]. Students who submit valid reasons for non-attendance using the Ulster University Notification of Absence Form (NA1 – [Appendix 2](#)) are not entered into the school attendance monitoring system, but, importantly, were included within all analyses in the current study. One of the authors (NI) is the current Ulster University School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences attendance monitor coordinator, and more importantly is also the module coordinator for PHA312 and can confirm attendance at all lectures, practical

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