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# Understanding student attendance in business schools: An exploratory study



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### ABSTRACT

There is considerable literature indicating that class attendance is positively related to academic performance. However, the narrative on what influences students' decisions to attend class is scant. This article examines why students choose not to attend class through the use of a survey distributed to first year undergraduates. Regression results point to three main reasons for reduced attendance rates: (i) alternative sources of information; (ii) valuing attendance low on the priority ladder; and (iii) timing/scheduling constraints. The most significant driver of greater attendance levels was attitudinal differences amongst students, and in particular, students with extrinsic achievement motivations with regard to their education.

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## 1. Introduction

Students skipping class appears to be an increasingly common phenomenon, and its prevalence is worrying due to potential negative impacts on not only the student, but also their peers, teachers, and even wider society. With regard to the negative impact on the student, there is a wealth of empirical evidence to support the notion that increased class attendance results in higher academic achievement (Caldas, 1993; Cohn and Johnson, 2006; Devadoss and Foltz, 1996; Gatherer and

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Manning, 1998; Kirby and McElroy, 2003; Lamdin, 1996; Marburger, 2001; Newman-Ford et al., 2008; Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Park and Kerr, 1990; Rodgers, 2001; Romer, 1993; Schmulian and Coetzee, 2011<sup>1</sup>; Woodfield et al., 2006). For example, Paisey and Paisey (2004) and Newman-Ford et al. (2008) document a strong positive correlation between attendance and academic performance at universities in Scotland and Wales respectively. Of course, correlation does not prove causation, and attendance may simply reveal a student's underlying attitude/motivation for education,<sup>2</sup> which then acts as the main driver of performance. If this is the case then further research is needed to understand the drivers of attendance rates, especially if there are other traits that deserve attention. One such trait may be gender: recent evidence from Woodfield et al. (2006) found clear differences in attendance rates by gender at the University of Sussex and their results highlight far higher absence rates for male undergraduates relative to their female counterparts. Their study also provides evidence which corroborates the view that a student's attendance rate explains a significant degree of variance in academic performance, even after controlling for the influence of personality and cognitive ability indicators. Similar gender differences were also found by Clifford et al. (2011).

While existing literature seems consistent in the conviction that attendance rates positively influence students' performance (Caldas, 1993; Lamdin, 1996; Rau and Durand, 2000; Romer, 1993), it is inconsistent with respect to the reasons for low attendance, thus resulting in difficulties for those attempting to design policy to raise attendance rates. Romer (1993) suggested that high rates of absenteeism reflect students' perceptions that teaching quality is poor and thus the belief that attendance would lead to little 'academic gain.' However, Woodfield et al. (2006) found that more than half of the students they surveyed were concerned about the work they missed following absences, indicating their belief that there were potential gains to be made from increased attendance. Overall, Woodfield et al. (2006) present evidence which suggests that absence is explained by a lack of application and conscientiousness of the student.

Two recent trends in the UK may act as opposing forces with respect to the attendance of their students. First, substantial increases in student fees may create added incentive for students to attend class because each class foregone has a higher average cost. In contrast, advances in learning technology and the increased willingness of universities to utilise this technology – perhaps driven by a perceived need to satisfy paying customers – create structures in which students are more likely to elect *not* to attend class.

This paper investigates the student attendance puzzle via application of a survey to first year students in a business school located in the UK. The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: the next section presents a brief discussion of relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the data and provides details of the survey utilised. Section 4 contains the descriptive statistics and results of the empirical analysis. Conclusions and further directions for this research are provided in Section 5.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Why attendance matters

As indicated earlier, there is a multitude of evidence in support of a positive relationship between attendance and student performance. Collecting data from four U.S. universities, Devadoss and Foltz (1996) find that even after controlling for other influences that might reasonably be expected to influence performance, a student that attended all classes is likely to achieve a grade 0.45 points higher (representing an increase of three letter grades, e.g. a B- to A-) on average than a student who only attended half of their classes. Marburger (2001) attempts to capture cause-and-effect by compiling a panel data set on 60 students in an introductory microeconomics class at a U.S. University, recording which specific class periods students missed over the semester, and relating class content to specific exam multiple choice questions. Using probit analysis, Marburger estimates that absenteeism

<sup>1</sup> This particular study investigated attendance patterns in an accounting class in South Africa, and while the authors find a positive and significant link between attendance and academic performance, the relationship is weak.

<sup>2</sup> Recent work by Andrietti (2014) makes use of proxy variables to capture the effect of unobservable student traits (which may be potentially correlated with attendance) and still find a positive and significant impact of attendance on academic performance.

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