Attendance, Employability and Learning Technologies: Are we getting it Right?

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Abstract

This short paper discusses the possible detrimental effects of low attendance on the achievement of important learning outcomes, in terms of "soft" employability-enhancing skills among undergraduate students in Business Schools, and explores how the use of learning technologies may contribute to high or low class attendance levels. The paper describes the exploratory results of a survey carried out among final year bachelor students attending a strategic management course, the findings of which suggest that a significant number of students view virtual learning environments as a substitute for lectures. Only very limited evidence is found that such students actually attend classes less than other students. It is found that reasons for non-attendance are similar to those reported in existing literature.

Attendance, Employability and Learning Technologies: Are we getting it Right?

"... because the materials for most of the modules are online this makes students say "Why should I go to the lecture? The material is online I can study at home."

- Anonymous student

Introduction

Absenteeism is a common problem in universities around the world. As such, the effects of attendance on student performance has been widely studied and discussed, with mounting evidence that attendance has positive performance effects. The effect of attendance on subsequent employability, in terms not of the possession of specialist knowledge but of broader self-governance and interpersonal skills, has, however, received little or no attention in the literature. Furthermore, the role of technology, in discouraging attendance and the learning of these soft skills, has also not been fully explored. This short paper discusses the possible detrimental effects of low attendance on the learning of "soft skills" among undergraduate students in Business Schools, and explores how the use of learning technologies may contribute to high or low class attendance levels. The paper describes the results of a survey carried out among final year bachelor students attending a strategic management course and draws some tentative conclusions on the effects of technology use on attendance and on ensuring student employability.

Graduate Skills and the Problem of Absenteeism

It has been suggested that the successful modern manager more than ever needs to possess a wide range of collaborative and self-governance skills to survive in a work environment where each person must effectively take responsibility for and manage their own careers (Allred, Snow, & Miles, 1996). Certain broad competencies, such as communication skills, the ability to solve ill-defined problems, creativity, teamwork, and adaptability are becoming increasingly valuable across a range of occupations (Hilton, 2008). Essentially, today's employee must be able to quickly integrate into a team environment, either as a leader or member. Self-management, as well as personal traits such as flexibility and trustworthiness, has come to the forefront of desirable skills in many modern organizations (Allred et al., 1996). An important question for Business Schools is therefore whether they are producing graduates with these types of skills.

In a recent interview in the Sunday Times, Lord Browne, former Chairman of BP, declared that whilst at BP he was not entirely satisfied with graduates of British universities, and that BP had to reinvest in graduates "in a big way"[1]. This issue is not only important among British universities but elsewhere as well. At a 2007 workshop on research related to future skill demands held in Washington DC and organized by the National Science Foundation, it was suggested by one panel member that:

> *"... as corporations are increasingly dismantling internal training and career ladders, young employees encounter more difficulty in advancing into leadership positions. He*

[1] "Lord Browne, worth £45m, tells students not to fret about loans", Sunday Times, 14 February 2010

suggested designing higher educational programs to include extensive internships and other realworld work experiences, so that graduates would have the demonstrated experience and skills that employers now seek in entry-level and leadership hires. (Hilton, 2008)[2]"

The relevance of what is being taught in universities and in particular the lack of focus on behavioral competencies, indicated by managers themselves to be most critical, is being criticized not just at the undergraduate level but also in MBAs (Chia & Holt, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Not surprisingly then, many universities have built specific graduate attributes and skills into their curriculums in response to growing pressure (Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009). We therefore find among the program outcomes for Middlesex University Business School undergraduate students such cognitive, practical and graduate skills as: the ability to demonstrate self awareness and sensitivity to others; the ability to identify and demonstrate interpersonal skills appropriate to a given business situation; the ability to contribute positively to team performance; and the ability to clarify career objectives and develop plans to achieve them. These important outcomes are to be achieved through tutorial guidance, embedded class activities, group exercises and class discussions[3]. Yet, low attendance appears to have become a fact of life for many university lecturers, with average attendance levels reported as low as 50% or less for final year BA/BSc Business lectures and seminars at Middlesex University Business

[2] P.74

[3] Source: BA/BSc Business & Management Student Programme Handbook, 2008/09

School[4]. Although absenteeism is rampant in even the best of universities, these numbers appear lower than the typical 60-90% attendance rates reported in the literature (Lin & Chen, 2006; Marburger, 2006; Romer, 1993). This lack of participation in the learning community is an indication of low student engagement (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007), a feature more common of city universities, where campus life tends to be less evolved (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In the case of a university such as Middlesex University, with a highly diverse student body, one might be tempted to attribute differences in student engagement to particular student background characteristics. However, existing studies have found that background characteristics (gender, minority status, entering ability levels) generally account for only 1–5% of the variance in levels of engagement (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Worryingly, it is often the weaker students who choose to skip lectures, even if they are the ones who would benefit the most from attendance (van Walbeek, 2004). Given the low attendance levels experienced, the critical question arises whether as lecturers we can assume that all our graduates are achieving the necessary soft skills when they are systematically missing lectures and seminars. Given that such skills are planned to be achieved through in-class activities, and that they often do not feature prominently in assessments, we have no real way of knowing. One can only speculate that this may not be the case. Understanding more about attendance, particularly in the context of individual institutions, therefore appears of vital importance if we are to guarantee the employability of our business graduates.

[4] This number is based on informal discussions with colleagues and the authors own experience

Attendance, Performance, and the (Possibly False) Promise of Technology

One variable that can readily be studied in relation to attendance is performance. Thus, the positive and statistically significant effects of attendance on class performance have long been established in a growing body of evidence found in the literature (Chen & Lin, 2008; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Kirby & McElroy, 2003; Lin & Chen, 2006; Shimoff & Catania, 2001; van Walbeek, 2004). It appears quite clearly from all these studies that the activities taking place in the classroom are beneficial from a learning perspective. Furthermore, as previously pointed out, several studies report that it is the weaker students who often choose not to attend lectures, despite the fact that whilst both strong and weak students gain from attendance, the positive effect is the greatest among these weaker students (van Walbeek, 2004).

A somewhat more mixed picture surrounds the performance implications of using IT-based learning technologies to assist student learning. The use of IT as a tool both in the classroom environment and outside continues to grow. One of the motivations that appears to have led universities and lecturers to promote the use of technology in teaching seems to be that students are using these technologies outside the university, and therefore lecturers have to catch up (Walls et al., 2010). The reality may be a little more complicated than this. Although students are generally reported to respond favorably to the use of technology in education (Copley, 2007), recent experiments into the use of more advanced tools like podcasting, either as a repetitive tool (recording lectures) or as a supplement (additional materials presented in audio format), tend to suggest that students may not be as ready as we think they are for educational podcasting (Walls et al., 2010). One very recent study found that over half the student sample was unfamiliar with the technology (Fernandez, Simo, & Sallan, 2009). More worryingly perhaps, is the lack of clear performance-enhancing benefits from such use of technology in education in general, an area

that has received far too little attention in the literature. In a recent study on the use of IT in an intermediate economics class, Savage (2009) concluded that the use of IT did not appear to have any substantive effect on student performance. That particular study included the use of video-recorded lectures. Even simpler technologies have not necessarily yielded the expected benefits for students either. In studying the use of PowerPoint presentations as opposed to overheads, Susskind (2008) suggested evidence that a switch to PowerPoint did not appear to affect course-related behavior, such as performance on exams, class attendance, participation in class discussions, or course website usage. Similarly, Hove & Corcoran (2008) reported that posting lecture content (in the form of slides) on an e-learning platform did not affect attendance levels. They did, however, report a small increase in performance among students having access to such online content (Hove & Corcoran, 2008). In another study, Riffel & Sibley (2004) reported that using a blended learning approach, with some traditional class lectures and some online ones, with written online content and questions replacing traditional tutorial seminars, the online seminar attendance was higher than was the case with offline seminars. Worryingly though, the blended format resulted in lower attendance of classroom lectures, particularly among upperclassmen (i.e. final year students) (Riffell & Sibley, 2004).

Asynchronous access to course delivery through the use of streaming video has been experimented extensively and again students tend to react very positively to such use of technology (Copley, 2007; Simpson, 2006), but there is evidence to suggest that some students choose to substitute video for lectures, rather than use it as a complementary tool for revision (Simpson, 2006). This is in addition to the aforementioned possible lack of performance benefits (Savage, 2009). It would seem then that not only are performance benefits of the use of

technology unclear, but there may be a certain risk of promoting absenteeism through the use of technology.

Method

In an effort to explore some of the issues discussed above, and related to attendance, employability and the use of e-learning tools, an online survey was carried out among the 192 students registered on MGT3170 Strategic Management at Middlesex University Business School in March 2010. This course being compulsory for final year business students, it was hoped that the results of the survey would be somewhat representative of the final year business student population. Three waves of emails were sent to request students to fill out the anonymous survey. The final sample was 54 students, representing 28% of registered students on that module. I opted for a simple online self-report questionnaire with a mix of closed and open questions aimed at exploring the students' views on attendance, the use of technology (limited to the generic use of OASISplus, the virtual learning environment at Middlesex University) and their employability. Rather than test any hypotheses in particular, I opted to mainly solicit opinions, which could later be categorized. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

Commented Results

The reported levels of attendance appeared quite high, indicating a possible sample bias. The mean reported attendance was 60-80% for both lectures and seminars. This was higher than the attendance levels observed by the lecturers involved in teaching this module. It would

therefore not be surprising to find that the students more likely to attend lectures were also more likely to fill out the survey. This indicates that the results of this survey should be interpreted cautiously and viewed as exploratory at best. In order to confirm any of the results, a more rigorous experiment would need to be devised. It should also be noted that the survey was completely anonymous and it was therefore not possible to link the data to student performance.

The table in Appendix 2 contains the correlation matrix for the various questions and a few results merit comment. Firstly, there is a significant and strong correlation between attendance levels of lectures and seminars. Likewise, there is a strong correlation between attendance and the student's perception of the importance of attending lectures and seminars. Interestingly, this link does not exist with seminars. In total 84% of respondents rated attendance as being somewhat to extremely important. The most commonly given reasons for not attending class was the pressure of competing learning tasks (65%), illness or accident (39%), and other private engagements (31%). I omitted asking about inconvenient lecture/seminar times, but this came up in the comments from two students. Uninteresting lectures were given as a reason by 26% of respondents to that question and the quality of teaching was mentioned as a reason by several students. Over-all these results are similar to what has been found in other studies (Dolnicar, 2005).

Interestingly, 59% of respondents indicated that there are things universities and lecturers can do to improve attendance levels. Not surprisingly (in view of answers to the question of reasons for non-attendance), suggestions given by students included allowing more flexibility in choosing what seminar (times) to attend and improving the quality of lectures both in terms of

making them more interesting, interactive and applied. Some answers suggested that a number of students primarily want relevant information for assessments when attending lectures and seminars, as illustrated by two students' answers:

"...provide more information, help and advice on assessments such as exams, coursework..."

"Devise lectures specifically for the assignments we need to do, give us additional information on how to work through our assignment."

Several students pointed towards the need for more interactive, practical lectures and the need for motivational lecturers:

"Seminars need to be handled by tutors who are good in terms of teaching and discussing."

"In the previous years the lecturers did not motivate me to attend. The reason that the current lecturers are better is that they are more practical-oriented. A lot of case study, real life examples, or stories. This is a more useful and effective way of teaching."

Some students very openly admitted not attending by personal choice, and one student linked this to the availability of materials on the university's virtual learning environment:

"However, because the materials for most of the modules are online this makes students to say "Why should I go to the lecture? The material is online I can study at home". However, there are some lectures that are pointless. Personally I never attended some lectures, however, I

had very good grades. As a result this means that a student can go very well either he attends to lecture or not. It depends on how hard study on your own."

Surprisingly several students suggested giving marks for attendance, or even handing out punishments for non-attendance:

"Create a scheme where the students can get marks for participation and attendance."

"For those students who miss one seminar or walk in late to write up 1000 words on the topic covered for that week."

"Give a bursary or some kind of bonus and also some percentage of the final grade could be attributed to attendance"

"Lectures attendance should be made to count for a percentage of the overall grade."

Over-all the comments provided by students painted a picture similar to that found in the literature and pointed towards diversity in how students view attendance and in their motivation, pointing towards differences in engagement among this student group. On the question of how students view the university's virtual learning environment (VLE), 32% (n = 15) declared that they view this as a substitute for lectures and seminars. Although such results have been found in previous studies (Dolnicar, 2005), the proportion appears quite high. Although one might speculate that this view would lead to lower attendance, I only found inconclusive evidence for this in the data. Students viewing the VLE as a substitute reported lower attendance of lectures, but similar attendance of seminars, when compared to those viewing the VLE as a complement. However, the difference in declared lecture attendance was not statistically significant (F =

1.265, sig = 0.29). A survey with a larger sample would be needed to paint a better picture of this association.

I asked three questions related to employability (questions 8, 9 and 10). The significant correlation between answers to these questions comes as no surprise. Students who feel more confident also indicated that their university experience had prepared them well for employment, whilst those who did not feel as prepared for working life logically felt their studies were less useful in preparing them. Attendance did not correlate significantly with these measures, suggesting that the effects of attendance on perceptions of readiness for employment may be more complex. Given that I did not measure employability per se, I can draw no conclusions on the relation between attendance and employability based on this data.

Limitations and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore issues surrounding student attendance, employability and the use of VLE-related technology. Given the limitations of the study both in terms of small sample size, but also of possible sample bias, the results can only be viewed with the greatest caution.

The results from the survey indicated that despite relatively low levels of attendance, students' attitudes towards attendance are quite similar to those found in other studies. Competing demands from various modules, quality of lectures and inconvenient lecture and seminar times were all indicated as reasons for non-attendance. In addition, I would posit based

on the qualitative feedback received that a number of students appear to have low levels of engagement in general.

There was some weak indication in the data that the current use of the university's VLE gives some students the impression that they don't need to attend lectures, which may suggest that as lecturers we are not being discriminating enough in our use of the technology. In terms of achieving learning outcomes and suitable levels of employability, one can only speculate that absenteeism and reliance on online materials as a substitute for lectures and seminars has a negative impact. This question deserves further study. In particular, given the inevitable future developments in learning technologies and the growing pressure on lecturers to use them, more research needs to focus on developing contingency-type theories of technology use, to help higher education lecturers understand how best to use the technologies available, without compromising learning outcomes and the employability of university graduates.

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Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

(Open-ended responses have been removed to maintain the anonymity of lecturers)

1. What has been your overall level of attendance of lectures this year?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	0-20%		0	0%
2	20-40%		5	9%
3	40-60%		9	17%
4	60-80%		17	31%
5	80-100%		23	43%
	Total		54	100%

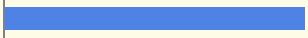
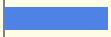
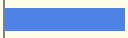
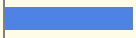
Statistic	Value
Mean	4.07
Variance	0.98
Standard Deviation	0.99
Total Responses	54

2. What has been your overall level of attendance of seminars this year?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	0-20%		0	0%
2	20-40%		6	11%
3	40-60%		8	15%
4	60-80%		14	26%
5	80-100%		26	48%
	Total		54	100%

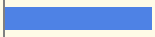
Statistic	Value
Mean	4.11
Variance	1.08
Standard Deviation	1.04
Total Responses	54

3. If you missed any lectures or seminars, what were the reasons (please indicate all reasons you have ever skipped a lecture or seminar this year - be honest)?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	I had coursework I needed to work on		35	65%
2	I was ill or had an accident		21	39%
3	I was working (paid or unpaid work)		12	22%
4	I had other private engagements		17	31%
5	The specific lecture or seminar in question was not interesting		14	26%
6	The materials for the lecture or seminar were available online (OASISplus) so I didn't need to attend the lecture/seminar		7	13%
7	Other (please specify)		15	28%

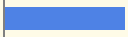
Statistic	Value
Total Responses	54

4. Do you consider OASISplus (and the materials found there) as well as other online technologies used by your lecturers and tutors to be more of a substitute or more of a complement to the classroom lectures and seminars?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	More of a substitute (I choose to attend the lecture OR work through materials online)		15	32%
2	More of a complement (I see online materials as something extra, not as a substitute)		32	68%
	Total		47	100%

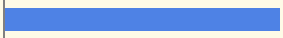
Statistic	Value
Mean	1.68
Variance	0.22
Standard Deviation	0.47
Total Responses	47

5. Do you consider regularly attending lectures and seminars important for your success at the university?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Not at all Important		1	2%
2	Very Unimportant		6	11%
3	Somewhat Unimportant		1	2%
4	Neither Important nor Unimportant		1	2%
5	Somewhat Important		10	19%
6	Very Important		21	39%
7	Extremely Important		14	26%
	Total		54	100%

Statistic	Value
Mean	5.44
Variance	2.67
Standard Deviation	1.63
Total Responses	54

6. Are there things the university or lecturers could do to increase your attendance?

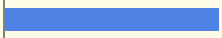
#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		32	59%
2	No		22	41%
	Total		54	100%

Statistic	Value
Mean	1.41
Variance	0.25
Standard Deviation	0.50
Total Responses	54

7. If you answered yes, what are some things the university or lecturers could do to increase your attendance?

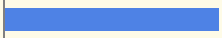
Statistic	Value
Total Responses	26

8. How prepared do you feel you are to enter working life once you have finished your current studies?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Not at all prepared		5	9%
2	Not well prepared		11	20%
3	Somewhat prepared		25	46%
4	Well prepared		12	22%
5	Very well prepared		1	2%
	Total		54	100%

Statistic	Value
Mean	2.87
Variance	0.87
Standard Deviation	0.93
Total Responses	54

9. How well do you feel you understand what future employers' expectations will be of you?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Not at all		2	4%
2	Not well		10	19%
3	Somewhat		25	46%
4	Quite well		14	26%
5	Very well		3	6%
	Total		54	100%

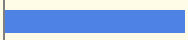
Statistic	Value
Mean	3.11
Variance	0.82
Standard Deviation	0.90
Total Responses	54

10. How useful was your experience at Middlesex University in helping you prepare to enter working life?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Very Useless		1	2%
2	Useless		3	6%
3	Somewhat Useless		4	7%
4	Neutral		19	35%
5	Somewhat Useful		10	19%
6	Useful		13	24%
7	Very Useful		4	7%
	Total		54	100%

Statistic	Value
Mean	4.65
Variance	1.89
Standard Deviation	1.38
Total Responses	54

11. Have you ever used any of the career centers services (including attending events)?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		21	39%
2	No		33	61%
	Total		54	100%

Statistic	Value
Mean	1.61
Variance	0.24
Standard Deviation	0.49
Total Responses	54

12. What could the university do to help you prepare yourself for employment after your graduation?

Statistic	Value
Total Responses	31

13. Would you like to add anything?

Statistic	Value
Total Responses	16

Appendix 2

CORRELATIONS

Correlations

		What has been your overall level of attendance of lectures this year?	What has been your overall level of attendance of seminars this year?	Do you consider OASISplus (and the materials found there) as well as other online technologies used...	Do you consider regularly attending lectures and seminars important for your success at the universi...	Are there things the university or lecturers could do to increase your attendance?	How prepared do you feel you are to enter working life once you have finished your current studies?	How well do you feel you understand what future employers' expectations will be of you?	How useful was your experience at Middlesex University in helping you prepare to enter working life?	Have you ever used any of the career centers services (including attending events)?
What has been your overall level of attendance of lectures this year?	Pearson Correlation	1	.488**	.170	.377**	.014	.011	-.200	.186	-.173
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.218	.005	.918	.939	.148	.178	.212
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
What has been your overall level of attendance of seminars this year?	Pearson Correlation	.488**	1	-.148	.037	.020	.035	-.013	.212	.086
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.286	.790	.884	.804	.924	.123	.536
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
Do you consider OASISplus (and the materials found there) as well as other online technologies used...	Pearson Correlation	.170	-.148	1	-.100	.016	.031	-.070	.026	-.190
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.218	.286		.470	.910	.823	.613	.852	.168
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
Do you consider regularly attending lectures and seminars important for your success at the	Pearson Correlation	.377**	.037	-.100	1	.028	-.023	-.009	.163	.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.790	.470		.838	.867	.951	.238	.955
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
Are there things the university or lecturers could do to increase your attendance?	Pearson Correlation	.014	.020	.016	.028	1	.076	-.103	-.173	.120
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.918	.884	.910	.838		.587	.459	.211	.386
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
How prepared do you feel you are to enter working life once you have finished your current	Pearson Correlation	.011	.035	.031	-.023	.076	1	.510**	.508**	.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.939	.804	.823	.867	.587		.000	.000	.706
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
How well do you feel you understand what future employers' expectations will be of you?	Pearson Correlation	-.200	-.013	-.070	-.009	-.103	.510**	1	.290*	-.198
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.148	.924	.613	.951	.459	.000		.033	.151
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
How useful was your experience at Middlesex University in helping you prepare to enter working	Pearson Correlation	.186	.212	.026	.163	-.173	.508**	.290*	1	-.150
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.178	.123	.852	.238	.211	.000	.033		.278
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54
Have you ever used any of the career centers services (including attending events)?	Pearson Correlation	-.173	.086	-.190	.008	.120	.053	-.198	-.150	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.212	.536	.168	.955	.386	.706	.151	.278	
	N	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54	54

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).