

Understanding Attendance and Non-Attendance Motivation Amongst First Year Undergraduate Students.

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ABSTRACT

Retention, attainment and academic progression are not only key performance indicators in the current higher education market in the UK, but also provide the benchmark for many of the university league tables. Many researchers point towards the positive correlation between attendance and attainment, though there is little research that highlights students motivations for attendance. This study focuses on why first year students choose to attend and not attend timetabled sessions on a sports related course in a UK university. The findings of the study show that students tend to attend class in order to find out what they need to learn and to better understand assessments, suggesting a more surface approach to learning. These expectations are contrary to a majority of the research that suggest that deep approaches are more suitable for engaging students. The implications of this study may mean that tutors in higher education may need to engage in developing delivery methods in order to meet the changing expectations of today's students.

KEYWORDS

attendance; non-attendance; student motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Patterns of class attendance amongst undergraduate students are the source of perennial debate in higher education (HE) institutions (Van Schalkwyk, Menkveld et al. 2010). (Massingham, Herrington 2006) suggest that poor student attendance has been a growing concern now for some decades. Nowadays, in an expanded student population in the UK, there appears to be a growing expectation for academic staff to monitor student attendance in HE institutions, based on the assumption that improved attendance can lead to increased rates of retention and better academic performance (Muir 2009). With retention and student progression and attainment being key performance indicators in HE league tables, institutions are keen to maintain and improve success in both areas.

Whilst attendance may have a positive impact on student grades, (Halpern 2007) claims that there is anecdotal evidence from fellow academics suggesting that there are declining levels of attendance at timetabled sessions as students and their environment change. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that attendance may have a positive effect on academic performance, (Friedman, Rodriguez et al. 2001) maintain that the issues surrounding attendance are complex, with a multitude of causes behind student absenteeism. Massingham and Herrington (2006) claim that research in the subject area reports a strong association between attendance and academic success but not necessarily a statistically sound causal relationship. That said it might also be important for academics to have a deeper understanding of students' patterns of and motivation for attendance and non-attendance. (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon et al. 2008) summarise the complexity of attendance issues by concluding that attendance is more a measure of students motivations for learning, and therefore, that it is a student's motivation that determines attendance.

With the changing nature of HE provision, it is then perhaps important that, as tutors, we begin to understand the changing behaviours and motivations of the students that we teach. (Assiter, Gibbs 2007) maintain that in recent times there has been a significant alteration in the student experience in the UK with more and more students failing to sit exams, hand in coursework assignments and ultimately withdrawing before completion of their programme of study. Whilst decisions to withdraw may be rooted in social, personal and financial reasons (Davies & Elias, 2003), (Thomas, Adams et al. 1996) found in their study that 52% of students' withdrawals were 'course related'. If this is the case, then surely if we can better understand 'course related' issue that students are experiencing, there may be a possibility for academic staff to address such issues before withdrawal occurs. This could begin with a better understanding of student motivations for attendance and non-attendance in timetabled sessions.

Motivations for Non-Attendance.

Whilst many more students are now attending HE institutions in the UK, this increased diversity also brings about many pressures on today's students. Massingham and Herrington (2006) report that the most common reasons for non-attendance and eventual withdrawal include sickness, being too busy and having to do paid work. Paisey and Paisey (2003) allude to the additional financial stresses placed on students with the ever-increasing cost of their education as well as the need for students to acquire part-time work during term time and vacations. (Winn 2002) also points out the pressures that are encountered by students with young children based around demands of childcare responsibilities. Research into why students choose not to attend timetabled sessions however demonstrates that there are many more reasons for students skipping class.

Within their study looking into motivations for student absenteeism, Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) categorise rationales for non-attendance into 3 levels of student motivation; low student motivation, moderate student motivation and high student motivation. Under the banner of 'high student motivation' typical findings were

based around sickness, injury and personal reasons related to family issues or as Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001:131) explain, 'unavoidable inability to be present'. The natures of these absences are obviously legitimate reasons for non-attendance, however only 39 out of 230 (17%) students surveyed fell into this category. With similarly low results, Paisey and Paisey (2004) reported 21% of responses from 68 third-year students indicated that absence was a result of illness. It is of course reasonable to assume that students that are normally highly motivated and regularly attend may occasionally miss a timetabled session for perfectly legitimate reasons, such as those stated above.

Under the category of 'moderate student motivation' Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) appear to have themed responses from students that relate to completing other course or academic related tasks and spending time preparing for assessment. Their findings concluded that 23% of students surveyed showed non-attendance rationales that signal moderate student motivation. In stark contrast, Muir (2009) found that 46% of the students in question had not attended class based on the fact that they were doing other work for their course. The fact that this particular reason is being readily given by students as a cause for absence may be a result of students' inability to effectively manage their time around assessment periods, or simply poor curriculum design on behalf of the programme team.

Whilst not examined by Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008), it may also be acceptable to include reasons where students have to make a choice over whether they attend class or partake in another type of activity that could have been arranged at another time such as part-time work or medical appointments. Paisey and Paisey (2004) found that the most frequent response for missing classes was part-time work, with 34% of respondents stating this as a reason. Massingham and Herrington (2006) also found that students gave part-time work as the third highest reason for not attending class after genuine sickness and being too busy. In contrast to this, Muir (2009) found that only 14.3% of students asked gave the reason of 'working at a paid job' for why they had not attended class. It appears that whilst the reason of gaining part-time work for missing classes has gained anecdotal momentum amongst academics within HE institutions, there is little evidence to confirm this based on research in this area that is currently available (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb, 2001).

The final category that Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) present is that of reasons that signal low student motivation. Staggeringly out of 230 responses for not attending class, 60% fell into this category. Linked to this category, Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) found that 32% of respondents missed class as they were tired or overslept as a result of having fun the night before a class. In the same study, students also gave reasons such as course content being available from other sources and the content or lecturer being boring for not attending class. Similar comments were also reported by Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008), as well as laziness, bad weather and a dislike of delivery styles.

After 'sickness' and 'completing other coursework' Muir (2009) found that 25.4% of students stated they had missed class because 'they thought it would be a waste of

time', 19% had missed because 'they couldn't be bothered' and 17.5% did not attend as they 'could access material online'. It seems that all of the above reasons would fit into Moore, Armstrong and Pearson's (2008) categorisation of low student motivation, where students are, for a variety of reasons, avoiding the classroom in favour of other, non-academic pursuits. This group of low motivated students appears to be an increasing trend in what Coxon, Jenkins, Marshall and Massey (1994) term as 'instrumental students', similar to Dolnicar's (2004) notion of 'pragmatics' whereby students do not attend in order to engage in the learning process and develop themselves, rather they treat a university education as more of a means to an end, which is to get a good job.

Motivations for Class Attendance.

As with reasons for not attending class, the reasons *for* attending are again complex and far-reaching with attendance behaviour being influenced by multiple factors (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb, 2001). (Devadoss, Foltz 1996) found that the expectation to be at classes was a strong motivator for students to attend. Their study shows that, with all else being equal, implementation of an attendance policy resulted in a 12.7% increase in rates of attendance. In support of this (Gump 2004) surveyed 144 first year students on their motivations for attending class with 66.7% (n=96) reporting that attendance was either a requirement or part of the grade for that module. Additionally, in the same study nearly half of the students (n=70) reportedly 'felt obligated' to attend.

In addition to an obligation to attend, (Westerman, Perez-Batres et al. 2011) suggest that it is not uncommon for undergraduate students to enquire into what might appear on the exam, thus assuming that students are only prepared to learn what is most efficient for achieving a given grade. Freidman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) discovered 65.7% of respondents gave the reason of 'information about course procedures and tests may be announced' as a reason for attendance. Similarly in a later study, Dolnicar (2005) found that 59% of the 612 students surveyed admitted that they attended lectures to find out about assessment tasks. More recently (Van Schalkwyk, Menkveld et al. 2010) found that amongst first year students, 88% of respondents agreed that 'test tips' was a motivator for attending class, surprisingly ranked as the second highest reason.

For students with higher levels of motivation there appears to be a number of reasons presented in the research that could be grouped under the theme of 'access to course content' (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb, 2001). Paisey and Paisey (2004) discovered that 63% of participants who completed their questionnaire indicated that attendance at timetabled sessions increased their knowledge and understanding of course material and the subject area. This supports the findings of Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) who concluded that 56% of students gave 'hearing what is said in class helps with my homework' as a reason for attending. Dolnicar (2005) found that 43% of respondents reported that attending class was 'easier than learning myself' and 39% stated that attendance 'made knowledge more meaningful'. Reasons for attendance that exhibit 'high student motivation' (Moore, Armstrong & Pearson, 2008) are also abundant in the literature. Gump (2004) reports that the highest motivator for attendance amongst 144 first year students was 'interesting

instructor/material' with 84.7% of respondents choosing that option. This is also supported by Fjortoft's (2005) conclusion that teaching effectiveness undoubtedly has an effect on class attendance and that students appreciate helpful and engaging tutors. Amongst first year students, van Schalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) also found that 50% of respondents reported 'interesting content' to be a determinant of class attendance.

Additional reasons that seem to indicate high levels of student motivation are seen in Fjortoft's (2005) study with students referring to 'application to real world settings' as a strong motivator for class attendance with 83% of respondents suggesting this was why they attended class. Dolnicar (2005) also hypothesised that students would rate highly the ability of lecturers to make knowledge meaningful through the introduction of 'real world' and research applications. Findings of the study however found that only 21% of respondents gave this as a reason for attending class. Other factors such as 'in class discussions' and 'group work' (van Schalkwyk, Menkveld & Ruiters, 2010) and being able to access 'more up to date research' (Paisey, Paisey 2004) are also apparent in the research as reasons for attending class. All of the above reasons for attendance appear to lean towards students who exhibit deeper approaches to learning, which in turn may lead to enhanced student professionalism (Fjortoft, 2005).

The purpose of this research was to examine first year student attendance based on a quantitative self-assessment of attendance in order to better understand both student attendance and student absenteeism. The specific research questions were:

1. What are the perceived reasons for attending timetabled sessions?
2. What are the perceived reasons for not attending timetabled sessions?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design.

An experimental research design was implemented using quantitative analysis. A positivist approach was used to calculate modal response for each reason for attending and for not attending and percentages of total responses are also presented.

Participants.

The sample of participants for the current study comprised mainly of 18-21 year old undergraduate students. A random sampling strategy was not feasible for this study as the research was intended to be program specific. As a result convenience sampling was employed based on those students who are on the programme and wished to take part. All participants were in their first year of a BSc Coach Education degree programme in which they had completed six modules over 2 semesters. A 72%

response rate was recorded. Out of 43 possible respondents enrolled on the programme, 32 completed the questionnaire and were included in the final analysis.

Procedures.

The study was conducted during a timetabled session in the final week of the second semester, at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year at Edge Hill University. The data was collected during this session, as traditionally more students tend to be present as it includes a submission of a summative piece of work. Questionnaires (Appendix 1) were distributed and the procedures were explained to the students. Students were asked to recall occasions, across all six first year modules, when they had not attended a timetabled session. Students were then asked to tick as many boxes that related to the reason as to why they had chosen not to attend the session or sessions. This process was then also repeated for occasions when they had attended a timetabled session. A familiarisation process was undertaken with all students prior to students answering the questions. This process took place in order to ensure that students had a universal understanding of the questions to be posed, to clarify meanings and enhance the validity of responses.

Ethical Procedures.

In accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2003) students were verbally informed of the reasons for undertaking the research and that by completing the questionnaire they were agreeing to take part in the study. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Edge Hill University.

Data Analysis.

Data collected from questionnaires were analysed using Microsoft Excel 2008 and results are presented as frequency of answers agreed with and as a percentage of whole group.

RESULTS

Reasons for Attendance.

Results from the questionnaires (see fig. 1) show that the top three reasons given for attending timetabled sessions were 'to find out about assessment' (90.63%, n=29), 'to find out what to learn' (81.25%, n=26) and because they are 'expected to be there' (78.13%, n=25). Alarming however, the lowest three reasons given for not attending were 'enjoy lectures' (31.25%, n=10), 'application to real world setting' (34.38%, n=11) and to 'find out the latest research' (34.38%, n=11).

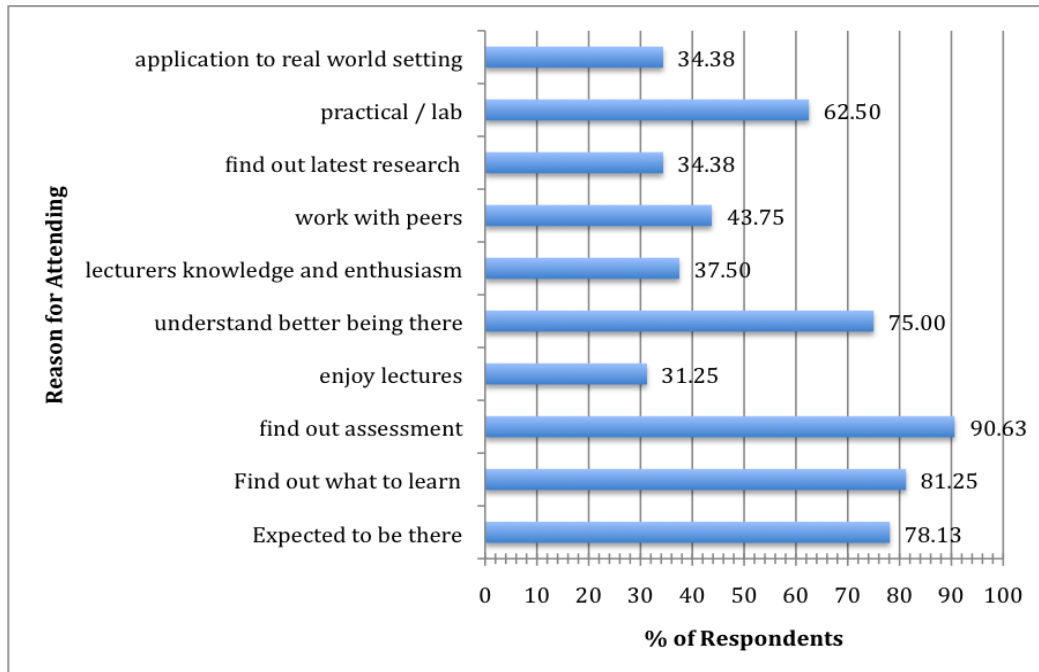


Figure 1. Graph to show reasons given for attending (n=32).

Reasons for Non-Attendance.

Results from the questionnaires (see fig. 2) show that the top three reasons given for not attending timetabled sessions were 'genuinely sick' (78.13%, n=25), 'content was boring' (46.88%, n=15) and 'can get information on Blackboard' (37.5%, n=12). Interestingly, the lowest 3 reasons given for not attending were 'didn't like lecturer' and 'too busy' both with 3.13% (n=1) and 'no practical/lab' (12.5%, n=4).

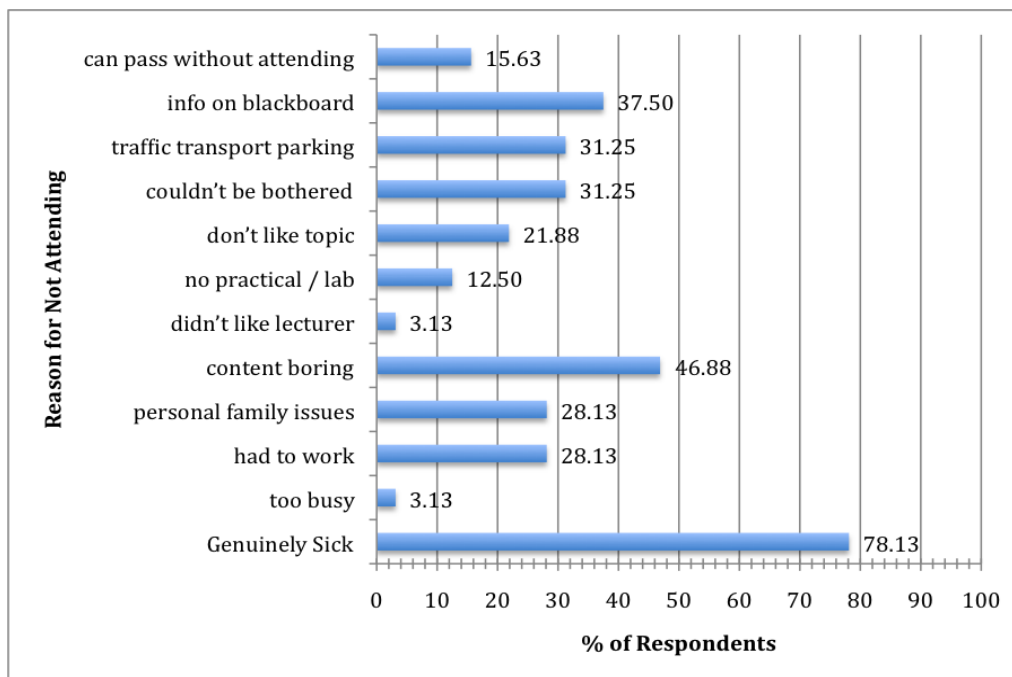


Figure 2. Graph to show reasons given for not attending (n=32).

DISCUSSION

Reasons for Attendance.

Dolnicar (2005) suggests that it is clear that a 'small group' of learners still go to university in order to learn and develop their knowledge because they genuinely enjoy learning. There is evidence to support this notion from the current results with a small number of respondents giving 'enjoy lectures', 'application to real world settings' and 'find out latest research' as reasons for attending class. Based on Dolnicar's (2005) assumptions of a 'small group' it may be unsurprising to see that these reasons are ranked as the three lowest reasons for why students attend with approximately only one third of respondents in the current study agreeing with these statements. The top ranked reason for attending timetabled classes in the current study was to 'find out about assessment' with 90.63% of respondents giving this as a reason. This resonates with Schalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters' (2010) findings in which 88% of students gave 'test tips' as a reason for attending class. Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) also found this as the third most common reason in their study with 65.7% of students relating to this. Similarly, 81.25% of students in the current study reported that they attended in order to 'find out what they needed to learn', again pointing towards a surface approach to learning whereby students fail to engage in the learning environment and simply want to 'jump through the required hoops' in order to pass.

This tendency for students to attend simply in order to gain information on assessments and to find out what they are supposed to learn appears to be concurrent with (Dolnicar 2005) notion of 'pragmatics', who sit at one end of the student motivation continuum and are categorised as students who 'mainly want to obtain the information they need to be successful in the subject' (p:113). Unfortunately this low motivation amongst students tends to relate to surface approaches to learning and (Coxon 1994) notion of the 'instrumental student' who tends to demonstrate poor attendance in timetabled sessions (Biggs, 1999). The third ranked reason for attending in the current study was that students were 'expected to attend' with 78.13% of respondents giving this as a reason. Fascinatingly, none of the modules undertaken have an attendance policy attached and therefore it would be interesting to ascertain where this 'expectation' derives from. In a similar study van Shalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) found that students reported a feeling of guilt when they did not attend, partly for financial reasons and not getting value for money, but also feeling that they had let their parents down.

Reasons for Non-Attendance.

The main reason given for not attending class in the current study was that students were 'genuinely sick' with 78.13% of respondents giving this as a reason. This appears to be a common theme throughout much of the literature. Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) found that the primary reason given for absence was sickness, with 38.1% of the students answering this way. In a similar study Paisey and Paisey (2004) found that 'illness' was the third most frequent reason given by students for not attending class. That said this response was only given by 22% of those students

surveyed. These findings go some way to suggesting that as tutors we must not lose sight of the fact that there are many students who are highly motivated and seek to attend timetabled sessions except in cases where they are genuinely sick. Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) categorises this under 'unavoidable inability to be present'.

More alarmingly amongst the findings from the current study is that of the second ranked reason for non-attendance being 'content boring' (46.88%, n=15). Whilst this is a worrying statistic, these findings are echoed in a number of other studies. Massingham and Herrington (2006) report that both boring lectures and content were amongst the top reasons for non-attendance. Moore, Armstrong & Pearson (2008) also present results showing students found lectures 'too boring' under their category of low motivation students. Finally, findings from van Shalkwyck, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) also points towards 'boring subjects' with 68.8% of respondents stating this as a reason for not attending classes. In this instance, this was the highest reported response for absence amongst first year students. Whilst the results from the current study may be congruent with other research findings, Gump (2004) concludes that it is important that tutors attempt to present subject material in as compelling a manner as possible in order to maintain high standards of attendance. Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) summarise that current students are increasingly part of a generation of 'digital natives', whereas many academic staff may still be 'digital immigrants'. This may be indicated in the 37.5% of respondents in the current study that referred to 'information being on Blackboard' as the reason for not attending class.

Whilst there appears to be much congruence with the findings of similar studies some aspects seem to contradict the current body of knowledge that exists around the subject area. It is interesting to compare the results of the current study with those found by Massingham and Harrington (2006) especially around the area of paid work interfering with academic attendance. They found that responses mostly emphasised societal realities in which a majority of their students had to work part time, which in turn had an influence on their attendance patterns. In the current study however, less than a third of respondents (28.13%, n=9) gave 'work' related issues as a reason for not attending timetabled sessions. It appears that whilst paid work is becoming an anecdotal 'excuse' that is being banded around by academic staff, the reality in this context is very different. What's more, in the current study, more students gave the reason of 'couldn't be bothered' (31.25%, n=10) than that of 'had to work' and ranking it as the fourth highest reason for not attending class. These results are also reflected in the findings of Muir (2009) who discovered that 19% of students gave 'couldn't be bothered' as a reason for not attending whilst only 14.3% gave 'working at a paid job' as a reason. Whilst this apparent 'laziness' amongst students is difficult to manage, van Shalkwyck, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) stress that students should be properly informed about the important relationship that exists between attendance and academic performance and that the classroom is portrayed as a beneficial learning environment. If this is not the case, then students may simply weigh up the costs and benefits of attendance and decide that the processes and outcomes associated with attending do not merit the effort required to attend (Moore, Armstrong et al. 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Limitations.

Clearly this study focuses on a small sample from one programme within one HE institution within the UK. Future research may look to include a larger first year sample across the department, faculty or even institution to look at trends across a range of programmes. Alternatively, it may be useful to look at collaborative work across institutions to look at regional or national trends. Additionally the questions posed in the current study were taken from a range of previous research articles studying similar issues. This inductive approach could be replaced by a more deductive approach in which the students are involved in determining the preset questions through the use of focus groups in order to help shape the questionnaire. Finally, the addition of academic performance data may have allowed a better understanding of the effects of attendance and non-attendance on student attainment and progression.

Conclusions.

This study has reported the results of research that considered the reasons for why students choose to attend or not attend class. It is clear from the results presented in the current study that attendance can be affected by a number of factors ranging from an unavoidable inability to be present, such as illness, to reasons that indicate students adopting instrumentalist approaches to learning, for example only attending in order to find out 'test tips'. Findings show there is clearly a group of students that attend because they enjoy the subject area, like finding out about new research, and enjoy applying what they learn into real world settings. Although such reasons for attendance point towards developing deeper approaches to learning, this appears only to be amongst a small number of students. Results suggest that students tend to take a more instrumental approach to learning and attend mostly to find out what they need to learn and to obtain information about assessments.

The current study does not agree with the findings of previous research that suggests that students are either too busy or engage in paid work as influences that affect their ability to attend. Instead, without considering genuine sickness as a reason for absence, students in the current study mostly gave boring content and ability to access information elsewhere as reasons for not attending. It is therefore logical to assume that students in the current study perceive the attendance costs to outweigh the attendance benefits.

Implications for practice.

In their recent study van Schalkwyk, Menkveld and Ruiters (2010) note that it remains the responsibility of each student to make appropriate opportunities of the learning that is on offer within their programme and that each student is in command of their own attendance. They also suggest that with the future rise in tuition fees, non-attendance would appear to be 'economically irrational' (p:641). However, even with the previous

rise in the cost of HE there still appears to be a core of students that adopt a surface approach to learning and see a university degree as a means to an end, i.e. getting a good job. Perhaps then it is the role of the tutor to reflect on their own practices and change their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in order to keep up with the changing motivations of students. We know that students are motivated to attend if there is information regarding assessments. Perhaps then there should be a shift to spreading assessments over the duration of a module or the introduction of more formative assessment in order to engage students for longer periods of time. Once students begin to attend more often it is then the role of the tutors to enthuse and engage the students in the content. Results from the current study highlight that students will not attend if they perceive the content to be boring. (Fjortoft 2005) summarises that students appreciate effective and engaging teachers and attend their classes which supports Gump's (2004) notion that, these shifts in motivations serve as a reminder that it is the responsibility of the teacher to inspire the students and that tutors should make information come alive in the classroom. Finally in support of this Massingham and Herrington (2006) conclude that maybe the issues do not lie with attendance problems but maybe it is about improving teaching and learning processes.

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