

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71634/er166487>

*Journal of  
Scholarship and Innovation in  
Management Education*

Issue 2, 2025

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# Understanding Student Attendance Decisions: The Role of Learner-Centred Factors in Higher Education



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## Abstract

Student attendance in university teaching sessions is widely acknowledged as a key factor influencing retention and academic success. However, declining attendance rates suggest a need for deeper insights into the learner-centred factors that shape students' attendance decisions. While institutional and educator-related factors have been extensively studied, students' individual circumstances, motivations, and perceptions remain underexplored. This research investigates how learner-centred factors influence attendance choices at Lancaster University Management School, a top-rated institution in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), where staff have observed declining in-person attendance despite high institutional standards.

Thematic analysis of survey results identified five key factors affecting attendance: (i) instrumental and consumption-related considerations, (ii) teaching and learning experiences, (iii) social dynamics, (iv) personal circumstances, and (v) timetabling constraints. Findings suggest that students weigh the perceived value of in-person sessions against competing academic, personal, and professional commitments. While engaging, interactive teaching fosters attendance, logistical barriers, mental health concerns, and the availability of digital resources often deter students from attending. Notably, a strong sense of belonging emerged as a critical determinant of attendance, underscoring the importance of social and academic integration.

These results highlight the need for higher education institutions to prioritise learner-centred factors in programme design. By aligning institutional policies with students' lived experiences, universities can create more inclusive and engaging learning environments that better support attendance and academic success.

## Keywords

Student attendance; teaching and learning; learner-centred factors; higher education.

## Introduction

The positive link between student attendance at in-person university teaching sessions and retention and attainment is widely recognised (Mearman et al, 2014; Moores et al., 2019). Yet “absenteeism is increasingly becoming the norm” (Oldfield et al, 2018, p.510). Institutional factors, educator decisions, and learner-centred factors all significantly affect students’ attendance decisions (Alvarez-Hevia et al., 2020; Laurillard, 1979; Mearman et al., 2014; Moores et al., 2019). While much work has been done to understand and improve institutional and educator-related factors, how learner-centred factors like students’ lives, individual preferences (Kelly 2012) and agency drive attendance outcomes is less well-understood.

This research explores how learner-centred factors affect in-person attendance choices of students. Understanding students’ reasons and predispositions would enable more appropriate interventions to increase attendance. Survey and focus group discussion (FGD) data were gathered from Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate (PG) students across a sample of modules during one term (i.e., 10 weeks) of teaching delivery at Lancaster University Management School, UK. The Business School is top rated in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), suggesting that the institutional factors driving attendance are top notch. However, staff had anecdotally reported declining in-person attendance. Because the interaction of institutional, psychological and socio-demographic factors creates a complex picture within which students’ attendance choices are made (Moores et al., 2019), the Business School is an excellent case for this research. It enables a natural isolation of learner-centred factors driving attendance choices.

## Attendance and Learner-Centred Factors

Though outside the control of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), student attributes (e.g., personality, gender, demographics and psychological factors), personal circumstances (e.g., family, finance and (long hours in) employment), practicalities (e.g., conflicting demands, social life commitments) and motivations (e.g., perceived value in attending) also impact attendance choices (Alvarez-Hevia et al. 2020; Mearman et al., 2014; Moores et al, 2019; Oldfield et al., 2018). These learner-centred factors interact with university concerns (for achievement, retention, and employability) to drive attendance decisions. For example, motivations and practicalities can be arguably linked to provision of online materials as well as teaching and scheduling issues (Mearman et al., 2014). However, Oldfield et al. (2018) find that whilst students make conscious decision to attend classes, “experiencing a lower sense of belongingness to university; facing coursework deadlines; and experiencing mental health issues are significant predictors of poorer attendance.” In contrast, Forsgren et al.’s (2021) work suggests that students have more agency. Their study into the reasoning behind nursing students’ attendance at lectures, found that students were guided by “self-governing of their own personal needs for learning”.

Overall, this suggests that personal factors and student perceptions of institutional/ educator-related factors affect attendance choices. This research, therefore, sought to capture both.

## Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach and included three related stages. Focus was on selected in-person teaching and learning sessions within the Business School over one academic term. Session formats included lectures, workshops and seminars across various times, days, and weeks. This is part of a broader study and, for this article, we focus on the survey and FGD data.

Stage One compared digitally recorded student “check-ins” and physical headcounts conducted by teaching staff in class. This yielded 417 observations across eight modules for timetabled in-person sessions.

Stage Two gathered qualitative data through an online questionnaire which explored factors affecting attendance decisions. There were 267 respondents across a population of UG and PG students, with a 232:35 split between attendees and non-attendees. Stage Three involved four FGDs with 14 students, facilitated by Graduate Interns to encourage candid discussions. The open-ended responses from the survey data and FGD data were thematically analysed. For the survey data, this was to identify patterns in relation to learner-centred factors and student perceptions. For the FGDs, the approach was to build on trends from the survey to develop richer insights.

## Findings

Table 1 (see Appendix) summarise the key findings. Three overarching themes were found related to both attendance and non-attendance: (i) instrumental & consumption; (ii) teaching & learning; (iii) social; and a further two themes related solely to non-attendance: (iv) personal; and (v) timetabling.

Many students recognise that attendance is part of the educational transaction, providing opportunities to develop skills and behaviours necessary for success in the workplace. Students appear to be making a cost-benefit choice between the effort (physical, mental, emotional, financial, temporal) of being present versus self-directed study at a time and place of their choosing. Students are more likely to attend a session that has value, as defined by richer or deeper learning opportunities and outcomes, greater social interaction, and time efficiency.

Educators who are engaged and engaging through interactive, participative sessions are preferred by students. For example, sessions where learning is sufficiently supported, the content is contextualised, clear and coherent with relevant and topical practical examples or case studies considered more engaging. Conversely, speed of teaching, lack of comprehension by students, and lecturers being limited by their presentations were found to discourage attendance. The availability of digital learning resources has also introduced a significant dynamic into attendance patterns. Many students appreciate the flexibility that recorded lectures and online materials offer, however, this convenience also poses a challenge for traditional in-person sessions, as students may opt out if they perceive the online alternatives adequately meet their learning needs and preferences.

Students are likely to attend sessions that give them a sense of belonging and community, facilitating meaningful interactions with peers. Lecturers who are welcoming, inclusive, provide interesting and engaging delivery, and create a supportive learning atmosphere are considered to also contribute to the sense of belonging. Conversely, an unwelcoming classroom environment deters attendance.

Logistical factors such as timetabling, session spacing, and the location of classes significantly affect attendance. Sessions scheduled at inconvenient or unpopular times (e.g. early and late in the day), spaced out during the day with fallow periods, or in hard-to-reach locations deter attendance, particularly for commuter students who must manage travel time and costs. Students indicated a preference for core hours (10am to 3pm). Further, students report prioritising other things, such as forthcoming exams, coursework, personal commitments (including paid work), sporting and university society activities.

## Discussion

This research deepens insights on the multifaceted nature of student attendance decisions, revealing that attendance is influenced by a confluence of instrumental, social, personal, and academic factors. Our findings suggest that students make an active choice by weighing a complex array of factors in deciding whether to attend sessions.

Some factors align with the literature on institutional factors and point towards the need for a revised approach to programme design. This could include reducing traditional lectures in favour of increasing opportunities for individual study alongside more robust digital and flexible learning options. This will also have a positive impact on the need to optimise the timetable but must be balanced with students' reported preference for in-person interactions with peers and instructors. A key insight from our research relates to the link between belonging and attendance. We find that belonging is crucial in the classroom and extends to private life. This is in line with Oldfield et al. (2018) who suggest that students must be given support on assessment (spreading out deadlines), mental wellbeing, and facilitation of social activities in their private lives. Strategies to enhance belonging could include creating more student-led sessions or implementing peer mentoring programs that foster connections among students across different years of study.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Our research confirms the central role of educators on student attendance but also reveals that learner-centred factors must be prioritised in programme design and delivery to improve attendance. Recognising the limits of institutional factors and educators' influence provides Business Schools with an opportunity to focus on understanding the needs of their students (as human beings with life outside of the institution) and integrating that in strategic and operational decisions.

We see some simple, yet tried and tested, approaches to addressing a big problem, such as clearly communicating the value of in-person attendance at in-person sessions to students and incorporating more interactive and collaborative teaching methods to make in-person sessions more appealing by leveraging the social connections with peers and lecturers. For a trend reversal, however, our results suggest that there is a need to pay more attention to learner-centred factors. This implies re-thinking what in-person sessions are for, delivery timing, and the value proposition of different in-person session types in relation to learning and belonging. The aspects related to working students also mean that there is a real need to enhance digital integration and develop a blended learning environment that leverages the strengths of both in-person and online modalities.

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### Acknowledgements

The Authors acknowledge the contribution of Dermot O'Reilly, Anthony Hesketh, Harrison Rolls, Jenni Carter, Will Tayler, Samuel Read, Isabelle King, Mike Ryder, and Rachael Barrow for data collection, coding and analysis.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix

TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Factors affecting attendance	Factors affecting non-attendance
<b>Instrumental and consumption</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance as a student norm or responsibility</li> <li>• (Belief that) Attendance equates to higher grades</li> <li>• Preparation for the workplace (Skills development)</li> <li>• Worthwhile part of the educational transaction</li> <li>• Enjoyment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritisation of assessments or revision</li> <li>• Prioritisation of paid work</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching and learning factors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing structured study time</li> <li>• Sessions facilitating greater focus</li> <li>• In-person sessions felt to be more engaging than online</li> <li>• Engaged and engaging lecturer</li> <li>• (Belief that) Sessions support learning and deeper understanding</li> <li>• Aids understanding of the assessment and expectations of the course</li> <li>• Timely answers to questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preference for online or asynchronous learning</li> <li>• Lecturer accents</li> <li>• Speed of delivery</li> <li>• Lecturers reading directly from slides</li> <li>• Lecturers straying off topic</li> <li>• Learning not sufficiently supported or scaffolded</li> <li>• Lack of enjoyment</li> <li>• Unwelcoming environment</li> </ul>
<b>Social factors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactions and social engagement with peers</li> <li>• Opportunity to discuss and debate course material and assessments with peers</li> <li>• Sense of belonging</li> <li>• Developing communication skills (especially international students)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clash with society/ sports events</li> <li>• Attendance patterns and choices of other students</li> </ul>
<b>Personal factors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Null</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illness and injury</li> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Clashes with interviews</li> </ul>
<b>Timetabling factors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Null</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of sessions per day</li> <li>• Spacing of sessions during the day</li> <li>• Timing of sessions (early or late sessions)</li> <li>• Location of sessions (unfamiliar or difficult to find)</li> </ul>