



Challenges and Choices in Student Attendance

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1. Introduction

It has been identified that attendance at in-person teaching and learning events in Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) is in decline. This has been identified anecdotally by staff, through the disparity between visual attendance headcounts and online attendance recording, and student feedback. To better understand this trend, and the choices that students are making, this research project gathered data from Undergraduate and Postgraduate students across a sample of LUMS modules.

This research aims to explore current levels of attendance, identify barriers to attendance, and investigate the reasons students choose to attend or not attend in-person sessions, including lectures, seminars, and tutorials. The primary aim of the research is to understand what factors inform students' decisions to attend or not, to evaluate our assumptions about student attendance, and to identify factors that we may not have considered so that we can implement teaching and learning strategies and pedagogies that enhance the student experience and improve attainment.

2. Research Approach

The research comprised three distinct phases.

Phase One compared digitally recorded student "check-ins" and physical headcounts with the number of students enrolled on the module, to validate the digital check-ins and check for false check-ins. The data gathered 417 observations across eight modules throughout Term 2 (January to March 2024) for in-person sessions across various times, days, and weeks of term.

Phase Two gathered qualitative data from students via an online questionnaire that asked students which factors impact their decision to attend academic sessions. 267



undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students participated by self-selection in response to direct (tutor request) and indirect (digital noticeboard) invitations. The split between students who did attend sessions and those who did not was 232:35. UG and PG data has not been disaggregated.

Phase Three consisted of focus groups with students who opted-in when completing the questionnaire. Fourteen students participated in two focus groups designed for deeper analysis of trends identified in the questionnaire. Phase three data collection and analysis was conducted by LUMS Student Representatives and Graduate Interns to encourage open and honest dialogue and minimize potential bias.

3. Results

3.1 Headcount Analysis

Attendance management systems at Lancaster require students to “check-in” when they attend in-person sessions. This data was supplemented by a physical headcount of the number of students in the room during each session and the number of students enrolled. *Attendance Rate* (AR) was defined as:

$$AR = \frac{Headcount}{Enrolled}$$

Where *Headcount* is the number of students counted in a session and *Enrolled* is the number of students that should be attending the class.

Analysis shows (for UG students unless stated otherwise):

- The mean session *Attendance Rate* (across all modules and all weeks) is 46%.
- *Attendance Rates* drop week-on-week throughout the term, from 60% in week 1 to 20% in week 10. (Figure 1)
- A lower *Attendance Rate* is observed where class sizes are greater than 200.
- Lower *Attendance Rates* are observed for sessions before 9AM. Slightly improved *Attendance Rates* are typically observed for afternoon sessions (excluding Wednesdays). (Figure 2)
- Average *Attendance Rates* are lower on Wednesdays and higher on Fridays. (Figure 3)
- Lowest *Attendance Rates* are observed on Wednesday afternoons and Thursday mornings and highest *Attendance Rates* on Friday mornings. (Figure 4)
- Higher *Attendance Rates* are observed for workshops and seminars compared to lectures.



- Postgraduate *Attendance Rates* are 34% higher on average and do not display the same drop-offs over the term.
- Digital *Check-ins* and *Headcount* are highly correlated (Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.83) indicating that digital check-ins are a good substitute for headcount data, however we need to be mindful of false check-ins (where students are manually checking into sessions they do not physically attend).

These results are also significant with regressions (see Appendix A)

3.2 Qualitative Analysis Results from Surveys and Focus Groups

The Phase 2 (questionnaire) and Phase 3 (focus groups) data reveals that students tend to make a conscious decision whether to attend. The Value in Attending and Barriers to Attendance are presented.

3.2.1 Value in Attending

Teaching and Learning

Students recognise that attending in-person sessions helps with their learning, including providing structure and focus for their studies, helping with their understanding of the learning materials, and clarifying what is expected of them as students on the course. Students also value the opportunity that in-person sessions for real-life examples to be shared and discussed, giving relevance to what they study. It was acknowledged in the responses that these factors are valued because they enhance learning, develop skills, and are more personal and engaging as they go beyond the learning resources.

Instrumental and Consumption

Some students see attendance as their responsibility and part of the norm for attending university, with a selection adding that attendance enables them to achieve higher grades. Students are also aware of the cost of university and regard attending sessions as a worthwhile part of a transaction through which they achieve “value for money”. They also acknowledge it as valuable preparation for the workplace.

Social

Attendance allows students to engage with their peers – getting to know others on the course, seeing friends, and preparing for group work. They also value engaging with faculty at sessions to get timely answers to questions. Students have made it clear that the lecturer and the teaching environment play a significant role in their attendance choices. They are



more likely to attend if they enjoy the lecturer, the teaching style, or the nature of the class. They are conversely less likely to attend if they dislike the lecturer or feel unwelcome in class.

3.2.2 Barriers in Attending

Prioritisation

A significant barrier to attendance is clashes with other commitments, such as paid work, internships, or sports and society events. This is especially prevalent on Wednesday afternoons when university sports events typically occur, corroborated by *Attendance Rates*. Students also prioritise assessments and coursework over attendance, especially common from week five onwards (see *Attendance Rates*). Students also report that they prioritise their wellbeing, such as recovering from illnesses, mental health, or sleep.

Timetabling

Students dislike having a single in-person session per day, which many consider not worth the time or expense of travelling to university. They also dislike large gaps between in-person sessions or having too many sessions in a day, which they find tiring, leads to lower levels of concentration in later sessions and has associated costs. Students are also against early (9am) sessions, this is partly due to busy bus schedules or being incompatible with students' sleep schedules and social nights. Focus group data indicates students have a strong preference for in-person sessions during "core hours," between 10am and 3pm with, ideally, multiple sessions on days they come to campus. These results are supported by *Attendance Rates*, where we see lower levels of attendance in early morning sessions.

Teaching and Learning

Students prioritise their personal learning preferences and actively evaluate the value they get out of attending in-person sessions. Students report a preference for being able to learn at their own pace and take breaks as needed, as when learning online. This also allows them to rewind, pause, slow down and use captions on session recordings which can be helpful, especially for complex topics and where they report being unable to understand lecturers' accents. Focus group data indicates that students stop attending if they are unable to keep up with the material due to the pace of the session being too fast. Students will not attend if they feel that they are not getting any value from a session. This is prominent if they feel the lecturer simply reads from the slides or if they have missed a previous session, which will make the upcoming session difficult to follow or understand.



4. Discussion

The data indicates that students are interested in attending sessions that add value to them, offer engagement and enrichment activities that go beyond the one-way transfer of knowledge. Students want a sense of belonging and community. Students make an active choice whether to attend. Decision factors include, but are not limited to, timetabling of classes and assessments, life commitments and the quality of the lecturer. By knowing this, educators can make changes to their delivery and style of teaching, creating a more welcoming environment in which students want to attend sessions that add value to their education. The results of the study will be published, along with recommendations, for consideration by Directors of Teaching with the intention of implementing pedagogical changes. Broader institutional issues, such as timetabling and student transport, will be the subject of further discussion.

This Pilot study provides background for further research. We recognise the limitations of the study, including that the study was limited to Lent Term only and evaluates a small proportion of LUMS's provision. Whilst 276 students participated by self-selection most responses were from students who did attend. Participation in Phase 3 was low. UG/PG data has only been disaggregated for Phase 1.

Further research may include: expanding the study to include other faculties and universities, across all terms; stronger focus on students who do not attend; analysis of differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students. Follow-up studies to better understand the students' preferences for personalised learning and the nature of teaching staff. Finally, it would be useful to understand what students mean by a welcoming environment and appreciate what they value about interactions where they have felt a sense of belonging to determine how this can be broadened out across the student learning environment.

Acknowledgements

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5. Appendices

5.1 Regression Tables

Table 1: Regression Models with Undergraduate and Postgraduate Separated

	Attendance Rate				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	PG
Tuesday	-0.004 (0.030)		-0.054** (0.023)	-0.041* (0.023)	-0.011 (0.053)
Wednesday	-0.081*** (0.029)		-0.088*** (0.024)	-0.060** (0.027)	-0.136*** (0.040)
Thursday	-0.004 (0.030)		-0.022 (0.025)	-0.014 (0.023)	-0.146*** (0.045)
Friday	0.087*** (0.030)		0.050* (0.026)	0.051** (0.025)	-0.064 (0.064)
Week2		-0.051 (0.033)	-0.031 (0.031)	-0.033 (0.027)	-0.065 (0.051)
Week3		-0.056* (0.033)	-0.032 (0.031)	-0.030 (0.028)	-0.065 (0.054)
Week4		-0.113*** (0.040)	-0.091** (0.038)	-0.091** (0.035)	-0.006 (0.051)
Week5		-0.155*** (0.037)	-0.138*** (0.036)	-0.145*** (0.033)	-0.078 (0.058)
Week6		-0.194*** (0.051)	-0.176*** (0.047)	-0.174*** (0.043)	0.013 (0.058)
Week7		-0.268*** (0.037)	-0.238*** (0.036)	-0.237*** (0.034)	-0.049 (0.058)
Week8		-0.248*** (0.046)	-0.224*** (0.044)	-0.236*** (0.041)	-0.040 (0.057)
Week9		-0.311*** (0.038)	-0.297*** (0.036)	-0.305*** (0.033)	-0.101 (0.068)
Week10		-0.412*** (0.041)	-0.392*** (0.048)	-0.386*** (0.055)	-0.179** (0.081)
Afternoon				0.055*** (0.017)	0.010 (0.037)
WS				0.066*** (0.015)	0.076** (0.036)
Large				0.002	-0.163***
Constant	0.457*** (0.021)	0.601*** (0.029)	9 0.597*** (0.032)	(0.017) (0.033)	(0.034) (0.053)
				0.515***	0.969***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



5.2 Diagrams

Data reflects all in-person sessions (lectures, seminars, and workshops).

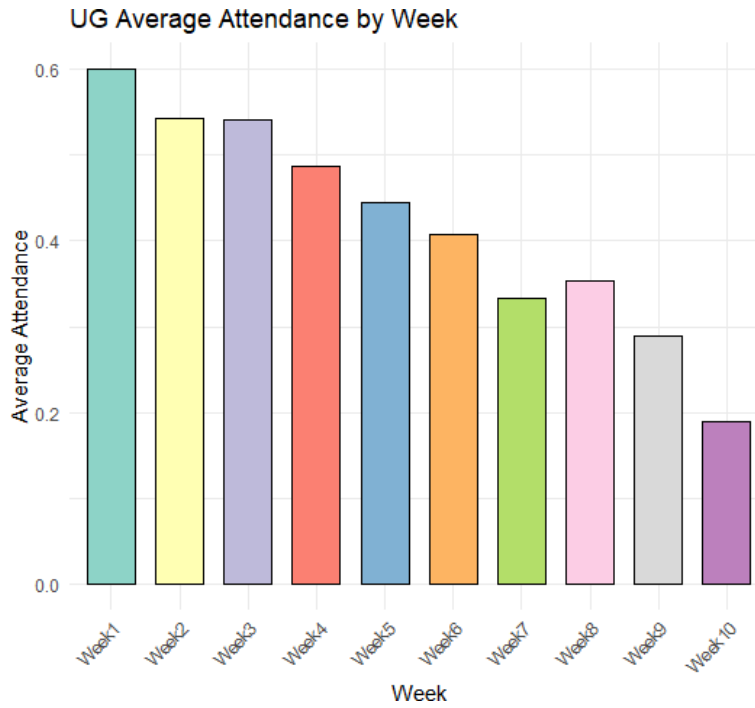


Figure 1: UG Average Attendance by Week

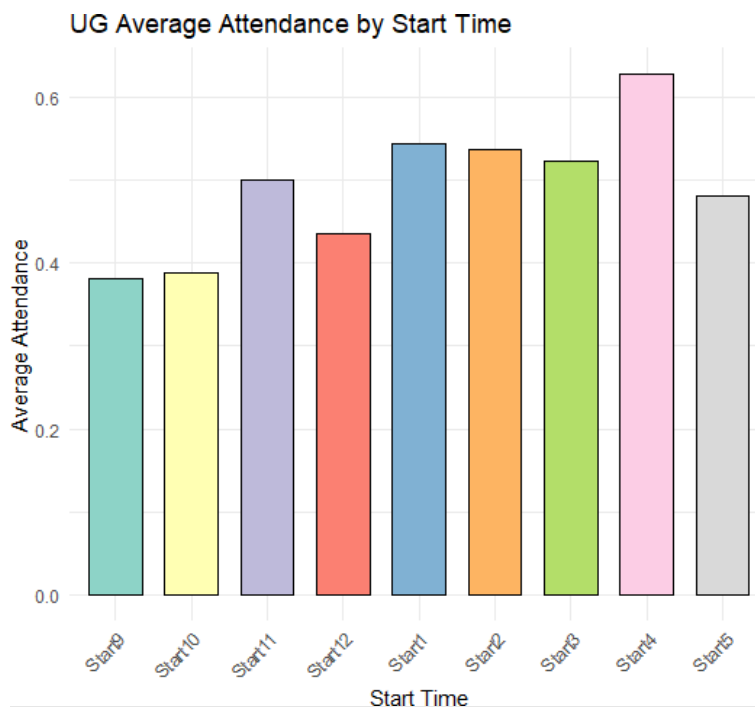


Figure 2: UG Average Attendance by Start Time

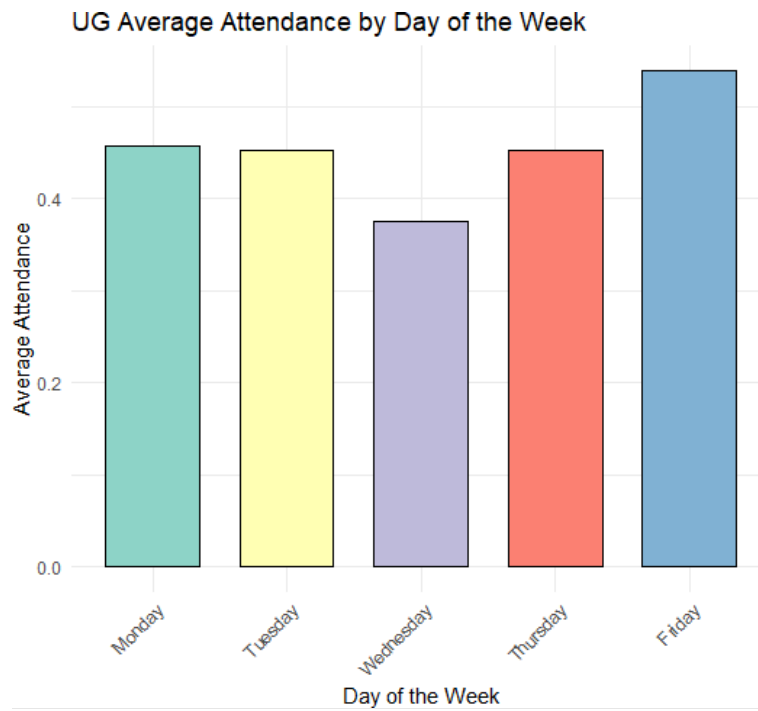


Figure 3: UG Average Attendance by Day of the Week

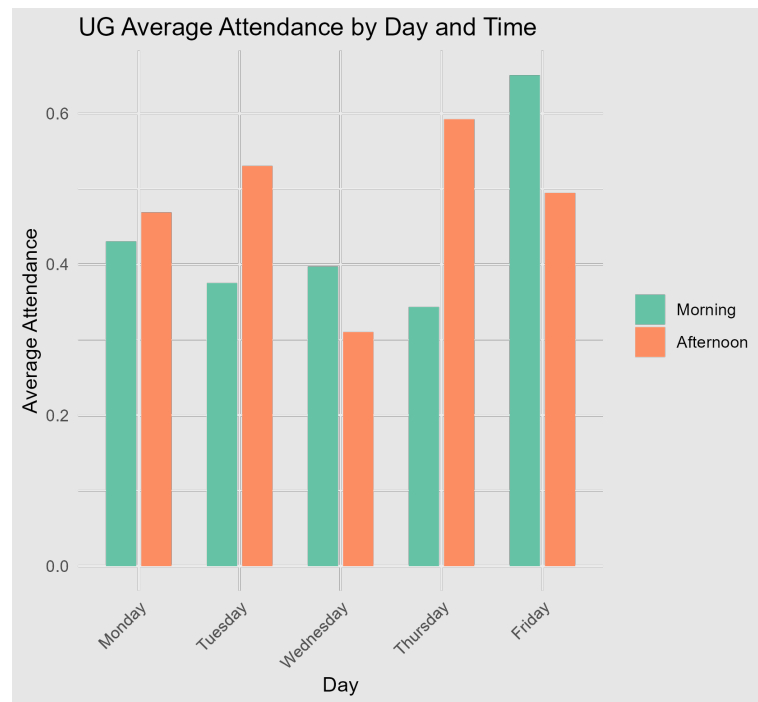


Figure 4: UG Average Attendance by Day and Time