UNPACKING MOTIVATIONS BEHIND ABSENTEEISM
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Krista Sorri, & Pasi Hellsten

Information and Knowledge management, Tampere University (Finland)

Abstract

The past few years, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, have challenged higher education in multiple ways globally. After two years of remote learning the students have, to a substantial extent, decided to skip in-class lectures. Research has shown that attendance in classes improves students' learning as it positively affects their learning habits and attitudes to learning, which are pre-requisites of academic achievement. While institutions could force the students to attend, it is not an effective way to increase student motivation and attending without motivation does not support learning. Therefore, it is important to understand which are the attendance-hindering factors, as well as how the institutions provide more motivating circumstances for the students. In this study, 43 Finnish masters' students of Information and Knowledge Management were asked to describe their reasons for absence and give suggestions, how to change the lectures to become more appealing. The main findings were that students were often already working and prioritized working over lectures. They also find three-hour lectures too long and especially exhausting later in the afternoon. It is noteworthy that over half of the students had more than two reasons for absence. The number of reasons varied from 0 to 5 reasons. Only one student had to skip one lecture due to being sick. The proposed improvement actions included e.g., splitting the lecture into two shorter ones, increasing discussion during classes, including case-based group discussions to the classes and giving points to increase the grade from each lecture attendance. Based on these results, compared to the time before pandemic, there is a clear change in student expectations and behavior. The concentration span of students has reduced. It can also be concluded that traditional lectures have seen their prime. Students expect to have active interaction during the learning events. The reasons behind the reduced concentration span could be studied further. Furthermore, it would be good to compare bachelor's student motivations to these results.

Keywords: Higher education, on-/off-campus learning, lecture absenteeism.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in higher education (HE), transforming how teachers teach, and students engage in teaching and how they learn. Rapid and global implementation of online and blended learning modes has addressed social distancing requirements and catered to the diverse needs of learners, including those in different geographical locations. From the students' perspective, smooth and flexible study opportunities are crucial to the quality of university operations (Tampere University (TAU), 2024). Teaching staff are responsible for supporting and enhancing students' engagement in studying, learning, and academic growth by employing varied teaching methods that consider the skills and abilities of diverse types of learners (Tampere University (TAU), 2025). Flexibility in education is increasingly seen as a core value, akin to diversity and equality (Naidu, 2018). The goal of flexible study opportunities is to ensure the smooth progression of all students' studies. Additionally, students appreciate courses that offer alternative study methods and teachers who consider different life situations and learning styles. But is this flexibility always for the good?

Remote learning has significantly increased flexibility in HE. Both students and teachers have identified flexibility as a major benefit of distance learning (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2019). Temporal flexibility allows recorded lectures to be accessed at any time, while spatial flexibility eliminates the need for physical travel to the classroom.

Simultaneously, remote learning requires more self-regulation from the students to manage the workload (Biwer et al., 2021; Díez-Pascual et al., 2025) reduces opportunities to peer-support and sense of belonging, which decreases the probability of graduating in their major (Cowit and Barker, 2023).

Although, the students appreciate the ability to combine work and studies, the flexibility of time and place, a recent study (Morales-Holguín and Mendoza-Morales, 2024) has demonstrated that students are more satisfied of synchronous in class learning event. Zhiling and Adkins (2022) support these findings by finding that students find the in-class teaching offering more peer-to-peer interaction, supporting active engagement to learning, and hindering procrastination, which enables them to complete even complex assignments.

Digital tools enable hybrid teaching, combining distance and contact methods, thus offering students the choice of how to attend lectures. The increased use of distance learning has also changed the value and meaning of lectures, challenging educators to make them more engaging and meaningful. Hybrid teaching reduces the temporal flexibility but when implemented successfully, it can offer possibilities to active peer-to-peer interaction, instantaneous feedback, and learning engagement (Wang et al., 2023; Zhiling and Adkins, 2022).

Gamvrelis and Timorabadi, (2022) found that online learning is hindered by technology as the discussion is not as fluent as in in-class learning events. In asynchronous remote class there is no interaction between students or students and the teacher, which can lead to misunderstandings but lessens the interactions and mutual learning to say the least.

From learning assessment point of view, the results vary. Various researchers have found that students generally have positive assessments of their distance learning experiences (Díez-Pascual et al., 2025; Gürler et al., 2020; Henckell, 2007). On the other hand, Leksuwankun and Vachatimanont (2024) have found that while the general level of assessment is similar, the remote asynchronous learners fail more often. Onyeaka et al. (2024) found that the assessed learning outcomes were equal but remote students had higher plagiarism index scores.

The above challenges in remote learning led us to questions, how could we increase the attendance rate of in class learning events without making those obligatory? What are the hindering factors for students attending the learning events? And, how to lower the barriers to attend?

2. Research setting

The data consists of 43 learning diaries of Finnish masters' students. The course in question is part of the advanced studies in Information and Knowledge Management, which the students are supposed to complete in the fourth year of their engineering studies. The course is based on lecturing and case discussions. The purpose of the case discussions is to enable students to reflect on what they have heard during the lectures and link the learning to real-life cases. The students who attended have found these discussions beneficial to their learning. The cases included e.g. finding solutions to scale a company's business through identifying potential novel business models and identifying new monetizable value from the business network.

The teachers recognized the benefits of attending the learning events. However, attending the learning events was optional as many of the masters' students in Finland are working alongside their studies. To support the attendance, students were offered points of attendance, which directly affected the course grade. This model has been found successful in other masters' courses. E.g., on Data project management -course students attended on average in four out of seven learning events (57%), only 5 (10%) students did not attend at all and 20% attended all learning events (10 students).

In this course there was one obligatory learning event, namely the final seminar. On average, students attended only two out of seven learning events (29%), 7 students (17%) did not attend any voluntary learning events and only one student attended all learning events (2%). Both courses are part of advanced studies in the same study program; hence the students are largely the same, one of the teachers is the same, all learning events are held in the afternoon. What causes the difference in attendance? While teachers were puzzled the only reasonable way to search for the answer was to ask from the students.

While the reasoning to skip a lecture was assumed to be complex, a qualitative interpretive approach was selected for this study. The students were asked to include in their learning diary a chapter, where they reflected the reasons why they attended or decided not to attend a lecture. The diaries were thematically coded and analyzed (Nowell et al., 2017).

3. Research results

As assumed the students had multiple reasons for not attending. On average a student had 1,7 reasons not to attend, the median being 1,9. One student found five distinct reasons not to attend. The most frequently mentioned reason was working or being otherwise busy (e.g. student society activities). This accounted for 28% of the mentions. While this was not a surprise, the second most frequently mentioned reason was. 23% of the students found a three-hour learning event to bee too long. Third most frequently

mentioned reason was the learning events were too late on the afternoon. They began at 2pm and ended at 5pm. Three next reasons were mentioned 5-6 times (7-8%). These were energy level, convenience, location of the student (lived hours away from the university) and prioritization between courses. Three students were completing their masters' thesis, two preferred to work alone, two found the lecture video to be a more effective way to learn and one found the subject boring.

Table 1. Summary of reasons of absenteeism.

Working or other non-study related prioritization	28 %
Lectures too long	23 %
Lectures end too late in the afternoon	16 %
Convenience, energy level	8 %
Student location	7 %
Prioritization between courses	7 %
Thesis work	4 %
Prefer working alone	3 %
Efficiency provided by the lecture videos	3 %
Boring subject	1 %

Fortunately, many of the most frequently mentioned reasons are "repairable". The university cannot affect students' work schedules, but it can affect the timing, length and structure of the learning event. The university can revise the timing of courses that are supposed to be completed during the same study year to be implemented at different times. This will, however, require increased coordination from the study services.

The students shared their improvement ideas, too. In total, the students gave 147 ideas for improvement. In total, 46 mentions (31%) included either more details in theory or additional assignments. For example, giving weekly assignments to be completed at home between the learning events and concrete proposals for additional subjects to be covered (e.g. how to plan to scale the business model, how to evaluate a business model and more about the business model maturity models). A sizable proportion was related to more detailed instructions and improving the Moodle-page, where the instructions were shared (25 mentions, 17% of all). Only five students (11%) would prefer a remote course, including remote team discussions or an interactive hybrid course implementation.

One of the ideas, which is probably easiest to implement is to send a weekly "learning event promotion"-message to the students. The message could include a concise summary of the subject to be covered and what the structure of the event is.

4. Conclusions

The world of higher education has been profoundly affected by both Covid-19 and digitalization. The students may seem to prefer remote learning as in some courses the attendance rate is low. However, while working is a major reason for absenteeism, there is only a small proportion of students who would like the courses to have remote implementations. The universities could increase the attendance rate through shortening but adding the number of the learning events from three hours to e.g., two hours, avoid scheduling them after 4 pm and promoting the learning events beforehand to explain why each of the events is important from a learning point of view.

The study also finds that the students would like to have clear instructions and weekly assignments to support their learning. Teachers may think that students in higher education are self-governing but based on our results they need more support in scheduling their learning assignments. While during the past decade the learning assessment in HE has transformed from exams to more applied problem solving. This challenges the young students as still in high school the assessment is largely done through exams. On the other hand, it also offers a possibility to learn through interaction, which is seen as an expectation from the present-day students.

Thirdly, the study finds that the students are not afraid of working hard. They want to learn more even if it requires more assignments. Teachers might want to consider more structured implementation with more assignments.

This study has its limitations. The study was conducted only on one masters' course. The conclusions would benefit from reproducing the study on multiple courses in different majors and in bachelors' courses, too. The reproduced studies would also benefit the reliability of the results. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand in detail why the three-hour lecture is too long for the current students. It has been a de facto length of a lecture for ages. It can be that the concentration span has shortened or that the students feel more comfortable saying their views when asked. Understanding the de-motivating and motivating factors of students could help the higher education institutions to bring forth more capable and skilled experts for our society.

References

Biwer, F., Wiradhany, W., oude Egbrink, M., Hospers, H., Wasenitz, S., Jansen, W., & de Bruin, A. (2021). Changes and Adaptations: How University Students Self-Regulate Their Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.642593

Cowit, N. Q., & Barker, L. (2023). How do Teaching Practices and Use of Software Features Relate to Computer Science Student Belonging in Synchronous Remote Learning Environments? In *Proceedings of the 54th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education V. 1, SIGCSE 2023* (pp. 771-777). https://doi.org/10.1145/3545945.3569876

Díez-Pascual, A. M., García-Díaz, P., Peña-Capilla, R., & Jurado-Sanchez, B. (2025). Face-to-face vs. online learning in science and engineering courses during covid-19 epoch. *Research in Science & Technological Education, 43*, 347-376. https://doi.org/10.1080/02635143.2023.2275136

Gamvrelis, T., & Timorabadi, H. S. (2022). Challenges with Online Teaching and Learnings for the Post-Pandemic Classroom. *Proceedings of the ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition* (pp. 1-20).

Gürler, C., Uslu, T., & Daştan, İ. (2020). Evaluation of distance learning from student perspective in Covid-19 pandemic. Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 24, 1895-1904.

Henckell, M. M. (2007). *Evaluating distance education: The student perspective*. Citeseer.

Leksuwankun, S., & Vachatimanont, S. (2024). Assessing the feasibility and outcomes of asynchronous and synchronous learning in nuclear medicine for medical students. *Iranian Journal of Nuclear Medicine, 32*, 175-182. https://doi.org/10.22034/irjnm.2024.129530.1604

Morales-Holguín, A., & Mendoza-Morales, G. (2024). University Learning Experience Between Physical and Virtual Environments, an Analysis from the Post-pandemic Context. In F. J. García-Peñalvo, M. L. Sein-Echaluce, & Á. Fidalgo-Blanco (Eds.), *Innovation and Technologies for the Digital Transformation of Education: European and Latin American Perspectives* (pp. 357-364). Singapore: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-2468-0_35

Naidu, S. (2018). How flexible is flexible learning, who is to decide and what are its implications? *Distance Education, 38*, 1-4.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D.E., Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*, 1609406917733847. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Onyeaka, H., Passaretti, P., & Miller-Friedmann, J. (2024). Teaching in a pandemic: a comparative evaluation of online vs. face-to-face student outcome gains. *Discover Education, 3*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00140-8

Tampere University (TAU) (2025). *Guidelines for academic ethics and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct at Tampere University* [WWW Document]. https://intra.tuni.fi/en/studying/studying-0/academic-integrity-and-study-regulations/guidelines-academic-ethics-and-procedures-handling-allegations-misconduct-tampere-university

Tampere University (TAU) (2024). *Education strategy of the Tampere university community* [WWW Document]. https://content-webapi.tuni.fi/proxy/public/2019-04/education_strategy_of_the_tampere_university_community.pdf

Veletsianos, G., & Houlden, S. (2019). An analysis of flexible learning and flexibility over the last 40 years of *Distance Education*. *Distance Education, 40*(4), 454-468. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2019.1681893

Wang, H.-C., Maslim, M., & Kan, C.-H. (2023). A question–answer generation system for an asynchronous distance learning platform. *Education and Information Technologies, 28,* 12059-12088.

Zhiling, C. T. U., & Adkins, J. (2022). Comparing Students' Evaluation of Online, Hybrid, and Face-to-Face Classes. *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Society and Information Technologies: ICSIT* (pp. 97-100). https://doi.org/10.54808/ICSIT2022.01.97