

Chapter 7

Attendance, Employability, Student Performance, and Electronic Course Materials: An Exploration and Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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 chapter 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. I find only very limited evidence that such students actually attend classes any less than other students do. Furthermore, I find that reasons for non-attendance are similar to those reported in existing literature.

... 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 recognized and concerning problem in universities around the world (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Romer, 1993). The effects of absenteeism on student performance have received some attention in the higher education literature, in particular in the fields of economics and the medical sciences, with

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mounting evidence that higher attendance is positively associated with student performance (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2008). This is the case because courses designed for classroom participation typically involve meaningful learning experiences that help students. However, what motivates a student to attend scheduled classes or not remains a relatively unexplored area (Woodfield, Jessop, & McMillan, 2006). The recent decade has seen a transition from paper-based to electronically distributed learning materials, making the availability of lecture slides, reading materials, and even video or podcasts on virtual learning platforms increasingly the norm. Some form of blended learning is becoming the rule rather than the exception.

The question of the effect of the availability of electronic learning materials in discouraging attendance is largely unknown, with some indications that a proportion of students may treat digital course materials as a substitute for class attendance (Simpson, 2006). This chapter attempts to explore this gap.

This chapter 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 chapter 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 “soft” skills, not just the “hard” skills gained in traditional courses.

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 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 suggested designing higher educational programs to include extensive internships and other real-world 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

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