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# ***Why don't they attend? Factors that influence the attendance of HE students of education***

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This paper explores the factors that influence attendance to taught sessions in higher education. Absenteeism is approached as a complex phenomenon that is problematic when considering how students, lecturers and universities relate to it. Our study is conducted as a case study based on a large post-92 university in England, focusing on the undergraduate Education Studies programme. We took a collaborative approach with students and staff as research partners. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews with different members of staff and focus groups with students in all the three years of the programme. We used a thematic network analysis to generate a visual representation of the subthemes that emerged from collaborative analysis. Our findings show that attendance is a situated decision that can be articulated in relation to two sets of factors. The first set refers to university imperatives, and which relate to discourses of performativity and accountability, such as success, employability, and retention. The second set relates to the complexities of students' lives, such as their family relationships, their finances, jobs, travelling and so on. In the intersection between these two clusters of concerns, the tension between the two

sets of discourses plays out and has implications for the degree of engagement that students have with the university and their courses

**KEY WORDS:** attendance, absenteeism, engagement, collaborative research, student experience.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the common concern in higher education (HE) that students' physical presence in scheduled lectures appears to be decreasing (Oldfield et al. 2018; Mearman et al. 2014; Kelly 2012). Attendance has become a matter of considerable importance for lecturers and HE institutions (Moore, Armstrong and Pearson 2008), partly for the reason that this issue is associated with concerns about retention (Sander, Mair, James 2016; Bowen et al. 2005) and the consequences that students who withdraw from their courses have for institutional accountability (van der Velden 2012; Wolbring 2012).

Much research has taken place to explore the negative implications of absence in taught sessions. In many cases, the lack of attendance is perceived as a waste of institutional resources and professional efforts, that may well have a negative impact on the student's academic performance, preparation for future work and well-being (Macfarlane 2013). It is sometimes the case that a lack of attendance can lead to students withdrawing from their studies; and the lack of attendance also poses a direct threat to universities' financial stability and performance indicators, as retention rates are becoming a key factor in university quality assurance processes (DfE, 2017; Yorke and Longden, 2004). This position has contributed to a developing interest within HE institutions in implementing a variety of different initiatives to approach the issue of attendance (Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009). For instance, in the current COVID-19 pandemic that higher education institutions are responding to, we have seen a general shift away from lectures and seminars as the mainstay of undergraduate course content to forms of 'blended learning' (Tesar, 2020), entailing opportunities for both physical and online presence and engagement. In this context, online and readily available resources, in the form of recorded lectures, slides, notes and additional resources commonly shared via virtual learning spaces are used to support, or even replace students' presence in a classroom/lecture session (Pisciano, Dziuban and Graham 2014). With the introduction of these new initiatives, the traditional view of attendance is altered, demanding new understandings of what means *to attend* or *to be in class*. The concept of engagement is proposed to transcend the idea of attendance, posing that merely attending does not mean a student is fully involved in the programme and getting the most of the HE experience. Debates about student engagement also consider the discussion of the quality of learning, teaching and the contribution of the HE experience to promote social justice (Zepke, 2017). New approaches and provisions might be useful in meeting the needs of a standardised model of contemporary HE student. They may be valid for managerial purposes that aim to make a more efficient use of resources. However, the problem is that they may not always serve and represent the needs and styles of all students or lecturers. This article suggests that a more nuanced view of attendance and what it means *to attend* is needed in order to be able to understand current students' and lecturers' positions. Whilst for some students and practitioners 'being there' represents a central element of the university experience, for students who may struggle to attend taught sessions regularly, attendance can be approached differently. We understand that accepting one vision of how attendance is embedded in the student experience might be problematic and therefore in this article we initiate further examination with the aim of enriching the debate. Our study explores different elements that contribute to and construct understanding of attendance within the HE setting. For this purpose, we have gathered data from

students, lecturers and other university staff who work on the undergraduate Education Studies course in one of the largest universities in the UK. Through our exploration of the data, we aim to outline a range of arguments used to articulate views and debates about ‘attendance’, ‘attending’ and ‘being there’(or not). The arguments presented in this article broaden the scope of how we conceptualise attendance and thus how we understand the complexity of students’ relationships with academic demands, personal obligations, and expectations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***The study of attendance***

A traditional understanding of the lecture-student interaction in HE is developed from the notion that principal teaching and learning activities happen in the shared space of the classroom. Attendance is generally conceptualised as the physical presence of students to ‘timetabled sessions such as seminars, lectures, practical or laboratory classes’ (Barlow and Fleischer 2011: 228). However, the idea of physical presence can be questioned, for example, by means of the use of virtual learning environments, learning technologies or other forms of distance learning that challenge classic views of the teaching and learning process.

There is a growing body of research concerned with the impact of attendance and absenteeism and the way in which attendance is problematized and approached by institutions and lecturers (e.g. Sloan et al. 2019; Gbadamosi 2015; Macfarlane 2013). Attendance in HE has received attention in the literature particularly in relation to the impact of attendance at class on academic performance. Most of the studies across disciplines and countries point to some form of relationship between student attendance and achievements (Pani and Kishore 2016; Louis et al. 2016; Arulampalam, Naylor and Smith 2012; Burd and Hodgson 2006; Newman-Ford et al. 2008). Nonetheless, critical voices claim that attendance is related to performance in complex ways that need to be unpacked and explored in more depth. The link is a complex one, as Allen and Webber (2010) point out. In particular, they found that student-specific factors (e.g. revision strategies) are important in mediating this link and cannot be ignored. They also suggest that the effect of absenteeism on achievement is non-linear. It is clear from their work that the complex interactions between a number of personal and other factors must be considered; the relationship between attendance and achievement is by no means a simple one.

The topic of attendance is problematic because discussions about what motivates students to attend or to miss classes are still inconclusive (Kelley 2012; Clark et al. 2011; Massingham and Herrington 2006; Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2003). The student decision to attend class (or not) is multifaceted, and absenteeism does not affect all the students in the same ways (Arulampalam, Naylor and Smith 2012). It is expected that students’ attendance at learning events will be influenced by a variety of factors, reasons and predispositions. Some of these factors may be within the control of lecturers and universities, whilst other factors are more related to students’ lives and individual preferences (Kelly 2010). For example, Oldfield et al. (2019) provides a comprehensive categorisation, organised into four key themes that explain the reasons why students may not attend university teaching sessions.

- Firstly, feelings associated with isolation or undeveloped sense of belonging caused by the lack of meaningful opportunities for interpersonal interactions with peers and tutors.
- Secondly, a negative perception of lecturers in terms of personality or teaching approach.
- Thirdly, the adoption of a consumerist or instrumental discourse that focuses the attention on the final product (grade obtained), overlooking the demands of the learning process.

- Finally, the external pressures and demands that require time from the students and reduce the time that they have to dedicate to their studies and attending taught sessions.

From our experiences of working in HE , we understand that there are also some more subtle and nuanced reasons that influence students' thinking about their attendance at taught sessions and the ways that attendance is generally conceptualised. With this in mind and departing from the more common arguments identified in the literature, we recognise that debates about attendance require a more holistic and situational approach that focuses on the intersection of the personal-contextual and institutional-pedagogical elements that together influence the way that attendance is conceptualised by key actors. To that end, we next consider each of these in turn.

### ***Personal and contextual factors that influence attendance***

The literature presents a wide range of studies from diverse disciplines that cover personal or environmental factors, which may prevent or motivate students from attending lectures. For example, Halpern's (2007) research with business management students suggests that attendance may be a consequence of personal characteristics that include maturity, previous studies, qualifications and sociocultural background. In a different study with college students, Longhurst (1999) explored 15 types of reasons for student absenteeism including travel and weather conditions, social activities and friends, courses and teacher, work commitments, student discipline and family and residence. He found that even for the most committed student, family obligations and illness appear as the most common reason given by students to miss classes. In many studies, the students' participation in part-time employment emerges as an important element to be considered (Kelly 2012; Draper 2011; Hall, 2010). Oldfield et al (2019) make exactly this point; external demands on students reduce the time that they have to dedicate to their studies and to attending taught sessions.

Health issues, and especially mental health problems, are also recognised as a main factor that affects lecture attendance across different disciplines (Bati et al. 2013; Gump 2004). This links to the first point made by Oldfield and colleagues (2019, above). It may be that some students have feelings of loneliness, caused by the lack of meaningful opportunities for interpersonal interactions with peers and tutors. Whether these factors cause or are caused by poor attendance is a link which warrants further investigation.

There are also studies that discuss the influences of other personal and social factors on attendance. An experimental study with undergraduate students conducted by Cortright et al. (2011) found differences between the genders when looking at the influence of regular attendance on examination performance. Linked to this is the work of Oldfield et al (2019) who discuss how significant discourses that focus on the final product (grade or examination result obtained), currently prevail. This focus may mean that the processes of learning may take more of a back seat than do the outcomes.

Cotton et al. (2016) studied attendance in relation to cultural features, finding that for example, issues such as confidence in speaking English has an impact on attendance. Further research has considered other psychological factors, suggesting that experiencing mental health issues is a predictor of poor attendance (Oldfield et al. 2018; Harris et al. 2016). There is also research that focuses on exploring differences based on age (Dolnicar 2005) or group identification (White, O'Connor and Hamilton 2011). It is therefore to be expected that in a HE context populated by a diverse group of students, the reasons for attending or not attending lectures and other teaching events may be articulated and approached in multiple and unique ways.

### ***Institutional and pedagogic factors that influence attendance***

Absenteeism is perceived as problematic for students as well as lecturers and universities, but it is not easy to provide institutional solutions for this 'problem'. Whether attendance should be compulsory or not and how it should be approached is still a matter of debate (e.g. Pinto and Lohrey 2016). Mandatory explicit attendance policies have demonstrated that they can improve attendance (Snyder et al., 2014) but in order to be effective, policies should be explicit and clear. However, this is not the case in many institutions (Self 2012; Marburg 2006). Barlow & Fleischer (2011) suggest that a clear policy on attendance will help students to take responsibility for themselves. There are also critical voices that argue that mandatory attendance policies lack an understanding of individual students' circumstances (Rendleman 2017). Some of these critical voices are concerned that requiring attendance contradicts humanistic pedagogic principles which are based on the idea that the student autonomy facilitates learning (Lipscomb and Snelling 2010).

HE institutions have mobilised different strategies to improve attendance, with the intention of identifying early patterns of disengagement to prevent withdrawals from university courses. Such withdrawals can cause a substantial economic loss for the student, the institution and the state (Yorke and Bernard 2004). However, there is also the concern that a tendency to intensify accountability measures to promote attendance may 'infantilise students rather than developing their capacity to make informed choices as adults thereby failing to respect their academic freedom' (Macfarlane 2013: 358). Therefore, it is suggested that institutions should not only pay attention to the effectiveness of the attendance policies, strategies and systems used to prevent disengagement and dropouts, but should also consider student agency and choice.

The pedagogical aspects that emerge from the literature associated with the issue of attendance include delivery models of taught sessions, access to learning material online and the qualities of the teacher. The traditional model of organising taught sessions in HE typically involves *lectures* (typically less interactive and bigger groups), *seminars* (typically smaller groups and more interactive) and *tutorials* (usually one-to-one tutor-student). The students' perceptions of the form of delivering taught sessions or of the ways of sharing learning material are factors that could motivate different attitudes to attendance. For example, Sharp et al. (2017) explain that students have a negative perception of traditional lectures that can be aggravated by the lack of class interaction and an inefficient use of teaching resources and this can lead to non-attendance.

The literature provides a good range of studies that explore the impact on attendance of different pedagogical initiatives and uses of online learning resources or ICT (e.g. Bos 2016; McDonald and Robinson 2014; Hove and Corcoran 2008). The adoption of learning technologies in the form of virtual learning environments and for instance, the possibility of making video recordings of lectures available for students have added new pedagogical possibilities that also challenge the idea of 'being there' as essential. Conversely, there are also students that see the experience of 'being there', the topic of study or the character and teaching qualities of the lecturer as more relevant to attendance than the technical arrangements of the teaching sessions (Cherualath 2017; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla 2015). This is also reflected in the work of Oldfield and his colleagues (2019), referred to earlier.

### ***From the literature review to our study***

The literature suggests that studies on students' attendance in higher education tend to consider both the students' personal contexts and broader institutional factors. In recent years, the debate has moved from the relationship between attendance and academic performance to other matters

that include an institutional perspective concerned with retention, student experience, and institutional performance. This literature review has shown that it is often only the voices of students that provide data to support the discussion. For that reason, in our study we combine the voices of the students with the voices of other educational professionals as this enables us to draw a picture that exemplifies the complexity of the multiple elements used to discuss attendance.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Our study was conducted in a large post-92 university in the North West of England, and focused on staff and students from the undergraduate Education Studies programme. Three staff members received university funding to conduct this collaborative study, and 15 undergraduates studying BA (Hons) Education Studies volunteered to become co-researchers. This research group was divided into three project groups, each comprising researchers with a variety of experience—a member of staff (researchers), and then 5 students (co-researchers) from each of the three undergraduate years.

We were keen to use a collaborative approach with students and staff as research partners. We drew on the thinking of Morwenna Griffiths in doing this. She suggests that

‘... the role of an educational researcher is always to work in specific circumstances *with* rather than *on* or even *for* the people who inhabit them...Such a way of working is also a way of dealing with some of the arrogance presupposed in some forms of knowledge, and their implication in structures of dominance and oppression’ (Griffiths 1998: 111).

Taking this ‘working with’ approach, we used a collaborative methodology at all stages after the initial inception of the project. Throughout the project, there was both joint theorising and joint action. Students collaborated with staff in teams, in designing the parameters of the work and the research questions, in deciding on methods and in collecting and analysing data. The contribution of the students and lecturers as co-researchers was not aimed to produce data, but to work together as active researchers. Interestingly, much of the established research in this area studies the lived realities of students’ HE experiences, but without including the students themselves in the research process and production. Our work remedies this by taking a collaborative approach that also acknowledge the capacity of students as producers of knowledge (Neary and Winn 2009).

A case study approach was taken in this work, where the case was ‘staff and students working on an undergraduate degree programme in a UK university’. The case study method ‘allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events’ (Yin 2009: 4). In our work, the case study was not designed to be generalizable to a wider population. Rather, the function of the case is instrumental (Stake 2004) in that this particular course was chosen and studied with the aim of gaining insights into students’ and lecturers’ views on attendance. However, the purpose of our case study is to expand and generate theory—what Yin (2009:38), calls ‘analytical generalisation’ as that transcends the case of Education Studies to be meaningful in a different context.

### **Data collection**

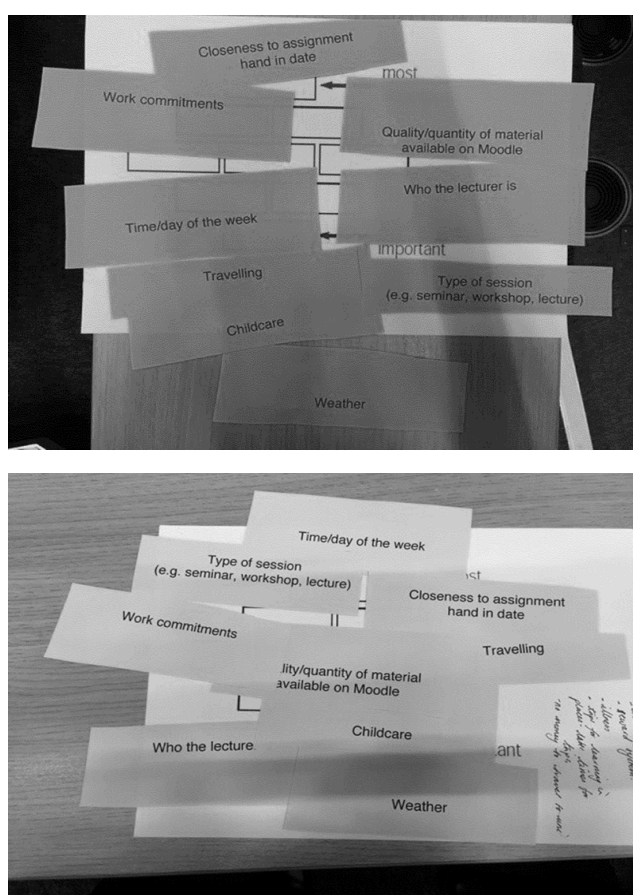
Research topics, questions, methods and data collection strategies were negotiated and agreed by the project groups. Data were collected using two methods, as follows:

1. Individual Interviews were conducted with University staff including 1 senior leader, 4 lecturers, and the faculty attendance officer. The interviews were semi structured and focussed on questions

which had been negotiated by the project groups. The key themes that emerged from initial conversations and approached as a departure point were: definitions of attendance; the importance of physical attendance; the importance of face to face interaction; the use of the virtual learning environment; and staff understanding of students' reasons for not attending sessions.

2. Focus groups with students in all the three years of the programme (14 from the first year, 18 from the second year and 14 from the third year), including commuter students, students from different gender and age group, students who work part time and students living on campus in order to consider a wide range of experiences. The focus group interviews employed various narrative elicitation methods and one of these was a 'Diamond 9' activity (inspired by Niemi, Kumpulainen and Lipponen, 2015) where participants ranked and discussed some of the reasons for lack of attendance at lectures/seminars (see figure 1: Diamond 9 activity)

[Insert Figure 1: Diamond 9 activity]



One of the limitations of this study—as in many other studies on the topic of attendance— is that the students involved in the project, either as participants or interviewers, were likely to be those with better attendance and motivation to attend. Inevitably, we were not working with the students who were rarely around, but we tried to combine the voice of lecturers and students to provide an original insight that informs practices and further research on this topic

### **Analysis**

Following a three-month long intensive period of data collection, the data was collated, and a full team data analysis meeting took place. The project teams had all felt that some form of thematic analysis was appropriate for this data. A thematic networks technique, as outlined by Attride-Stirling

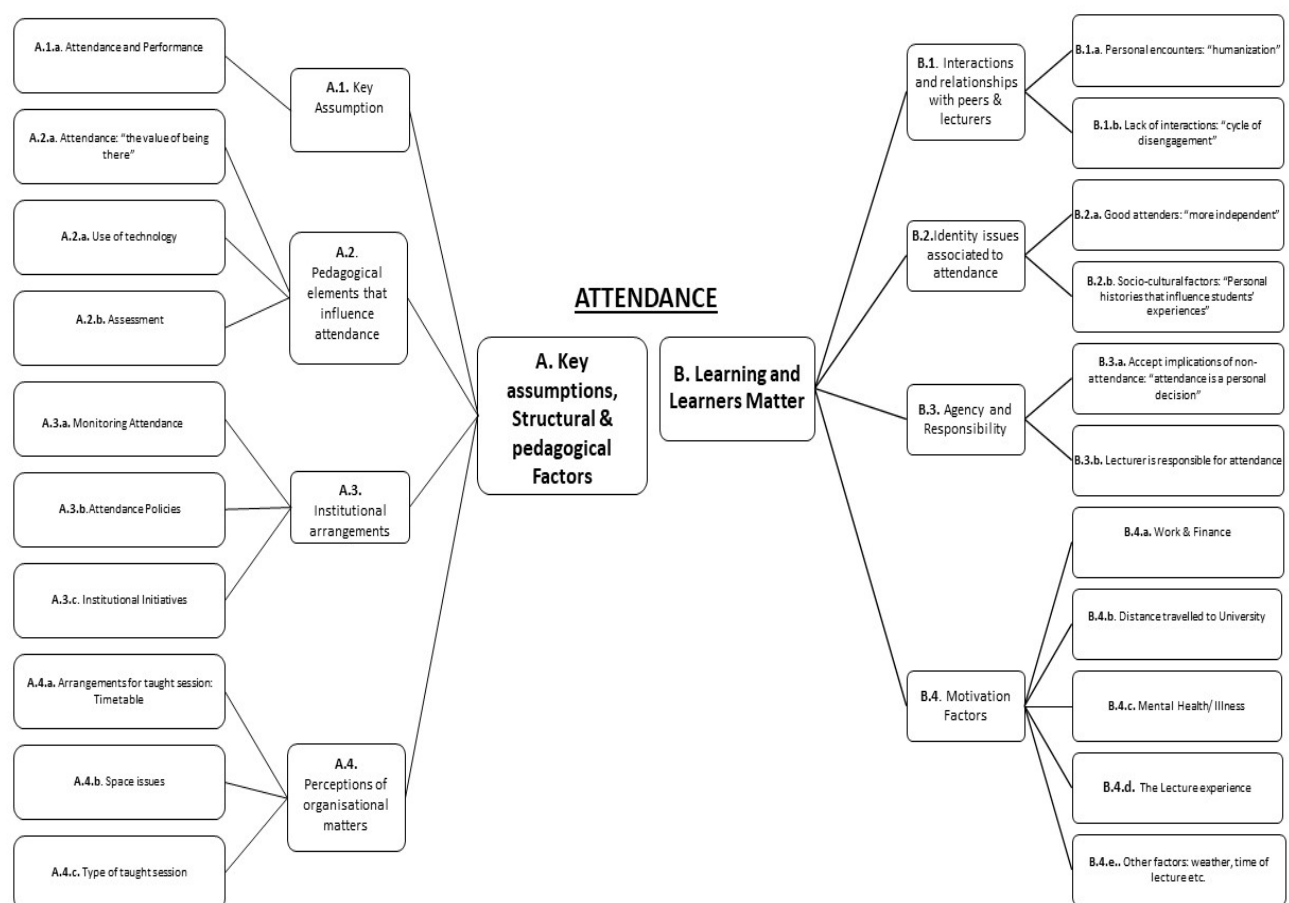


(2001) was chosen, as it allows for the exploration of ‘the understanding of an issue or the signification of an idea’ (p.387). This was an efficient and robust tool for the systematization and presentation of qualitative analyses. Thematic Network Analysis also allows a visual representation to be developed that provides a framework to discuss the data and analysis and to facilitate understandings of the processes of meaning-making. Analysis proceeded in an iterative fashion; we used both deductive approaches, driven by the research questions, and also an inductive approach, driven by new themes brought out in the data. We generated different representations that illustrate emerging themes and sub-themes, for sharing and understanding complex information, and to display and facilitate the construction of these analyses. After a process of reduction, we produced a final illustration that we used to build our final argument. We explain our findings in the following sections.

## FINDINGS

The figure below (Figure 1) shows the graphic representation of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the collaborative network analysis. We use extracts from our data to illustrate each theme

[insert figure 2 here Emerging Categories]



### **Key Theme 1: Key assumptions, Structural and Pedagogical Factors**

Four subthemes were developed within this theme – key assumptions; pedagogical elements that influence attendance; institutional arrangements; and perceptions of organisation matters.

A1. *Key assumptions*, which are ‘taken for granted’ assumptions about the nature of the relationship between attendance and achievement or in other words, the value of attendance. They are also included here – for example, one first year student explained:

Generally, there is a correlation between how often someone has attended and how well they do. (p.11, l. 21-22)

A key administrator reflects on the benefits of attendance focusing on the interactions between other students and the tutor:

I think that the benefits of attendance are obviously that you can learn from your tutor’s expertise, you can ask questions and you can benefit from other experiences within the same cohort. You can speak to other students and bounce ideas, if there’s things you are unsure of you can ask questions. (p.21, l. 9-12).

On the other hand, we found a senior manager in the faculty suggesting a more critical view on attendance:

I think attendance is a little bit... a disciplinary regime. It is about compliance with scheduled engagements that are established by the institution. (p33, l.2-3)

From this last extract, we can see that the issue of attendance is not only related to achievement, but open to other considerations that can be used to expand the debate about attendance.

A2 – *Pedagogical elements*, include how attendance is defined by matters of pedagogy – the use of technology, assessment, or teaching practices. For example, one member of staff suggested that teaching practices were important when he was asked about encouraging attendance:

...when I’m teaching I’ll often not really refer to the... you know I won’t read out what’s on the slides it’s all really...about talking about the particular issues and making those connections and trying to keep it kind of lively and going in that way. (p.2, l.34-37).

This extract reflects on the added value of attending a taught session. The different pedagogical elements (in this case slides, knowledge of the topic, personal experiences and teaching style) are entangled by the lecturer during the session and this is what gives value to be there.

A3 - *Institutional arrangements* which influence attendance, such as student attendance monitoring, attendance policies and institutional initiatives were identified as important. Students generally were in favour of an attendance monitoring systems such as the ‘swipe’ attendance system, as expressed by a student:

This kind of electronic digital development [electronic monitoring system] we have so yeah, I kind of like this kind of swiping in and all that, I feel it seems cool compared to saying yes I’m here or present (p.65, l.11-12)

On the other hand, lecturers show a more critical understanding of its meaning and how it could be used for other purposes:

Inevitably it [data on attendance] will probably become part of the metrics when you are looking at teaching quality and that is a very difficult one because at my level is the impulse is to hold that back from people....but it tells you something as well. You know, you’ve got a cohort who comes to everything for three units but don’t go to a fourth one. It would be wrong to ignore that data. Again that has not been coded into an institutional policy but the data is made available to me. So locally there is something there.(p.35,l.23-29).

However, both students and lecturers show a limited understanding of the policies on attendance and the rationale underpinning the monitoring of attendance is always not clear for them.

A4. Space, type of session, and the times of taught session are included under *Perceptions of organisational matters*. One year 1 student suggested:

Like if there is a lecture that starts at 9, and only that's an hour, people are going to be like they can't be bothered to come in just for an hour at 9...yeah (p.53, l.27-28).

Similar features were mentioned on many occasions, such as the timing of sessions (first thing or later in the afternoon) and gaps of more than an hour between timetabled slots. As with other elements, when looking at different extracts from data we found that there is no clear consensus.

### **Key Theme 2: Learning and learners matter**

The areas highlighted on the right-hand side of figure 1 include interactions and relationships with peers and staff; identity issues associated with attendance; agency and responsibility; and factors relating to student motivation to attend.

B1. Both staff and students felt that *relationships* were key to attendance. One lecturer suggested:

...I think importance of building up rapport and that sort of confidence in each other I think is important. (p.19, l.12-13).

Another stated that he values:

being able to connect, the possibility to develop a relationship even though there might be like a hundred people in the room (p.9, l.28-30).

Students mirrored this:

'It is nice to have a personal connection with the tutor, which is possible when it is a smaller group. (DB3, p28, 16.)

And:

I personally think it's better face to face because you get more from the tutor, that's not on the slides. Little things like body language, facial expressions and personal anecdotes used to explain concepts...'Cos sometimes you miss important information if you don't come in (p.31, l.14-19)

It was common in our data to see that personal connections are key for students and lectures.

B2&3. The notions of *identity* and *agency* are key to understanding students' attitudes. One of the main features that came out of the research is the complexity of the lived realities of students' lives – how they were having to drop children off at school and then drive some considerable distance to attend university sessions, how they had elderly parents to look after, or how they had to work to be able to afford the university life.

This quote from a third year student exemplifies some of these tensions, as she explains how she is conscious that being known to tutors is also important, but how it's difficult to maintain a balance between the need to work to live and to pay HE fees as well as to attend university;

....you have to think right if I'm gonna ask this person for a reference you need to be able to show that I have been here and been engaged and that sort of stuff, but I also think that

because it's university and its independent...people have got families, people have got jobs; people need to be able to live and its really expensive and obviously bills are getting more expensive as well as uni fees (p.67, l.30-37).

This illustrates the tension and agentic dilemma for students perfectly. Students' identities are multi-layered and complex. There are tensions involved in the lived realities of students' lives; these tensions are reflected in the multiple identities that students experience and exhibit. Students may work to pay their fees but the timing, nature and demands of that work limits their attendance.

B4. When students were asked what the factors relating to their *motivations to attend* lectures or seminars were, some mentioned other issues such as the weather and travelling

Probably for me it's travelling and weather (p.29, l.10).

However, other students suggested that the weather made no difference to them:

There have been travel delays due to weather but they are not the most important reasons (p.28, l.11).

Illness is an important issue for students:

I think illness is a massive one, because if you're the type of person that can't concentrate if you're slightly ill, then you might as well stay at home (some people use this excuse quite a lot). I'm the type of person that comes in no matter what unless I physically cannot get out of bed. The biggest reasons people don't come in because of illness whether they are or it's just an excuse (p.21, l.32-36).

Staff reflected this too as a major cause of non-attendance:

....in my view, most of the students who don't attend actually have health problems. So for my lectures personally, I never ever think that it's because they don't find it interesting or engaging... (p.8,l.38-39).

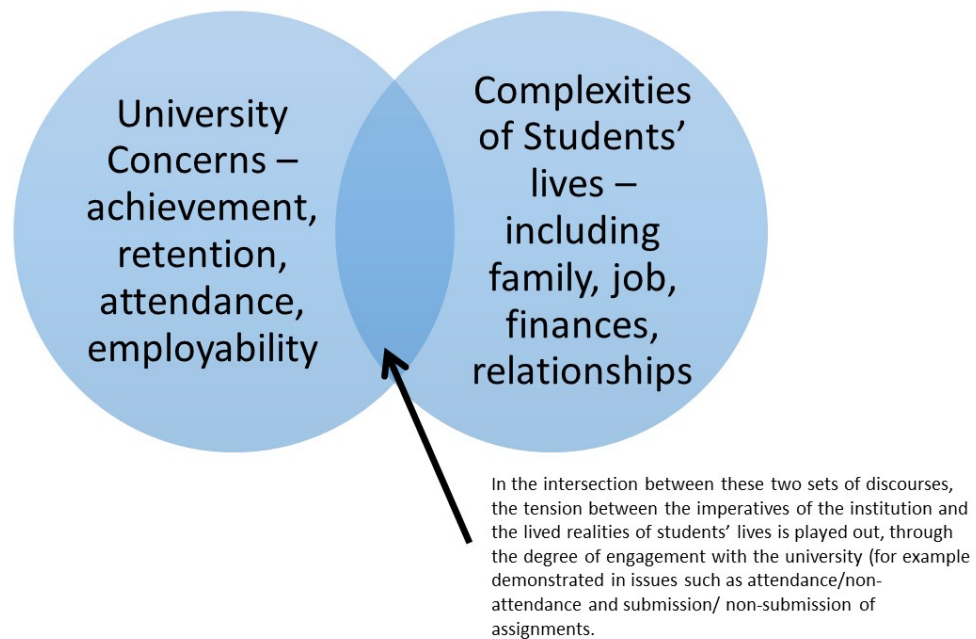
Students talked about work on a number of occasions. Their struggles to find a balance are indicative of what might seem to be a rather paradoxical approach to attendance and work on the part of students.

... -so yes you've got a loan but you're still having to try and live and it's not easy. Well, I either need to eat or you know I can come to university, it's a balancing thing and I think we need to be very careful in making that balance right. (p.67, l.32-37).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Attendance is a situated decision that can be articulated in relation to the multiple factors that we presented in our findings. The figure below (Figure 3: Discourses) shows two sets of discourses that affect students' attendance and their approach to attendance. The first set is the set that link to university imperatives, and which relate to discourses of performativity and accountability, such as success, employability, and retention. The second set relates to the complexities of students' lives, such as their family relationships, their finances, jobs, travelling and so on. In the intersection between these two clusters of concerns, the tension between the two sets of discourses plays out, and is evident in the degree of engagement with the university and the students' courses

[Insert figure 3 here: Discourses]



Our work showed that students valued the opportunity to 'belong' to a particular course, programme or HEI and recognise the 'added value' by lectures to taught sessions. They appreciated the opportunity to work with and to interact both with other students and with staff, at a personal and relational level. Hearteningly, this suggests that students appreciate the human value of education. It may be that this observation/finding is particularly relevant to studying in the caring professions, education and the social sciences. In an educational course where education, teaching and learning is at the centre of the debate, we were not surprised to find a well-developed relational approach to attendance that takes into account and allows for a wide variety of contextual, social and personal factors. The link between student expectation about human contact – with staff and with each other - and attendance is an important one and a theme that came through strongly in our work but is also present in the literature (Cheruvath 2017; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla 2015; White, O'Connor and Hamilton 2011).

Oldfield et al. (2018) found that a lower sense of 'belongingness to university' was a significant predictor of poor attendance. They suggest that providing support for students in relation to mental wellbeing, paying careful attention to assessment deadlines and helping students to organise their attendance around social activities could be advantageous in improving attendance and engagement. On the other hand, there is a balance to be found. Lipscomb and Snelling (2010) note that andragogic and humanistic principles tend to emphasise student self-direction and guided independence, and that lecturers do often emphasise the nature of students in HE as adult learners. Our findings show that students too see the importance of an agentic approach to learning. However, if it is the case that teaching staff seek to control and enforce attendance, it might be argued that students are subject to conflicting messages – they are required both to conform *and* to be independent; so perhaps enforcing attendance may undermine some important pedagogic principles about caring, community and connectivity. Some of the student participants expressed that the relational aspect of learning was in tension with discourses concerning attendance.

It is worth pointing out that there were differences between staff and student views of attendance, although these were variable. Some staff felt very strongly that physical attendance was important; others were less focussed on this. These differences could be investigated further, perhaps including

a consideration of the impact of accountability and performativity discourses in relation to staff views of attendance.

Nonetheless, our findings show that students' and lecturers' views on the topic of attendance are not limited to references to the relationship with performance. Attendance is therefore conceptualised in a complex system of relations between structural, pedagogical and personal matters. Our research shows that attendance is strongly influenced by the perception of the value added to the delivery of the session, and other factors within the control of universities as suggested by Kelly (2012). However, there is also a wider range of subjective factors associated with student identity and with the demands of the current university student life that are not under the control of lectures or HE Institutions. What is more, these factors can be articulated in contradictory ways. A good way to explain this idea is through what we have called "the student life-attendance clash" that defines the conflictual relationship between the demands of the identity of the students as learners and their other life commitments. University students try to achieve a balance that allows them to attend university lectures while simultaneously dedicating time to other activities (e.g. part time work, family commitments, social life, etc.). The problem is that balance cannot always be achieved, as students are bound to the demands of their personal life and in many cases to the need to work to pay for the opportunity to study at university. Attendance at university is no longer perceived as a privilege but as a kind of social demand (Margison, 2016). Absenteeism is in many cases the materialisation of the struggle of some students to find a balance between personal life and university life.

Whilst higher education institutions and lecturers can still work on different ways to "add value" to attendance, the impact of their different initiatives will be conditioned by their capacity to support and understand the elements that configure students' different identities. There should be an effort to develop taught sessions that will be perceived by students as opportunities to get more than subject knowledge. Physical presence should be offered as an opportunity to interact with peers and lecturers and as something that is still difficult to reproduce through technology. Lectures, tutorials and seminars should be presented as opportunities to develop a sense of belonging that humanise the learning process, facilitate engagement and gives new meaning to the idea of attending taught activities.

In the current context, where e-learning is more prevalent than ever; where universities are very keen to increase their student numbers; and where students are more than ever encouraged to go to university, students should also appreciate the demands that studying in higher education add to their lives. Attendance at lectures is an important element of a taught programme and they should understand that it demands some of their time. VLE and online material such as lecture capturing can be useful to catch up when sessions are missed but it is the responsibility of the institutions to ensure that students enrolled in a taught programme understand how both the online experience and the lecture experience are related. In the current pandemic situation, the importance of pedagogic thinking that does this is starting to assert itself.

What is clear from our research is that attendance is not only about "being there"—in the lecture, seminar or tutorial or retaining students for economic purposes. It is about the lecturer and institutional commitment to add value to the taught experience, understanding that in many cases attending lectures requires a big effort from students. It is also about the student, understanding that when missing a taught session, they are not only missing subject content but the opportunity to engage with peers and lecturers in meaningful relationships that nurture a sense of belonging. Attendance is not only conceptualised in relation to performance; our findings show that it is not always a priority in students' lives. We recognise that our study is limited by a small sample of

education students, lecturers and senior managers. We are also aware that our effort to map the different factors influencing attendance does not capture the full complexity of the phenomena under discussion and the different ways in which they are entwined. However, the ideas discussed in this paper illustrate the multiple, contradictory and heterogeneous ways in which students and teachers talk about attendance, and they evidence the impossibility of creating interventions that satisfy all the parties.

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