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Student non-attendance in higher education

A phenomenon of student apathy or poor pedagogy?

Joanne Cleary-Holdforth

Introduction

Non-attendance at university seems to be an on-going problem that appears to transcend country, university and discipline. One need only consult the literature on this subject to appreciate the magnitude of this phenomenon (Gump 2006; McCarey et al. 2006; Sharma et al. 2005; Nicholl and Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005; Hunter and Tetley 1999; Longhurst 1999). It is a phenomenon that is both intriguing and frustrating and yet there is very little evidence of university or governmental policy on it. It is generally accepted that university is a rite of passage for its students and is, therefore, as much about a 'coming of age' and the development of autonomous adults, as it is about training and 'education' per se (Bourgeois et al. 1999). This culture, therefore, does not embrace mandatory attendance. Consequently, policy on attendance is often non-existent and where it is considered, it certainly seems to vary not only from university to university but even from department to department (Cohn and Johnson 2006). Attendance does become an issue, however, where there is a 'professional' element to the programme, such as in nursing, for example, where a high 'minimum' attendance is stipulated (An Bord Altranais 2005). This leads to tensions between the professional and academic values. This assignment will attempt to explore the phenomenon that is non-attendance amongst university students from the students' and academics' perspectives. It will consider the implications of non-attendance and propose possible ways forward in an attempt to resolve the issue in a way that benefits both groups.

Non-attendance by university students

From the literature reviewed, it would seem that students undertaking university courses skip classes on a not infrequent basis (Cohn and Johnson 2006; Hughes 2005; Rodgers 2002). The question of why students do not attend class is often raised.

Numerous studies have investigated this and have uncovered the many reasons that students proffer as explanations for absenteeism (Gump 2006; Nicholl and Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005; Timmins and Kaliszzer 2002; Hunter and Tetley 1999; Longhurst 1999). The range of reasons include family, social and work commitments, illness, faking illness, family emergencies, faking family emergencies, to mention but a few. Clearly some of these reasons are completely valid and occur as a consequence of life circumstances, life events and the changing profile of the student. However, a number of the reasons for absenteeism offered by students appear to be quite trivial in nature and give rise to the question of how much students actually value educational activities such as lectures and tutorials. There is also evidence of a particular pattern of non-attendance amongst university students, with most absenteeism occurring on Mondays and Fridays and being of one day in duration (Timmins 2002; Rodgers 2002).

Gatherer and Manning (1998) suggest that there may actually be psychological benefits to occasional absences. Yet if one were to try to address this in timetabling and, in so doing, scheduled classes only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, one would have to ask the question whether attendance would then be problematic on Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons. There may be some sense, however, in avoiding 9 am scheduling on Mondays and classes after 3 pm on Fridays, although this is not always logistically feasible given the number of programmes that have to be catered for, group sizes, availability of appropriately sized venues and so on; and there is little promise that such scheduling would achieve the desired outcome. The reasons given for absenteeism are largely student-centred and there may not be very much that educators or the academy can do to address them. To some extent, perhaps, it may simply be the case that students will be students and so there will always be a degree of absenteeism on university courses.

Hunter and Tetley (1999) interviewed 168 full-time students about not only their reasons for not attending lectures but also their reasons for attending. This information is of tremendous value to educators as it provides direction with regard to what students want from lectures, what excites them and, ultimately, what may encourage them to attend. Lectures that these students would not miss were those that were interesting, those that were difficult and hard to make up, those that they

considered important to their degree, those in which there was a lot of material given out, those where they liked the subject or in which the lecturer was good. It is imperative therefore that, in so far as is possible, educators endeavour to ensure that their lectures are interesting, relevant, delivered in a positive manner and in an environment that affords respect and equality to all, in a climate that is conducive to learning (Quinn 2000; Toohey 1999). Reasons for student non-attendance – such as the following, that can be perceived as academy-centred – are what educators need to focus on in an effort to address the problem. These reasons include failure to connect the content of the lecture to assessment or the ‘real world’, the availability of lecture material in online forms, unexciting, unchallenging lecturers, timing of lectures and competing assignment commitments (Gump 2006; Nicholl and Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005; Timmins and Kaliszer 2002; Hunter and Tetley 1999; Longhurst 1999). Many of these contributing factors to non-attendance are, to a greater or lesser degree, under the control of the educators and the policymakers of the academy. Mark Twain is reputed to have said, ‘I have never let my schooling interfere with my education’. Conditions such as long lectures without a break, lectures that are scheduled late into the evening, numerous assessments due for submission around the same time, lectures in which interaction is not encouraged and where either the content or the manner in which they are delivered is dull, unenthusiastic or irrelevant, or where the relevance not explicated, all these deter students from attending class. Those students who are academically stronger or more self-directed in nature are likely to seek the information elsewhere and probably succeed but not necessarily excel, while those who have less academic prowess or who are less motivated are likely to struggle to pass (Sharma et al. 2005). Yet these are contributing factors that educators can reduce by reviewing and reflecting on their own practice in terms of how they facilitate (or not) learning and strive to foster an enthusiasm for their subject.

Significance of attendance on undergraduate nurse education programmes

Nurse education in Ireland has undergone a great change in a very short period of time, moving from a three-year hospital-based apprenticeship model of training in 1995 to a three-year hospital-based diploma, and subsequently to a four-year full-time university degree in 2002. The theoretical content of nursing programmes has

increased significantly since the apprenticeship model with a greater emphasis on research and evidence-based practice. At the same time, the nature of the clinical practice aspect of nursing programmes has also changed. Under the apprenticeship model, student nurses were fully integrated as part of the healthcare team, working alongside qualified nurses but assuming a distinct role within the team. In current nursing programmes, student nurses for the most part assume a supernumerary role, working very much under the supervision of an assigned preceptor but not taking the place of a staff member until they reach third year when they undertake a one-year rostered practice placement. While this is a positive move, in that it allows student nurses to learn in practice, in a safer and less stressful manner, it also means that students are assigned responsibility as a team member much later in their programme. Clearly these changes carry significant implications and challenges for nurse educators in how student nurses are taught in class and how they are prepared in the classroom for practice in the clinical setting. Absenteeism among nursing students is of substantial significance for these educators as a matter of professional concern. The Irish Nursing Board, An Bord Altranais, whose ultimate responsibility is that of patient/public safety, requires nurse education programmes to yield graduates who ‘demonstrate development of skills of analysis, critical thinking, problem solving and reflective practice’ and who can ‘act as an effective member of a health care team and participate in the multidisciplinary team approach to the care of patients/clients’ (An Bord Altranais 2005: 12). This clearly places a significant onus on nurse educators to develop, utilise and evaluate educational strategies and approaches that facilitate the development of such skills. However, An Bord Altranais also places responsibilities on the students of these programmes in terms of attendance and domains of competence in which the students must achieve the required minimum standard in order to graduate and be eligible for registration as a nurse. An Bord Altranais requires that nursing students are provided with no fewer than 1,533 hours of theoretical instruction and that ‘the process of monitoring student attendance ... is declared’ (2005: 40). Depending on the style and, to a lesser degree, the subject of theoretical instruction, those 1,533 hours may be a positive, pleasant, constructive experience for students or plain drudgery. Notwithstanding this, for nursing students attendance is mandatory and has been monitored since the beginning of the current academic year in the institution where the writer is employed. Students must attend 80 per cent of a minimum of 1,533 hours. Should a student fail to do so they must

undertake further prescribed work. Failure to do this to a satisfactory standard seriously threatens their eligibility to graduate and register as a nurse with An Bord Altranais. The outcome of monitoring so far is that students are indeed, for the most part, coming to class. This initiative, therefore, may appear to have been successful. However, this ‘success’ comes at a price, one that is paid not only by educators but also by students.

The essence of the problem

It is generally accepted that not all students learn in the same way nor at the same pace and simply ‘spoon-feeding’ information to students does not guarantee that learning will occur (Curzon 2003; Bastable 2003; Reece and Walker 2002; Quinn 2000). Each learner will have individual strengths, limitations and needs. Therefore it is imperative that a variety of teaching and learning strategies are employed that reflect and respond to these diverse needs. However, the main teaching strategy employed in university is the lecture (Gatherer and Manning 1998), which is perceived as a very teacher-centred rather than a student-centred approach to education (O’Neill and McMahon 2005; Bastable 2003; Reece and Walker 2002). A lecture-led approach represents the transmission model of teaching (Quinn 2000) and it is criticised for being a one-way communication process (Curzon 2004) that does not suit all learners and, in fact, may hinder interaction (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1994). By their very nature lectures cannot address the individual learning needs or facilitate the individual learning styles of students. They are designed for delivery of information to the masses and do not lend themselves to interaction, discussion or very much active learning in a way that is meaningful to the students. This approach limits the learning styles and needs that can be addressed to those of a largely behaviourist model or orientation, with the students occupying a more passive dependent role. Students who are more intrinsically motivated and self-directed may find this model of teaching very restrictive, de-motivating and generally quite boring. For students who are less intrinsically motivated and who choose to adopt a more passive, receptive mode, perhaps lectures serve the purpose of knowledge transmission adequately. Perhaps there is some truth in the phrase of Robert G. Ingersoll when he asserted that ‘colleges are places where pebbles are polished and

diamonds are dimmed'. This could certainly be said to be true of teacher-led didactic lectures where the familiarity of the lecture hall, the podium, the blackboard, the powerpoint presentations and all other props can and seemingly do breed boredom, if not contempt, at least amongst some of the students. Yet 'attendance' continues to be an issue due to the educators' perception of its academic value and its potential to engender good work etiquette, responsibility and enhance social skills (Gump 2006; Cohn and Johnson 2006; Rodgers 2002; Timmins and Kaliszer 2002; Longhurst 1999). Longhurst (1999) affirms that student absenteeism results in inadequate learning, disruption in class and compromised performance. However, is this faith or confidence in the value of attendance in classes misplaced?

Effects of (non-) attendance on performance

A number of studies have been undertaken in an attempt to investigate whether there is a direct relationship between attendance and academic performance. Such studies have yielded mixed results. Gatherer and Manning (1998) undertook a correlational study to investigate the relationship between lecture attendance and examination performance on a first-year biological sciences programme. This was a reasonably rigorous study, comprising a sample size of 152 students and utilising appropriate statistical analysis for the nature of the data in terms of levels of measurement attained and the distributions of the variables. The findings of this study reveal that there is a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between lecture attendance and examination performance. It is interesting to note that this correlation was more pronounced in the ethnic minority groups in the sample. This is particularly relevant and useful information given the increasing diversity of the student body. In a study undertaken by Sharma et al. (2005) the relationship between student-centred tutorials and examination performance on a physics programme was investigated. Not only did this study demonstrate that students with greater attendance performed better in their examinations, it also established that students working together in the same group with consistent attendance attain higher examination results than those who do not. Moreover, the results of this study not only advocate the importance of attendance but also that of the role of groupwork in facilitating student learning.

Cohen and Johnson (2006) examine the relationship between class attendance and examination performance in a sample of 347 economics class. Their findings demonstrate a strong positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance. A study by McCarey et al. (2006) explores the predictors of academic performance in a cohort of nursing students. One of the variables that was under investigation as a predictor was non-attendance. Data were obtained from 154 students in this study and appropriate statistical tests were performed on the data. Results demonstrated that attendance was a significant predictor of performance with increasing non-attendance being consistently associated with poorer marks. This study also yielded a number of findings that are invaluable in terms of facilitating individual student learning and the endeavours one could undertake to support students. For example, students aged 26 and over tended to perform better than those under 26 years of age. While this was not statistically significant, it would be worthwhile considering in terms of the need for different levels and types of support for younger versus more mature students. Students who performed poorly in their first year continued to do so throughout the programme. It is interesting that it was these students who had higher rates of non-attendance. In light of this, educators could use both poor performance in first year and poor attendance as predictors for poor academic performance overall on a programme and could target such students early on in the programme. By addressing any difficulties they may have early on one could provide relevant and meaningful support to enable these students to improve.

On the other hand, contrasting studies have been undertaken that demonstrate no relationship between attendance and academic performance. Rodgers (2002) implemented an incentive scheme in an undergraduate introductory statistics module. In practice, each student's overall mark was reduced by 1 per cent for every tutorial missed in excess of two. The students' attendance and performance were compared with the performance of students who had undertaken the same module in the previous academic year, prior to the introduction of the incentive scheme. The results of this study indicate that while attendance did improve, improved attendance did not translate to improved academic performance, even when the 'penalty points' that had been deducted for non-attendance were added back on to the students' overall marks. Grabe (2005) examines the relationship between students' use of online notes as a substitute for attending class and examination performance on an introductory

psychology module. The data conveyed that approximately 30 per cent of students who frequently used notes claimed to have done so as a replacement for at least six classes. In comparison, amongst students who used online notes as an adjunct rather than as an alternative to class attendance, no difference in examination performance was seen. Such information is very useful to educators when deciding whether and how to provide online notes to students.

Encouraging attendance

Incentive schemes such as awarding marks for attendance, subtracting marks for non-attendance, promises to discuss exam-related topics and mandatory monitoring of attendance do little to address the core issues and causes of non-attendance. While such schemes may increase the number of ‘bums on seats’ they do not guarantee a corresponding improvement in performance, as was reported by Rodgers (2002). The consequences of these schemes include an over-exaggeration of (true) attendance and often an over-inflation of marks. Such schemes raise the question of whose needs they are meeting – the students’ or the educators’, the university’s or, in the case of professional programmes, the professional regulating body’s? Furthermore, it has been the writers experience that mandating attendance, as advocated by Bowen et al. (2005) has brought with it new problems. Mandatory attendance monitoring requires attendance by all students, even those who would otherwise not attend. This results in increased disruption in class and makes it more difficult for students who want to be in class to listen and hear and for the educators to teach. Teaching in this manner is, as Dame Judy Dench put it in her recent movie, *Notes on a Scandal*, certainly more a case of ‘crowd control’ than education. Consequently it is clear that more positive ways that are inherently motivating are needed to enhance the students’ desire to attend class.

While the evidence regarding the impact of non-attendance on academic performance is mixed, there are certainly lessons to be learned from both sides of the argument. The reasons for student non-attendance and indeed, perhaps equally importantly, student attendance need to be considered carefully and examined closely if this issue is to be addressed, particularly where it is of professional consequence, as

it is in nursing, for example. While there may be little that can be done about many of the student-centred reasons for poor attendance, educators can certainly endeavour to address the educator-centred reasons. Increasingly the student population comprises mature students as well as school leavers from a wide variety of social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds (NQAI 2003). Such learner diversity will clearly bring new challenges and it carries implications for educators to ensure that programmes of education are relevant, meaningful and responsive to the individual learner. Gatherer and Manning (1998) demonstrate that lecture attendance was more beneficial to students from ethnic minorities than those from non-minority groups. This may indicate a greater perceived need among ethnic-minority students to attend lectures perhaps due to difficulties with language and discomfort with or a reluctance to use alternative learning resources such as virtual learning environments, online notes and so on. This highlights a specific need among this group of students for linguistic and information technology support. Even though their better attendance rates are admirable, they should not feel confined to this one learning resource. Such inequity puts these students at a disadvantage not only in terms of their performance in university but also in terms of their success after graduation.

There is an increasing presence of mature students in university programmes. This brings challenges not only for educators but also for mature students. Many of these students will have heavy family commitments and/or commitments outside of their programme of study that they will have to work around in order to attend class and to study. Despite this, however, McCarey et al. (2006) found that mature students tend to perform better than their younger counterparts. This might suggest a difference in how they value the opportunity for education, a stronger motivation to succeed or greater insight into the meaning and value of their chosen programme of study leading itself to a greater commitment to study. In order to further support these students Hughes (2005) suggests an increase in self-directed learning, a family-friendly approach to curricula and a reduction in the number of theory hours as an attempt to facilitate students who struggle to attend class due to family commitments. On the other hand, however, younger students who tend to achieve lower marks must not be neglected. The findings of McCarey et al. in this regard, in addition to the findings that poor performance in first year and poor attendance are predictors of ongoing poor performance, warrant close observation of first-year students and close

liaison between first-year students and their educators and/or personal tutors (where a personal tutor system exists). Early and on-going liaison with these students will enable the identification of individual difficulties or problems and the measures to address these issues. Such measures may include increased tutorial support, facilitation of students with learning disabilities, or increased support in terms of helping students who are struggling with university life or living away from home and friends for the first time.

Reliance on the lecture style of teaching is, unfortunately in many cases, a necessary evil due to high student numbers, staff shortages, and reduced resources such as appropriate rooms, timetabling issues and so forth. However, that is not to say that this is an ineffective but rather a necessary teaching and learning strategy. There are numerous ways in which even lectures can be rendered more interesting and fun. The onus falls, of course, to the individual educators to closely review, reflect on and revise their approach to teaching in this format. The integration of more innovative teaching methods into the lecture such as gaming, for example, word searches or crosswords, five-minute classroom assessment techniques, interactive handouts, questioning, brainstorming, debate (Race 2001), student-led seminars (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1994) and demonstrations (Quinn 2000) might be considered. Building in appropriate breaks or changes in activities every fifteen to twenty minutes (Quinn 2000) helps to re-engage students and recharge the attention spans that tend to diminish, particularly in large, full lecture theatres. The Report of the Nursing Education Forum states:

Pre-registration nursing degree programmes must use innovative delivery methods and be sufficiently dynamic, flexible and responsive to accommodate advances and ultimately provide the value system and basis for excellent nursing practice in the future.

(2000: 30)

This report clearly advocates and encourages nursing educators to embrace new and innovative teaching and learning strategies in a responsive and relevant manner. Other innovative teaching strategies that can be utilised, particularly with smaller groups or in tutorials include simulation, role-play and self-instruction activities. Computer-assisted instruction greatly enhances the probability of meeting the needs of the learners (Bastable 2003). Other teaching strategies that are useful

include interactive handouts, questioning, brainstorming, debate (Race 2001), student-led seminars (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck 1994) and demonstrations (Quinn 2000). Such teaching and learning strategies help to invigorate an otherwise potentially dreary session for both the student and the educator. It is clear therefore that there are numerous measures available to educators to enhance the teaching and learning experience. In so doing, educators can potentially entice back into the classroom at least some of the students who would otherwise absent themselves, in a manner that demonstrates respect and consideration rather than false promises and penalties.

Conclusion

It is evident from the professional literature that student non-attendance is a reasonably universal problem, one that transcends country, university and discipline. 'It is little short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not already completely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry' (Albert Einstein 1879–1955). Perhaps this is what university students have in mind when they choose to absent themselves from their classes. There are mixed findings in relation to the relationship between attendance and academic performance. Nonetheless there are valuable lessons to be learned from both sides of that particular debate in providing a way forward that facilitates and encourages student attendance and indeed performance. While there may be the perception that attendance is largely a student issue and responsibility, and that there is little that educators can do about students' non-attendance, the time has come for educators to step out from behind this parapet, albeit reflectively and to expose themselves to self-scrutiny about their respective roles in improving student attendance.

The literature suggests why students do not attend class, and also why they do. This information provides educators with an insight into what motivates students to attend and what puts them off attending. There are many reasons that are solely student-centred that educators have little or no control over. Equally there are numerous reasons that educators do have control over and can do something about. It is essential that educators utilise this evidence and translate it into improved practice and positive outcomes for both their students and themselves. After all, as William

Butler Yeats is reputed to have said, 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'.

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