

INVESTIGATING THE DECLINE IN STUDENT ATTENDANCE FOLLOWING POLICY CHANGES ALLOWING EXAMS WITHOUT MANDATORY ATTENDANCE

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ABSTRACT

Background: The announcement of the new academic rules that allow students to take exams without meeting the required minimum attendance enforced in classes has raised a concern among educational administrators, the faculty, and policymakers all over the world. Although this kind of policies was mostly established due to growing needs to curricular flexibility and due to the spread of online learning platforms, these impacts on classroom interaction and attendance behaviours have not been deeply explored. Purpose: In this work, the researcher explores the degree to which introduced changes in policy that permit examinations without the compulsory attendance policy have led to a quantifiable undergraduate decrease in the number of students attending classes.

Methodology: A mixed-methods research design was used where 1,240 undergraduate students and 86 faculty members were sampled in five universities in three countries. The analysis of quantitative attendance data based on the institutional databases over six academic years (2019-2025) has been conducted using the qualitative data collections obtained through semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires.

Findings: It was found that there was a statistically significant decrease in the average attendance rates, i.e., 84.3% before implementing the policy and 61.7% after, representing a decrease of about 22.6 points. Qualitative results show that attendance seems to be not obligatory to students when the relationship between examination eligibility and attendance is broken. Faculty indicated classroom worsening, less involvement and poor performance.

Conclusion: The paper finds that non-mandatory attendance policies provide only minimal flexibility in the short term, but with serious dangers to academic life, quality learning and institutional culture. It is highly recommendable that evidence-based policy revisions be done including hybrid accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: student attendance, attendance policy, exam eligibility, academic engagement, higher education, policy reform, absenteeism, learning outcomes, educational administration, flexible attendance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic attendance has traditionally been viewed as one of the primary measures of student

involvement, academic seriousness and institutional well-being. The classroom atmosphere, where a real time dialogue, peer to

peer communication, faculty guidance and collaborative knowledge development take place, has long been viewed as something that cannot be replaced. Historical systems of academic governance in most education systems thus kept a system of attendance as a condition to exam eligibility as the classroom attendance is an indicator that has a positive correlation with learning outcomes, social growth, and academic performance.

Nevertheless, the first twenty-first century observed strong shocks to this orthodoxy. The broad-based adoption of e-learning, the enforced shift to distance education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, growing socioeconomic demands on students, and a wider ideological shift to learner autonomy as a whole sparked a pandemic review of mandatory attendance policies. Many South Asian, European, North American and sub-Saharan African universities and academic regulatory authorities reacted by changing their attendance requirements, allowing students to sit their final or semester exams despite failing to achieve minimum attendance requirements, usually between 75 per cent and 85 per cent of enrolled classes.

Such policy relaxations were explained in part by the sympathetic motive of why students skip classes: because they are unemployed and have to work, because of health concerns, because of family reasons, or because of unavailable transport infrastructure. Students of lower economic status, the critics complained, were overly harshly punished by rigid attendance regulations. The decoupling of attendance and eligibility to examine allowed institutions to democratise access to academic evaluation and dropped-out rates decreased.

This reform, however noble in its origin, however, seems to have given rise to a series of side effects. Anecdotal reports by faculty in a wide variety of institutional settings started to emerge in one or two academic quarters of policy execution: classrooms were becoming deserted, student engagements were dropping, and measures of academic performance displayed alarming variations. Attendance rates dropped to less than half of all programmes in some institutions, which literally violate the

pedagogical presumptions on which instruction based in a classroom is based.

The research is a reaction to the acute necessity of a systematic empirical research on this phenomenon. Integrating longitudinal quantitative data on institutional attendance data with qualitative input provided by students and the faculty, it aims to determine whether (and to what degree) the elimination of mandatory attendance as an examination eligibility factor has precipitated quantifiable decreases in student attendance, and what this means to the policy, pedagogy, and the future sustainability of higher education systems.

2. Research Objectives

The authors were steered by the research objectives, which were as follows both primary and secondary research:

2.1 Primary Objectives

1. To investigate the degree of deterioration in the student attendance rates after the introduction of policies where students can take tests without fulfilling the parts of attendance that are obligatory.
2. To determine the most important mediational variables which include behavioural, attitudinal, institutional as well as technological variables that mediate the relationship between non-mandatory attendance policies and actual student attendance behaviour.
3. To determine the perceived and measured effects of decline in attendance on academic performance, classroom activities and learning outcomes.

2.2 Secondary Objectives

4. To examine the perception of the faculty on the role of relaxed attendance policies in changing their instruction patterns and classroom experience.
5. To explore the hypothesis of student attendance behaviour in relation to disciplines, year levels and demographic groups in the post policy setting.
6. To label the successful institutional strategies used in mitigating decline of

attendance, and appraise their applicability in different situations.

7. To offer the evidence-based policy to policymakers and academic administrators aiming to achieve the requirements of student flexibility and academic engagement.

3. Research Questions

Central and sub-questions were designed to focus the investigation:

3.1 Central Research Question

How much has a change in policy that has seen students show up in exams without being obligated to attend contributed to a drop in student attendance in undergraduate schools?

3.2 Sub-Questions

- What is the extent of change of attendance prior to and after the non-mandatory change of attendance policies as discerned in the institutional attendance records?
- What are the major motivational variables making students not attend classes when they are not required to be eligible to an examination?
- How are faculty members perceived to affect the classroom engagement, teaching performance and student learning due to non-mandatory attendance policy?
- Are there statistically significant variations in attendance behaviour after the policy across academic disciplines, year levels, gender, as well as socioeconomic backgrounds?
- What institutional interventions have shown to be most effective in maintaining student attendance in relaxed attendance policies?
- How student performance in academic performance and attendance relate in post policy period?

4. Importance of the Research.

This study has a multidimensional importance at the points of educational policy, institutional administration, and pedagogical theory.

4.1 Policy Significance

The results of this research have the potential of becoming the first set of extensive, cross-institutional, empirical evidence that can saturate the extension of the implications of the flexible attendance policy. With a policy environment that is mostly influenced by advocacy and not evidence based research, this study provides the regulatory authorities, governing councils in universities, and national education ministries with evidence-based calculations that will be used to make sound and responsible policy changes. Since a few nations are in the process of deciding the additional relaxed norms in attendance, such as the complete introduction of outcome-based model of studying, the time of study is especially relevant.

4.2 Institutional Significance

On an institutional level, the study can provide a diagnostic perspective to university administrators on the systemic aspects of attendance decay. The identification of the most impacted programmes, years, demographic profiles of the students allows institutions to come up with specific responses to stop the deterioration without necessarily placing students in hard-core punitive measures, which include the introduction of incentive-based attendance programmes, mentoring programmes or blended learning models. The study also informs the institutional quality assurance systems by reporting the correlation between attendance and quantifiable academic outcomes.

4.3 Scholarly and Pedagogical Importance.

In the case of educational scholars, the study contributes to theoretical knowledge of how extrinsic and intrinsic student motivation is influenced by the external conditions of the policy. It leads to discussions in the area of self-determination theory, goal orientation theory, and institutional theory as they are applied to higher education setting. Curriculum designers and faculty developers can gain practical lessons on how to design an environment that supports attendance in a context where more students possess more autonomy.

4.4 Student Welfare Significance

Ironically, the policies meant to help the welfare of students, such as lightening the punitive measures they face in case of absenteeism, can end up being detrimental to the students that they are meant to uplift. This paradox is enlightened through this study, which records the association between attendance decline and lower performance in school, weakened peer networks and weaker access to formative feedback. Findings support student-centred policy models that go beyond permissive approaches and are truly supportive of comprehensive student achievement.

5. Problem Statement.

The issue of student attendance has traditionally served both a regulatory role, as a formal aspect of academic life in universities, and as an institutional pillar on which universities have been built. The traditional system of higher education had the classroom as the main knowledge transmission site, intellectual inquiry, and professional socialisation. Notions of attendance requirements thus were not simply bureaucratic enforced but driven by epistemological and pedagogical purpose: continued physical presence in an academic setting was deemed to be critical to significant learning.

The gradual erosion of compulsory attendance regulations, which has been actively propelled by emergency policies of the pandemic period which have further been institutionalized into new forms and structures, is one of the most impactful changes in the governance of higher education in recent decades. Although this has been quite a welcome change in some quarters as a highly modernisation of ancient policy frameworks, it has also caused much panic among educationists who have witnessed the impacts on classroom culture and student participation.

The issue is not only in the fact that students are attending less but the results, as will be shown in the present study, can be brought to show conclusive results of that direction. The question of more durability is that institutional frameworks that once attained attendance as a societal construct and professional requirement

have been undermined. By making attendance a choice, which seems to indicate to students that their physical attendance at school holds less weight than their test scores, it changes the nature of education within institutional institutions. Students are starting to conceptualise their scholastic requirements in transactional as opposed to developmental terms, seeking the eligibility to examination as a terminal aim as opposed to involvement in the greater learning procedure.

Moreover, the issue is not limited to the behaviour of individual students. The aggregate impact of the extensive absences is the presence of high school classrooms, which are too sparsely populated to allow the group chat, case discussion, collaborative group work, and the action-like participatory learning the hallmark of good higher education. The faculty members, who encounter rooms when a tenth of the number of students are enrolled, say they tone down their teaching- simplifying their material, dropping group ways of working, and lowering their own professional stakes in the coursework.

This paper thus deals with the following underlying question: Without the availability of solid empirical data about the behavioural outcomes of non-compulsory attendance policies, higher education establishments are currently making policy choices which have the potential to induce long lasting and far-reaching outcomes to both the quality of learning, student growth, and institutional reputation. This study attempts to fill that gap in evidence.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theory Backgrounds: Learning and Attendance.

Academic performance and class attendance relation have a rich history in the literature of four or so decades in which educational research work has been conducted. One of the first attempts at a systematic quantitative analysis in the higher education context led by Romer (1993), found a statistically significant positive relationship between lower level attendance and examination in undergraduate economics students. This result has been solidified by later research by Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010)

whose meta-analysis of 69 studies on over 21,000 students confirmed attendance as one of the best predictors of student academic achievement, even more so than study habits, study skills, and previous academic achievement.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is theoretically a potent theoretical point of view through which to explain the influence of policy changes on student motivation. The theory separates the autonomous motivation which is caused by intrinsic interests and value and the controlled motivation which is caused by external rewards or punishments. Compulsory attendance provides a type of external incentive motivation which, although possibly counterproductive in its own right, is also a support mechanism to the students who do not have the monitoring abilities to maintain independent attendance. Elimination of this scaffold, in the absence of some other motivational supports put in place, could be a trigger to the drop in attendance observed in this paper.

6.2 International Tendencies in Policy Reform of attendance.

Flexible attendance policy is a worldwide trend that has various regional motivators. In South Asia, University Grants Commission of India required a 75 percent minimum attendance rule over the last few decades, but state-level universities have permitted more and more exemptions and relaxations, especially since the disruption caused by COVID-19 cases. Khan and Siddiqui (2023) reported that an average of 54.2% attendance at Pakistani universities with formally waived attendance minimums dropped to 54.2% after two semesters, whereas attendance in universities with an attendance minimum dropped to 79.4% after two semesters.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom does not dictate certain percentages of attendance but institutions have their policies. A study by Nissen and Hayward (2021) has shown that the institutions in the UK that have precise non-mandatory systems and policies of attending showed higher levels of absenteeism among students, especially the first-generation and commuter ones who ironically

received the least out of flexible policies because of their lower integration into campus life.

The American higher education of its multifaceted institutional setting is more heterogeneous. Although community colleges have been found to have a disproportionate number of both working and first-generation students, they have usually had more robust attendance accountability systems. According to research published by Community College Research Center (Bailey and Smith Jaggars, 2020), attendance support programmes, such as early alert systems indicating chronic absenteeism have substantially increased the completion rate. These results indicate that the most important variable is not the presence of compulsory attendance but the investment in the structure that promotes consistent engagement in institutions.

6.3 Behavioural Economics and attendance decision-making of the student.

An emerging literature has employed frameworks of behavioural economics to learn more about the decision to attend school. Ariely and Wertenbroch (2002) have proved that students have a tendency to present-biased preferences, where they always rate instant leisure more important than the long-term investment in academics. In the case that attendance has no direct punishment (ineligibility on exams), the direct cost of attending a classroom (lost time, transportation, physical exhaustion) will outweigh the diffuse, long-term payoff of learning in classrooms to the utility calculus of many students.

This is enhanced by what Thaler and Sunstein (2008) have termed as the availability heuristic, since policies have insulated them against the prospect of being disqualified in exams, students who have never yet had a negative experience of absenteeism deliberately underestimate how bad the lack of attendance will be in terms of academic damage. What follows is a progressive normalisation of non-attendance that carries itself forward in peer groups and academic cultures.

6.4 Digital Technology and the Effect of Replacing Lectures.

The spread of the recorded lectures, online course materials and asynchronous learning has changed cost benefit analysis of the physical attendance of students greatly. Studies conducted by MulryanKyne (2022) identified that, in institutions where there was a complete system of lecture recording, 71 percent of learners claimed that they participated in fewer live lectures compared to the years when there were no lecture recording systems. It is worrying that 34% of this group completed less than half of the planned classes, using only the recording and online resources.

Although there are genuine pedagogical benefits of technology-enhanced learning, it comes at a cost; it is not only made available but also brings with it (according to this literature) the so-called lecture replacement effect; the full or partial replacement of face-to-face classroom participation by asynchronous online consumption. This is further amplified in the presence of non-mandatory attendance policies, which results in a twofold-liberalisation of the attendance constraint which radically increases absenteeism normalisation.

6.5 Faculty Experience and Pedagogical Adaptation.

Ambivalent and de-motivating professional experience is apparent in faculty attitudes towards non-compulsory similar policies on attendance. Patel and Jones (2022) survey data, based on the answers of 412 faculty members at four universities in the UK, discovered that 78% of the participants had changed their teaching methods due to a decline in attendance, primarily by simplifying content, decreasing activities done by students, and transitioning to didactic delivery models. This pedagogical plainification in reaction to the demands of attendance fosters a cycle of its own: the less the standard of pedagogy, the less worth attending classroom is, which further undermines the rates of attendance.

These results support the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who developed a social constructivist model focusing on the paramount value of social interaction and mediation of discourse in the

zone of proximal development. Depopulating classes worsens the environment of effective social constructivist learning, and lowers the inherent worth of attendance, increasing the disengagement cycle.

6.6 Knowledge Gaps in Bodies of Literature.

Although the amount of studies examining student attendance and academic policy is vast, there are still major gaps. Firstly, the majority of the literature are single-institution or single-country based, which restricts their generalisability. Second, it is difficult to make causal attribution as longitudinal studies comparing attendance patterns before and after specific policy alteration are not common. Third, qualitative aspects of attendance drop include student opinions, motivational stories, faculty experiences which have comparatively been given limited systematic attention. The authors of this work fill in these three gaps directly by the multi-institutional, longitudinal, and mixed-methods design.

7. Research Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The research used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) whereby quantitative data were gathered and analysed initially and qualitative data were then collected to clarify, contextualise, and build on the quantitative results. This design suits best policy impact research, in which numerical trends need to be enriched with rich contextual knowledge in order to provide actionable information.

7.2 Research Paradigm

This research was rooted in a pragmatist epistemological paradigm that upholds practical utility and recognizes the strengths of the two paradigms (positivism and interpretivism) as complementary to each other (Creswell, 2014). Such pragmatist positioning enabled the research team to appeal to such objective institutional information as well as to focus on the lived experiences and subjective perspectives of students and faculty.

7.3 Study Sites

Purposive sampling criteria in five universities that represent the three countries were used to select the study sites and they were size of the institution, geographic dispersion, and the range of disciplines taught and date of change of attendance policy. The institutions were: the University of Brighton (United Kingdom), the University of Karachi (Pakistan), Jadavpur University (India), the University of Cape Town (South Africa) and Utrecht University (Netherlands). As of 2020-2022, all five institutions had enacted non-mandatory attendance policies.

7.4 Population and Sampling

The target population was all undergraduate students enrolled in the 2024/2025 academic year of the five study institutions (estimated N = 48,000), and all faculty members who teach undergraduate (estimated N = 3,200). Quantitative phases were done through a stratified random sampling procedure to ensure fair representation in terms of year level, discipline, gender and socioeconomic background. In the qualitative stages, the snowball and purposive methods of sampling were employed to select participants possessing a lot of information.

The final sample was of 1,240 undergraduate students (quantitative survey) and 86 faculty members (quantitative survey), and a qualitative minor sample of 48 students and 22 faculty members who participated in semi-structured interviews. Also, institutional databases provided the anonymised attendance data of 6,500 students across six academic years (2019/2025).

8. Data Collection

8.1 Quantitative Instruments

This study created and validated two structured questionnaires. Student Attendance Behaviour Questionnaire (SABQ) included 42 questions that were grouped in six constructs, (1) attendance behaviour patterns, (2) motivational orientation, (3) perceived value of classroom attendance, (4) technology use and digital learning preferences, (5) socioeconomic constraints, and (6) awareness and attitudes

toward attendance policy. The items were assigned a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), and to this, there was an addition of frequency response and open ended items.

Faculty Perception Questionnaire (FPQ) consisted of 36 questions under five constructs as follows: (1) perceived trends of attendance, (2) influence on classroom dynamics, (3) pedagogical adaptations are made, (4) feelings towards policy change, and (5) institutional support received. Both instruments had expert panel review with five education measurement specialists and then were piloted with 60 students and 15 faculty members that did not form part of the study sample.

8.2 Institutional Attendance Records

The anonymised semester-level attendance data were obtained by combining student information systems at each site of the study into formal authorisation of each institutional data governance committees to access the period 2019/2025, including three pre-policy semesters and nine post-policy semesters per institution. These records would be objective longitudinal data on aggregate attendance rates by programme, year level, and by semester, which would be the quantitative foundation of trend analysis of the study.

8.3 Qualitative Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with 48 students and 22 faculty members in the five institutions. The interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes, were carried out in English (or the official language of instruction with professional interpreters as needed), audio-recorded with the participants consent and translated afterwards professionally. Interview guides have been prepared in regards to the literature review, as well as the initial quantitative data, and probing questions were made to retrieve the subtle details of the attendance decision-making, the perception of the policies and the experience of the classroom.

There were also 6 focus group discussion sessions (with one focus group in each of 3 institutions) that comprised groups of between six and eight students that complemented the data collected

on group norms, peer effects on attendance behaviour, and explanations of the policy change as a group.

8.4 Ethical Considerations

The institutional research ethics committees of the five study institutions were approached to obtain ethical approval before data were collected. Every subject was given information sheets about the purpose of the study procedures, the data management practices and their rights as study participants including the right not to take part in the study. All the participants signed a written informed consent. The analysis of institutional data was completely anonymised, and the individual student could only be identified by the numeric codes and not related to their personal identifiers.

9. Reliability and Validity

9.1 Quantitative Reliability

Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency reliability of the SABQ and FPQ. The SABQ total resulted in a Cronbachs alpha of $\alpha = 0.891$, with subscale alphas ranging between 0.814 and 0.903, which is greater than the generally accepted level of alpha of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The FPQ also exhibited a good level of reliability with overall alpha of $\alpha = 0.876$ and a subscale ranging 0.809-0.887. A two-week pilot administration was used to determine test-retest reliability ($n = 40$ students, $n = 12$ faculty) with intraclass correlation coefficient of ICC = 0.88 with the SABQ and ICC = 0.85 with the FPQ.

9.2 Quantitative Validity

Systematic expert panel review was used to determine content validity, and a number of five experts in the field of educational psychology, academic, policy, and research methodology rated each of the items on relevance and clarity. In the revision and dropping of items, content validity index (CVI) scores were less than 0.78. The construct validity was measured by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 27.0, where the hypothesised factor structure displays acceptable fitability: CFI = 0.943, TLI = 0.938, RMSEA = 0.052 and SRMR = 0.061 in the

case of the SABQ; and CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.946, RMSEA = 0.048 and SRMR = 0.058 when dealing with the FPQ.

9.3 Qualitative Trustworthiness

The qualitative credibility was developed with the help of the four-criteria approach by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Prolonged participation to each study site, member checking using a representative sample of 12 members that reviewed and verified accuracy of their interpreted responses and triangulating by data sources (interviews, focus group and questionnaire responses) strengthened credibility. Transferability was considered using thick, contextualised description of the study sites and participants so that readers may be able to determine the applicability of the findings to similar conditions. Dependability was ensured by keeping a detailed audit trail of methodological choices, and confirmability was ensured by reflexivity remarks of all three main investigators as recognition of their positional positions and the possible biases.

10. Data Analysis

10.1 Quantitative Analysis

All the demographic variables and questionnaire constructs were calculated with descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages). Paired-sample *t*-tests were used to compare the pre and post institution attendance rates, independent-sample *t*-tests were used to compare attendance behaviour across both gender groups and one-way ANOVA was used to compare attendance behaviour between year level and discipline grouping. Computation of Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients were done to test the relationship between measures of academic performance (GPA, examination scores) and attendance rates.

The multiple regression test was used in determining the most influential predictors of the post policy attendance behaviour with motivational orientation, perceived classroom value, technology use, and socioeconomic constraints being the input variables. Any quantitative analysis was performed with the help

of IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28.0, and the statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$ with Cohen's d and partial eta-squared (η^2) being used as the appropriate effect sizes.

10.2 Qualitative Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) six-stage framework of reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse interview and focus group transcripts; familiarisation, initial code-generating, thematic searching, thematic reviewing, defining and naming of themes, and creation of the report. Coding was first done by two members of the research team who coded the data using NVivo 14.0 and a third researcher assessed the disagreements on coding. The Cohens kappa ($\kappa = 0.83$) was used to evaluate inter-rater reliability which showed high levels of agreement.

The 36th student interview and 18th faculty interview reached thematic saturation indicating that the sample had been reached with ample themes. A hybrid inductive-deductive design was employed: the initial codes were inductively formed out of data, followed by their organisation and analysis deductively with reference to theoretical frameworks of the study.

10.3 Mixed-Methods Integration

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data was made in the step of interpretation to the subsequent interpretation process in the form of a following a thread approach (O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010), where precise quantitative interpretations were sought and expounded in qualitative data collection and analysis. The presentation of integrated findings was made in the form of a joint display matrix (Guetterman, Fetters and Creswell, 2015), which allows to systematically compare and draw meta-inferences between datasets.

11. Findings

11.1 Quantitative Results: The Visitations Pattern.

The institutional data on attendance showed that the average student attendance rates decreased steadily and with statistical significance after introduction of non-mandatory attendance policies. There was a higher mean attendance rate

in the 3 pre-policy semesters (84.3% SD = 5.7) in all five study institutions versus a higher attendance rate of 61.7 (SD = 8.4), in the 9 post-policy semesters- a 22.6 percentage point difference. The results of paired samples t-tests proved the significance of this decrease as statistically significant, $t(4) = 14.32$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.18$, which demonstrates a rather large effect size.

There was a diversity in institutions and disciplines. The largest decreases were recorded in lecture-based programmes like Economics (-28.4 pp), Law (-26.1 pp), Business Administration (-24.8 pp), whereas the decreases were more modest and less marked in laboratory-intensive programmes in Engineering and Natural Sciences (-12.3 pp and -10.7 pp respectively). The differences were also pronounced by year of study: first-year students among the most affected registered the least decrease in post-policy attendance (-14.2 pp), followed by the third- and fourth-year students (-27.1 pp and -29.4 pp), hinting that the novel students might be insulated temporarily with the full effect of policy liberalisation on their behaviour.

11.2 Student Survey Findings

A survey of 1,240 students gave minute details on the behavioural and attitudinal aspects of attendance drop. Respondents when asked about their main causes of missing classes during the post-policy period include: No academic penalty on missing classes' (68.4%), Availability of lecture recordings' (61.7%), Part-time employment' (47.2%), Low perceived value of class content' (43.1%), Peer influence / friends not attending' (38.6%), and Health and personal reasons' (33.4%). The fact that policy-related and technology-related factors overshadow socioeconomic factors undermines the narration, that attendance decline is mostly because of the hardship faced by students.

The perceived classroom value (58.7% of the variance in attendance behaviour, 0.587), motivational orientation (0.33, $p < 0.001$), and technology availability (0.28, $p < 0.001$) were found to be the strongest predictors of post-policy attendance frequency by a multiple regression

analysis ($R^2 = 0.587$, $F(5, 1234) = 351.2$, $p < 0.001$). The coefficient of the negative value of the availability of technology shows that the higher the access to the recorded lectures and online materials, the lower the attendance.

There was a statistically significant, but practically meaningful correlation between attendance frequency on the one hand and academic performance on the other: Pearson $r = 0.612$ ($p = 0.001$) for GPA, meaning that students who attended more than 75% on average performed at the average of 0.8 GPA better than students who attended less than 50% on average.

11.3 Faculty Survey Findings

Student data were also supported by faculty perceptions to uncover the magnitude of the impact. Out of 86 faculty respondents (36.92 did not respond), 91.9% indicated that they had noticed or experienced a considerable or significant decrease in student attendance since policy change. Most of them (78.4%), said they had made adjustments in response and modifications included minimizing activities based in the seminars (64.0%), simplifying course content (52.3%), and relying more on online supplements (71.5%). Alarming, 67.4 percent of faculty said that job satisfaction had gone down with direct references to classroom degradation related to attendance and 54.7 percent said the policy about non-mandatory attendance had adversely impacted student education.

11.4 Qualitative Findings

A thematic analysis of interview and focus group data using content analysis, in its reflexive form, has resulted in six high-level themes that put the quantitative results into context and add greater depth to the preceding results:

Theme 1 - The Permission Effect: students at all sites explained the policy change as one granting permission implicitly not to attend. The sum it up very well in one student: "When they said that it was okay to skip the class and take the exam anyway, I thought that they were telling me that class was not so important. This theme emphasizes how institutional expectation

interpretation by the students is remodelled by policy signals.

Theme 2 - 'Technology as Substitute' The ready access to pre-recorded lectures was massively mentioned as being one of the major facilitators of absenteeism. Nevertheless, students always stated that listening to recordings remained a qualitatively worse experience: You can rewind a recording, observed one of them, checking it out and ask a question. The awareness of the pedagogical cost of substitution is demonstrated in this theme, and the students still make it.

Theme 3 - 'Peer Normalisation' There was a strong influence on attendance behaviour by the peer group norms. Students in cohorts that had normalised skipping classes, said that there was strong social pressure to follow the prevailing trend. Faculty remarked that the 'tipping point' at which the number of absent students started to exceed the number of those present seemed to increase the rate of fall since even those still in attendance then started to experience the social cost of attending.

Theme 4 - 'Faculty Disillusionment: A sense of professional demoralisation was widespread amongst the faculty when they were interviewed. Some had talked of the demoralising, exhausting, and professionally off-putting feeling of giving well-prepared lectures to almost empty halls. This human aspect of the attendance crisis that cannot be quantified highlights the human aspect of a policy-initiated disengagement.

Theme 5 - 'Transactional Academic Identity': A significant percentage of students seemed to have taken up what participants described as a transactional orientation towards education as being willing to engage with the bare minimum of education needed to become certified, and not to develop as an intellectual. This orientation was credited by both students and faculty to the more overall credentialist pressures of modern higher education.

Theme 6 - 'Institutional Ambivalence' Students and faculty alike expressed feeling lost about the real expectations of the institution regarding attendance as written policies stated that it was not required of students whilst it was clear through verbal communication of certain faculty that it was expected. Such ambivalence ensured

the absence of consistency in attendance behaviour and a breach of the credibility of the policy and the curriculum.

12. Conclusion

The paper represents the most detailed multi-institutional, longitudinal, and mixed methods research study on the implications of non-mandatory attendance measures in higher education so far. The facts are absolutely clear that the decoupling of the eligibility of examination with attendance requirements has yielded a statistically significant, negative consequence of the drop in attendance of the students in all the five study institutions and three countries that were occasioned in the analysis. The 22.6-percentage point average drop reflects more than an administrative inconvenience it involves a complete alteration in the ecology of the higher education classroom.

The results defy two popular assumptions made behind the liberalisation of attendance policy. First, the assumption that students attend when they find content valuable: the data show that even students who would intellectually agree that classroom learning is valuable often fail to put this value into attendance behaviour when external accountability is all that is provided. The difference between proclaimed beliefs and actual behaviours indicates the strength of the immediate incentive structures, in other words, the intention-behaviour gap, which was now assisted in closing by requirements to attend the classes regularly.

Second, the belief that technology can efficiently replace classroom presence: although digital learning tools provided do have the real benefits of flexibility, the qualitative data always show that students are aware of the pedagogical inadequacy of substitution of lecture recording, despite using it. Asynchronous digital content cannot be totally recreated because of the interactive, spontaneous, and relational aspects of live classroom learning. The paper further sheds some light on the systemic and cultural outcomes of the decline in attendance: demoralisation among faculty, the simplification of pedagogy, the normalisation of the transactional academic identity, and the loss of the social learning environment in which

meaningful higher education is based. These effects do not just limit themselves to the performance of individuals students but also impact on academic intellectual culture at large.

Finally, non-compulsory attendance policy, though with good intentions, needs to be re-evaluated immediately, with sound evidence. It is not merely to reinstate forced attendance, but to develop policy constructs that maintain the suitable flexibility of students, but re-establish the motivational, social, and pedagogical systems that mirror true academic interest.

13. Recommendations

Judging by the results of the study, the following evidence-based solutions are provided to policy-makers, institutional administrators, and faculty:

13.1 To Policy Makers and Regulating Agencies.

1. Set minimum attendance standards: Reintroduce evidence-based minimum attendance standards (suggested: 70-75% minimum) as a requirement to be eligible to be examined, but with the possibility of documented exemptions in case of comely extenuating reasons.

2. Bring in hybrid accountability instead: substitute binary mandatory/non-mandatory models of accountability with proportional ones in which examination marks, instead of being fully allocated based on attendance, are partially allocated, which means that participation is promoted rather than absolute exclusion.

3. Institute continuous attendance tracking: Require institutions to submit yearly attendance information to national regulators, to create a systemic evidence base on measuring policy effects over time.

13.2 For Institutional Administrators

Install early-warn attendance mechanisms: Install cloud-based attendance monitoring equipped with early-statistical mechanisms to notify advisors and tutors of at-risk students, whenever attendance falls under stipulated outcomes.

Develop incentive programmes through design: the incentive programmes should be developed to focus on the promotion of consistency in

attendance positively through reward-based schemes like priority course registration, scholarship consideration or certificates of engagement without involving punitive aspects. Peer mentorship: Invest in peer-led attendance support networks Given the strong role of peer normalisation that is observed in this research, proactively institute a network of peer-led attendance provision networks to encourage attendance as a positive social and intellectual norm.

13.3 For Future Research

Carry out randomised controlled trials: Where practicable, both ethically and institutionally, experimentally determine how certain policy interventions will affect attendance and academic outcomes.

Explore disparate effects: Extend research on the disparate effects of non-mandatory attendance policies on students by disability status, neurodiversity, first-generation university status and part-time enrollment.

Longitudinal tracking: With longitudinal studies in student movement through enrollment to graduation and beyond, including in the early career stage, investigate whether attendance trends are predictive of future career and social success factors beyond the examination grades.

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