



Teaching and learning approaches that students show up for - An exploratory study of student engagement and attendance in UK higher education

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ABSTRACT HEAD

Sector narratives relating to student engagement beyond COVID-19 report decreasing footfall on campus and attendance at timetabled classes. Researched factors leading to decreased attendance include; the advent of en-masse distant learning; a cost-of-living crisis often acutely impacting students; and students taking on higher amounts of part-time employment. The study follows a recent research study's finding, across three UK universities, that supported the above factors, while also suggesting that the timetabled session itself, teaching and learning approaches deployed, and the perceived learning benefit of each session, influenced students' decisions to attend (Lowe, et al. 2025). As students are perhaps becoming more strategic with their time and making daily assessments regarding the perceived relevance of travelling to campus, this research study focuses particularly on the timetabled sessions themselves. This paper shares the findings of a qualitative study conducted by the School of Finance and Accounting at the University of Westminster (UK). In interviews held in 2025, students were asked about how teaching techniques, content chosen and the relevance of assessments to taught sessions, impacted their attendance. Findings highlight that students attend when they feel content is relevant to assessments; material covered is characterised by a level of difficulty that makes just going over content outside class insufficient; where the lecturer goes beyond reading slides to highlight application, relevance to securing employment and engenders engagement; sessions where lecturers care and form a relationship with students; active learning techniques are implemented and creative and novel learning techniques shared.

Keywords: student engagement, attendance, accounting education, learning and teaching, curriculum design

Introduction

Student engagement in higher education continues to both drive and cause debate (Quinlan, 2025). Since the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, research regarding student engagement has explored attendance at timetabled classes and revealed a decrease in global settings (Williams, 2022). This paper aims to add to the field of literature on student engagement in higher education as it relates to attendance. It uses a qualitative approach to explore the pedagogical factors that impact student decision making. As a study conducted at a metropolitan university in the United Kingdom (UK) where the majority of students are commuters, this paper explores factors such as teaching technique and learning approach, curriculum content, and perceived link to assessment, to greater understand students' perceptions of pedagogical choices made by faculty. Drawing on student interviews, the study augments knowledge of student decision

making and perceptions of timetabled activities in higher education. It also seeks to inform pedagogical planning for universities in similar contexts in the years ahead.

Research aims

The research first seeks to provide a greater understanding of students' pedagogical choices relating to attending in-person timetabled classes in higher education. Secondly, the study aims to explore students' decision making relating to such factors as technique and learning approach, curriculum content, and the link to summative assessments. Finally, the study aspires to contribute qualitative data to discussions on curriculum design, teaching and learning opportunities approach, and assessment planning to inform student engagement strategies. Together these aims facilitate further exploration of student attendance in post-Covid-19 higher education, focused on a commuter-majority metropolitan UK university.

Literature

Increasing or improving student engagement in higher education has been evidenced to improve educational outcomes, student belonging, and overall satisfaction (Thomas & Allen, 2022; Schnitzler et al., 2021; Snijders et al., 2020). Student engagement can be understood as both the time and energy students invest in educational activities, as well as the complementary time and energy put into supporting students from their education provider (Bryson, 2014; Kuh, 2001). In a digital age, the means and pathways to engaging are varied, where traditional behavioural engagement measures, such as attendance at timetabled classes, are no longer the only opportunity for students to learn. In higher education post-Covid-19, students can engage with learning online, access resources that enable students to catch up, and even produce their own knowledge, artefacts and resources via the internet and Generative AI. It is within this context that many institutions have reported decreases in student engagement through attendance at timetabled sessions and wider more general footfall on campuses (Kerigan & Foster, 2021; Williams, 2022). Yet when Faculty see fewer students in class, they become concerned as the learning is no longer visible and the worry of lower student outcomes as a result of such behavioural changes is apparent.

The cause of such decreases in attendance at timetabled classes in English Higher Education has been attributed to several other factors beyond digital learning options. Some factors are societal, and some are due to decisions made by individual educational providers. The most significant societal element is the increased costs that relate to being a student, enhanced by the economic crisis causing inflation in the UK because of political instability and global events – the so-called 'cost of living crisis' (Department for Education, 2023). This has led to clear evidence of students increasing the numbers of hours they work per week. In a study at the University of Lancashire, students work an average of 23 hours a week compared to 13.5 prior to the pandemic (Wright et al., 2024). In addition, a large sector study by the Russell Group Students' Unions surveying over 8,800 students has evidenced that; 1 in 4 students regularly go without food, over half (54%) of students report their academic performance has suffered due to finances, and 18% have considered dropping out due to financial reasons (Russell Group Students' Unions, 2023). This has been further evidenced by the Office for Students where a national study sees one in five students saying that they have considered dropping out of university because of cost-of-living increases (Office for Students, 2023). Research from the Sutton Trust corroborates this evidence, stating that 49% of undergraduate

students who responded have missed a lecture, seminar or workshop since September to do paid work (Johnson, 2023).

On the educational provider side of the debate, a sector survey by Dickinson (2023) highlights the fact that decisions and activities by institutions are also contributing to lower student attendance. This includes such pedagogic practice as poor teaching; disjointed or spread timetables impacting commuter students; and assessment deadlines clashing with taught content (Dickinson, 2023). Other sector research highlights a lack of academic or social integration to university level study during and post Covid-19 (Resch et al., 2023). A major UK national study evidences a lack of a sense of belonging for students during the pandemic years (Jackson & Blake, 2022). The existence of less 'rich engagement opportunities' negatively impacts social integration, including basic activities that lead to friendship making opportunities (Lowe, 2022). To further explore student stories through qualitative interviews, a recent study in 2025 across three universities complements the above research findings, where beyond the cost of living crisis and COVID-19, students also reference that poor teaching (such as reading from the slides), a limited level of interactivity in class, convenience of online catch ups, and lack of links to the assessment in the contact time also contribute to decisions not to come to campus (Lowe et al. 2025). This study further explores the pedagogy of the timetabled class as highlighted in this study, to greater understand students' perspectives and influences on decision making to attend on campus sessions in the midst of this complicated context.

Method and research context

The English higher education (HE) sector is under immense pressure over issues such as the assessment of student outcomes, and finances for students. The four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) that make up the United Kingdom, each have different funding models which impact elements such as tuition fees charged and maintenance loans available to students. Westminster is situated in London, England, where at the time of this study in 2025, students were charged a tuition fee of £9,250 per year for undergraduate programmes of study. Since the introduction of tuition fees in England in 1998, research and policy suggest that there has been a societal shift towards students as consumers so that despite increases in higher education participation (student numbers), student engagement has been shifted toward a more strategic relationship with learning (Taylor & Magne, 2025). In addition, following innovation in technology enhanced learning to create such applications as lecture recording/capture in individual classes, many UK lectures are now recorded for online catch up to support students with access or learning needs (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). This ability to catch up and learn online at the students' convenience was catalysed during the Covid-19 pandemic, where an entire generation of learners across all educational levels (early years to higher education) were taught, assessed, and awarded 'from a distance' (Nordmann et al., 2022). It means that at the time of this study, students were familiar with the choice of how and when to engage and as such they can be selective about engaging in person, online or via a hybrid approach.

The study was conducted with undergraduate students within the School of Finance and Accounting at the University of Westminster, UK. Westminster is a metropolitan multi-campus university located in London. It was founded as the first Polytechnic in London in 1838 and gained full university status in 1992. The institution has c.24,000 students, and its School of Finance and Accounting has c.1,500 students studying both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. At undergraduate level where this research is focused, the School has five courses of study (BSc FinTech, BSc Finance, BSc Accounting, BA Finance and Business

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Management, BA Accounting and Business Management). The average cohort size per year of study (and therefore in core units of study) is 100. The students in this school are largely from backgrounds of relative disadvantage with 62.9% coming from lower income households, 65.6% first in family to go to university, and 81.2% being members of the Global Majority. The students at undergraduate study level are also predominantly commuters (78%) who were living in London prior to enrolling to study at university. The students are largely from the 'traditional' 18-21 age range on entry for university study in the UK (86.6%) and have progressed to university having completed secondary school. In addition, the University of Westminster, like many UK universities, has no formal attendance rules beyond international students' visa requirements. This is akin to what occurs in many national contexts across the globe, where participation in higher education is voluntary.

To conduct this study, the research team used one to one interviews that were conducted online, to gain rich qualitative data from students about their engagement (See Appendix 1 for Questions). Ethical approval was sought and obtained from Westminster Business School's Ethics Committee in January 2025. Beyond the three-university study referenced above (Lowe et al. 2025), the majority of the sector studies are surveys. In exploring a topic such as pedagogical preference and student decision making, an interpretivist study gives space to explore the nuances and complexity that are not often explored in quantitative studies or qualitative surveys. The interviews were conducted online to create an accessible environment and opportunity for students to take part; transcription of the interviews occurred post recordings.. In addition, a thank you incentive of a £20 Cinema Voucher was provided to encourage students' participation and to recognise students' time in the light of the financial challenges highlighted above.

The data was thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's recommended steps: familiarisation with data; generation of initial codes; search for themes; review themes; definition of themes; and writing (2006). Twelve voluntary participants studying a variety of Accounting and Finance courses were recruited and interviewed in May-July 2025. This study does have substantial limitations and is by design not generalisable because of the number of participants and the context bound nature of the study as it relates to a School of Accounting and Finance and an individual English metropolitan commuter-focused university. Despite this, the findings below are discussed in the light of the extant literature and considerations are offered to the wider UK and global higher education sector post Covid-19. The authors have included some direct quotes that serve to enrich the reader's understanding of this unique context.

Findings and discussion

In the thematic analysis, the themes outlined below were identified and a number of quotes are highlighted and their context discussed in line with the extant literature.

- Content Relevance
- Teaching Approaches
- Active Learning

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- Peer Influence
- External Commitments and Recordings
- Classroom Environment
- Artificial Intelligence

Content relevance

In the data, students reported that attendance is often closely aligned to how essential a module is perceived to be for the achievement of good academic outcomes and grades. For example, modules directly linked to blind-paper examinations or difficult assignments are reported to be prioritised by students, as these are seen as opportunities for success in their degree but also higher stakes. In addition, when the timetabled lecture content is clearly aligned with these assessments, students reported being more motivated to attend, perceiving each session as directly beneficial to their academic goals:

So there were two lectures that related to the course work, right? So I attended the first one that related to the first coursework and the second one I attended the seminar that related to the coursework. So together like that was that was literally it. That's that's all. That's all I did. I did come a couple of other times to some random lectures and seminars just because the lady was really nice.

Conversely, when timetabled classes appear to be only loosely connected to assessments, students report that they often choose not to attend. This highlights the importance of curriculum design in making explicit connections between timetabled material and assessment outcomes. As evidence in earlier studies (Taylor and Magne, 2025), students are increasingly strategic, weighing the value of each session against competing demands on their time, such as work or personal commitments:

And because in the lectures we were actually going through the content, so even if it was at 9 AM, would like the latest I would get to that lecture would literally be 09:30 like that's that's latest because they were valuable for us to say. Yeah, but now let's say semester 2. Certain modules were literally just coursework, right? So if it's just coursework then I can do it at home and I can do my research at home.

Teaching approaches

Regarding the content of the classes, students also outlined more accessible (perhaps being more relatable to prior learning, current knowledge or experiences) topics are more engaging, while information overload (and reading from the slides), where sessions are fast-paced and/or packed with excessive detail, can deter attendance (Young et al., 2020). However, when the data is explored further with participants, the underlying issue is not necessarily the difficulty of the content itself, but rather the lecturer's ability to break down complex topics into manageable, understandable steps. The data suggests that effective teaching involves scaffolding difficult concepts, using clear explanations, examples, and interactive elements to make challenging material accessible (Race, 2019). Perhaps when lecturers succeed in ensuring

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classes overtly link to upcoming assessment, and content is engaging and accessible to students, higher attendance can be achieved.

The amount of interest he took, like the amount of interest he produced in my mind, not only me, it's just me. I'm talking about me. Maybe the other students as well. I think most of us now are like working like little bit practical. I just put my money a little bit my savings into the stocks to just see that how things are working. So that's in kind of influence. Teacher produce on to the students that they really want to do something in their real life, that what they want to learn. So honestly, like I I've been doing it.

Enthusiasm and approaches used by the lecturer played a crucial role and was often reported in the data. Interactive and engaging teaching methods, such as discussions, problem-solving activities, and real-world applications or examples, are reported to encourage higher attendance (Revell and Wainwright, 2009). In contrast, sessions where lecturers simply read from slides, talked about academic theories purely or fail to add depth and context are associated with lower attendance:

I think in our first year we had a module where the teacher would be reading off of the slides for the entire lecture and then we would be split into like four groups and have three questions each that we needed to answer. And that was the same format for the whole semester. So I can see why students wouldn't really be interested in attending when they can just sort of ChatGPT the answers at home.

Students asserted that they valued sessions where they can see the practical relevance of what they are learning, especially when linked to assessments or future careers. In addition, word of mouth recommendations or reviews from previous cohorts about the quality of teaching can also influence attendance decisions, underscoring the importance of maintaining high teaching standards across modules and years:

I'd say too much information on the slide like it's if it's info packed and I feel like I'm digesting too much and the lecture is going fast and I can barely and I'm trying to take notes alongside it, but obviously if it's too much information, I'm barely like digesting what's going in and I'm just writing notes. But those notes aren't even going to stick unless I go over them and revise again.

Active learning

Students consistently reported higher engagement and attendance in sessions that incorporated active learning elements. Examples included coding workshops, trading simulations, and other hands-on activities that allowed students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. A strong preference emerged for classes that allowed time for discussion and interaction. Students felt that being able to ask questions, share perspectives, and engage in dialogue with both peers and instructors enriched their learning experience. This aligns with broader research showing that collaborative learning and peer-to-peer interaction can deepen understanding and foster a sense of belonging (Gravett et al., 2024).

Yeah, I think one particular teaching technique would be engaging, as I said, engaging more with the students rather than just reading the slides and. Yeah. And talking about it, I would rather prefer a teacher talking about real life examples. I mean there are topics on the blackboard or the presentation, but it gets more engaging when the teacher actually involves us and talks about real life experience or any real life case study, anything like that, ask questions to the students so that it

so. Even like we, we become proactive. And then? Just answer them actively. So getting more engaged with the students, that would be my preferred learning style, yeah.

Interestingly, while students valued interaction, there was a notable aversion to formal group work. Some participants found group assignments unappealing due to social discomfort or previous negative experiences. However, this resistance was not universal: in cohorts where efforts had been made to build community, such as through residential trips or structured peer interaction, students were more open to collaborative activities. This suggests that the success of group work depends heavily on the social dynamics within the cohort and the extent to which students feel comfortable and supported.

[Lecturer] just wanted to talk to everyone and you know, get them to answer and get feedback during the lecture. And it was really off putting because it's like it's 9AM, I don't want to talk to you right now. You know, like I'm still defreezing from, you know, my night's sleep, so I don't really want to talk. I just want to listen to you and drop down some notes, you know? So I think lecturers that go through the content but explain it is great, but lecturers don't want to really, really engage like the people in the audience... No. Stop, right? ... That's what the seminar is for.

Peer influence

While many students reported that their attendance decisions are made independently, the social context of higher education cannot be underestimated. Even when students claim autonomy, subtle peer dynamics often shape their behaviours. For instance, students embedded in active study groups or close-knit friendship circles may find that the collective habits of their peers—such as regularly attending or skipping classes—set informal norms that influence their own choices.

Not really, no. I think that our course is a little bit like split up. We're not like we don't stick together as a course. The Berlin trip was good for that, though we'll speak a lot more now, but yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, but that that was also good because there's a lot more people going to like events now. We had there was an event last week that was run by Westminster University student and a lot of people that weren't going to events before went to that, which was good.

Our participants also suggested that the presence of friends or study partners in a class can improve the class experience. Students often look forward to post-class discussions, collaborative study sessions, or simply the social interaction that comes with being part of a group. For commuter students or those who may feel isolated, these peer connections can be especially important in sustaining engagement and a sense of belonging: This sense of community can foster a positive learning environment, increase accountability, and make the prospect of attending classes more appealing. One student remarks below on the positive impact of a recent excursion on relationships in the curriculum.

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External commitments and online resources

A significant number of students reported choosing recorded lectures over attending live sessions, primarily due to outside of university employment commitments (Lowe et al., 2025) This theme reflects what the literature highlights as the increasing necessity for students to balance academic responsibilities with

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part-time or even full-time employment—a pattern that has intensified in the wake of the cost-of-living crisis and rising tuition fees in the UK (Russell Group Students' Unions, 2023; Wright et al., 2024). The flexibility offered by recorded lectures allows students to fit learning around their work schedules, but it also has unintended consequences of lower attendance in timetabled sessions (Nordmann et al., 2019).

For my fellow students, I think some of them are occupied with work. So like part time jobs and it clashes with the university timetable and as you said, because everything is recorded, they just say, OK, if I'll go to work and I'll just watch the recordings when I'm back home.

While the timing of classes was not a question in the study, the time classes were scheduled to take place did emerge as a noteworthy consideration for some students. Early morning classes often coincide with peak travel times in London (the location of the University of Westminster), leading to higher transportation costs for commuter students. For late evening classes, safety concerns, particularly for those travelling after dark, was also reported as a deterrent. Students also expressed that early morning sessions, especially those covering complex or demanding material, made challenging circumstances. Many felt that they were not mentally prepared to engage deeply with difficult content first thing in the morning, which could impact both attendance and learning outcomes.

Most likely probably the timing of the class is probably a big reason to why. Because, like let's say for example, I know some lectures are like 3:00 to 5:00, and then there's a seminar right after from 5:00 to 7:00. But most people don't like to travel like in the dark as well, so they're most likely to, like, skip that seminar.

Classroom environment

Traditionally, the physical classroom environment, such as room layout, lighting, and facilities, has been considered a significant factor in student engagement and attendance (Neary & Beetham, 2015). However, our study did not highlight this to be a factor. This may be due to Westminster Business School having a consistency in decoration and room layout across our teaching rooms, or may highlight that the above discussed factors are more prominent in student decision making.

It's that not toxic at all or not like discouraging, not judgmental. It's just very generally positive, like people are encouraging.

A recurring theme in our findings is the mismatch between scheduled lecture durations and the actual content delivered. Many students felt that not all lectures require the full two-hour slot, especially when the material could be covered more efficiently. Prolonged sessions without breaks can lead to diminished attention and engagement (Kell, 2024). The students in the study also suggested that shorter lectures or the inclusion of regular breaks would help maintain focus and make sessions more productive. This feedback highlights the need for interrogated timetabling to justify the approach and length for the purpose of learning, instead of default models across all learning units of study.

You go for about 45 minutes, even though there's nothing left for me to say. So then they would just talk and talk and talk. And that's when it drags, because being talked at when you know that what you're being talked at is. Nonsense like it's you could let me go. You could have literally let me go. But you're just talking because you just checked the time and you said, oh, I can't let you go yet. So you're just talking talking. That's that's when being talked at becomes annoying.

Classroom environment

The availability of catch up materials were not the only technology referenced that impacted attendance. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT has had a noticeable impact on student's attendance patterns. Several students expressed that, with easy access to such technologies, students feel less compelled to attend classes in person as knowledge can be sourced through AI. The rationale is that if they miss a session, they can simply use ChatGPT or similar platforms to retrieve explanations, summaries, or even answers to specific questions. Some students acknowledged that while these tools are helpful for revising or clarifying concepts, the temptation to substitute class attendance with AI-generated content sometimes leads to gaps in understanding, ignorance of nuance, and missed opportunities for skill development.

Yeah, I think that ChatGPT probably has an effect on that, because I think a lot of people feel like if they do miss stuff, it's fine because ChatGPT is going to tell them anyway.

Despite the university innovating in assessment practice toward authentic assessments based on live projects, or assessments in person where AI cannot be used, some participants had an impression that students who were not attending were using the technology for assessment success. Either via replacing the learning and teaching gained from attendance with Generative AI summaries, or using AI itself to write assessment, was a suspicion, giving opportunity to short-cutting the learning process for students choosing not to attend timetabled sessions.

They're too lazy to attend modules and let's say, let's say for it's like I think it depends on the one factor could be the coursework as well, because some coursework is just very basic. So you have to write essays and anything like that so. Students are more comfortable doing that on their own, so they would probably tend to be like, OK, I can even, even if I don't attend. Probably they'll probably use AI or something like that.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the fact that there is no single reason that determines whether students attend timetabled sessions or choose to miss them. It is clear that the developments in technology, COVID-19, the cost of living crisis and other external factors, alongside a number of internal circumstances, come together to influence what students choose to do. It is encouraging to note that whilst the University of Westminster and other institutions will continue to grapple with the challenges outlined in this paper, all is by no means lost. A focus on doing our best to ensure that the factors in our power are addressed whilst not bringing wholesale shifts will serve to encourage more engagement.

The findings from this study highlight the evolving nature of student engagement and attendance, underscoring the diminishing influence of the physical classroom environment in favour of engaging, inclusive teaching approaches. This shows that students attend classes when they feel it is worthwhile to do so. What this amounts to is sessions that are assessment-relevant, intellectually demanding, and delivered through active, relational teaching that goes beyond slides.

Recommendations

Overall, these insights call for a student-centred, flexible, and interactive approach to teaching, with ongoing reflection and adaptation to meet the changing needs of learners. It is important to engage students in dialogue at all points of the learning journey so that what can be altered to encourage engagement can be dealt with in a timely fashion. Faculty needs to consider providing the rationale for engagement to students at every opportunity, especially as regards the use of AI that effectively prevents the development of skills and the application of knowledge.

As students engage in conversation with faculty, it is hoped that they will come to recognise that there is more than a mark at stake if they don't engage for their own growth and development. This is a long-term view that faculty can aim to share regularly so that the reason for coming to campus and engaging in lessons becomes a compelling argument. Faculty should prioritise creating learning spaces that foster active participation, approachability, and a sense of belonging, as these factors are now central to positive student experiences.

Lecture capture and AI increase choice, so in-person time must offer what recordings cannot. Interaction, feedback, and applied practice. Programmes should design work around cohort trust, and timetabled to sustain attention. Using shorter sessions, breaks, varied and hands-on activities, and those that reinforce the real world relevance of academic material, should be prioritised for maximising productivity. In short, make every class unmissable and worth turning up for.

Biographies

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