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## What Makes Students Attend Lectures? The Shift Towards Pragmatism in Undergraduate Lecture Attendance

### Abstract

An empirical study was conducted to gain understanding about reasons for lecture attendance among undergraduate students. Students were found to be heterogeneous regarding their reported lecture attendance motivations, with two segments representing prototypical extremes. The student group labelled "idealists" reported genuinely enjoying lectures and consisted of more mature aged students with working experience. Students labelled "pragmatics" were most highly represented in the Commerce Faculty, were among the younger students, reported attending lectures to get the information they need to succeed in the subject and demonstrated the lowest lecture attendance while achieving the highest grade point average. Generally, as opposed to the findings of previous studies into reasons for lecture attendance in the Seventies, a shift towards pragmatism among students seems to have occurred and now might be defining the reality of the tertiary education environment in marketing.

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## **What makes students attend lectures?**

### **The shift towards pragmatism in undergraduate lecture attendance**

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#### **Abstract**

An empirical study was conducted to gain understanding about reasons for lecture attendance among undergraduate students. Students were found to be heterogeneous regarding their reported lecture attendance motivations, with two segments representing prototypical extremes. The student group labelled “idealists” reported genuinely enjoying lectures and consisted of more mature aged students with working experience. Students labelled “pragmatics” were most highly represented in the Commerce Faculty, were among the younger students, reported attending lectures to get the information they need to succeed in the subject and demonstrated the lowest lecture attendance while achieving the highest grade point average. Generally, as opposed to the findings of previous studies into reasons for lecture attendance in the Seventies, a shift towards pragmatism among students seems to have occurred and now might be defining the reality of the tertiary education environment in marketing.

#### **Introduction**

Studying lecture attendance and reasons for lecture attendance has a long history. Feldman (1976) reported that the reasons stated most frequently were knowledge, stimulation of interest, clarity of explanation, enthusiasm and organization. Bligh’s (1972) meta-analysis of lecturing studies points out factors like the excitement of intellectual discovery; the presentation of challenging and provocative ideas, arguments and counter-arguments. These findings are supported by Isaacs (1992), Biggs (1999), Browne and Race (2002), Laurillard (1993), and Ramsden (1992). Other reasons include the ability of the lecturer to make knowledge meaningful. Students in Sheffield’s study (1974) stressed the importance of the lecturer conveying principles rather than details. Ogborn (1977) and Bliss and Ogborn (1977) illustrate the importance of generating understanding for lectures to be effective. Murphy (1998) indicates the importance students place on clear explanations. Land (1985) summarized lecturing studies over 10 years and found achievement scores to be higher for students attending lectures where explanations were clear and specific. Clarity within lectures correlated with student learning in studies by Solomon, Rosenberg and Bezdek (1964) and Feldman (1989). Land (1985), Bligh (1972) and Isaacs (1992) indicate the importance of the ability of lecturers to analyse and synthesise complex material, make it simpler for students and explain it clearly. Students place high value on clarity and structure (Brown and Atkins, 1988). Ramsden (1992) also refers to the importance of the provision of structures and frameworks. This is supported by other writers, for instance, Exley and Dennick (2004), Race (2002), and McKeachie (1994). On the other hand, students might attend lectures in order to acquire current information (Murphy, 1998; McKeachie, 1994; Exley and Dennick, 2004; Bligh, 1972) or obtain information that will help them with assessment tasks or exam questions (Browne and Race, 2002).

Disciplinary differences may exist however these are not clear. Referring to various studies of lecturing, Brown and Atkins (1988: 14) state “whereas science students tend to see lectures as a way in to reading, for arts students lectures ideally follow reading and help them to interpret

what they have read". Brown and Daines (1981a) conclude that Science students value logical and structured lectures more highly than Arts students who value insights and new perspectives.

Based on the findings from prior research and the exploratory pre-study the following research questions were investigated: (1) What motivates students to attend lectures? (2) Are there differences in lecture attendance across faculties? (3) Is there an association between student evaluation of the lecture and/or the lecturer, and the level of lecture attendance? (4) Is lecture attendance higher in compulsory subjects? (5) Are personal student characteristics associated with lecture attendance levels? (6) Are there groups of students who differ with regard to their lecture attendance motivation? (7) If so, how do these students differ from each other?

### **Empirical Study Design**

The study was conducted during the autumn session of 2004 on an Australian university campus and consisted of an exploratory stage, including a literature review, cartoon tests and short interviews, and a qualitative survey. The questionnaire for the second phase was developed using the findings derived from the exploratory stage, in particular the list of reasons to attend lectures. Data was collected in lectures held in six faculties with the permission of the respective lecturers. The questionnaire included questions about the students (degree, age, nationality, grade point average, family status, work status), about the lecture in which they completed the survey (faculty, quality evaluation of the lecture and the lecturer, estimated difficulty level, motivations to attend lectures), and about their general motivation to attend lectures AND attendance rates.

Due to data base limitations, a convenience sample of lecturers willing to support the research project was approached for permission to survey their classes. The final sample size amounts to 623 students (48% from Commerce, 26% from Arts, 12% from Informatics, 9% from Health & Behavioural Sciences, 5% from Engineering and 1% from Science). Australian and New Zealand students make up 74% of the sample, 17% come from Asian countries, 4% from the USA and Europe each, only small proportions are from South or Latin America or Africa. The group of 18-20 year old student dominates the sample with 43%, followed closely by the age group of 21-23 (36%). 11% are aged between 24 and 26, 3% between 27 and 29 and, finally, 7% are 30 years or older. They have, on average, worked for almost 5 years, attended 80% of the lectures offered and reach a 69% grade point average.

### **Results**

#### **Reasons to Attend Lectures**

Students were provided with a list of reasons for attending lectures and stated whether they apply to them or not. This list was presented twice, once with respect to the subject where the survey was conducted and once with regard to all of their subjects. The results to research question 1 are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that there are only minor deviations from the subject-specific to the general evaluation of students. The reasons that drive the majority of students to lectures are to find out what they are supposed to learn, not to miss important information, and to find out about assessment tasks. Enjoyment and derivation of enthusiasm from lectures seem to be rarely encountered reasons. The only difference that could be determined between marketing students and all other students was that marketing students stated significantly more frequently to attend in order to learn about real world applications.

**Table 1: Reasons to attend lectures (in percent of students saying “yes” on a binary “yes-no” scale)**

	Agreement for subject under study	General agreement
Find out what I am supposed to learn	75%	78%
Don't want to miss important information	68%	72%
Find out about assessment tasks	52%	59%
Make sure I learn fundamentals	38%	45%
Easier than learning it myself	37%	43%
Make knowledge meaningful	35%	39%
Expected to be there	25%	30%
Enjoy them	19%	21%
Find out 'real word' application	18%	21%
Work on problems	15%	22%
Enthuses me	13%	17%
Find out latest thinking	13%	20%

### Associations

A number of *a priori* reasons for differences in lecture attendance were investigated. First of all, it was assumed that lecture attendance might vary across faculties (research question RQ2). This proved to be the case in this study, where the attendance rate was stated by the students directly. Analysis of variance results are highly significant ( $p$ -value  $< .001$ ) leading to the conclusion that with regard to the typical general attendance rate, Science students attend most often, followed by Arts students. Students in the Faculty of Commerce have the lowest attendance rates. With regard to the one particular subject where the survey was conducted, Science, Health & Behavioural Sciences, and Engineering students report the highest attendance rates ( $p$ -value  $< .001$ ), with Commerce reporting the lowest attendance levels. As the number of students is as low as 5 in the Science Faculty, these findings can only be taken as indicative and hypothesis-generating for a follow-up study of the same nature.

Both the reported quality of the lecture and the quality of the lecturer are significantly (Pearson correlation  $p$ -value  $< .01$ ) and positively correlated to lecture attendance (RQ3), as is the age of the students (RQ5). Surprisingly, the fact whether a subject is compulsory or not is not associated with the lecture attendance level (RQ4). Neither is the nationality of students (RQ5). Both led to insignificant ANOVA results. Whether students work or not does significantly influence ( $p$ -value  $< .01$ ) the typical levels of attendance (RQ5). However, the direction of association is counter-intuitive: working students attend 3 more lectures on average per session.

### Psychographic Student Segments

In order to investigate RQs 6 and 7, a cluster analysis was conducted based on students' binary motivation statements. Cluster stability of solutions with three to ten clusters was investigated by repeating computations 50 times and comparing the Rand index value. The eight cluster solution was chosen. Topology Representing Networks (Martinetz and Schulten, 1994) based on Euclidean distance computations were used for partitioning because they render superior results to the classic k-means algorithm.

The following segments provide insights into student heterogeneity (two segments are not discussed in detail as they represent answer tendency patterns): Segment 3 (7% of the sample) represents enthusiastic students (consequently labelled “idealists”). They enjoy lectures, feel enthused by them and feel that lectures make knowledge meaningful. Segment 4 (17%) is referred to as “pragmatics”. They want to know what they need to learn; get information about assessment tasks; and not miss any relevant information. Students in segment 5 (11%, “averagely

motivated students”) report similar motivations to the “pragmatics”. However they also feel that attending lectures is easier than learning alone and that they make knowledge meaningful. This group differs from the pure pragmatic perspective in that content of the subject was important.

Segment 6 (“fundamentals oriented students”, 15%) share the main pragmatic lecture attendance motives, but additionally report that attendance assures learning the fundamentals. Segment 7 (14%) was labelled “minimalists”. Their only reported reason to attend lectures was not to miss relevant information. Finally, Segment 8 (11%, “everything but pleasure”) reports that most of the listed reasons apply, except for enjoying lectures and feeling enthused by them.

Descriptive information was used to gain insight into who these segments are. Most distinctly, the “idealists” present themselves as older students. More than half of them work and can mostly be found in the Arts Faculty. They rate lecture quality higher than other segments. “Pragmatics” are over-represented in Commerce and Informatics, tend to be the youngest on campus, and Australians are significantly over-represented in this segment. They rate lecture / lecturers worst, report the lowest attendance rates and yet receive the highest marks. Marketing students are underrepresented among “idealists” and over-represented in segments 5, 6 and 7.

### **Conclusions, Discussion, Limitations and Future Work**

The main reasons for lecture attendance are to find out what to learn, not to miss important information, and to find out about assessment tasks. This reflects recent study results (Browne and Race, 2002) while pointing to a dramatic motivational shift since the studies conducted in the Seventies (Bligh, 1972; Sheffield, 1974; Feldman, 1976) in which factors like stimulation of interest, gaining knowledge and enthusiasm dominated student views. However, lecture attendance was found to vary across faculties (supporting prior findings, e.g. Brown and Atkins, 1988), older students and working students attend more lectures, and good evaluations of lectures and lecturers are positively associated with attendance levels. Segments were constructed based on attendance reasons. At one extreme, “idealists” enjoy attending lectures and feel enthused by them. They are older and more frequently encountered in Arts subjects. “Pragmatics” represent the other extreme: they want the information they need to be successful, are younger, more frequently in Commerce, rate lecturers/lecture quality low, and report the lowest attendance rates.

While the main aim of this study was to gain insight into student’s reasons to attend lectures in today’s tertiary education environment in Australia, the findings pose a few questions: Do lectures nowadays fulfil the purpose of knowledge transfer or are they only used to pass on formal subject information? If so, should we accept this and offer the information they seek online and stop offering lectures? If “pragmatics” receive the best marks, are we using bad assessment tasks to measure learning or are our lectures useless? If the most enthusiastic students are older and working, should lectures be offered in the evenings only?

The two major limitations of this study are the small sample sizes in certain faculties and the adopted convenience sampling procedure. Nevertheless, results generate valuable insights, which can be used as empirical hypotheses for representative follow-up studies. Analyses based on the total sample (associations) are not crucially affected by the sampling problems, neither is the segmentation, as long as the proportions are not interpreted as valid for the entire student population. Given small sample sizes in some faculties, the single most critical analysis is the investigation of across-faculty differences. Furthermore, there are differences in subjects with regard to where (in lectures or tutorials) information about assessments is passed on. This was not controlled for in the present study.

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