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Why aren't they attending class like they are supposed to? A review into students' perception of the value of class attendance

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Abstract

Enabling courses are designed to assist with the upskilling of non-traditional students in order to make the transition to university more seamless. Enabling educators understand that the cohort who enter via the enabling pathway are unique and require holistic support as the students develop their academic skills and their self-efficacy. Class attendance has long been regarded as a vital component of a quality education, but with the accessibility of online material and the ever-increasing opportunities to study online, the viability and value of face-to-face classes is being challenged. This paper reports the findings of a research project that sought to better understand enabling students' conceptions of the benefits of attending face-to-face, on-campus classes and the factors that influence their choices to attend. The project investigated the link between attendance, academic achievement and retention and aimed to identify a more effective alignment between the conception of expectations and the provision of a quality learning experience.

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to capture the perceptions held by enabling students studying at an Australian regional university with regards to the value of attending internal face-to-face classes. For many years, the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) course, when offered internally, boasted high attendance rates; however, in recent years there has been a growing trend to lower attendance in face to face, on campus classes. Class attendance has long been purported as a value added component of a quality education; however, with the ever broadening and increasing accessibility to online materials, the notion of the value that students attach to attending face-to-face classes is being questioned. Additionally, educators have voiced concerns around lowering attendance rates in classes and the effect it has on student engagement and depth of understanding unit content. This research aims to understand the value students place on attending face-to-face classes, and to identify possible correlations that support the assumption that non-attendance may have negative consequences on students' levels of understanding, engagement, and ultimately, on retention.

Background

CQUniversity, a multi campus university located across a number of Australian states, offers the STEPS enabling course both internally and online as a pathway for non-traditional students to enter university. The Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (2012) defines an enabling course as "a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award" (p. 26). The term 'enabling' is used to describe courses that are otherwise known as bridging, foundation, pathway, access or university preparation programs (Agosti & Bernat, 2018). The purpose

of such courses is to offer a second chance opportunity for students who, for a variety of reasons, have not followed the more traditional pathway from secondary schooling directly into higher education (Hodges et al., 2013). Hodges et al. (2013) found that these courses provide or support alternative pathways for non-traditional students with the intention of developing core skills such as critical thinking, academic writing, math and computing competencies. The aim of STEPS is to equip learners with lifelong learning skills, self-belief and academic rigour, with its central tenet being its underlying philosophy of transformational learning (Doyle, 2006). The role of STEPS in creating a foundation for motivation, and developing autonomous study habits is critical, as it may determine the students' willingness to commit to engaging more fully in undergraduate study.

Literature review

Low level attendance at face-to-face internal classes within the university sector is a behaviour that concerns educators. Longden (2006) suggests that universities should show an interest in what their students' perceptions are about the journey they are about to undertake in order to understand whether it has a tangible influence on student engagement and retention. The question as to why university students do not attend internal classes has inspired numerous studies (Arulampalam, Naylor & Smith, 2012; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Fjortoft, 2005; Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb, 2001; Gump, 2006; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Stewart, Stott, & Nuttall, 2011), the results of which point to students' behaviour being motivated by factors such as personal attitudes, lifestyle choices, work values, and personality traits. Additionally, Massingham and Herrington (2006) identified that health and lifestyle factors are barriers to class attendance and lack of interest or motivation are barriers to class learning (2006, p. 96). However, similar research within the enabling sector is very

limited, with scant attention being paid specifically to attendance in internal classes. What is evident however, is the strong similarity with the issues identified in the data drawn from the previously identified studies in higher education. Non-attendance of lectures and tutorials appears to be a growing trend.

Research suggests that attendance has a direct correlation to student performance (Gump, 2006) and when at a high level has a positive effect on performance and achievement levels (Durden & Ellis, 1995; Gatherer & Manning, 1998; Grabe & Christopherson, 2008; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Stewart, Stott, & Nuttall, 2011; Thatcher, Fridjhon, & Cockcroft, 2007). This is verified by Massingham and Herrington (2006) who found that students with attendance rates of satisfactory to frequent were more than twice as likely to be in the higher percentile of performers compared to poor attendees who were more likely to be low level performers. This is further substantiated by Friedman et al. (2001) who claim that higher levels of attendance are associated with a higher grade point average. Additionally, Arulampalam et al. (2012, p. 23) found that the causal effect of missing class is negative. Whannell (2013) found similar results within research into attrition in an enabling course. He contends that lower levels of attrition are associated with lower levels of absenteeism from class. This indicates that education institutions need to inform internal students that a strong indicator of student engagement and success is the time devoted to study, which includes attending classes and spending time on campus. Massingham and Herrington (2006) claim that today's reality is one where the majority of students will attend classes only if they perceive 'value' in doing so and these 'value' perceptions are based largely on the teaching process and the competence of the educator. An Australian study by Crisp et al. (2009) found that a majority of first year students acknowledged the importance of class attendance. Yet, this finding does not align to results reported in a longitudinal study of first year students in

Australia which documented that full-time students are spending less time on campus attending lectures and tutorials (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). This indicates a variance between university expectations and the reality of the students' behaviour. Research by Friedman et al. (2001) into why students do or do not attend on-campus classes identified minimal differences in absentee rates between gender, and also that age and class standing were insignificant; however, they discovered that where there was a policy in place that involved checking for and penalising absences, attendance was improved. They state that "when teachers do not assess attendance and do not provide lively, meaningful instruction, absences increase" (p. 7). Additionally, the authors suggest the primary attendance motivator is internal, "a sense of responsibility to be present", and in fact, students' responses verified a strong intrinsic work ethic as a major contributor to class attendance (p. 7).

Research suggests that blended learning is a major influence on a student's decision to attend class or engage with online resources (Chang, 2007; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Naber & Kohle, 2004). Chang (2007) proposes that the true purpose of face-to-face classes is under attack as more students use alternative methods to access course materials. This is further substantiated by Naber and Köhle (2004) who identify the main reason for absenteeism at university as being the availability of other relevant study material. Picano (2006) describes blended learning as a method of instruction that combines online learning with face-to-face activities that are integrated in a planned, pedagogically valuable way. Yet, research is suggesting that where online options are available to students, student attendance is substantially reduced. Massingham and Herrington (2006) pose the question as to why educators continue to believe students with competing life commitments will want to attend classes if universities provide course material online. Friedman et al. (2001) claim that students

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would skip class if they felt that their attendance was superfluous and this was increasingly evident if the course content was available from another source.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to ensure the student voice was being heard through each stage of this research project. There were three sources of data investigated over two phases of study. A phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) underpinned the process of gathering the data for both the focus groups and the individual interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative datasets. Ethical clearance was sought and approved to retrieve data through surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Data Collection Tools

Online Survey

Firstly, in 2014, an anonymous online survey, through SurveyMonkey, was distributed to the internal STEPS cohort of students enrolled from Term 1, 2012 to Term 1, 2014 across all campuses offering the internal mode of study. Questions posed were designed to capture the student voice in order to gain a rich source of data relating to reasons for the level of attendance and students' perception of the value of attending internal classes.

Focus Groups

Secondly, students enrolled from Term 1, 2013 to Term 1, 2014 were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss their experiences within a face-to-face classroom and their perceptions of the importance of attending scheduled classes. Two focus groups, each lasting one hour, were facilitated with a total of ten student participants.

Individual Interviews

Finally, 20 students who were enrolled internally in STEPS at the Bundaberg campus, were invited to participate in individual interviews.

Limitations of the study

Only two students of the 20 possible who were identified as having very low attendance accepted the invitation to be interviewed. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the study as there is no clear identification of issues or factors that contributed to the remainder of students not attending class.

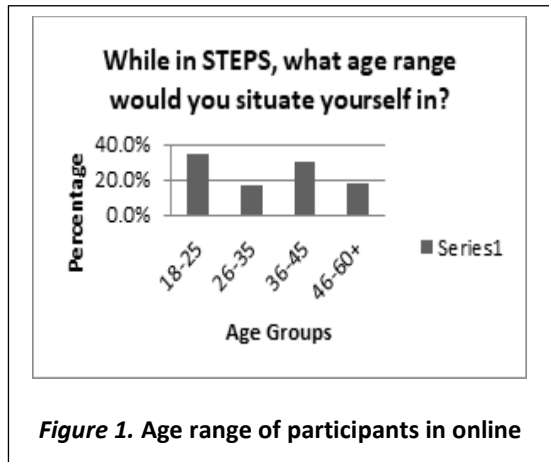
Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was used to analyse the data. The three sources of data include the online survey responses, focus groups and individual interviews. Thematic analysis (Boystzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) which involves the search for common threads that extend across the data sets was used to analyse the data. The process of thematic analysis was employed as it attempts to understand the underlying messages behind the social and cultural phenomena, not just the words or stories being shared. In turn, this allows the researchers to understand the perceptions of the participants alongside their actual experiences (Boystzis, 1998; Guest, McQueen & Namey, 2012; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013).

Participants

The participant group for the online survey were students enrolled from Term 1, 2012 through to and including Term 1, 2014. A total of 129 students responded to the survey, of these, 83.6 % were female and 16.4 % male. The highest response rate at 34.9% were students aged between 18-25 years, with the 36-45 years response rate of 30.2%. The lowest percentage

of respondents were the 26-35 years at 17.1% and the 46-60 years at 17.8% (See Figure 1).



The participant group invited to participate in the focus groups were STEPS students enrolled from Term 1, 2013 to Term 1, 2014. The email was sent to the students' university email and a total of 10 students participated with ages ranging from 22 to 65 years of age.

Finally, the two students who attended the individual interviews were both females aged between 30-40 years.

Findings

Online survey

Value of attendance

Students were asked whether they considered attendance at scheduled classes to be an essential element in attaining a high standard of education with 93% responding in the positive and only 7% in the negative. This correlates fairly closely to the response for the next question that asked participants to clarify how they would rate their level of attendance. There were three levels of attendance to choose from: 1. Regular (80% or above), 2. Intermittent (50% and above) and 3. Infrequent (less than 50%). A

total of 87.1% situated themselves as regular attendees (80% or more of scheduled classes), 12.9% identifying as infrequent (less than 50%) or intermittent (50-80%). This suggests that for the participants who responded to this survey, there is an alignment (with only 5% variable) between the value placed on attendance to actual class attendance. Students were also asked whether they had successfully completed STEPS and 87% responded in the positive and 13% in the negative with similar percentage rates when asked if they entered undergraduate studies post STEPS. One response qualifies the value of the enabling course experience in setting students up for success in undergraduate studies:

I feel that STEPS was a valuable experience for me in entering university. I felt I understood the requirements, how the systems worked and what would be expected of me as a student. I also understood what support was available to me and how to get that. I felt when I began my undergraduate studies, it really felt like a flow on from the STEPS course and not something completely brand new.

The next question asked the 93% of participants to qualify their response as to why they felt attendance was an essential element in attaining a high standard of education. Three key themes emerged: 1) Academic support, 2) Motivation, and 3) Peer support.

The most common response related to the academic support students received from lecturing staff. Participants acknowledged that lecturers were, "thorough, understanding and willing to work at a pace where everyone was able to stay on board". Additionally, students placed value in the knowledge and experience that lecturers bring to the classroom. One student noted:

[I]n these competitive times people have to start putting value into experienced lecturers...what you gain from these valuable learned people in person exceeds what you

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would ever learn from a text book... there is nothing like reading the text and then listening to an enthusiastic lecturer to back up the information.

The participants also felt that content clarification and instant response to questions were a benefit of attending class: "You are able to receive guidance and a deeper understanding of the subject. Lecturers can answer questions immediately and become aware of any struggles the students are having".

Another key theme that emerged was that of motivation: "Face-to-face classes kept me motivated and interested in what I was studying. I prefer this more 'intimate' environment as opposed to distance classes". For some participants, class attendance was linked to higher grades: "I believe that internal attendance is vital. In my own experience I know that I achieve higher results and retain more information from internal classes". Participants also highlighted the importance of understanding the university culture and academic rigour that is expected at undergraduate level: "The scheduled classes were a vital part of me integrating into university level study". "In STEPS, internal classes are important as you do not know the ropes of University yet". Further to this, participants also touched on the value of the development of self-management skills and emotional empowerment: "Attendance is vital ... more so for a preparatory course like STEPS where students are learning the self-discipline that study requires. Internal classes provide an emotional as well as academic crutch that the vast majority of students undertaking an enabling course require". Another student suggested that, "face-to-face learning is really beneficial as it helps to build student confidence".

Peer support was considered a positive characteristic of face-to-face classes as expressed by one participant: "internal classes encourage students to form real life support

groups". Other participants felt that they built connections with like-minded people and they were able to interact and support each other and learn from peer discussions: "Students asked questions about problems that I had not thought of so I learnt from class mates which does not occur as much with distance".

The students who identified as having successfully completed STEPS and transitioned into undergraduate studies were asked what elements of class attendance they believed assisted them in making a successful transition to undergraduate studies. There were three key themes that were evident in the responses: 1) Better prepared for university, 2) Independent study skills, 3) Confidence in self. These students shared that they felt they were better prepared for the rigour of university and that STEPS set them up with the skills and strategies that helped the transition to undergraduate study be more streamlined. One student shared:

It enabled me to understand the importance of a consistent work ethic as a means of achieving success. Without the guidance of internal classes, I don't think I would have been able to find the family/work/study balance as quickly or easily and, in all likelihood, I would have given study away as just too hard.

Alongside the development of the skillset required for university, students gained confidence in their own ability. One student shared:

After STEPS I actually believed I was good enough to enter a university program. I only applied to STEPS because my daughter had and they pushed a form at me. I did not believe I had what it took to be a university student.

Factors contributing to non-attendance

Two questions were specifically directed to the 7% of participants who indicated they were lower level attendees. The first question asked

what factors contributed to their level of attendance with 76% stating family/personal reasons, 28% medical, 24% financial and 33% employment issues. The next question asked the participants to qualify what elements would have assisted them to attend class more frequently. The key theme that emerged reflected that more financial support would help to fund travel to and from class plus bridge the financial gap between work and study. Secondly, more accommodating class times and more perceived value in class activities may assist with students attending more. Finally, health related issues were identified with both family sickness and mental health mentioned as factors, that if overcome, could help with higher level attendance.

Participants were asked to consider whether they gained as much depth of knowledge, understanding and skill as those who regularly attended class. Notably, 66.7% of students believed that they did acquire the same depth of knowledge, understanding and skill with 38.9% sharing that lower attendance may have negatively impacted their learning. The reasons attributed to not attending were varied with some participants considering themselves to be at a higher academic level than the other regularly attending students and therefore not requiring the additional component of teaching. One participant shared, “half the reason I did not attend is because I felt that I already knew most of the information”, with another stating, “the students who went regularly got a lot more out of the experience; however, I also believe a lot of those students needed STEPS more than I did”. Another participant’s comment demonstrates the freedom students believe they have to choose the units they want to attend: “I only attended internal classes that I thought would be extremely beneficial to my learning”. On the other hand, a student, challenged by a mental health issue, stated that:

Even though I didn’t always feel good for class, I still spent a majority of the time studying at home and I felt I understood it

better at home because my anxiety from people wasn’t distracting me. In class I spent most of my time trying to control my anxiety so not much sunk in.

This raises the question as to whether mental health issues could also be a contributing factor to the rate of non-attendance and would warrant further investigation.

A question relating to mandatory attendance was posed in the survey as an option for improving classroom attendance. Students were asked if their attendance would have improved if there were a mandatory requirement for them to attend 80% of classes. A notable percentage, 56% of participants, claimed it would encourage them to attend, with 44% replying in the negative. Some participants raised concerns around this idea: “Don't make it mandatory!!! On top of study, work and other responsibilities, sometimes I just can't make it”. Others were in support, stating:

I think if a person makes a commitment to do a course then they need to be there for all classes or what's the point in enrolling in something if you not going to turn up. You are taking another person's privilege to learn.

Analysis of focus groups and individual interviews

Following the process of Thematic Analysis (Boystiz, 1998), themes emerged that effectively articulated aspects that related directly to the phenomenon of attendance and specifically to the students’ perceptions of the value of attendance and the reasons for lower levels of attendance. The first theme identified was the reasons for non-attendance with three key categories becoming evident: 1) health, 2) financial and 3) ability. The second theme focused on the benefits of attending class and the three emerging key categories included: 1) peer support, 2) social connectedness, and 3) motivation. The final theme spoke to students’ perceptions of why classmates did not attend

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class. The three categories in this element included: 1) non-engagement, 2) age, and 3) accountability.

Participants were asked why they chose to enrol in STEPS as internal students. There were various reasons that were shared and external circumstances often played a part in this decision. Participants in a more secure financial position reported that they could more easily commit to consistent attendance. Moreover, for those balancing work commitments alongside study, they preferred internal classes as they felt that this mode of attendance would assist in motivating them. One participant recognised the value of attendance and stated that, "the face-to-face contact for STEPS students is very important because it is when we are all very fragile and we are still trying to learn who we are and perhaps gain confidence". Students felt that attendance is vital in order to gain as much depth from the classes as possible: "I was too scared to not come because you would invariably miss something" and "attendance was important for me because it gave me the interaction I craved. If you've got questions or you don't quite understand, you can ask and it helps you to clarify that you are on the right track".

Factors that contribute to non-attendance

The first theme identified centred on the reasons for non-attendance. Three sub-themes emerged which included: 1) health, 2) finance, and 3) academic ability.

Various elements of health ranging from personal sickness, family sickness and/or mental stress and illness were identified. Personal health was described as both sickness and acute health conditions. One participant shared that attendance was dependant on how she felt when she woke up due to having an acute condition which has a cyclic effect on her overall health: "because I haven't been well, I've missed classes and then I found the course

harder so I have put more into it and this has a kick back on my health". Parents acknowledged that attendance was inhibited if a family member was sick as the caring responsibility usually rested with them being the primary carer. This was a common factor for parents with younger children. Stress and mental illness were also highlighted as factors that contributed to student absenteeism. Incidences of stress related non-attendance were prevalent late in the term, coinciding with when assessments were due and participants were feeling overwhelmed. Participants relayed that they had to weigh up the value of attendance over staying home and ensuring they completed the assessment items. A few participants who identified with high levels of anxiety shared that they were prone to panic attacks and were thus more inclined to not attend classes. One student shared what they witnessed with a study partner: "they were fighting an internal battle trying to overcome their anxiety, but worry and stress just fuelled their situation and contributed to their inability to push through and attend classes".

Financial implications impacted considerably on participants in a number of ways, and it was evident that a majority of students balance work commitments alongside study. A single mum shared, "I carry a lot on my plate as a single parent having to work and study as well, but it's my choice that I've made". Some students noted that they were able to organise work around study, but there were times they would be required for a shift with little notice. The threat of losing their job and their source of income was instrumental in accepting work over their commitment to study. For those students who were reliant on government payments, it was the constant stress of living on minimal income and having to run a tight budget that was highly influential in their decision to attend or not. At times this would impact on them attending if they did not have fuel for their car or had an unexpected bill arrive that set them back financially.

Academic ability manifested in a number of ways from students falling behind with study, attitude towards the effort required, sense of failure due to low grades in assessments, to low self-belief. One student entered the course knowing that her academic ability was not strong. She was fully committed and had high levels of attendance. Despite substantial effort expended on her assessments and sound results for most of the term, she failed the final assessment. She shared, “I put in hours and hours of work and thought I did a good job. When it came back with a fail, it was disheartening and upsetting. I sort of stopped coming to uni altogether”. This student knew her academic ability was limited but was willing to continue and overcome each obstacle: “Even if I didn’t pass an assignment, it didn’t dishearten me, but for some reason this time it did”. Some students shared that the pace at which some units were taught could be disorientating and overwhelming. If students fell behind in their understanding, they could begin to doubt themselves and lose confidence and this contributed to losing the motivation to attend: “If it gets beyond you and it gets so hard, you just think, look I’m just so hopeless. I feel like I’m really stupid”.

The participants also shared what they had witnessed with their fellow students. They felt that some students made a conscious decision to not attend as they thought it is too easy and they could easily catch up in their own time:

People that I’ve met either don’t attend because at the start things are quite easy and they don’t need to be here to do it. I don’t think they understand the amount of work and the commitment that is required. It’s not until the last four to five weeks they realise there is a lot of work to get done in a short period of time.

The decision of some students to not attend was balanced with the availability of online resources and therefore, they were not concerned about falling behind. One stated, “I use Moodle to try and catch-up with what I can”.

There was an overall consensus that students all valued the online resources that could be accessed through the learning platform, Moodle. One student shared that, “getting on Moodle and looking at whatever was available helped enormously. I love Moodle”.

Benefits of attendance

The second theme centred on the benefits of attending class with sub-themes including: 1) peer support, 2) social connectedness, and 3) motivation.

The ‘peer’ aspect featured very strongly with peer teaching, peer interaction, peer sharing and peer support terms raised throughout the transcripts. It was clear that students considered there was value in the sharing of ideas. They could see they were, “learning from other people and most people were quite happy to help”. One student shared that, “peer teaching was very helpful” and she found her fellow students “made that sound so easy”. Peer contributions helped students feel they were not alone and this contributed to a sense of connectedness within. The flipped classroom style of teaching was highlighted as being an effective class that encouraged peer interaction and the students enjoyed the group activities. One student shared, “I like a group discussion where everyone is throwing in ideas; this has been very helpful for me personally”. Even introverted students appreciated the benefits of group work: “As an introvert, I can still get into a group and be a part of something”. Participants also highlighted the value of having past STEPS students mentor and support them in an informal manner throughout the term.

Developing relationships was critical to social connectedness. As one student shared, “it takes time to get to know people ... you have to start by having conversations”. Another identified that with the range of ages within the classes, it is vital that both the younger and older generation are willing to develop relationships and not just gravitate to their own age group.

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Participants also shared that they felt a sense of connectedness to the university campus. The various events that were organised by the university allowed students to connect on a more social level yet still within the confines of the university. Some participants mentioned how these events helped their partners and children adjust to the parent studying. They mentioned that when their family members were able to come onto campus for the social events, they experienced that the university was not a threatening environment.

As relationships developed and the sense of social connectedness strengthened, students felt motivated to attend class more frequently and, in turn, develop a routine. One student shared that it gave her a purpose for attending: "What I noticed is the ones that don't attend regularly don't develop that connection. When they do attend, they always feel like the odd one out and they are missing out".

Student perceptions

The final theme spoke to participants' perceptions of why classmates did not attend class. Again three sub-themes emerged: 1) non-engagement, 2) age, and 3) accountability.

Non-engagement was attributed to non-attendance by the participants. Students felt that by not attending, the other students were limiting their ability to develop relationships and the sense of connectedness with others and the university, in turn, reducing the opportunity to find their identity as a university student. One participant suggested that maybe these students did not realise the time commitment required or did not have the emotional or personal capacity to undertake an experience that requires commitment and perseverance. Non-engagement was also mentioned in relation to students being off-task and this caused some participants to get frustrated whilst in class. One shared, "I often found myself being the one to turn around and say 'can we actually get back to what we are supposed to be

talking about?'" Another student shared her sense of frustration when other students were talking about topics that were completely irrelevant to what they were there to learn about. Social media was also identified as a distraction and another cause of non-engagement. Overuse of mobile technology caused frustration to the students who were dedicated to learning as they found students were unable to dis-engage from the phone and were constantly responding to texts or checking Facebook in class. One participant stated, "It's as though they don't know how to switch off from that influence". There was the view that disruptive students caused non-engagement: "There are some young ones in our classes that really were disruptive". One shared that a small group would "sit at the back of the class and they would talk and disrupt the class. They were not trying to learn", and this participant felt "I can probably use my time better by not necessarily going into that class and having to deal with that sort of distraction". However, one participant felt that at times some students were very critical of their cohort and shared that, "where students were doing well that they tend to be very judgemental".

Variances in age within the class was a factor raised, both positively and negatively. Some older students shared a sense of frustration with the attitude of younger students: "They have too much flexibility. They don't take it seriously enough, and it's mainly the young ones. They lack discipline and they consider the flexibility to be acceptable". These older students were concerned with the attitudes and the personal motivation of their younger counterparts which they attributed to the differing attitudes and mindsets of the generations: "Younger people have a different attitude to my generation. They come in tired because they've been playing computer games until late at night. They have to give something up to make the time to come in to do STEPS". One of the older students even suggested that their young counterparts are not emotionally

ready to contribute within an adult environment:

It's a huge culture shock, they are not used to having older people in the class because it is very obvious...you've got a class of 30 people and you've got half that are putting up their hands and asking questions and the others switch off and you can see it. They are texting under the desk.

One student suggested that maybe the reason the younger students fall behind is because they don't know how to communicate well or they feel embarrassed about asking for help. One participant used the words 'emotionally dysfunctional' when referring to the younger learners and hypothesised that society has moulded this younger generation this way.

Contrary to this, a number of the older participants shared that they have not had such a negative experience with the younger cohort in class. One shared, "I have had a different experience with my class. We had a lot of younger ones and they were all very interested in doing the class". Another student actually found the young ones in her group were friendly and respectful and all seemed to join in well. She had not experienced the negative side of the younger generation. A mother within the class personalised an example of her daughter who completed STEPS straight out of high school: "My daughter did the STEPS course here and she did all the subjects. She passed every subject and then went on to do university".

Accountability was a characteristic mentioned both in a positive and negative manner. Positive accountability was evident where participants commented on making an informed decision about not attending class and realising the repercussions. As one participant shared, "I carry a lot on my plate as a single parent having to work and having to study as well but when I can't attend, it's my choice I've made. I'm not going to come in here acting like a victim". Another shared that he was using his time more efficiently by not attending class: "I enjoy the

classes but I find I get more work done on my own at home than I would do here". Participants did note that when assessment tasks were looming, they struggled to focus on other units. In this instance, students used 'intelligent neglect' (Prochaska-Cue, 1994) to ensure their focus was on the most pressing task and to ensure they were keeping on top of assessment items. One student shared, "even if I'd gone to class, I would not have learned a single thing because my mind would have shut down and it would have caused more frustration".

Negative accountability was recognised in students who were learning how to be accountable for their actions but often were challenged due to non-achievement. Participants noted that, "structure, discipline and organisation" were lacking in some students and they felt there is a point where the students need to be more accountable for their personal actions and their decision to not attend classes: "There should be a point that they have to have accountability". The participants relayed that attendance levels reduce from the first week with much higher levels of non-attendance near the end of term. Yet, they agreed that, "I don't see there is much that you can do. It is up to the people who are not attending to want to be there. What you are offering is what you are offering". It was evident that the participants often felt frustrated with the ones who do not attend, making comments such as: "Some are just lazy and didn't attend regularly" and "They said they'd rather be doing other things than coming to class and they just didn't realise how far behind they were getting".

All transcripts indicated that participants held lecturers in high regard, and they valued and appreciated their knowledge base and dedication to their students. Comments showed they appreciated teaching environments that were engaging and where they, the student, felt valued. However, in relation to attendance, the students highlighted that some lecturers seem to take low attendance personally: "I can understand the lecturer's point of view where

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they want to know why those people aren't attending. They kind of take it to heart and take it personally". One student was more straight forward and stated "we've given our time to be here, so why are we sitting here wasting time talking about people who aren't even here. The lecturer is there for the people who've attended so let's forget about them and get on with what we are here to do". Students stated that they believe the responsibility to attend class falls on the students and if they cannot attend, then it is their responsibility to catch up or talk to the lecturer if they are having problems: "I think the lecturer just has to simply accept it. These students have obviously got bills they need to pay or they aren't in the right mindset or head space to attend at this point in time". Some students showed displeasure that they had been attending regularly and felt it unfair that the non-attendees were afforded additional support at a later date.

Discussion

What is evident within the findings was the value students placed on attending class. Students who registered higher levels of class attendance indicated they felt better prepared to transition to their bachelor studies at university and valued the skills and academic processes they learnt whilst in STEPS. This aligns with what James (2016) found when interviewing STEPS students who had successfully completed their first year of undergraduate studies. They had a sense of preparedness and contentedness about what they were expected to do at university and through mastering the core components of study and successfully achieving the rigour that is expected whilst at STEPS, their levels of self-efficacy were elevated for the transition to undergraduate studies. Further to this, the students who had strong attendance rates attributed it to the connectedness they had with other students, in turn, motivating them to continue attending class. Additionally, connectedness was also attributed to past STEPS students who were supportive and

informally mentored current students. This points to the value of involving past students more regularly within formalised classes; however, it was noted that mentoring has to be positive, reassuring, encouraging, supportive and devoid of any negativity (Seary & James, 2016).

The findings indicate that quality teaching practices, which include engaging andragogical approaches, reflective practices, and perceived ongoing support, are vital to engage students and contribute to attendance at internal classes (Seary & James, 2016). Fiortoft (2005) found that teaching effectiveness was a positive indicator of higher levels of attendance and that students appreciated effective and engaging practices. As noted by Massingham and Herrington (2006), students are looking for the 'value' component of attendance which is based largely on the teaching practices employed by educators and the way the content is delivered. Quality adult education begins with understanding and appreciating the whole person in the classroom: emotionally, cognitively and physically and applying teaching practices that engage and improve the quality of knowledge acquisition (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The value of appreciating each student's personal situation, as it relates to the expectations of the course attendance, points to the importance of students feeling comfortable sharing the factors that are negatively impacting their ability to attend class (Seary & James, 2016). In addition, students will be passionate about content if the educator demonstrates that they are passionate about teaching it. Also, of major importance, is assisting students see the benefit of attending class, so that when they do attend, they feel that their time has been valued. This supports Friedman, Rodriguez and McCombs' (2001) claim that if students feel their attendance is superfluous, they are more likely to miss class and catch up using online resources. In addition to this, lecturers' attitudes and conversations highlighting non-attendance was found as

undesirable by students which puts the onus back on educators to ensure they value the students who are attending and devote their attention to ensuring these students receive quality support. Educators need to be cautious that their negative feelings about non-attenders does not affect the overall classroom environment. This research has identified that educators need to see past the behaviours, actions and appearances that students may present, in order to see the potential that exists within the student. Within the enabling environment, this is of utmost importance as the journey into education is a time of transformation for many of the students. Fazey and Fazey (2001) believe that it is the responsibility of those who structure the learning environment to nurture those students in their care if true autonomy is to be realised.

Social media and the ease of access to technologies is a cultural issue affecting the face-to-face class environment. Online resources can be easily accessed on most forms of technology, formally and informally, and Gikas and Grant (2013) suggest that teachers need to ensure that content and curriculum is integrated via various technological avenues. However, frustration with students' inability to 'switch off' their mobile was evident in this study as students feel that this contributes to non-engagement by these students. Keller (2011, as cited in Gikas & Grant, 2013) characterised university students "as digitally obsessed, even addicted" and further explained that most slept next to their mobile devices (p. 24). In their research, Gikas and Grant (2013) make reference to 'blurring of the lines' where students use technology devices to access content and resources, but they also find it difficult to switch off as it has become a part of their 'identity', and this behaviour has become habitual, automatic, and distracting (McCoy, 2013). Ophir, Nass and Wagner (2009) note that it is normal for people in society to consume more than one content stream at the same time; however, Thomas (2009) states that the human mind is not really built for processing multiple

streams of information. Therefore, educators need to actively encourage those addicted to social media to implement strategies to more appropriately engage with technologies whilst in class. Part of the frustration around the use of social media emanated from the older generation who participated in the research and this speaks to the issue of enculturation and generational acceptance and tolerance. As enculturation refers to the process of teaching individuals what the accepted norms and values are in relation to accepted behaviours in a classroom environment, this would be evidenced through engaging andragogical approaches that encourage high levels of student participation where students take ownership of their own learning and develop their personal habits of mind that drive and empower them through their learning journey (Seary & James, 2016).

Conclusion

There is no easy solution to the problem of decreasing attendance rates at internal face-to-face classes in a university setting. It seems that the intrinsic desire to be personally accountable is the underpinning reason why students attend class as they equate quality class time with a deeper understanding of course material. The initial premise was that by broadening students' expectations to better match the reality of the university experience may remove some of the disappointments of negative accountability through non-attendance. However, it seems that the issue is much more complex. Institutions have realised the potential of offering curriculum through online platforms and in doing so, have made it easier for internal students to access online resources, thus justifying not attending scheduled classes. Educators need to be mindful that when students attend an internal class, they want to be motivated and inspired to learn and they expect to gain a deeper understanding of content and concepts; otherwise, they cannot see the value in attending. Another key message

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for educators is the expectation students have that the classroom environment needs to be stimulating, with educators employing engaging teaching approaches, and respecting the need of students to feel valued. However, the ultimate responsibility for attendance lies firmly with the student who needs to be aware of the ramifications and implications for them personally if they choose not to attend their scheduled face-to-face classes. As students' progress through an enabling course, their worldview is challenged and they learn that they are not only influenced by those around them, but are themselves an influence on their world. The role of enabling courses in creating a foundation for motivation, and developing autonomous study habits in learners is critical. Ultimately, it is the individual student's determination and willingness to commit to their studies that is a true indication of a student's potential to succeed within their studies.

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