Reviewing the Complexities of Student Non-Attendance and the Implications for Block Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the key academic narratives relating to student non-engagement and non-continuation. Factors influencing non-attendance include family life, mental health concerns, the pressures associated with transition to university, meeting new people, timetabling, paid work, financial concerns and being on the wrong degree programme. The article argues for the need for a shift towards a greater understanding of this complexity, including through intersectional analyses, in getting to understand structural factors affecting student non-attendance as well as for a shift towards a better use of data.

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, if not centuries, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have tended to follow a relatively similar pattern in terms of the approach that is taken to curriculum design, with students studying a number of subjects at any one time within either a term or semester format. At undergraduate level, this was often typified by so-called 'long-thin' modules that started in October and finished in April with examinations taking place in May and June. Although there were inevitably a number of exceptions to this approach, for the most part it reflected the curriculum and timetabling approach that a student would find whether they were studying at the start of the 19th century or the start of the 21st.

Whilst such a state of affairs might be viewed as being a testament to the longevity of many HEIs (which are often older than the countries in which they are based), the nature of higher education (HE) and the make-up of the student body has changed without recognition in the intervening years. This has been marked by a growth in the number of HEIs and associated student numbers. Over the last 50–75 years this has been shaped in particular by the post-Second World War education reforms that increased participation in countries such as the UK through the building of new universities. Towards the end of the twentieth century there was a further expansion of student participation that was reflected in the awarding of university status to former polytechnics in 1992 (UK Government 1992). The latter reflected a strategy by the 1990–97 Conservative government of John Major to increase student participation without the costs of building new universities, which in turn led to the end of a binary divide which had existed since 1965 between universities and other HEIs that were for the most part comprised of polytechnics and teacher training colleges. An immediate and direct impact of this change was to create a more competitive higher education landscape with all institutions competing for students, which the subsequent Labour government of Tony Blair sought to increase the number of students by setting an ambitious target of 50% of school leavers entering into HE (BBC News 1999).

In the UK, such changes have been part of a broader set of government reforms that have included an expansion of private providers, an emphasis on enterprise (or competitiveness among providers), and a reduction in central government direct funding to HEIs (Hunt & Boliver 2023). Margaret Thatcher's government of 1979–1990 was particularly influential in this shift to a more marketized HE landscape, both in terms of a reduction in government direct funding and a reduction of the independence of HEIs. In this regard the 1988 Education Reform Act was particularly pivotal in shifting the provision of education into a more competitive environment, while at the same time reducing academic freedom through the removal of tenure (UK Government 1988).

One impact of these developments has been that ever increasing significance is attached to recruiting students. This has become a particularly acute issue over the last decade, given that since UK student fees were increased to £9,000 in 2012, the fee cap has only been increased once to £9,250 in 2017. A direct impact of this is that in 2024 the £9,250 fee is in reality only worth just over £6,000 when compared to 2012 prices, meaning that HEI's have faced a real-term cut of one third in the value of UK domestic student fees. One consequence is that HEIs have increasingly turned to international students to help plug the gap in their finances. For some HE providers the increase in international students has been particularly stark, and by 2021–22 international students accounted for more than 75% of the student body at Imperial College, University College London, London School of Economics and London Business School (Drayton et al. 2023: 23). Whilst London is not wholly reflected of the UK HE sector, it is nonetheless the case that across the board the pressure on finances and student numbers has meant that there has in a number of circumstances been a reduction in the spaces that are available for UK students (Gross et al. 2023).

The increasing reliance on international fee income is particularly problematic given that it cannot be taken for granted that international students will continue to study in the UK, a risk highlighted by the Office for Students (2023b). This is a result of the combination of the global competition for foreign students, the UK government's struggle to balance its narrative on reducing net immigration and desire to attract international students, and the growth in the quality of education in many foreign countries who traditionally sent students to study abroad (Broeke 2023; Morgan & Havergal 2024).

An increase in student numbers through a focus on widening participation, when combined with the increasing complexity of student lives (e.g. caring responsibilities and the requirement to work), has, however, brought to the fore the competing priorities that students face between attending class and their personal responsibilities. One impact of this has been a concern that has been noted in media outlets, academic journals and also by government over student non-attendance and the overall link to non-continuation (Hilman 2021). This is a significant issue because of the specific impact on the individual student, notably in relation to the financial cost of studying, time spent studying, and the psychological impacts of 'failure'. Yet it is also the case that for too long academic departments and universities in general have focused more on the recruiting of students and less on issues such as student retention. This balance of priorities needs to shift, both on the moral ground of the lost opportunities at the individual student-level and on the broader macro-level of the financial strains that are all too visible in education systems such as the UK.

Concerns about student non-attendance cuts across different national educational systems, with a good deal of the literature focusing on ways to enhance student engagement (Trowler 2010). Notable studies include those that focus on student involvement (Astin 1984), sociocultural factors (Kahu 2013; Kahu & Nelson 2018) and those that examine different dimensions of student engagement such as behaviour, emotions and cognitive factors (Fredricks et al. 2004; Bowden et al. 2021). There is therefore widespread acknowledgement of the challenges that students increasingly face, such as in relation to financial support and the pressures of balancing employment with their studies.

These are issues that have become more acute as a result of significant increases to UK inflation in 2022–2023 which has led to a cost-of-living crisis which has led to universities endeavouring to meet the needs of students through such measures as introducing food banks, providing free and subsidised meals on campus and distributing food vouchers (Office for Students 2023a). Whilst these issues equally affect university staff, there is a recognition that taken in the round all of these factors have a detrimental impact on students. Addressing these collective challenges and establishing more support for the well-being of students is an acute concern for the UK HE sector. While the UK has an overall positive record of student retention when compared to many other countries (Hillman 2021), non-continuation is a concern for students, student support networks, universities, and the UK government itself. A direct impact of this has been the growing prominence that is attached to technology platforms such as SEAtS Software that promote student engagement and improve student retention.

This context is important in terms of the debates relating to a block curriculum design, whereby students' study one module at a time. Whilst this is an approach that has its roots in the Block Plan that was introduced by Colorado College over 50 years ago (Ashley 2021), in more recent years the focus attached to block teaching has been given renewed impetus in terms of an approach to curriculum design through the block teaching initiatives undertaken by the likes of Victoria University in Australia and the University of Suffolk in the UK. Key arguments in favour of block teaching include: improved student engagement (including attendance); and students finding it less complex to be juggling the demands of their non-student life with their studies (McKie 2022; Slevin 2021; Turner, Webb & Cotton 2021).

In some ways this is not surprising, given the timetabling implications of block delivery, where students engage with their fellow students and staff over a shorter timeframe. One potential outcome is enhancing and improving opportunities for interaction, alongside establishing connections that are critical in creating a sense of belonging (Pedler, Willis & Nieouwoudt 2022). Block teaching has benefits in enabling staff to know their students more quickly and also for records of student attendance and engagement to more clearly show levels of student engagement that might otherwise be lost when reporting across multiple modules of study.

Yet, despite these benefits, block teaching cannot and should not be viewed as the start and end of any curriculum transformation. Whilst block teaching reflects a model of curriculum delivery, it does not signal an explicitly radical pedagogical change. The very teaching via a block model does not automatically mean that students will be exposed to problem-based learning, challenge-based learning, or active learning. Instead, for this to happen the pedagogic approach for teaching delivery needs to be clearly articulated. In a similar vein, while block teaching has reported benefits for student non-attendance and lack of engagement,

this does not necessarily mean that block teaching has resolved all of the issues relating to student non-attendance. It is with this background in mind that this article examines the wider debates relating to student non-attendance, and endeavours to shed a light on some of the key issues that need to be considered in relation to discussions of block curriculum delivery. This is important given that many of the reasons for student non-attendance and non-continuation are often complex and involve structural factors.

NARRATIVES ON STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Concerns over student engagement has proved to be a fertile ground for HE researchers. Intervention efforts to reduce non-continuation have included a focus on embedding mental health in the curriculum (Houghton & Anderson 2017), and a reduction in the attainment gap between white and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students (Mcduff et al. 2018). Where research has been undertaken on this subject, focus has largely been attached to the issue of student non-attendance, with there being an implied linkage between non-attendance and non-continuation. These studies tend to draw their research participants from a representative sample of the student cohort as opposed to students with specific non-attendance records (see, e.g. Oldfield et al. 2019; Sloan et al. 2020).

Of particular concern is the issue of decreasing lecture attendance rates which, according to Kelly, 'is a significant issue in universities all around the world' (2012: 17). As Cleary-Holdsworth states, the issue 'appears to transcend country, university and discipline' (2007: 1). The main concern with lecture (and seminar/tutorial) attendance is the impact upon academic success and ultimately completion rates. For Kelly (2012), a notable concern here is the correlation between lecture attendance and: exam performance; retention rates; student engagement and satisfaction; and, faculty/staff morale. In their study on first-year students in the Bachelor of European Studies programme at Maastricht University, Bijsmans and Schakel (2018) found that attendance matters as a key determining factor in relation to student success. Merely turning up to 'attend' is, however, not the same as engagement within the classroom (Büchele 2021; Maxwell 2023). While these correlations may seem reasonably obvious to HE practitioners who can see the impact of non-attendance first hand, there is, considerable disagreement over the importance of attendance with relation to student performance (Eisen et al. 2015).

Universities have produced wide-ranging responses in the form of 'attendance policies', which range from 'draconian and punishment measures' to much more *laissez-faire* procedures (Macfarlane 2013: 359). The literature often raises the co-existing issue of how pursuing such attendance polices and collecting attendance data is linked to concerns around growing surveillance techniques, and impositions upon student autonomy (Grove 2016). For Macfarlane, 'attendance and engagement policies are part of a culture that treats university students as children rather than adults' (2013: 371).

In the UK, the high level of focus that is attached to attendance monitoring is amplified by regulatory matters relating to the reporting of international students. Many universities have increased international student recruitment in response to the impact of a decline in the real value of tuition fees. Therefore the retention of 'Tier 4 status' (the category that allows overseas students to come to the UK and study) is critical to the overall health of a UKHEI. Student attendance is also important in the context that low attendance has a demoralising impact on other attending students. This includes there being less interaction with peers, the sense of there being a 'don't care' atmosphere within the class, and a lack of attendance being viewed as being 'rude' to the teaching staff and potentially demoralising.

REASONS FOR NON-ATTENDANCE FROM PREVIOUS STUDIES

While there is a consensus in the literature on block teaching, in that it offers many potential benefits for improving student attendance and engagement, this does not necessarily imply that all of the reasons for student non-attendance will simply go away. This is an important point to note, because narratives on block teaching can all too easily report macro-level data when there is often a need (and a requirement) to look in more detail at these issues. In this

context, it is therefore imperative to explore in more detail some of the established reasons for student non-attendance.

One of the most commonly referred-to studies on student dropout is Tinto (1975), who provided a conceptual framework that stressed the importance of integration between a student's academic and social context. Thomas (2002) stresses the importance of an institutional habitus in developing holistic practice at an institutional-level. The intention is to embrace diversity and to enable students from non-traditional backgrounds not to feel isolated. Kelly (2012) (following the work of Dolnicar et al. 2009) divides the key reasons into those that are student- and university-related. However, this distinction is not as clear as it may first appear. University 'decisions' may affect students in many and unforeseen ways. Studies by Gump (2006) and Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) have found a range of reasons given by students for their non-attendance, including: tiredness; engagement in other social activities; bad weather; completing other assignments; illness; family issues; travel; and bereavement. It could also be suggested that some of the former issues may simply infer low motivation levels. Motivation is, as will be discussed, another separate and complex area for later analysis.

There is a general consensus in the literature that the need for students to secure additional income through part-time (and in some instance full-time) work has an impact on student attendance. While it might seem uncontroversial to presume negative impacts, the research is rather ambiguous. As Kelly (2012) shows, a range of studies have found conflicting data (Massingham & Herrington 2006; Delaney et al. 2007). Sloan et al. (2020) reported that there was no difference in attendance rates between those students who worked and those who did not. Working beyond 20 hours does seem to show significant negative impacts (Delaney et al. 2007). However, the issue of working commitments is likely not to be just about clashes with timetabled classes, but rather about the capacity to undertake the necessary reading to prepare for classes and to succeed in their studies (Oldfield et al. 2019: 448).

A second area of concern is timetabling where research indicates that students often make judgements about attendance on particular days of the week, as opposed to say a morning or afternoon class. Kelly discusses the work of Timins and Kaliszer (2016: 16) who found, 'absenteeism on Mondays and Fridays accounted for more than half of absenteeism episodes in a group of third year student nurses'. Khong et al (2016) found that 39.5% of students agreed/ strongly agreed that non-attendance is connected to the lecture being held on a Friday. Kelly's (2012) study which looked at this issue in some detail found that there seemed to be little difference between morning and afternoon attendance rates. Rather it is the day which seems more important. Fridays, in particular showed 'very poor attendance' with Mondays being the best (ibid.: 30).

Scheduling only one class in a day does appear to have a negative impact on attendance, with Sloan et al. (2020: 2213) concluding that 'it is the pattern of delivery not the total amount of contact hours that impacts on attendance'. This is a point that is equally made by Moores, Birdi and Higson (2019: 379), who note that 'efforts could be made to decrease long gaps between classes and to avoid single events on one day'. Timetabling is therefore an issue that appears to be particularly important in the context of arguments relating to block teaching given that student non-attendance has been shown to be negatively impacted by competing pressures outside of university. In this regard block teaching accepts that the study of multiple classes at one time can often lead to a student's timetable being spread out in a way that often does not reflect the pressures and demands on their lifestyles, from caring responsibilities, commuting to classes, and part-time work.

A third concern is the accessibility of the university and transport issues. This is a rather complex area. Kelly (2012) concentrates upon the impact of living in very close proximity to the university on attendance, while other research has looked at impacts of long-distance travel. In their study of student attendance rates among paramedicine students, Beovich and Williams also stress that transport is a significant factor for many students in affecting their ability to attend class (2021: 4). There is a general consensus in the literature that students who live on or near campus, particularly in their initial year(s) of study, are more likely to develop stronger commitment to their studies and also to their university. The literature also notes that commuting can disproportionately impact BAME students (Smith 2018). In this regard, block teaching not only has the ability to enable students to have a greater sense of campus

presence by enabling them to structure their week more easily around their studies, it also has the potential to have a positive impact in closing the BAME attainment gap by minimising the impact of commuting (Maguire & Morris 2018: 7–8).

A fourth area is socio-economic issues. Anders (2012) has looked specifically at the role of household income and how this affects the desirability to actually go to university and one's attitudes whilst there. In broad terms, higher income backgrounds create a more reified sense of attending university and completing studies as 'normal'. Aina et al. (2022) have also highlighted the socio-economic impact in relation to the factors that impact on student drop out. They highlight that students may revisit their reasons for studying based on a cost-benefit analysis of their expectations of the programme of study alongside their likely post-graduate career path. Studies also indicate the impact of personal commitments, with students in the above studies reporting a range of personal issues such as family and relationship commitments that affect their ability to attend.

A fifth concern relates to gender, although limited work has been directed at this. Both Kirby and McElroy (2003) and Kelly (2012) found no difference in relation to gender with regards to attendance. However, within this, Kelly does report specific themes, including female students living on campus being more likely to attend than males. Kelly (2012: 31) also discusses the work of Delaney et al. (2007) who found that men (in Ireland) experienced higher levels of adjustment difficulties than woman in the early stages of university/college, which in turn affected attendance rates.

A sixth area is environmental. Gump (2006), Kelly (2012) and Khong et al. (2016) found that the state of the weather could significantly affect student decisions to attend. However, other factors such as low motivation, as Moore, Armstrong and Pearson (2008) discuss (cited in Kelly 2012) could be the underlying factor for such 'excuses' and inertia.

A final, but important concern, is lecture quality. Numerous studies (Kelly 2012; Massingham & Herrington 2006; Oldfield et al. 2019) cite the quality of the teaching/lecture as a factor commonly raised by students as a reason for their non-attendance. Dolnicar (2005) argues that self-funding students are more likely to attend in order to get 'value for money'. However, by contemporary standards, this would seem open to debate. Related to this is the issue of the impact of the use of recording of lectures through the impact of lecture capture technology, where concerns are often raised that the recording of lectures has a negative impact on student attendance and academic outcomes (Edwards & Clinton 2019) Whilst the introduction of the recording of lectures has been acknowledged to be particularly beneficial to disabled students, some studies have indicated that students perform better when attending a live lecture rather than simply accessing teaching via a recording (Varao-Sousa & Kingstone 2015). The general consensus in the literature is that lecture recordings are an important benefit which enhance the student experience, and that concerns about the negative impact of recorded lectures are more anecdotal given that many studies have produced inconsistent findings (Havergal 2015; Nordmann et al. 2019).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In considering issues that impact on student on-attendance, it should not be forgotten that HEIs need not only to attract students to class, but also to keep their attention once there. One of the fundamental arguments in favour of block teaching is that it creates a curriculum framework that itself enables students to study one subject at a time, thereby creating a focused study environment (Buck & Tyrrell 2022). In this, students are not faced with the complexity of juggling multiple classes at one time.

Whilst block teaching can be viewed as being central to creating an enabling curriculum framework, it is nonetheless the case that a primary issue for all teaching staff is that of creating an environment where students are actually wanting to turn up. What is then 'done' with them is another issue. Ultimately, the basis of this is better data to understand their reasons and motivations. As Trotter and Roberts (2006) have argued, understanding the background to early disengagement is vital. A deeper understanding of the 'lived experience' of the student and a more intersectional approach to the structural issues affecting them seems essential to our concerns. The beginnings of this approach have already been broached with Blair's

study (2017). This, for instance, concluded with the importance of greater understanding of the student's transitional experience to first-year study and how this can then affect success outcomes. Therefore, data collection of how individuals are behaving within their first year becomes essential.

Many universities are collecting data as a way to check student attainment. Swain (2013) discusses how a scheme at the University of Huddersfield discovered that students who did not use the library were seven times more likely to withdraw from their degree than those who were regular users. Shaw (2015) highlighted a project run by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) that measured library use, card swipes for access to buildings, VLE use and electronic submission of work, as a data-focused way to assess student engagement and subsequent progression/retention. It was found that low levels of engagement in these areas correlated with low performance levels at year 2. The NTU study raised important issues in relation to an intersectional approach to attendance issues. Ed Foster, who was running the NTU project noted how they discovered 'that if you're from a BAME or low socio-economic background, then participating is a far more important factor in your progression' (cited in Tickle 2015).

What is apparent from such studies is the importance of sustained interventions, including:

1. transitional intervention work to identify potentially vulnerable students based on background factors;
2. providing a much more detailed early term programme to prepare students and build relationships with staff;
3. the identification of early trigger points in modules and offer more proactive support for these;
4. the increasing use and dissemination of data collection, to identify early problems and to intervene even more quickly;
5. the use of predictive modelling will help to identify and then support vulnerable students; and,
6. maintaining relationships with students identified as vulnerable, with appropriately trained staff taking on the role of mentors.

What is particularly apparent from these approaches is the focus that is attached to engaging students at an earlier stage in their studies through helping them to build relationships with their peers, their tutors and the university as a whole. These are important points which are aligned to the arguments behind a block curriculum, because they reflect the desire and need to engage with students in a sustained way as well as providing more proactive support. Such sustainable and proactive engagement can be more complicated when teaching is delivered across a number of modules at any one time, and where the overall picture of an individual student's level of engagement can be harder to understand at an early stage of their studies.

In this regard the need for early and effective intervention is a compelling issue for responding to the challenge of student non-engagement. These recommendations contrast with those of Sloan et al. (2020), which focus on the control side of the lecture environment. These include the use of registers, reviewing lecture content, assessment deadlines, timetabling, and even providing incentives for student attendance through the use of marks. In a similar vein, Lucey and Grydaki (2023) also emphasise the importance of so-called control initiatives, in the form of an incentive scheme that rewarded seminar attendance. This had a positive impact on attendance and academic performance. Whilst we recognise the importance of institutional strategies relating to the so-called control side, we equally consider that universities need to do better at using data. This would help to predict longer-term trends and to identify vulnerable students, where pre-crisis intervention work could be carried out.

CONCLUSION

The question that all universities need to be asking is whether (and not why) can they build a 'predictive' system that responds to issues of student engagement and non-engagement? Tickle (2015) discusses the pre-entry work done at Brockenhurst College where data analysis is used to create a tailored learning package for each student, based upon geo-social background,

previous qualifications and other key factors. This allows the College to better understand individual learning styles and also support staff to assist the student more successfully.

Within the UK, a more extensive example of predictive work can be seen at the Open University (OU). The OU Analyse Project (Kuzilek et al. 2015) aimed to provide early prediction of at-risk students based on their demographic data and how they interact with the VLE. Kuzilek et al. (2015: 1) found 'The precision of the predictions increased from about 50% at the beginning of the semester to more than 90% at the end'. The underlying idea was to create a 'dashboard' to allow the module teams to have access to the most up-to-date predictions for identifying at-risk students, using machine learning techniques and student activity data. Predictions of at-risk students also help the student support teams to focus the interventions onto the specific needs of each individual. As Wolff et al. (2014) have argued, predicting failure is very important to support students who would otherwise 'disappear' with targeted additional support.

It is, however, important that interventions cannot be 'passive'. Large numbers of emails or links to helpful sites, alongside relevant support, are often ignored by student due to their passivity. Our argument is that HEIs must focus more on active interventions, created by a timely interpretation of data which alerts the university to the student. We recognise that technological advances such as the use of Artificial Intelligence-powered Chatbots and intelligent agents, for instance within virtual learning environments, enable important and timely communications that include prompts to assignment non-submissions. However, we equally argue that interventions to support student engagement need to be 'human', given the need for an inclusive student experience that is underpinned by an intersectional approach which reflects the needs of different student groups.

In setting out the above points, we consider that block teaching needs to be considered as part of a broader teaching strategy that recognises the importance of following a genuinely intersectional approach which is data informed. This includes, first, grasping students' increasingly diverse backgrounds and how they fit within the existing HE framework. Second, it requires more 'joined up' thinking in relation to providing support and guidance to students from academics who are resourced and trained to do it. Such guidance would partly take the form, as Blair (2017) raises, of: successful navigation around the digital environment; developing academic literacy; creating social engagement opportunities; and, being trained in how to use feedback effectively. Ultimately, following Wittel (2018), it is important that we see HE as part of a 'gift' to society, a common good. This gift can be seen as a transformative action rather than simply a turn to an educational consumer action. In this sense, we consider that HE must avoid the stifling dialectic of the student-customer/teacher-facilitator where quality is replaced by quantification.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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