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Towards Improving Class Attendance in Higher Education: A Case Study of a University of Technology in South Africa

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Abstract. The relationship between absenteeism and academic performance in the higher education environment is extensively documented. In the South African context, this was exacerbated by the institution of emergency measures at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and followed by hybrid adoption in the post-pandemic context. This study, relying on the views of sixteen academics from a university of technology in South Africa, explores the pandemic era considerations by examining pre-, during, and post-pandemic class attendance trends. By adopting a thematic lens, the study's outcomes highlighted a high prevalence trend in class non-attendance numbers from the academics' viewpoint. Nevertheless, the relationship between attendance figures and students' performance was disproportionate as the academics witnessed slight differences in the performance levels of various categories of students, even in the context of the pandemic, a nuanced suggestion that certain pandemic-related interventions such as lecture recording could have been positively received. The study proposes strategies for potential implementation and suggests recommendations while advancing future research pathways.

Keywords: student success; class attendance; absenteeism; teaching and learning; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Skipping scheduled classes has been noted as a prevalent practice, trend and pattern in higher education and a major source of growing concern for university instructors (Oldfield et al., 2018; Sekiwu et al., 2020). Non-attendance and/or irregular attendance has been shown to negatively affect students and faculty (Landin & Perez, 2015; Sloan et al., 2020). While there are studies suggesting that this is an increasing phenomenon (Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Van

Schalkwyk et al., 2010), other evidence seems to point in the direction that this is an age-old problem (Web et al., 2007; Rodgers, 2001).

South Africa, like the rest of the global higher education landscape, has had to contend with the challenges of irregular and even non-attendance of lectures and its resultant multi-faceted impacts (Mukorera & Nyatanga, 2017; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010; Swanepoel et al., 2021). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant regulations meant that more resources had to be channelled to support students and their instructors as they adapted to the new teaching and learning approaches. Such support entailed, among other interventions, ensuring that students and instructors were adequately resourced with equipment (e.g., computers, laptops), data, and the necessary capacitation for the online learning approach. It also meant that both the educator and learner had to adjust to allow for the academic project to be delivered. Despite the support provided by institutions, some existing challenges were still noticeable. These included those issues faced by students who could not cope with the new way of teaching and learning delivery, which exacerbated the already noticeable impact of poor attendance in the prevalent virtual spaces even before the pandemic.

Despite its value in enhancing academic performance, class attendance continues to be a major concern in the higher education context in South Africa (Sekiwu et al., 2020; Katoch et al., 2022). Given the multitude and multifaceted nature of challenges within the South African higher education sector, which were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, irregular and sometimes non-attendance at lectures heightened. Despite implementing several institutional interventions to enhance student achievement and throughput, the problem persists at most academic institutions. Such concerns have been met with ongoing debates among scholars to remedy this challenge. Hence, the current study seeks to examine irregular class attendance or absenteeism and its impact on student performance so that empirically based solutions to addressing this are proposed. In completing this study, the views of academic instructors within a selected faculty of a university of technology in the Western Cape province in South Africa were utilised to assess the impact of irregular class attendance aimed at improving student performance.

Although the availability of extensive literature on student attendance and performance from a global perspective, several of these studies (e.g., Gottfried, 2010; Chou et al., 2012; Landin & Pérez, 2015; Fadelelmoula, 2018; Sekiwu et al., 2020) have mostly relied on the available reports (student attendance registers and grade reports) without engaging academics to understand to gauge the extent of the phenomenon. Thus, this presents a knowledge gap, prompting the researchers to obtain insights into absenteeism, its impact on student performance and empirically based propositions from a university of technology context in South Africa. Given the longstanding nature of irregular and non-attendance challenges, and with contributory exacerbation by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes critical to garner the outcomes of this study and provide insights into how academics and higher learning institutions could advance scholarship in the context of such challenges. With hybridity being proffered as an alternative to pre- and post-pandemic approaches, this study in the University of Technology

context could pioneer best practices to enhance student performance. The study, therefore, examined irregular class attendance or absenteeism and its impact on student success so that empirically based solutions to addressing this are proposed. In doing this, the study reviews irregular class attendance phenomenon during various COVID-19 periods and mechanisms for improving class attendance at the University of Technology in South Africa.

2. Literature Review

Class attendance entails regular student participation and engagement with learning and teaching activities (Gottfried, 2010). By attending planned class sessions regularly, students can access consistent educational support, which helps enhance educational achievement and success (Oghuvbu, 2010; Sekiwu et al., 2020). In addition, when students consistently attend most classes and engage in their learning activities, they are hypothesised to achieve academic excellence (Roby, 2004; Fleming, 2008). However, Black et al. (2014) emphasise that class attendance, including visibility/engagement with live virtual sessions, can be reinforced through academic instructors' guidance and family or guardians or friends' support that comes through continuous encouragement.

Debates around class attendance have dominated higher education platforms. As previously noted, while researchers such as Massingham and Herrington (2006) note a worrying and increasing trend of irregular class attendance, Rodgers (2001) sees this as an age-old concern. Much research on this topic, however, has been directed toward a link between class attendance and student performance (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010; AbuRuz, 2015; Karnik et al., 2020) as well as the factors contributing to irregular class attendance (Friedman et al., 2001; Moore, 2004; Marburger, 2006; Newman-Ford et al., 2008). Literature has shown that context, such as the academic environment, affects student attendance in several ways (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010; Moores et al., 2019). In addition, a plethora of research studies have examined poor attendance and absenteeism, highlighting several reasons for this, such as the non-avoidable and inevitable issues such as family emergencies and illness (Grabe, 2005; Traphagan et al., 2010). Some academic institutions have used ways such as instituting compulsory attendance policy (Reyes, 2020), assigning marks for attending a certain percentage of classes for the course, academic instructors support to enhance their teaching (Cheruvalath, 2017), and many more interventions to induce regular class attendance to improve academic performance. Interestingly, and unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 context began to gain traction (Iwu et al., 2022), thus presenting new learnings, opportunities, and challenges for academics.

2.1 Towards Improving Class Attendance

Various strategies can be implemented to improve class attendance. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by creating a welcoming and engaging academic environment (Hamlin, 2021). This can be achieved by establishing a comfortable learning and teaching environment, which could involve offering engaging academic activities (Bukoye & Shegunshi, 2016) and providing challenging tasks (Price, 2015), allowing students to think and feel great after successfully completing such tasks. Student engagement programs focusing on managing emotions or regulating behaviour can be used to address students'

underlying challenges (Cohen et al., 2021). Mentorship can also be an effective intervention for students with persistent absenteeism (Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). Senior students and even peers can work with the support of academic instructors to build stronger connections with students, thereby helping particularly the at-risk students who seem to show a higher sporadic class attendance (Masehela & Mabika, 2017; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023).

Developing a student class attendance policy has also been implemented at some institutions and helped enforce attendance (Syahrin et al., 2021). Such policies usually stipulate the minimum attendance or maximum possible excused absence the course or academic program allows. An example is the University of Cape Town in South Africa, where the postgraduate diploma in higher education studies requires students to have at least 80% attendance to be considered competent for the qualification. Other institutions would indicate explicitly how they handle unexcused absences, highlighting the steps to correct chronically absent students and actions to take when a student violates the institution or faculty attendance policy (Credé et al., 2010; Syahrin et al., 2021). Reward points for students who regularly attend and do not miss classes can also be included to encourage frequent class attendance (Visaria et al., 2016). Creating healthy student competition for the highest or most improved attendance could also enhance class attendance (Tarabichi et al., 2018). This could be executed by creating reward systems for those learners with the highest attendance and using class bulletin boards to list students' names, especially those with improved and good attendance (Abonyi & Sofo, 2021).

2.2 The Relationship Between Class Attendance and Student Performance

Class attendance has been shown to correlate positively with student performance (Credé et al., 2010; Orazem & Gunnarsson, 2003; Wu & Zhang, 2023). A plethora of evidence has revealed that regular class attendance is associated with higher course grades, especially in courses with technical and practical subject matter (Terrin & Triventi, 2023; Newman-Ford et al., 2008; Wu & Zhang, 2023). Regular class attendance correlates strongly with course grades, stronger than motivation (Kim et al., 2020). However, the relationship between class attendance and student success is not uniform, and in some circumstances, class attendance may not always lead to improved course grades (Kwak et al., 2019). For instance, some studies found that class attendance does not always significantly affect student performance, especially where an option to watch the lectures in video online is available (Credé et al., 2010; Martínez-Carrascal et al., 2020). Another study revealed that the correlation between attendance and course grades was weak in second and third-year courses on engineering economy and construction management until a threshold of 30% absences was met (Fadelelmoula, 2018). While regular class attendance is generally associated with higher course grades, the relationship between class attendance and student success is complex and depends on various factors such as the instructor (teaching style), subject matter, the student's background, and the mode of instruction (Bukoye & Shegunshi, 2016; Chou & Kuo, 2012; Noor et al., 2020).

2.3 The Impact of COVID-19 on Class Attendance

The COVID-19 pandemic impinged notable devastation on both learners and academics because of the profound disruption of the traditional patterns of learning and teaching (Jewel, 2024). Such effects engendered a significant impact on class attendance globally. As governments and educational institutions grappled with the challenges posed by the virus, various measures were implemented to curb its spread (Mncube et al., 2021; Ramola, 2021), and these measures, in turn, had substantial consequences on students' ability to attend classes physically.

In response to the pandemic, several academic institutions primarily adopted virtual or remote approaches, where most academic activities (learning, teaching, and assessment) moved to online platforms (Jewel, 2024). Moving academic activities to the virtual mode was an intervention aimed at minimising the risk of virus transmission and also ensured the respect of social distancing guidelines. While this move was crucial to ensure the safety of people (students, support, and academic staff), it presented a myriad of challenges relating to class attendance (Betthäuser et al., 2023; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). The digital divide emerged as a major obstacle, with not all students having equal access to resources that would enable sufficient and efficient learning, such as technology, gadgets/devices (e.g., computer/laptop, smartphone, tablets, etc.), and a conducive environment for effective learning and a stable internet connection. Students from underprivileged backgrounds faced difficulties acquiring the necessary devices and reliable internet access, leading to disparities in attendance (Jewel, 2024).

The shift to online learning presented additional requirements, such as involving a certain level of technological proficiency, and students who were unfamiliar with digital tools faced additional barriers to regular class participation (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Moreover, the lack of face-to-face interaction and the physical separation from the traditional classroom environment affected several students' engagement and motivation (Salta et al., 2022). The absence of direct lecturer-student and inter-student interactions presented challenges for maintaining productive engagement, focus and discipline. The blurred boundaries between home and academic life also contributed to a sense of isolation and reduced accountability, further impacting attendance rates.

In addition to technology-related challenges (e.g., losing connections, resources unavailability and proficiency) and motivation, the pandemic-induced disruptions had psychological and emotional repercussions on students (Siegel et al., 2024). The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic crisis, concerns about family members, and the overall stress of the situation contributed to increased levels of anxiety and mental health issues. These factors, in turn, influenced students' ability to attend and participate in virtual classes consistently.

It is important to note that the impact of COVID-19 on class attendance varied across countries, educational institutions, and educational levels. While some students effectively adapted to the remote learning modality, others faced considerable hurdles. As schools gradually adapted to the evolving situation and reopened their doors once the mobility restrictions related to the pandemic's

regulations were suspended, hybrid education models emerged, combining the in-person and online components. However, challenges such as ongoing health concerns, logistical issues, and the need for continued flexibility continued to shape attendance patterns in the post-pandemic higher education landscape.

3. Theoretical Framework

Since the current study delves into understanding an undesirable student behaviour of irregular class attendance within higher education, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was deemed appropriate to direct the study. The SCT emphasised the role of observational learning, imitation, and modelling in shaping students' class attendance behaviour (Bandura, 1986). More precisely, the theory explains how people learn and develop through interacting with the environment. It posits that human behaviour is shaped by three factors: personal, environmental, and behavioural (Nickerson, 2022). This theory was applied in the study to understand how students' behaviour (mainly non-attendance) is influenced by social factors and institutional response to the marauding health hazard. According to the SCT, students' behaviour is usually influenced by their self-efficacy, whereby those with high self-efficacy are more likely to regularly attend classes and exhibit better performance (Cherry, 2022; Ilmiani et al., 2021), unlike those with low self-efficacy. Applying the SCT to the current study provided a theoretical lens to understand the dynamic interactions between academic staff, students and institutional interventions and responses during the pandemic. It allowed for a nuanced exploration of the social factors influencing class attendance and academic performance in higher education settings.

4. Research Design and Methodology

A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs (metaphysics) that deal with the ultimate or first principles (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Based on the nature of the current study, the constructivist research paradigms were adopted. A constructivist approach depends on the study's transactional and subjectivity and indicates that the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the findings can be created as the investigation proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). With the constructivist research position, the researchers believed that knowledge or phenomena could be better understood through social interaction between the researcher and the researched, leading to theory creation (Adom et al., 2016). In the current study, the researchers constructed their own understanding and knowledge of the world through "experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences" (Adom et al., 2016, p.1). The researchers, therefore, conducted interactive sessions with academic instructors who had experienced pre-, during and post-COVID-19 teaching and learning activities to gauge their perspectives on students' attendance versus performance-related constructs. A non-probability sampling technique using convenience and purposive sampling methods was implemented in this study (Acharya et al., 2013). Those academics who could participate in the study and meet the inclusion criteria were approached for potential participation.

A qualitative research approach was adopted in the current study, relying on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 academics from a selected university of technology in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Before the interviews

were conducted, consent was requested from the participants, and the preferred interview location or platform was agreed upon. Since the study was conducted during a time when most academic activities were still virtual, thus making almost all the participants (13) opted for the virtual platforms (Microsoft Team and Zoom), while the other three requested to be interviewed physically in their offices. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) in their study revealed that interviews conducted virtually usually do not produce significantly different results from those obtained from physical or in person interviews. Only academic staff in the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences (FBMS), the largest faculty at the chosen university, who had the pre-, during and post-pandemic teaching and learning experience were purposively sampled to participate in the study. The interviews took between 25 to 30 minutes of each participant's time, and with their approval, all the responses were digitally recorded and later manually transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researchers strived to ensure the reliability and validity of the study data by frequently checking the transcripts and comparing them with the voice recordings.

This study complied with all the ethical requirements, which included obtaining permission from the relevant line managers in the selected faculty and, most importantly, getting approval from the institution's ethics committee (Fundani Research Ethics Committee - FREC Reference Number: 0605/2023). The gathered data were analysed using the constant comparative analysis method whereby the study findings and explanations provided by the study participants were compared and discussed in relation to the extant literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

5. Results and Discussions

This section presents the study findings and data analysis. The study results derived from the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1) with the academicians in the faculty revealed several themes, which are discussed under the following headings: general class attendance; class attendance pre-, during and post-pandemic era; and towards improving class attendance. In each of the above aspects, key themes were identified and discussed with the relevant quotations provided to enhance and further support the presented claims.

In trying to better understand the study results, the researchers found it imperative to provide a comprehensive description of the participants, thereby giving additional information that could aid in the interpretation of the findings (Muresherwa et al., 2022). As a result, the researchers initiated the process by selecting academic participants denoted by the letter R, who exhibited the requisite and practical attributes to furnish the information necessary to accomplish the study's objective. Table 1 presents the profile of the study participants, the departments from which they were selected, their duration of working in their respective departments, their highest qualification, and information about whether they were undertaking further studies. Thereafter, the themes that emerged from the sixteen semi-structured interviews were analysed.

Table 1: Study participants' profile information

Participant Number	Gender	Department where participant is from	Duration in department	Highest Qualification	Currently Studying
R1	Female	Tourism & Events Management	14 years	Masters	Yes
R2	Female	Tourism & Events Management	10 years	Masters	Yes
R3	Male	Tourism & Events Management	6 years	Masters	Yes
R4	Female	Tourism & Events Management	7 months	PhD	Yes
R5	Female	Sport Management	6 years	Masters	Yes
R6	Male	Tourism & Events Management	5 years	Masters	Yes
R7	Female	Hospitality Management	4 years 3 months	Masters	Yes
R8	Male	Marketing	5 years	Masters	Yes
R9	Male	Tourism & Events Management	7 years	Masters	Yes
R10	Male	Tourism & Events Management	8 years	PhD	No
R11	Male	Tourism & Events Management	6 years	Masters	Yes
R12	Female	Tourism & Events Management	1 year 3 months	Masters	Yes
R13	Female	Entrepreneurship Management	5 years	Masters	Yes
R14	Female	Tourism & Events Management	11 years	Masters	No
R15	Male	Human Resource Management	7 years	Masters	Yes
R16	Female	Tourism & Events Management	11 years	PhD	No

Source: Authors' Construction

As shown in Table 1, more women (56.3%) than men (43.7%) participated in the study, with a large number coming from the Tourism & Events Management Department (11 academics). The other departments with only one participating staff member were Sports Management, Hospitality Management, Marketing, Entrepreneurship Management and Human Resource Management. The time periods of serving in the departments ranged from new staff with seven months [R4] to the longest-serving academic instructor with 14 years [R1]. It is important to note that those with the shortest duration in the departments were considered in this study since they had pre-pandemic academic instruction experience from other departments, faculties or institutions where they were previously stationed. However, most participants, except for R4 and R12, had the pre-, during and post-pandemic academic and considerate instruction experience in their respective departments. The study results also showed that all participants had at least a master's degree, with R4, R10 and R16 possessing PhD qualifications.

5.1 General Class Attendance

To determine attendance levels in the modules taught by the study participants, the academic instructors were asked to indicate how student attendance was in their modules. The responses to this question were mostly similar, with almost all participants describing attendance as 'poor', 'unpleasant', 'concerning', and 'discouraging'. While most participants found attendance in their modules disturbing, some differed and described attendance as pleasant, as described by R8, who remarked, "… on average, *I have 200 to 300 students per module that I teach, which is pleasant*." In describing how poor attendance in his classes, R4 indicated, "*only about 10% of students attend classes, so I can say it is poor and unpleasant*", which is concerning, especially given that the primary academic engagement of instructors' was to provide learning and teaching services to students (Wang et al., 2021). Table 2 provides a culled selection of nine quotations from the study participants, providing an overview of general class attendance in their modules.

Table 2: Excerpts from the study participants: General class attendance

Number	Quotations on the current data
1	"*Discouraging, with most students not attending classes*" [R1]
2	"*It's bad, it's poor …*" [R16]
3	"*Poor, I rarely achieve 50% attendance in the physical classes; however with virtual sessions, the numbers fluctuate and difficult to get an indication of whether the students are concentrating or not*" [R2]
4	"*It's usually poor, very low due to load-shedding and lack of internet …*" [R15]
5	"*Fair but not as expected; I rarely have 50% of class attendance*" [R5]
6	"*… usually, only half of my students attend classes*" [R6]
7	"*… attendance is low or average in some subjects; I always have very low numbers …* [R2]
8	"*First-year students are the ones attending more than the 3rd year. I would roughly say 3rd attendance is normally +-50%, compared to +-80% of 1st years attendance*" [R12]
9	"*… currently poor… Student absenteeism is of great concern since it can lead to students' failure, poor performance or dropouts*" [R9]

Source: Study Data (2023)

Most study participants were concerned about sporadic class attendance, with more than half of students not showing up to both the in-person (face-to-face/physical) and virtual classrooms. Poor class attendance among higher education students continues to be a prevalent issue with significant implications for academic performance and overall success. Irregular class attendance has been noted as a perennial issue and trend that continues to dominate academic debates (Mokhtari et al., 2021; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010). Thus, highlighting the need to design practical solutions which could be implemented to address this challenge.

5.2 Class Attendance pre-, during and post-pandemic Era

Most of the academics who participated in the study possessed pre-, during and post-pandemic learning and teaching experience. Despite some participants indicating that they joined their institution and their current departments during the COVID-19 era (e.g., R4, R6 and R12), they further noted that they had teaching and learning experiences from the institutions they previously worked at. The study participants were asked to provide an overview of what class attendance was like during the different time periods of the pandemic. In addition, they were also requested to indicate the reasons for irregular or poor class attendance during the pre-, during and post-pandemic periods. The discussions revealed that absenteeism had been an issue even before the COVID-19 period, however, during the pandemic era, its impact had magnified the problem with several students not attending. There was general agreement among the participants' views that the pre-pandemic period had better class attendance compared to the time when most learning was moved to online platforms. The post-pandemic period, coupled with a return to face-to-face instruction modality, was noted as witnessing better attendance than the period when COVID-19 was at its peak (March 2020 – end of 2022). To show how the study participants viewed the different periods, the following selected quotations provide an overview of class attendance in the different time periods:

> "Before COVID-19, students would bunk classes, the usual culture of students … during face-to-face [pre-pandemic], academic staff used to use registers to record students' attendance, and students being aware of this, would attend. Unlike during COVID-19, there were several issues, such as not having data, not having Wi-Fi, a network, or electricity (online learning). There is also loafing, where students are available but not available; you call their names, but no one is responding …" [R4].

> "COVID-19 made it challenging to have in-person class attendance, and all T&L activities shifted to virtual. The number of students who attended was higher than during the pre-COVID-19 period. In the pre-COVID-19 period, in 2019, I had two classes offered in the evening running from 5 pm to 9.30 pm, and students would only attend the early evening sessions and would not wait longer due to transport issues and their safety" [R3].

> "Before Covid, Non-resident students [those staying in private accommodation] would come late to school or leave earlier, hence absconding some classes …" [R16].

The discussions with the academic staff further underscored that students have always been skipping classes, even before COVID-19, with class attendance becoming extremely low during COVID-19. The pre-pandemic period saw many more students attending classes, and this changed during COVID-19 when attendance became erratic at times, some participants indicated the numbers of students attending their sessions, "… *at times you would even have only 5/50 students attend an online class*" [R7]. Also echoing R3's sentiments of poor attendance, especially with late time slots, as exclaimed "… *students would attend classes which are in the later time slots such as 10:00 - 14:00 anything before or after also results in a low attendance in class*" [R2]. Having presented what class attendance was like in the different time periods of the pandemic, the researchers probed to ascertain the reasons for irregular class attendance. The responses to this are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Reasons for not attending classes pre-, during and post-pandemic era.

Pre-COVID period (< Mar 2020) – in-person attendance	During COVID (Mar 2020 – Dec 2022) – virtual attendance	Post-pandemic period (>2023) – hybrid method (both virtual and F2F)
Safety (late classes)	Loadshedding	Loadshedding
Transport challenges	Lack of Gadgets (computer)	Transport challenges, safety
Lack of Motivation	Lack of Motivation	Lack of Motivation
Financial reasons	Wi-Fi challenges, data	Wi-Fi challenges
Protests (Taxi and political)	Home environment	Home environment
Work (employed)	Work (employed)	Work (employed), financial reasons
Sickness/illness	Sickness/illness	Lack of Gadgets (computer)
Lack of interest	Recorded sessions	Recorded sessions

Source: Study Data (2023)

Regarding reasons for class absenteeism, several themes emerged. Transport challenges and safety issues contributed to sporadic class attendance, as exclaimed by R3, who revealed that evening classes had higher absence, unlike the early sessions, "… late evening classes, especially those running after 8 pm were not favoured *due to transport challenges*." Also sharing the same view, two participants in their explanations provided a volley of reasons causing poor class attendance:

> "Although a shuttle service is available to major transport hubs, they do not enter townships and some areas which seemed risky (high crime) so students would quickly pick up their stuff and leave to get public transport that takes them into their communities. Another reason for not attending classes was work; some students are working, and their shifts may not allow them to attend classes. Other reasons included sickness on the part of the student and, at times, close family members. At times, family rituals (traditional), I recall, I had three students who reported that

> they could not attend classes due to traditional ceremonies such as having a cultural calling (to become S*angomas* - traditional healers and herbalists) … "[R3]

> "… due to work reasons, some students are working, and their shifts sometimes would not allow them to come on time to attend classes. Other reasons included sickness on the part of the student and, at times, close family members. At times, family traditional rituals may cause students to miss classes; I recall that I had three students who reported that they could not attend classes due to traditional ceremonies and rituals which were conducted. One had a calling to become a *Sangoma* (traditional healer or herbalist), and others would go to the mountain for initiation …" [R3].

The issue of transport was most prevalent in the pre- and post-pandemic era, where most learning required in-person attendance. The university has shuttle services, which, however, do not extend services into township areas where a considerable number of the students come from, thereby adding to the problem of non-attendance by students coming from areas where the shuttle does not service. In Cape Town, most public transport, particularly the commuter omnibus, which gets into most communities, including townships, end their service around 8 pm or increase the fare during late hours. With reportedly high crime rates in the province and the city (Western Cape Gov, 2022), students consider it unsafe to be outside during late hours, resulting in poor class attendance in late classes. In the pre- and post-pandemic period, more reasons emanating from the study included 'lack of motivation', 'lack of interest', and 'financial reasons'. Protests and public transport strikes, which sometimes turn violent (Bick, 2019), also contributed to absenteeism, reverberating in the study findings.

During the COVID-19 period, students had the opportunity to attend live classes and tutorial sessions virtually through the Blackboard Learner Management System (BLMS). Most of the reasons shared for absenteeism were related to technological challenges, including unavailability of gadgets or equipment that allow participation in learning activities, poor connectivity (Wi-Fi and data) and a home environment not conducive to learning. The other challenges of remote learning that relate to attendance have been aptly captured by Marongwe and Garidzirai (2021), and these were expressed in the current study by participant R4, who exclaimed, "*…there is also loafing, where students are available but not available, you call their names, but no one is responding*" denoting being 'together but not together.' Also, students being aware that all sessions are recorded and uploaded on the BLMS made them reluctant to attend live sessions, as expressed in the following quotation:

> "If students know that the session is recorded, they would not be motivated to attend classes since they can access the material online. There is the comfort of being able to access recorded session later" (R16)

The ongoing challenge of load-shedding (a phenomenon instituted by South Africa's main electricity provider, ESKOM, whereby power supply is rationed throughout the day by cutting off specific areas from the grid at specific planned

periods to avoid a total blackout) also contributed to irregular class attendance and was primarily predominant during and post-COVID-19 periods. Loadshedding's impact on higher education has been captured in Asgher and Hanif's (2021) study, causing students and learners to be offline, another reason for absenteeism, and this came out prominently in the current study with the participants highlighting that students were not attending classes because of "*lack of data and load-shedding issues in South Africa as classes are hybrid*" [R15]. The other reason expressed included "*students are working full-time jobs in the daytime …, many have not returned to Cape Town for university*" [R6] and are not available for either the virtual or hybrid classes. The institution's decision to keep teaching and learning activities on virtual platforms allowed students to continue their studies in different locations. However, from the beginning of 2022, some cohorts of students, particularly first-years and selected courses, had to be back on campus for face-to-face classes, which were planned fortnightly. However, this saw several students reluctant to return because of challenges such as securing accommodation in Cape Town and being used to the new learning modality. One participant highlighted a reason why some students never came back to Cape Town, hence exacerbating absenteeism:

> "… during the pandemic outbreak, all students were requested to vacate their residences and return home. While home, some of the senior students whose lectures were mostly held after hours [5.15 pm – 9.30 pm] found employment during the day, which helped them alleviate financial challenges. When Covid regulations were eased, it became difficult to get everyone back on campus, and because of the institution of hybrid options, these students would rather continue working and rely on the recorded lessons" [R10].

The above pandemic scenario that presented several challenges to students and academic institutions has been reported by Birmingham et al. (2023). Relocation to other areas due to university closure created unplanned changes in students' living conditions, some of which were not convenient for learning to continue uninterrupted. Consequently, some students lost contact with their peers and academic instructors and even missed planned virtual sessions.

5.3 Class Attendance and its Impact on Students' Performance

The researchers also wanted to understand how class attendance affects performance, drawing from academics perspectives. The results were almost similar, with only variations in how it was expressed by the academic staff. There was general agreement in the responses that attending classes was crucial for success, with most participants highlighting that it enhances understanding and that students who regularly attend are more likely to perform better than those who regularly abscond classes. This finding aligned with literature highlighting high success rates in those who attend classes (see Kim et al., 2020; Orazem & Gunnarsson, 2003; Wu & Zhang, 2023; Vidal et al., 2024). It was clear that when students attend classes, they would 'not miss out', especially on crucial information that is important for their success; they would also be kept abreast with the learning process, get exam tips as well as get an opportunity to interact with their peers (Vidal et al., 2024). However, there were also revelations that class attendance was not the only indicator of success or better performance, as some students who did not attend classes yet performed well in their classes. Below are

selected quotations to highlight what the study participants thought were the impact of class attendance on student performance:

> "They (students) miss out on vital information in class and then are confused and lost. Often submitting late or putting together poor-quality work. They end up copying from friends because they do not participate in class …" [R6].

> "If students do not attend classes, they lose touch with the subject matter contents and understanding, which is linked to their overall performance. Failure to attend classes, students miss important assessment tips and even assessments which contribute to their passing marks …" [R8].

> "In most cases, lecturers give exam guidelines and or 'exam scope' during class delivery times, and those who miss this may not get the opportunity to ask questions about whatever they may not have understood on their own …" [R3].

> "Students who miss out on classes miss a lot of information that is shared in class, and this poorly affects performance, especially since they would not be able to keep up with the workload on their own" [R2].

> "Class attendance allows students to access real-time information, resources, and interactions necessary for acquiring knowledge and skills. Students who attend classes regularly are likely to perform better than students who don't attend classes" [R9].

While the link between class attendance and academic performance is well-established and documented in the literature (see, e.g., Terrin & Triventi, 2023; Newman-Ford et al., 2008; Wu & Zhang, 2023; Vidal et al., 2024), it is not a rigid equation. Studies show regular attendance generally boosts grades, but the pandemic era muddied the picture. The researchers in the current study have found that some academics observed surprisingly varied performance even with high absenteeism during and after the pandemic. This suggests that factors like individual learning styles and engagement with recorded lectures play a crucial role. Understanding these nuances alongside theories such as Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory can assist in designing solutions that address the complexities of attendance and academic success in today's diverse learning environments, going beyond simply counting empty seats.

5.4 Towards Improving Class Attendance

Having realised the concerning trend of absenteeism, the researchers wanted to find out what academics think would be some ways of improving class attendance. In this regard, the participants were asked to indicate what can be done to ensure that students regularly attend classes. Several themes emerged in relation to this question with educators emphasising the need for academic instructors to 'employ interactive teaching methods', 'fostering student engagement' and interest. 'Implementing innovative and relevant course content', 'incorporating multimedia tools', and 'encouraging active participation' was also highlighted as ways to help improve attendance, aligning with Vidal et al. (2024) postulations for increasing attendance. Academic instructors also suggested that

'establishing a supportive' and 'inclusive classroom environment' plays a critical role in promoting a sense of community, making students more inclined to attend classes regularly. Furthermore, providing 'clear communication' about the importance of attendance, such as linking it to academic success and future career prospects, can motivate students to prioritise class participation. Employing 'attendance tracking systems' and 'timely feedback' on student performance reinforces the importance of consistent class attendance. Nearly all study participants were of the view that randomly launching several 'unscheduled assessments' (["*Spot tests and making a percentage of attendance mandatory in order to write a final exam*" [R2]) can be used to make students attend classes while some are of the view that making class attendance 'mandatory' could also be used as way to ensure regular attendance. Regarding the awarding of marks for class attendance, the following excepts highlight participants' views of addressing irregular class attendance:

> "Assign marks for class attendance, a small percentage to motivate or encourage students to attend. Also, the university policy should be clear on the importance of class attendance rather than making it compulsory to say attendance should be at least 80% of all planned sessions. I recall when I was studying at UCT we had to have at least 80% attendance to successfully complete the course; this may be applied at CPUT since attendance has been poor, especially in my classes, if not in several" [R3]

> "…allocate 2% towards marks for attendance, or perhaps at least 80% attending, … students like getting marks, maybe if it's 1% or 2%, and if students know it counts towards their marks, it will motivate or push them to attend most classes" [R16].

'Surprise tests', however, must be carefully thought of so that students are well prepared, especially for tests contributing to their final marks. Launching such tests may result in poor marks, as students could be underprepared when tested, causing an additional problem of high student failure (Immerman, 2017). Despite their benefits, surprise tests present additional challenges, such as accommodating those with legitimate reasons for not attending when such tests are given and adding to the administrative work of academic staff, among other disadvantages - more work (Basioudis, 2008).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the persistent challenge of irregular class attendance in higher education, particularly in the context of the University of Technology in South Africa. This is, however, evident at various institutions of higher learning across the country, thus making the findings applicable to various academic contexts regardless of the levels of study. Despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study's findings reveal a concerning trend of poor attendance in virtual spaces during the pandemic and in face-to-face sessions in the pre- and post-crisis era. However, intriguingly, the study results reveal minor differences in the reasons for not attending classes during the different pandemic periods.

The results underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between class attendance and student performance, challenging the conventional

assumption that regular attendance directly translates to better academic outcomes. The recommendations for improving class attendance include exploring innovative approaches such as awarding marks for regular attendance, instituting compulsory attendance policies, and fostering a culture encouraging student participation in classes. Moving forward, institutions should consider reevaluating existing policies and adopting evidence-based strategies to address the root causes of irregular class (physical and virtual) attendance. Moreover, a comprehensive approach that considers the diverse challenges students face, especially in the context of South Africa, is crucial. The study contributes invaluable insights that can inform institutional policies and interventions to enhance student success.

It is also vital to note that addressing the issue of class attendance requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique circumstances students face and leverages effective strategies to create a conducive learning environment. By implementing the recommended measures, institutions can strive towards improving the overall success rate of students in higher education. Moreover, a holistic understanding of irregular class attendance could be better understood by getting the students' views, which can indicate why they are not attending classes, including their insights into addressing this worrisome issue. Therefore, future studies on sporadic class attendance could involve integrating the views of academics and students and implementing mixed research methods to help comprehensively understand the phenomenon.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest between them.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Interview guide (Academic Staff)

The study aims to assess the contribution of class attendance in enhancing student success.

In order to ascertain the data for this research, your participation is of great importance. You are therefore kindly asked to participate in the study. Please note, participation is voluntary, and the information provided is purely for academic purposes and will be treated with integrity and confidentiality.

The interview will be semi-formal and should last for about 30 minutes or less and you may withdraw from the interview at any given time.

SECTION A: INTERVIEW PROFILE

1. **Which department are you from? ……**

Tourism & Events	Retail	Sport Mngt	Entrepreneurship	Hospitality
Marketing	Human Resource	GCM	Operations Management	Management & Project Management
Financial Accounting & Taxation	Business and Information Administration	Unit for Applied Economics	Cost & Management Accounting	Public Administration & Governance

2. **How long have you been in this department? ……**

< six months	Six months to one year	Btwn 1 – 2 years
Btwn 2 – 3 years	Btwn 3 – 5 years	Btwn 5 – 10 years
Btwn 10 – 15 years	**>15 years (Specify)**	

3. **How many subjects or modules do you teach? ……..**

4. **What is your highest educational qualification? ……**

BTech/Honors/Degree	Masters	PhD	Other

5. **Are you currently studying? …….. (***Probe, what the person is studying***)**

No	Yes

6. **Gender of participant (***do not ask – only note***)**

Male	Female

NB: The above questions are open-ended (*the categories are to simplify the analysis – for researcher*)

SECTION B: VIEWS REGARDING ATTENDANCE AND PERFORMANCE

- How is student attendance in the subject(s) you teach? ……
- What can be done to ensure that students attend classes? ……
- Were you involved with T&L activities before 2020 (pre-Covid-19)? ……..
- If yes, how do you compare class attendance in your modules pre- and during the Covid pandemic era? .,……
- In your opinion, what could be the reasons for students not attending classes? ……
    - ❖ Before 2020 (pre-Covid) …….. (What was it during that time – face-to-face classes)? ……..
    - ❖ During and post- Covid-19 (Online learning – hybrid)? ……
- From your own point of view, how does class attendance affect student performance? ……
- What are your recommendations for improving student grades? …….
- What are the factors contributing to students' underperformance? ……..

Thank you for your participation in, and contribution to this study