

A critical review of the socio/economic influences on attendance patterns within a H4 economics cohort

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Whilst it is recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic that descended rapidly during 2020 forcibly altered delivery modes for all students of higher education throughout the UK, prior contemporary research suggests that attendance rates at lectures and seminars appear to be in decline (Oldfield 'et al' 2017, Mearman 2014.) In the first instance, this may not appear overly problematic, however, there are evidence in numerous studies that conclude, through varied research methods, that there is a strong correlation between appropriate attendance rates and subsequent student achievement (Romer, 1993, Marburger 2001, Rodgers & Rodgers 2003, Kirby & McElroy 2003, Cohn & Johnson 2006). The studies suggested that there was a relationship between attendance and student achievement research reconnoitring the various influences on student attendance patterns remained limited (Mearman 'et al' 2014.)

In this paper, I am presenting the results of an exploratory study of those potential influences from a socio/economic perspective within an H4 economics cohort based upon a qualitative study undertaken in the academic year 2017-2018 within an economics department located in a post-1992 HE institution. The purpose of my study was to locate and analyse the relationship between socio-economic influences and the potential of those influences on student decisions to attend lectures and seminars. The initial point of departure within my study focussed upon the evolving commoditised macro-environment within which higher education resided and the implications this may have had upon prevailing student behaviour regarding attendance.

Embedded within a critical framework, in order to consider prevailing power structures this study examined the values and attitudes of 27 H4 economic students regarding their attendance utilising semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Regarding the socio-economic groupings for the sample, this was determined by the student cohort themselves as this denoted how the sample categorised their own socio-economic orientation. For the purposes of this study, a combination of criterion sampling and reflection upon the potential for researcher bias was adopted to ensure rigour, validity and reliability. Thematic analysis was then utilised to locate relationships between socio-economic influences and subsequent attendance patterns. 21 participants of this sample described themselves as poor attenders therefore this research afforded the opportunity to analyse a recognised 'hard to reach' group.

Potential socio-economic influences upon attendance patterns from secondary literature were identified prior to the undertaking of my study were paid employment, potential future earnings and the student as a consumer.

Points of interest that emerged from my research in relation to these influences were that 18 participants (the majority of the sample) considered themselves to be consumers of higher

education and 26 participants (all but one) required “value for money” from their study. From the themes that arose within this sample, it appeared that one of the major influences on attendance was the need to attain a credible classification to gain financial security via employment. This validated previous research undertaken by Fromm (1976), Field (2012) and Mearman ‘et al’ (2014).

The central findings that arose from my research were that the majority of this sample would only opt to attend lectures and seminars if that attendance would result in some benefit for them with regards to forthcoming assessments. This was regardless of self-defined socio-economic orientation or being the first in the family to attend university. My research suggested that in order to reverse this pattern of declining attendance rates professional practitioners need to ensure that all lectures and seminars are relevant to assessment outcomes in order to negate diminishing student attendance rates.

Therefore, in relation to the notion of student attendance being influenced by certain socio-economic factors this study supports the notion that the academic profession is deemed within a marketised higher education environment to provide an andragogic environment that meets the needs of students that demand ‘value for money.’ However, further research is required to explore what students mean by this concept as within this study students were unable to quantify this need. The need for critical, challenging and reflective students appears to be currently at odds with the perception of the majority of students within this sample who viewed higher education as a financial investment. Perhaps the role of the professional practitioners now needs to extend further to incorporate student’s need to ‘have’ to value the need to ‘be.’