Understanding Student Attendance Motivation in Higher Education: a Qualitative Study at Westminster Business School

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UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ATTENDANCE MOTIVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT WESTMINSTER BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex dynamics of students' attendance motivation within the context of higher education, focusing on students studying business subjects. Conducted at Westminster Business School, the research aims to understand factors influencing class attendance and enhance progression rates by fostering empathy and communication between students and staff. Using a qualitative approach, narrative interviews were employed. The study involved 45 students and 8 staff members, facilitating collaboration and trust through visual and narrative dimensions. Thematic analysis revealed key determinants of attendance motivation, including course content, teaching methods, and perceived relevance to future careers. The findings offer valuable insights for educational practitioners and policymakers, with recommendations for curriculum design and teaching strategies to enhance attendance and student success. The study underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of student motivation and the role of empathy in educational settings.

Keywords: Student motivation, higher education, qualitative research, narrative interviews, empathy, engagement, inclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Student attendance in higher education is a multifaceted issue that has attracted attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers alike. Attendance rates are often considered an indicator of student engagement, which has a significant impact on academic performance and progression [1]. In business schools, where students frequently balance academic responsibilities with job commitments, understanding the motivational factors behind attendance becomes crucial for designing effective educational interventions. This study, conducted at Westminster Business School, explores the diverse motivational drivers behind student attendance, focusing on factors such as course content, teaching methods, and the perceived relevance of the curriculum to future career aspirations.

The qualitative nature of this research, which employs narrative interviews, provides an in-depth examination of both student and lecturer perspectives. Narrative interviews, as described by Brannen [2], allow for the exploration of socio-historical contexts and personal experiences, offering a rich dataset that captures the complexities of motivation. This approach facilitates empathetic dialogue between students and staff, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by students. Themes such as fear of academic failure, balancing multiple responsibilities, and anxiety about future job opportunities emerged as central points during the thematic analysis. Additionally, the role of lecturers in creating engaging, empathetic, and supportive learning environments was highlighted as a key influence on student attendance.

By analysing the dynamic interplay of these factors, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on student engagement and motivation in higher education. The findings offer valuable insights for curriculum development, teaching strategies, and institutional policies that aim to enhance student attendance and employability outcomes.

2   METHODOLOGY

The interviews were conducted in four sessions, approximately two hours each. The study adopted a narrative interviews approach to investigate student motivation for attending higher education. Narrative interviews are a qualitative research method that allows participants to share their personal life stories in a structured yet open format where the interviewer's influence is minimised, allowing the interviewee's perspective and experiences to emerge naturally. This method emphasises understanding socio-historical contexts through individual narratives, capturing how beliefs and values evolve over time. The benefits of narrative interviews include the ability to gain deep insights into personal experiences, linking these with broader societal contexts and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the factors motivating individuals' actions [3].

Some advantages of narrative interviews, as identified by Brannen [2], include offering rich, detailed insights into personal experiences and social contexts of interviewees. These interviews allow individuals to shape their stories on their own terms, revealing deeper meanings and subjective experiences. However, disadvantages include the performative nature of storytelling, where interviewees may construct their narratives in response to perceived expectations or social norms, which could introduce bias or limit the authenticity of the data. To reduce these disadvantages, the research allowed participants (students and staff) to discuss their current experiences or their experiences before joining the university, specifically in the context of their motivation for attending and succeeding in higher education.

3   RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the narrative interviews revealed four key themes:

3.1   Challenges Faced by Students

3.1.1   Balancing Multiple Responsibilities:

Students often struggle to balance work, family, and academic responsibilities, which leads to heightened stress [4]. One student remarked, "I work two jobs and balance university so it can be a lot for me."

3.1.2   Fear of Failure or Not Doing Enough:

Fear of academic failure, especially in the early stages of university, was a recurring concern among students [5]. As one student stated, "I'm scared of not passing the first year of university." Lecturers also

expressed concerns about meeting the diverse needs of students, fearing they may not be doing enough [10].

3.1.3 Job Opportunities and Future Uncertainty:

Students expressed concerns about their future job prospects and the impact of their academic performance on their careers. One student mentioned, "Academically I haven't failed, but when it came to job opportunities, I've got rejections" [6].

3.2 Inspirational and Engaging Lecturers

3.2.1 Empathy and Caring:

Students highlighted the importance of lecturers who show empathy and care for their students' personal and academic development. As one student said, "He cares about us...we feel that he truly cares about our careers and our future" [7].

3.2.2 Encouragement and Support:

Students often excel in environments where they receive encouragement and support from their lecturers. One student remarked, "He encouraged me, and that's why I did great in his class" [8].

3.2.3 Creating Comfortable Learning Spaces:

The importance of creating psychologically safe spaces was noted as a critical factor in student engagement. One student explained, "They make us feel like we are listened to...they want to engage and teach us something" [9].

3.3 Collaboration and Student Involvement

3.3.1 Students Enjoying Collaborative Projects:

Collaborative projects were appreciated by students, as they provided opportunities to engage with peers and step outside their comfort zones [11].

3.3.2 Lecturer's Role in Collaboration:

Lecturers play a crucial role in facilitating collaboration. As one student noted, "We build a bridge in teamwork, and it was fun; if all the classes were like this, I wouldn't skip any classes " [12].

3.4 Confidence Building

3.4.1 Building Confidence Through Seminars and Engagement:

Seminars were cited as critical in building students' confidence by providing platforms for active participation and critical dialogue [13].

4 CONCLUSIONS

The research presented offers an understanding of the factors influencing student attendance motivation at Westminster Business School. The study underscores the importance of a supportive and empathetic learning environment, where students feel their academic and personal challenges are acknowledged by lecturers. It also highlights the role of relevant and engaging course content in maintaining high attendance rates. By fostering a more inclusive and motivating educational experience, institutions can improve both attendance and academic outcomes, thereby enhancing student progression and job prospects.

Further research could extend these findings by exploring the impact of specific interventions aimed at improving student motivation and attendance. Nonetheless, the insights gained from this qualitative study provide a foundation for the development of targeted strategies to address the multifaceted nature of student motivation in higher education.

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