

## **University absenteeism: Students' and lecturers' point of view**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main aim of this study is to analyse the students' absenteeism reasons in different social science degrees taught at the Universitat de Barcelona. Both the students' perception and lecturers' perception are studied and compared. A survey was used in order to gather data from both students and lecturers. The final samples analysed were 2,673 students from five different degrees and 276 lecturers or staff members. A difference analysis of means using ANOVA and a factorial analysis were done to analyse the data. The findings show that students and lecturers identify the reasons of absenteeism similarly, although the level of importance given is different. From the factorial analysis, students grouped the reasons into five factors, while lecturers do it in four. How students design their profiles and the teaching methodology are similar factors for both. However, students differentiate among different aspects of the subject, while lecturers consider these aspects as a whole. This is one of the first studies, to the best of the authors' knowledge, in comparing the students' and lecturers' perceptions of the absenteeism reasons. The results of this research would help in proposing actions to be taken to increase students' engagement and to reduce the gap in perceptions of both groups. The identification of stakeholders' responsibilities will also help in reducing absenteeism.

**Keywords:** students' absenteeism, subject characteristics, teaching methodology, students' profile.

**Paper type:** Research paper

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the spending on tertiary education in the majority of the countries has decreased (OECD, 2018). This is affecting how the available resources are allocated and used in higher education institutions (see e.g., Ramchander, 2017), which have to find more efficient and effective methodologies to provide a high quality teaching. Thus, a call for a more efficient use of these resources is needed, trying to avoid phenomena that could mean a waste of them, such as students' absenteeism. An absent student is considered as the one not attending the lessons despite being

enrolled in the subject (Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013).

The interest to analyse the reasons and effects of absenteeism at the university level has increased (see e.g., Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; Triadó-Ivern et al., 2014; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2015; Ramchander, 2017; Sarmiento-dos-Santos et al., 2017), although the existing literature is still scarce (Pithers and Holland, 2007; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2015). For example, Romer (1993) detected, in a study performed in the United States, that a third of students do not attend class, while Barlow and Fleischer (2011) analysed the absenteeism in a British university with a survey of academic staff (33 responses) and 25 interviews with first year students, finding that each stakeholder has its responsibility on reducing the problem.

Absenteeism is not only negative for the sources spent but it also contradicts the European Higher Education Area, in which students should play an active role in the learning process, with a high level of engagement and commitment required and also a high level of attendance and participation in class activities (EU, 1999). However, absenteeism could be voluntary or involuntary. The former refers to absent students who do not attend because they prefer to devote their time on other activities, such as staying at home, doing leisure activities, attending a test preparation service or working with tutor. The latter refers to students that work or have other subjects at the same time and thus, cannot attend because of that.

Regarding the reasons of absenteeism at the university level, the most highlighted are, among others (see e.g., Romer, 1993; Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; Triadó-Ivern et al., 2014; Ramchander, 2017): health problems, problems in the relationship between teacher-student or student-student, lack of interest in the learning process, difficulty in meeting academic requirements, and scheduled tests. Analysed in detail, Triadó-Ivern et al. (2013) identified 12 different reasons of absenteeism in six different degrees which were grouped into four factors: (1) factor related to course characteristics in which attending was not compulsory, (2) factor referred to lecturers' and subjects' characteristics, (3) factor related to structural elements such as schedules, and (4) factor grouping to resources available such as notes or manuals. Triadó-Ivern et al. (2014) found significant differences in absenteeism perception depending on the timetables, i.e., students of morning lessons compared to evening lessons. The former gave more importance to how the lecturer explains the subject and give it as a reason for attending the test preparation services, for example; while the latter gave more importance on how they manage their profile, for example because they work.

López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla (2015) analysed 28 determining factors in a sample of tourism students, which could be grouped into seven factors: (1) efficiency, (2) teaching style (the most important), (3) academic interest, (4) teaching content and format, (5) classmates influence and

fears, (6) imponderables and (7) convenience. Ramchander (2017) analysed a sample of 140 management students in South Africa concluding that one important factor of absenteeism is studying for tests or complete assignments, which make students be absent the day before the test and the day of the test. Oldfield et al. (2017) analysed a single UK university with a sample of 618 undergraduate students and found that the most important reasons for non-attending are: lower sense of belongingness, working more hours in paid jobs, more social life commitments, assignments deadlines, and mental health issues. According to Barr (2017), using anonymity (clickers) could increase students' engagement into lectures by an increased participation, influenced cognitive engagement, allowed for normative comparisons and allowed for more processing time.

Another aspect analysed in the literature has been the relationship between attendance and performance (see e.g., Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Woodfield et al., 2006). For example, Cabrera et al. (2006) found that attending class helps in finishing the degree in the established years. Walker et al. (2008) found that although class attendance did not ensure knowledge gaining, there is a direct and positive relationship between attendance and passing the subject.

The point of view analysed is also important. Students' perception on absenteeism has been widely analysed (see e.g., Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2015) but few studies analyse the comparison between their perception and lecturers' or staff members' perceptions (see e.g., Barlow and Fleischer, 2011; Marchand et al., 2014). As said, the perception of participants is used to measure the absenteeism and it follows the model proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1992) called SERVPERF in which only the perceptions of service users were analysed. This model has been widely used in the quality service studies and also at the university level (see e.g., Oldfield and Baron, 2000; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Stodnick and Rogers, 2008; Brochado, 2009; Torres and Araya-Castillo, 2010; Icli and Anil, 2014), at the point of becoming a decision-making factor to choose the institution (Bayraktaroglu and Atrek, 2010).

Thus, considering the abovementioned, the aim of this study is to analyse the students' absenteeism reasons in different social science degrees taught at the Universitat de Barcelona. Both the students' perception and lecturers' perception are studied and compared. The results of this research would help in proposing actions to be taken to increase students' engagement and to make the differences in perceptions of both groups come together. The identification of stakeholders' responsibilities will also help in reducing absenteeism.

The structure of the paper continues with the methods used and the results are presented. The paper is closed with the conclusions.

## RESEARCH METODOLOGY

In order to analyse both the students' perception and lecturers' perceptions on this phenomenon, an existing questionnaire was adapted and used (see Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013). The same questionnaire was submitted to students and lecturers and data gathered was analysed using statistical techniques. The description of these aspects is presented in this section.

### *Sample*

Data were collected during the spring of 2017, with a sample of 2,673 students from the Social Science degrees, i.e., Business, Economics, Sociology, Law and Labour Relations at the Universitat de Barcelona (Spain). Different subjects taught in each faculty were selected and in each of them, different scheduled groups and languages of teaching were studied. Regarding lecturers' sample, 276 valid responses were received. Lecturers teaching in each of these degrees participated in the study. Table 1 shows the respondents' sociodemographic profile.

Table 1 – Students' and lecturers' sociodemographic profile

		Students	Lecturers
By gender	Men	52.5%	54.9%
	Women	47.5%	45.1%
By course	1 <sup>st</sup> year	33.3%	32.0%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	26.7%	28.8%
	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	21.6%	25.2%
	4 <sup>th</sup> year	18.4%	14.1%
By schedule	Morning	79.2%	
	Afternoon	20.8%	
By degree	Business	39.2%	42.4%
	Economy	27.0%	18.2%
	Sociology	4.6%	2.2%
	Law	22.7%	27.9%
	Industrial Relation	6.4%	9.1%

### *Questionnaire and data gathering*

Students' absenteeism is a real problem and it is not easy to measure directly. In an attempt to overcome this lack of measurement agreement, a questionnaire supported by the literature (Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013) was used, composed of 18 items and 5 sociodemographic items. A Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree) was used (see Table 2 for the list of items analysed). The reliability analysis takes a correct value, obtaining a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70, and was statistically significant for the t-square test of Hotelling and the test of Tukey's additivity.

In order to analyse the students' absenteeism, the questionnaire asked to those students attending class for the reasons of their classmates for not attending. Although this measurement is indirect, it

was the only way of gathering these data, as the non-attendants were not in class in the moment of submitting the survey. The researchers of the team gathered the data for each group of subjects selected in the different degrees analysed. The survey was paper-based and was completed in class (similar to Aparicio-Chueca et al., 2017). The objective was to know the reasons of students' absenteeism, not to analyse the level of absenteeism of each specific subject. Figure 1 shows the protocol used to gather students' data.

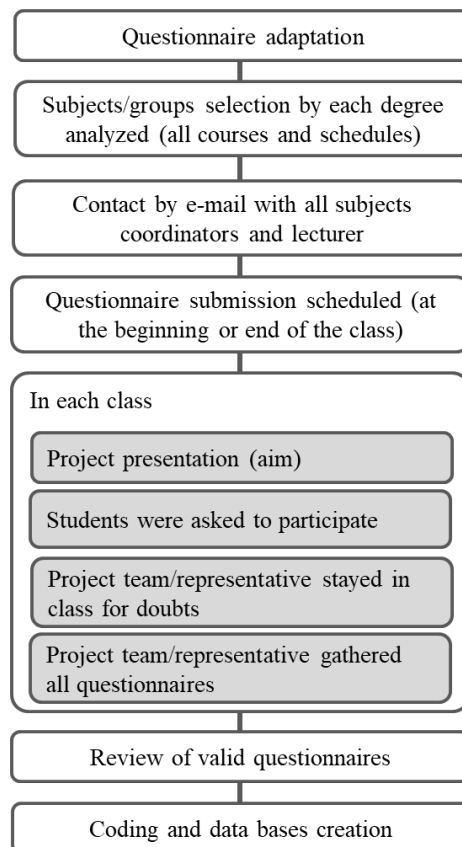


Figure 1 – Students' opinions gathering

Regarding the lecturers' point of view about absenteeism in university lessons (see Table 1 for sociodemographic profile characteristics), the same questionnaire was applied and submitted to all the faculty members of the participant faculties (only the sociodemographic items were different). Their opinion was asked after collecting the data from students and the tools used to collect them were different, as an online survey was used (see Figure 2). With the data collected, both points of view were compared and discussed (see also Marchand et al., 2014).

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was performed using the SPSS 24 software package. First, a difference analysis of means using ANOVA analysis, with the aim of knowing differences between students' and lecturers' perceptions on the phenomenon was calculated. Then, a factorial analysis for each group,

students and lecturers, was carried out with the aim of grouping the reasons why the students are absent.

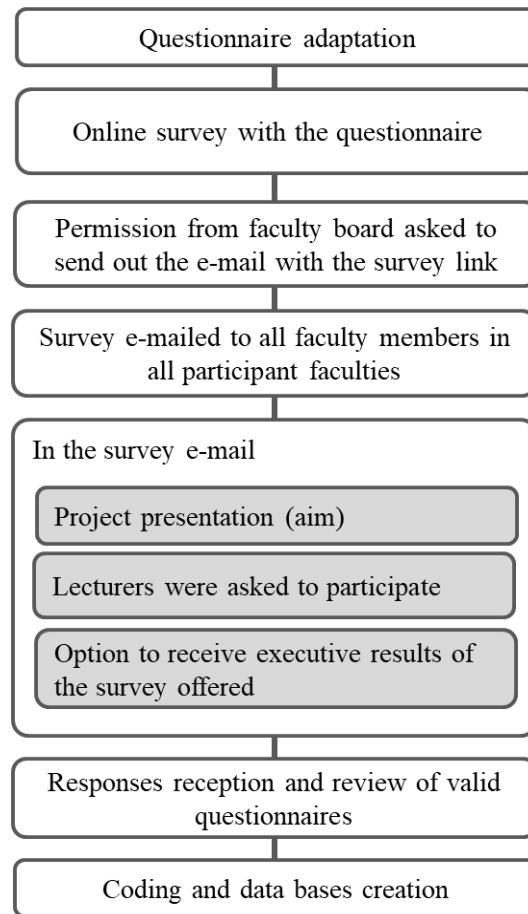


Figure 2 – Lecturers' opinions gathering

The findings of these analyses are presented in the next section.

## RESULTS

The data gathered were analysed using two different methods. First, a difference analysis of means using ANOVA was done and then, a factorial analysis. The comparison between students' perceptions and lecturers' perceptions is also presented.

### *Difference of means*

Table 2 presents the different reasons why students and lecturers think the absent students do not attend class, comparing the average valuations and their deviations. These findings show that both students and lecturers have the same opinion only in three out of the 18 items analysed, named 'the teacher does not oblige to attend', 'they study simultaneous degrees' and 'they work and cannot attend lessons'. For the rest of the items the perceptions of both groups are different.

Table 2 – Comparison between the average valuations

	Students	Lecturers	F	Sig.
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
Because of the subject, lessons become heavy and/or boring	<b>2.95</b> (.799)	2.22 (.908)	203.298	.000*
The content is not interesting	<b>2.36</b> (.810)	2.12 (.816)	20.244	.000*
The content is simple	2.04 (.860)	<b>2.48</b> (1.00)	64.316	.000*
They repeat the subject and do not attend lessons	2.48 (1.189)	<b>2.64</b> (1.210)	4.426	.035*
Attending class is not useful to pass the subject	2.16 (1.062)	<b>2.38</b> (1.030)	10.942	.001*
Because of the lecturer's explanation, lessons are heavy and/or boring	<b>3.21</b> (.807)	2.19 (1.026)	375.711	.000*
The lecturer provides sufficient material and it is not necessary to attend the lessons (book, intranet, etc.)	2.34 (.924)	<b>2.76</b> (.929)	50.336	.000*
The lecturer dictates the notes or reads the slides	<b>2.83</b> (.984)	2.11 (1.083)	131.063	.000*
The lecturer does not oblige to attend	2.83 (1.050)	2.86 (1.044)	0.162	.687
It is more useful to study in the library or at home than attending lessons	2.38 (.984)	<b>2.55</b> (1.173)	7.124	.008*
It is better to attend test preparation service to pass	2.08 (1.258)	<b>2.53</b> (1.378)	30.040	.000*
They have access to alumni notes and do not attend class	2.56 (.958)	<b>2.77</b> (1.009)	11.142	.001*
They follow the single evaluation	<b>2.69</b> (1.137)	2.16 (.927)	56.908	.000*
The schedules match with another subject	2.25 (1.209)	<b>2.45</b> (1.153)	6.861	.009*
They study simultaneous degrees	2.32 (1.293)	2.31 (1.157)	.014	.906
They have enrolled many credits	2.21 (1.214)	<b>2.69</b> (1.179)	38.490	.000*
They work and cannot attend lessons	2.66 (.968)	2.70 (1.110)	0.410	.522
They live far away and do not come to class	2.50 (1.098)	<b>2.71</b> (1.224)	8.830	.000*

Regarding the significant differences, students weight higher the following reasons of absenteeism: ‘because of the subject, the lessons become heavy and/or boring’, ‘the lecturer dictates the notes or reads the slides’ and ‘they (absent students) follow the single evaluation’. The lecturers, in turn, weight higher: ‘they have enrolled many credits’, ‘it is better to attend test preparation service to pass’, ‘the content is simple’ and ‘the lecturer provides sufficient material and it is not necessary to attend the lessons (book, intranet, etc.)’. Thus, for both students and lecturers, aspects related to the teaching methodology and support material and resources could explain absenteeism. Also, aspects

related to students' decision on their profiles, such as the type of evaluation or in how many credits they are enrolled have been highlighted.

### ***Factorial analysis***

In order to group the items into factors to ease the interpretation of the data gathered, a factorial analysis was performed, one for the students' perceptions and another for the lecturers' perceptions.

Regarding the **students' perceptions** factorial analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure is 0.772, the Bartlett's test is significant (p-value=0.000) and the  $\chi^2$  is 5901.53, with 153 degrees of freedom. From the analysis, five factors (those with an eigenvalue higher than 1) were extracted which explained the 52.30% of the total variance. Table 3 presents the rotated matrix of the components. Oblique oblimin rotation was applied because the factors were considered as correlated (students affect lecturers and viceversa). Only those factor loadings higher than 0.5 were considered.

According to the analysis, the first factor explains 17.41% of the total variance. It groups the items related to the students' design of their profile, such as 'they study simultaneous degrees', 'the schedules match with another subject', 'they work and cannot attend lessons', 'they have enrolled many credits', 'they live far away and do not come to class' and 'they follow the single evaluation'. The second factor explains 13.90% and refers to the items related to how to pass the subject (evaluation): 'it is more useful to study in the library or at home than attending lessons', 'attending class is not useful to pass the subject', and 'it is better to attend test preparation service to pass'. The third factor has a variance of 8.34% and contains two items related to the subject characteristics, which are 'the lecturer does not oblige to attend' and 'they have access to alumni notes and do not attend class'. The fourth factor explains 7.03% of the variance and also contains two items related to the subject content, such as 'the content is simple' and 'the lecturer provides sufficient material and it is not necessary to attend the lessons (book, intranet, etc.)'. The last factor explains 5.64% of the total variance and grouped items related to the teaching methodology: 'because of the subject and lecturer's explanation, the lessons become heavy and/or boring' and 'the content is not interesting'.



Table 3 – Students’ factorial analysis matrix

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
They study simultaneous degrees	.797				
The schedules match with another subject	.776				
They work and cannot attend lessons	.765				
They have enrolled many credits	.732				
They live far away and do not come to class	.518				
They follow the single evaluation	.512				
It is more useful to study in the library or at home than attending lessons		.789			
Attending class is not useful to pass the subject		.710			
It is better to attend test preparation service to pass		.607			
The lecturer does not oblige to attend			.710		
They have access to alumni notes and do not attend class			.629		
The content is simple				.753	
The lecturer provides sufficient material and it is not necessary to attend the lessons (book, intranet, etc.)				.664	
Because of the subject, the lessons become heavy and/or boring					.837
The content is not interesting					.751
Because of the lecturer's explanation, lessons are heavy and/or boring					.703
Variance (%)	17.41	13.90	8.34	7.03	5.64

Extraction method: principal components analysis  
 Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalization

Regarding the **lecturers’ perceptions** factorial analysis, the KMO measure is 0.848, the Bartlett’s test is significant (p-value=0.000) and the  $\chi^2$  is 1709.915, with 153 degrees of freedom. From the analysis, four factors (those with an eigenvalue higher than 1) were extracted which explained the 58.17% of the total variance. Table 4 presents the rotated matrix of the components. Oblique oblimin rotation was applied because the factors were considered as correlated (students affect lecturers and viceversa). As for the students’ factorial analysis, only those factor loadings higher than 0.5 were considered.

The first factor explaining the absenteeism reasons according to lecturers’ perceptions explains de 27.76% of the total variance. It consists on content, materials and no obligation to attend, aspects related to the subject, as the ‘content is simple’, ‘attending is not useful to pass’, ‘more useful to study in the library’, ‘lecturer provides sufficient material’, ‘access to alumni notes’ and ‘lecturer does not oblige to attend’ are the items belonging to this construct. The second factor explains 16.32% of the variance and grouped items related to the students’ design of their profile, such as ‘simultaneous degrees’, ‘enrolled in many credits, ‘schedules match’, ‘living far away’ and ‘work’.

The third factor represents the 8.54% of the variance and is related to lecturers' teaching methodology, as the items belonging to this construct are 'lessons are boring because of the lecturers' explanation and subject', 'content is not interesting' and 'lecturer dictates the notes or read slides'. The final factor explains 5.56% of the variance and is related to the evaluation characteristics or how to pass the subject, according to the items grouped: 'single evaluation', 'better to attend test preparation service' and 'repeat the subject'.

Table 4 – Lecturers' factorial analysis matrix

	<b>F1</b>	<b>F2</b>	<b>F3</b>	<b>F4</b>
The lecturer provides sufficient material and it is not necessary to attend the lessons (book, intranet, etc.)	.776			
Attending class is not useful to pass the subject	.733			
The lecturer does not oblige to attend	.715			
The content is simple	.700			
It is more useful to study in the library or at home than attending lessons	.673			
They have access to alumni notes and do not attend class	.670			
They study simultaneous degrees		.856		
They have enrolled many credits		.809		
The schedules match with another subject		.813		
They live far away and do not come to class		.772		
They work and cannot attend lessons		.708		
Because of the lecturer 's explanation, lessons are heavy and/or boring			.839	
Because of the subject, the lessons become heavy and/or boring			.834	
The content is not interesting			.733	
The lecturer dictates the notes or reads the slides			.702	
They follow the single evaluation				.831
They repeat the subject and do not attend lessons				.607
It is better to attend test preparation service to pass				.568
Variance (%)	27.76	16.32	8.54	5.56

Extraction method: principal components analysis

Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalization

Source: Own elaboration

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study is to analyse the students' absenteeism reasons in different social science degrees taught at the Universitat de Barcelona. In order to have a wider vision of the phenomenon, both the students' perception and lecturers' perception are studied and compared. A survey asking for their perception of absenteeism reasons has been used. Based on the results, the following conclusions could be extracted.

First, students and lecturers think that the same absenteeism reasons are significant but give them different weight of importance. Taking this into consideration, both think that the teaching methodology (see also, Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2015) is an important reason but also how the students design their profile, such as the type of evaluation they choose or if they work or study another degree simultaneously (see also, Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; Oldfield et al., 2017). Thus, it could be stated that students and lecturers agree on the absenteeism reasons but when responsibilities should be accepted, then the perception is different (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011). In other words, students perceive that lecturers should teach and prepare better the subjects, while lecturers think that students should design and perform better their profiles.

From the factorial analysis, students' perceptions are grouped into five main dimensions related to the students' design of their profile, the subject characteristics (three factors), and the teaching methodology (see also, Triadó-Ivern et al., 2013; López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2015). Regarding the lecturers' perceptions, four main dimension were found which are related to the subject (content, materials and no obligation to attend), to the students' design of their profile, to lecturers' teaching methodology and to the evaluation characteristics or how to pass the subject.

These results show that the reasons of absenteeism related to the subject characteristics are perceived differently between students and lecturers. On the one hand, lecturers considered the materials, content and way of studying it in the same factor and the evaluation or how to pass the subject in another construct. On the other hand, students grouped the same items into four different factors. Thus, it could mean that the perception of a subject characteristic is different depending on the point of view. While lecturers consider subject characteristics as a whole, students consider them to be different. However, students and lecturers identify two factors similarly. The first is related to the students' profile, and the second is related to the teaching methodology. In both cases, almost all the items grouped are the same.

Another aspect of these results is that both groups are aware of their responsibilities on this phenomenon (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011). Students' know that the way they organise and design their profile could contribute to be absent. But at the same time, lecturers know that the content, way of teaching and materials, among other reasons, could also enhance absenteeism. The identification of reasons, responsibilities and awareness are the main contributions of this paper.

### ***Implications***

The main implications of this research are for students, lecturers but also for the university government and the state government. For the first, students should mainly try to engage more in

their learning process, being more motivated and committed to achieve the learning requirements, and try to improve their profile organization and design. Lecturers should listen to what students propose, at least through the teaching satisfaction surveys (students pose qualitative comments about the subject and the lecturer), in order to improve and adapt their way of teaching (lecturers need to be active and predispose to change), trying to make their subjects more attractive (improved and updated content) and to provide the additional basic information and material that could help students in their learning process. The university should also be involved at all levels trying to improve the design of the degrees in terms of schedules and compatibility with students' labour profile. Finally, the state government should be able to provide the resources needed in order to make these practices be implemented, mainly economic resources to hire more personnel but also to train them in improved and more suitable teaching methodologies and also to renew the technologies used in teaching. Although this is not going to be an easy change, all stakeholders should accept their responsibility to achieve a better use of resources and increase the knowledge and satisfaction of university members.

### ***Limitations and future research***

Limitations of this study are mainly the indirect measurement of absenteeism. Also the degrees analysed, in which the type of knowledge could condition the way teaching and learning processes are developed. Also, the type and size of university studied could also conditioning the results. Another important factor to be considered in future research is the type of lecturers, as differences between full- and part-time dedication could also condition the results. A wider study considering more degrees and different types of universities, as well as trying to gather direct data, e.g., using an online survey to try to obtain the absentees' opinions, could enhance the generalisation of results and future research will be focused on achieving them.

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