




Virtual Class Truancy in a South African Higher Education Institution: Voices from the Students

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ABSTRACT

Academics in higher education institutions provide virtual classes as part of student support initiatives. The problem, however, is that there are persistent complaints from lecturers that students do not attend virtual classes. Using Siemens' Connectivism as a theoretical framework, this paper presents insights on the reasons behind students' poor attendance of virtual classes. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions, which was disseminated to students registered in one of the largest departments (about 130 000 student registrations) at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Following the thematic analysis of the participants' responses, the study found that the reasons for non-attendance of classes centred around time, finances, technology issues, as well as personal preferences for independent studies. The implication for practice is a call to ODL principles of accessibility, flexibility and student support, so that academics can strategise student support for effective provision of virtual classes for the benefit of students.

KEYWORDS

Class attendance; higher education institutions; Open Distance Learning; student support; truancy, virtual classes.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents insights into truancy in virtual classes, garnered from the voices of students in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution. Open Distance Learning institutions provide access to students who, otherwise, would not be able to study further owing to family, work, business, and other life demands. For the students' university access to translate to success, the students need to be adequately supported, since "access without support is not opportunity" (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). What happens, then, when those who are supposed to need support do not take advantage of the support provided? As an example, support can be granted to virtual classes where content, assessments and other topics are covered, for the benefit of the students, only for the students not to attend those classes. There is a growing interest in research on virtual class attendance and non-attendance (Kirksey et al., 2024; Qutishat et al., 2022; Sekiwu et al., 2020). Some researchers have detailed how class attendance and participation can negatively affect performance (Amoo & Swart, 2018; Ancheta et al., 2021; Sloan et al., 2020). There is consensus that class attendance is a crucial part of one's studies and that it contributes to success. It also seems students understand the importance of class attendance, most likely because some programmes attach marks to such attendance, but still, non-attendance remains an issue. So concerning is the issue of attendance that researchers such as Rani et al., (2023) have dedicated time to researching how machine learning can be used to monitor attendance, including the fake attendance of virtual classes.

As far back as 2013, before Covid-19 spurred virtual class attendance, there were concerns about the poor attendance of virtual classes (Archambault et al., 2013). One could argue that back then, virtual class attendance was optional, as there were other blended-learning options for learning. Yet, in ODL contexts, where online learning is the medium of learning, students still miss virtual classes. The question that remains is why students skip classes, virtual classes to be specific. In this regard, there has been mention of technology, environment, and finances as some of the reasons behind students' poor attendance (Qutishat et al., 2022). There is a need, thus, to understand from students why they continue to not attend classes, even when they comprehend the importance of such an endeavour.

This paper aims to rely on student voices to garner insight into the reasons behind the low attendance of virtual classes in ODL. The paper answers one research question, "Why do students not attend virtual classes in an ODL context?". It focuses on synchronous learning contexts, even though there are some implications for asynchronous learning. It also should be mentioned at this juncture that the thrust of the paper is on attendance, without the nuances of participation or contribution.

Research Context

This study focuses on a department within the University of South Africa (Unisa), one of the largest and oldest Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in South Africa. Unisa has an enrolment of about 370 000 students from 110 countries. The department in question teaches English to about 129 000 students. The numbers are high because the department largely

services other departments and colleges since English is a requirement for most qualifications, which require that students register for at least one English module (or a language) at first-year level. Tuition takes place on the Learning Management System as well as on MS Teams, which is where the virtual classes mostly take place. Class attendance in the department is, in general, lower than 10%, except when assessments (assignments and exams) are discussed. Even then, class attendance is poor. When following up, there are suggestions that students do access class recordings, but the data is not conclusive regarding this activity, since one student can revisit one recording multiple times. In a module comprising 20 000 students, one cannot state, with confidence, the pattern of watched recordings, not as how one can see the number of attendees in a virtual class and download the attendance register. During the virtual class, interaction can also point to an understanding and application of new knowledge through live discussions, reactions, chats, and the question-and-answer functions.

It should be noted that some discussions are held on other platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, often shared by students who attended the class; such spaces fall outside the perimeters of this paper, which focuses only on virtual class attendance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Connectivism provides the theoretical framework for this paper. This theory proffers that learning is not limited to assimilating and restating knowledge, but learning can also be created, shared, and distributed in groups through networked technologies. Connectivism, according to Siemens (2004), is the theory for the digital age, and it is based on these key principles of learning: Learning and knowledge can rest in diversity of opinion; Learning is a process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources; Learning can reside in non-human appliances; The capacity to know is more critical than what is currently known; Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning; The ability to see connections between thoughts, ideas and concepts is a core skill; Currency is the intent of all learning activities and Decision making is itself a learning process. Because this paper discusses class attendance in virtual spaces, it focuses on three of these principles, namely that learning is a process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources; learning can reside in non-human appliances, and nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.

Connectivism highlights the importance of “learners making connections, which allow the flow of information to occur between the learner and their learning community” (Garcia et al., 2013, p. 253). Because of the connected nature of learning, which happens online in ODL to augment the inherent distance, it stands to reason that broken connections would have an impact on learning. Connectedness, through digital spaces and devices, whether within the students, among students, with the lecturer, or with the content, is crucial for successful learning; it is also the reason that a concern is raised when students do not attend classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown a correlation between success in academic studies and participation in online activities, including virtual classes (Qutishat et al., 2022). While in some instances, class attendance is an optional resource for student support, other contexts make it mandatory to attend classes (Rani et al., 2023), while some extend it to the point of attendance forming part of the final mark, as in the study by Ancheta et al. (2021). In that study, the researchers found that “as the absence of the student increases, the mark also decreases by at least 1 mark” (p. 115). Another study by Martínez-Serna et al. (2024) investigated the effects of students’ online class attendance on academic performance, particularly focusing on the likelihood of taking the exam, the probability of passing the course, and the final grade. The study found that asynchronous class attendance improved students’ academic performance.

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 (Archambault et al., 2013; Oldfield et al., 2018; Sekiwu et al., 2020). The university lecturers, or instructors and tutors, understand the importance of student support, and they urge students to participate in these classes. Some of the strategies used include sending email reminders to students about classes (Cline, 2022; Tefo & Pitsoane, 2023; Zwane & Mudau, 2023).

The study by Martínez-Serna et al. (2024) highlights that, in ODL contexts at least, a distinction is made between synchronous and asynchronous classes when discussing class attendance. This is because ODL students have competing responsibilities vying for their time, they study whenever they find an opportunity, and they study in ODL because it provides the flexibility they need (Lephalala & Makoe, 2012; Mdakane et al., 2024; Pitsoane, 2024; Shandu, 2017). While research has established a correlation between class attendance and performance (Amoo & Swart, 2018), this paper acknowledges that there is research that suggests that it “does not necessarily make a difference whether students attend synchronous virtual classes or watch the recordings of the virtual classes (Noh et al., 2018). The question of synchronous and asynchronous class attendance is important in ODL contexts, but this paper focuses on answering the question of why students do not attend virtual classes. This is the gap that needs attention since the literature, as shown above, has established the relationship between class attendance and academic performance. Establishing the reasons may offer insights into interventions or changes on how institutions and lecturers provide interventions for student support, particularly in ODL. At the very least, answering why students do not attend virtual classes may assist in understanding the connectedness in the current learning spaces.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a case study that looked into the reasons behind the perceived poor student attendance of virtual classes in one of the departments in an ODL institution. The case study research design was chosen because case studies “allow investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events...and behaviours” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). The focus

on in-depth inquiry is emphasised in the subsequent edition (Yin, 2014). This method allowed for a deeper understanding of the reasons behind students' poor attendance of virtual classes. The population was that of students in one department, the students themselves come from various departments and colleges within the institution. This is because the department services other colleges and departments, in that students have to take language modules as part of the requirements for their qualifications. Because the study was a response to the identified problem in the department, a qualitative questionnaire, compiled through MS Forms, was sent to all the students registered in the department, and 3385 responses were received. Of that number, 3249 agreed to have their responses form part of the study and the research findings being published, while 136 did not agree. MS Forms was set so the first question dealt with consent, and those who did not agree to participating were 'branched out' to the end of the form and thanked for their time. For those who agreed to participate, the form branched to the rest of the questionnaire. This particular paper focuses on the open-ended question in the questionnaire, which asked the students the reasons they did not attend classes.

For data collection, the researcher requested student support administrators to email the survey questionnaire to the students registered in the department where this research is based. For data analysis, the researcher relied on the six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data did not need transcription because the participants typed in their responses, by the responses were transferred to a Word document for ease of reading, as part of familiarization with the data. As part of coding, I used different highlight colours as an initial noticing, then I generated themes by combining related codes. This was followed by reviewing the initial themes and naming them by going back to the data to ensure that there was no confirmation bias. The final stage was the writing up of the findings, where the excerpts from the data were used to support the findings.

I relied on Morse et al. (2002), who present verification strategies for establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research. For methodological coherence, I aligned the research question to the method by asking the 'why' question through an open-ended questionnaire, allowing the participants to relay the reasons in their own words. The appropriateness of the sample was clear because the questionnaire was sent to the students in the same department where the problem of class attendance had been noted. Saturation was reached in that the responses provided over three thousand responses, ensured sufficient data. Thirdly, the iterative interaction between data collection and analysis was facilitated by the platform used, MS Teams, which did not need transcription since the responses came in as typed. I was able to read data as it was collected.

FINDINGS

A total of 3249 students agreed that their responses could be used for research purposes. The research question on why the participants did not attend classes necessitated responses from students, and not what was opined by lecturers and managers. For this paper, it was crucial to

allow students' voices to detail the reasons behind what was perceived to be their poor attendance of virtual classes. The instrument yielded thousands of responses as students articulated their thoughts. Data were then analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

Through thematic analysis, the initial codes were generated and they comprised main themes, that is, time factors, technology, personal matters, as well as student and lecturer responsibilities. The following section delves into the themes that were generated, reviewed, and defined. The themes are supported by excerpts (verbatim) from data for strengthened quality and scientificity.

Time factors

As illustrated in the close-ended section, the main reasons for students not attending virtual classes were related to time factors. From this main theme, there were four sub-themes, that is, module load, scheduling of classes, work/business demands, and family responsibilities.

Module load

Under module load, the participants admitted that they had a demanding load of semester and year modules. This module load then led to a clash of virtual classes where students had to decide which classes to attend, sometimes opting to finish assignments rather than attend a virtual class.

The following excerpts illustrate the difficulty of trying to manage a heavy module load:

I HAVE MANY MODULES SO I FIND LIMITED TIME. (P.1554)

Sometimes the number of modules leads to a feeling of being overwhelmed.

I have so many modules so I can't attend all of the classes for all modules and sometimes they could pass me without me being alert that there's actually a class. So yea. Even though I check my modules announcements every now and then, sometimes it happens that I get overwhelmed as a student and I miss some announcements regarding online classes.(P.1540)

Because some students take many modules, it stands to reason that the class times would clash.

Some classes clash with others and the time of the classes (P. 1613)

Time clashes with other module virtuals (P. 266)

Sometimes my online classes are the exact time as my other modules, eg, ENG and psychology are the same time, so I have to decide which class I'm going to attend based on which one I need most if that makes sense.(P. 1473)

Sometimes classes clash and I obviously cannot attend two classes at the same time. Sometimes they clash with work/personal responsibilities. Sometimes there is just too much work at the time and I don't attend class but with the hope that I will watch the recording later. (P.1650)

When various classes clash and there is an added demand of completing assignments, then assessments take precedence:

Too much stress about assignment when I found an open assignment I concentrate that assignment and forgot to attend virtual classes (P. 1589)

Work/business demands

In addition to module-related clashes, classes are sometimes held when students are at work or travelling to or from work.

The time is inconvenient, as I am working. (P. 3060)

The times are really inconvenient as from 16:00 till 18:00, I am travelling back from work.

(P. 2)

THE TIME OF THE CLASSES ALWAYS CLATCHES WITH MY WORKING TIME

(P. 1601)

Unfortunately as a preschool teacher I am required to lock the school twice a week and only get home after the class has concluded. I would love a Saturday class or a 7pm class.

(P. 1593)

Because the research context is ODL, the student's work context may be in a different country and, therefore, a different time zone.

I work overseas in Argentina, the virtual classes fall within my work time. (P. 1586)

The issue of work-study clashes becomes even more difficult to manage when work hours are not confined to specific times:

I have 2 jobs one in morning and one in evening so its difficult (P. 1591)

Personal and family responsibilities

In addition to juggling studies with work, the participants had to attend to family responsibilities.

I am a mother who is always working and also at work I can't even touch my own work , as my job is too demanding, I try by all means to work ahead when it comes to my assignments. I really want to do everything at once but can't. (P. 1539)

MOST OF THEM ARE AROUND 7PM AND 9PM AND AT THAT TIME ITS RUSH HOUR AT HOME I NEED TO BATH MY KIDS PREPARE FOOD AND FEED THEM SO THEY NEED TO CHANGE VIRTUAL TIMES (P. 1448)

Sometimes classes are missed because students were attending to other demands:

I usually have personal respobilities and sometimes I realise later that I had to attend an online class (P. 1614)

Students' resources limit their options and they are not able to make adjustments that may allow them to attend classes.

I am raising a child and due to higher prices of chretch I am staying with him so his sleeping time is around to 12 and classes usually star early (P. 1615)

In addition to the standard personal responsibilities, some students are battling crises, illnesses and other personal challenges:

I was having a crisis (P. 1583)

I fail to balance the school work and home chores. (P. 1129)

In my background there are personal issues that cause me to do not attend some virtual classes (P. 1549)

In the whole scheme of things, the classes may be perceived as an inconvenience:

Some are inconvenience for me as they sometimes clash with personal issues (P. 1633)

In sum, the work-life balance may deem attending classes difficult or even impossible as expressed by the following excerpts:

The time factor is the reason. I work and than have family responsibilities when I get home. Attending a class is difficult and at tomes impossible. I also at times don't see that there is a class that is gonna happen. (P. 740)

The virtual classes always clash with my work time I work Monday to Fridays 8 to 5:00 so it becomes difficult for me to attend virtual classes (P. 90)

Technology factors

Further to time factors, the participants pointed to technology-related reasons for not attending classes. Under this theme, there were subtopics of internet data, familiarity with technology and platforms, network and connectivity, as well as device issues.

Internet data

The participants made it clear that access to internet data was a hurdle to attending virtual classes. This varied from having inadequate data to no data at all.

I had no data because it was in the middle of the month (P. 61)

I don't have enough data. (P. 1436)

I do not have access to Wifi nor money to buy data. If only the institution could send more data, to cater for the virtual classes, assignment researches and being active on Moodles. Data is a real problem for most me and many more students who can not afford it. Please send more data and I believe there will be an improvement in virtual class attendance (P. 2722)

At times, the data that the university allocates to students on a monthly basis was deemed to be insufficient:

I couldn't attend classes because i had no data. I still fail to understand y is night data more than day data. You should give us more. Data during the day to be able to attend classes. 10gb is not enough. (P. 1579)

The data we get from it is very useful and I appreciate the data and I'm very much happy with but the problem is that the data is not enough for virtual classes and you can find out that one may have 3 consecutive online orientations(it can be attending classes,and other departments) .So those online virtuals consume more data... (P. 1634)

I couldn't attend classes because i had no data. I still fail to understand y is night data more than day data. You should give us more. Data during the day to be able to attend classes. 10gb is not enough. (P. 1579)

Familiarity

Some participants were not familiar with virtual classes. Thus, they did not attend the virtual classes because they did not know how to access them.

Because I am first year student am still struggling to understand how I join the class but I really need to attend please help me (P. 1612)

I don't understand this online thing and there is no one to help me (P. 1587)

It happens that when students are not sure what to do, they rely on acquaintances who, at times, provide incorrect information.

Sometimes it could be network problem or else didn't know about virtual classes and sometimes got the wrong link from other students. (P. 1572)

Network issues

Network issues were also raised as a challenge that affected the participants' attendance of virtual classes:

I couldn't join in most classes because of my unstable network (P. 49)

If I did not attend its because of network connection otherwise if network corresponding with my device I have no problem I do attend. Or if did not attend during the module class of BAD connection I download later the recording of a particular lecture to catch up some module (P. 1658)

Device issues

In certain instances, the network would be fine, but the device, or lack of one, would be a hindrance:

i dont have laptop, i use to borrow to my friend , but now she busy (P. 3234)

I don't have laptop only using my cellphone (P. 1562)

For other participants, even when they have cell phones, they struggle with the platform, owing to the phone-platform compatibility. Some of these are caused by international business politics:

I am using a Huawei cellphone, there I cannot access my teams (P. 2270)

I did not have Laptop and my phone doesn't not allow Teams on it (P. 2148)

Am struggling to register and use Microsoft teams to be able to attend virtual classes (P. 2140)

Infrastructure

The participants also reported issues related to infrastructure that prevented them from attending meetings. These included lack of electricity:

Personal responsibilities clashes with virtual classes, there's no electricity at the farms i use the battery on my devices for assignments. (P. 1570)

They also included the realities of being a student who is situated in rural and necessitous areas:

Unisa has virtual session of which i as an indivitual situated in rural i struggle with network or reception on getting on time in classes it is either i cannot get i at all or get in an hour and 30 minutes lates . I cannot also rely on the school wifi because it is quite a long distance and we are struggling at home i cannot afford payong taxi fares everyday

therefore all my assessment were written poorly because of lack of knowledge because i only use study guide for my assessments which i was writing using my phone because i also i do not have a laptop i only got half of NSFAS at the beginning of my archaeological studies and never got it again (P. 1537)

Network problem where am staying, so I have to go to the street for me to attend.

(P. 2483)

It because of loadshedding and network (P. 1153)

I live in rural area ... it's difficult for to get a internet connection... and I don't have money to go campus everyday ... (P. 2774)

Personal factors

The participants noted that sometimes the reasons for not attending classes are of a personal nature, such as illness of self or family, personal learning preferences, and financial constraints.

Illness of self or others

The participants reported that their own illnesses and caretaker responsibilities to ill family members as reasons for lack of virtual class attendance.

I was sick and I was in hospital due to some reasons (P. 1308)

And my mother was sick and I was the one who was taking care of her. (P. 2483)

I have so much responsibilities at home, I stay with my sick elderly Grandfather whom can't do anything most of the time. (P. 1129)

Learning preferences

The participants were clear that the virtual classes were not aligned with their learning preferences. These included an inclination to individual learning, coupled with a more flexible asynchronous access to class recordings.

I work an 8 to 5 job and when I get home I have duties that need to be done. However I do catch up with my classes on the recordings the lecture sends on our emails.

(P. 1661)

There is too much wasted time during the class. I prefer to watch the video after the fact so that I can skip through the first several minutes where they are muting and unmuting one another and waiting for presentations to load etc. (P. 1547)

Other students prefer to study at night, and that is when they access class recordings.

Practicals for now and unstable wifi connection. I'd prefer them to be held during the day than at night because that's when I want to study. (P. 1609)

Lecturer teaching styles

Some students raised concerns about the style of teaching.

Sometimes the lecture makes some example with a XXXX (indigenous) language so its hard for me to understand the content because I don't know that language she is adding when teaches us. (P. 1479)

Lectures are not clear enough on teams and just say exactly what's in the textbook they don't allow us to have discussions and engage they just go through topics

(P. 2372)

When watching back the recordings of the virtual classes I have to put the classes on 1.5x speed and sometimes 2.0x speed because it feels so slow and meandering and not getting to the point fast enough. (P. 2576)

I was working at the scheduled timings .Some of the sessions were very long and I had to go back to work like for XXXX (module name) - the sessions aren't very organised and the last one went on for 2,5 hours (P. 1595)

Platforms preference

The participants also revealed a proclivity for certain platforms and modes of learning, such as social media and face-to-face classes.

The meetings time are at a time where I am making my way back home. And so the information misses me, using Telegram, email or WhatsApp for messages could be more convenient for me. (P. 1663)

I prefer face to face classes for me to understand my work better (P. 783)

Some virtual classes starts early so I may be busy with my personal things, but when am done I watch the recordings for the virtual classes that I have missed (P. 2095)

Financial constraints

The participants noted that finances played a role in their attendance of online classes. This mostly related to affording to purchase internet data.

I dont have money (P. 3077)

I have a financial struggle and dont have access to the laptop and internet.i would like to attend virtual classes.I would like to apologise Im just struggling at the moment. (P. 3221)

I couldn't attend because I no longer receive data from school I don't know for which reason and also I am not getting any financial assistance from NSFAS. (P. 526)

Responsibilities or role-players in teaching and learning

The data revealed insight into student and lecturer responsibilities in relation to virtual class attendance.

Student responsibilities

It seems some reasons were related to being organized, on the part of the participants.

Most of time is because I forgot about time and dates because I didn't mark them on my calendar (P. 1166)

Other modules I did not read announcements to see the class times when they started. (P. 1912)

I forgot to set my outlook notification and it tends out I have missed the date of virtual classes (P. 1575)

Lecturer responsibilities

The participants pointed to reasons that may be the responsibility of lecturers, such as the scheduling and communication of virtual classes.

I don't know about most of them I would know about them when the meeting has already ended (P. 11)

Sometimes I don't know about the class because I didn't receive any formal notification (P. 54)

DISCUSSION

As a prelude to the discussion, a summary of the findings is essential. The findings provided insight into themes of time, technology, personal matters, and, finally, student and lecturer responsibilities as reasons for absence from virtual classes.

The following table illustrates the factors affecting students' class attendance, or non-attendance.

Table 1.

Factors affecting class attendance

Time factors	Technology factors	Personal factors and preferences	Role-player responsibilities
Module load	Internet data	Illness	Student responsibilities
Work demands	Technology familiarity	Learning preferences	Lecturer responsibilities
Family responsibilities	Network connectivity	Teaching style	
Personal challenges	Device issues	Platforms	
	Infrastructure	Finances	

The findings demonstrated how various factors are influencing students' attendance and non-attendance of virtual classes in an ODL context. This is crucial since it is in the understanding of students' non-attendance of these classes that strategies can be developed for improving attendance. According to Weijers et al. (2022), class attendance is an important predictor of academic success, and it stands to reason, then, that hurdles to class attendance can translate to barriers to success. Viewed within the framework of connectivity, which asserts that learning is facilitated through making connections in digital spaces, there seems to be a necessity to expand the ambits of the term 'connectedness' to highlight a connection with content, in addition to connections with students and with lecturers. There is also a need for creative ways to provide opportunities for connectedness for both synchronous and asynchronous classes. to include asynchronous presence. The concern for low to no attendance of virtual classes is valid, but it should be viewed within the context of ODL, where students who have various other responsibilities may have chosen ODL for its flexibility, knowing that they would not be expected to 'sit' in class at specific times of the day. In this vein, the words of Qutishat et al. (2022) are reiterated so that innovative strategies are utilised to accommodate students' needs. There is a

need for an intentional incorporation of the flexibility of online classes for student success (Nieuwoudt, 2020).

This study illuminates the need for establishing a balance between lecturer and student roles in student support because a one-sided approach to responsibility may lead to missed classes. It is true that the lecturer plays a crucial role in planning and facilitating classes, including sending students reminders to attend the scheduled classes (Cline, 2022), but the students also play a key role in the attendance of classes, based on motivations (ability/effort/task value), as asseverated by Fryer et al. (2017). What this particular study does, however, is to contend that there are other factors beyond motivation that can impede student attendance; these include family responsibilities, technology challenges, as well as preferences for individual study associated with ODL.

An unexpected insight highlighted in this study, which falls beyond the control of students and lecturers, was the issue of technology compatibility. The study points to a glaring conundrum where a platform for which the university paid license fees is not compatible with some students' cell phones, sometimes those being the only cell phones that the students could afford. No matter how motivated the student (Fryer et al., 2017) or how well-planned and presented the virtual classes (Garrison et al., 2001), if the phones are incompatible with the platform, then there can be no connectedness, making truancy inevitable.

Time factors were highlighted as the main reason for missed virtual classes, and the role of the device, and by extension, internet connection, in facilitating and ensuring class attendance is highlighted. This connection, or lack thereof, speaks directly to Connectivism. For example, Siemens (2006) states that nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning. If, for any of the reasons the participants mentioned in the findings, there is a break in the connection, then that would be the reason the participants would describe virtual class attendance as "inconvenient" (P. 2; P. 1633; P. 3060), "difficult" (P. 90; P. 740; P. 1591) and "impossible" (P. 740). This study stresses that before students are labelled as truant or not wanting to attend classes, there is an exigent need to determine the reasons for lack of class attendance, particularly based on the voices of the students.

Students and lecturers understand the link between class attendance and academic performance, but the reasons for lack of virtual class attendance are multidimensional.

CONCLUSION

As part of the conclusion, it should be noted that this study was conducted in the ODL context, limited to students in one department, even though the students represent other departments and colleges, as explained in the methodology section. Before academics and planners can claim truancy or feel dejected that students are not attending classes, it is worthwhile to look into the reasons for the students' non-attendance of these classes, particularly from the voices of students. As this paper evinced, the students identified four factors, that is, time, technology, personal factors, and role-player responsibilities provide reasons for their poor attendance of

classes. Sometimes, the support designed for students may be a reason for hampered support, as it was shown that increasing the number of virtual classes may frustrate students who have to work during the day, or who have taken an intensive workload, or even those who prefer individual study. Tuition managers and instructors may not gain insight into these reasons without listening to the voices of students. Another implication for practice is that virtual class attendance has to be re-examined, and relevant strategies have to be implemented to make sure that students are accommodated.

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