

# From Presence To Purpose: Understanding Post-Covid Class Attendance



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**UFS**  
CENTRE FOR TEACHING  
AND LEARNING (CTL)

# Table of Contents

Executive summary .....	i
1. Introduction .....	1
2. Class attendance post-Covid.....	2
2.1 To what extent are students attending in-person classes?.....	3
2.2 Engagement with synchronous and asynchronous Blackboard activities .....	5
3. Class attendance and student motivations .....	6
3.1 What motivates class attendance .....	6
3.2 What are the reasons for absenteeism.....	9
3.3 Student definition of class attendance .....	12
4. Class attendance and academic performance .....	15
4.1 Relationship between class attendance and academic performance .....	15
4.2 Relationship between Blackboard engagement and academic performance .....	16
4.3 Practical implications .....	18
5. Discussion of results.....	19
6. References.....	22
Appendix A .....	24
Appendix B .....	28
Appendix C .....	29

## Executive summary

This report examines post-COVID class attendance patterns at the University of the Free State (UFS), comparing them with pre-pandemic data and exploring their relationship with academic performance. The report draws on the survey responses of 3012 undergraduate students across all faculties and campuses at the UFS.

- **Class Attendance Trends:** A total of 59% of respondents indicated that they attend all formal classes in 2024, compared to 27% in 2019. The highest rates of attendance of all classes were seen in the Faculties of Health Sciences (84%) and Theology and Religion (80%). By campus, the Qwaqwa campus reported the highest percentage of students who attend all their classes (69%).
- **Motivations for Attendance:** The primary motivations for students attending classes were to gain a better understanding of the content, stay current with coursework, and learn about key concepts highlighted by lecturers. Students who attended regularly valued the deeper engagement with material and interaction with teaching staff. In contrast, those with lower attendance were more influenced by external factors such as needing exam scopes and mandatory attendance requirements.
- **Barriers to Attendance:** The most cited reasons for absenteeism included needing to study for tests in other subjects and completing assignments. Additionally, the 2024 survey highlighted the significant impact of mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, as barriers to attendance. Poor instructional methods, such as lecturers reading directly from slides without interactive teaching, were also a common deterrent.
- **Academic Performance:** The analysis showed a significant positive correlation between regular class attendance and academic achievement. Students who attended all their classes achieved a higher module pass rate (89%) and average mark (64%), compared to those who did not attend any classes, who had a pass rate of 66% and an average mark of 52%. Notably, attendance impacted performance across most faculties and campuses, with a significant correlation observed, except in the Faculties of Health Sciences and Theology and Religion.
- **Engagement with Blackboard:** The report highlights that students who attended over 75% of their classes were also more engaged with the university's Learning Management System (LMS), Blackboard. They spent an average of 99 hours on asynchronous activities and attended more synchronous sessions (13 on average) compared to students with lower

attendance, who spent 91 hours on asynchronous activities and attended 11 sessions on average.

- **Student Preferences and Learning Modes:** While 54% of students preferred face-to-face classes, a considerable number showed interest in online and blended learning options, indicating the need for flexible learning modalities. The results underscore the importance of fostering an enabling blended learning environment that integrates both in-person and online learning tools. Recommendations include enhancing the institutional LMS for asynchronous learning, using tools like Cirrus for online assessments, Class 2.0 for synchronous activities, Panopto for large classes, and Feedback Fruits for interactive participation. These tools would help maintain high engagement and support student success.
- **Definition of Class Attendance:** Students' definitions of class attendance highlighted a blend of physical and virtual participation. The majority defined attendance as being present in face-to-face or online classes, involving active engagement such as asking questions, interacting with peers and lecturers, and focusing on the content being taught. Additionally, some students included asynchronous participation, such as accessing recorded lectures and engaging with materials on Blackboard, as part of how they define class attendance.

### **A note on sample representation and interpretation**

Although the sample size of over 3,000 students is substantial, it represents only about 10% of the undergraduate population at UFS. Moreover, the sample is skewed towards students who attend class more frequently. This bias does not diminish the value of the findings but instead provides a clearer picture of the experiences and motivations of students who do attend classes. While lecturers anecdotally report that many students do not attend class or do not actively participate, these results do not necessarily contradict those observations. Instead, they shed light on the experiences of those who do attend, offering insights into what drives their attendance and engagement.

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) conducted a study among undergraduate students at the University of the Free State (UFS) to explore their motivations for attending classes and the reasons behind their absenteeism (view the report [here](#)). This research was prompted by a decline in class attendance observed during and after the peak of the #FeesMustFall movement, which, along with subsequent campus disruptions, led to an increased emphasis on blended and online learning methodologies. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a further shift in learning and teaching approaches, resulting in the implementation of emergency remote teaching at UFS throughout 2020, 2021, and a part of 2022. During the pandemic, research involving university students in South Africa underscored the expressed need for a return to in-person classes and heightened interaction with peers and lecturers (DHET, 2020). Nevertheless, in the post-Covid period, there has been a renewed decline in class attendance.

Post-Covid, contact universities such as the UFS adopted a blended learning approach, integrating face-to-face classes with asynchronous online components. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) defines blended learning as “the provision of structured learning opportunities, using a combination of contact, distance, and/or ICT-supported opportunities to suit different purposes, audiences, and contexts” (DHET, 2014:20). At UFS, this definition is complemented by Christensen, Horn, and Staker’s (2013:7) perspective, which suggests that blended learning “provides the student with some control over the time, place, and/or pace of learning, creating an integrated learning experience of face-to-face and online activities.” Thus, at UFS, blended learning involves a combination of in-person and online learning and teaching activities, with an emphasis on asynchronous components, allowing students to control the time, place, and pace at which they engage with these activities.

Some research done on class attendance during and after Covid suggest that students' non-attendance is influenced by a variety of factors, including academic, personal, and institutional reasons. Academic reasons such as studying for tests, finding lectures unhelpful or unstimulating, and the availability of online learning resources are significant contributors to absenteeism (Swanepoel et al., 2021). Personal reasons include work commitments, health issues, and transportation difficulties (Shieh et al., 2022; Sloan et al., 2020). Institutional factors such as class schedules, the timing of lectures, and the quality of teaching also play a critical role in student attendance (Mokhtari et al., 2021). Moreover, generational preferences towards digital

learning and the perceived irrelevance of lecture content further exacerbate the issue (Wyatt, 2023).

Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance (Khanal, 2019; Motsima, 2020; Teixeira, 2016). However, in the post-Covid era, the way students engage with their studies has evolved. Nieuwoudt (2020) found that while there is a correlation between class attendance and academic performance, it is equally effective whether students attend synchronously in-person or asynchronously through lecture recordings. The aim of this study is twofold: first, to investigate whether students' perceptions of class attendance have shifted post-Covid, and second, to explore the relationship between academic performance and synchronous (in-person class attendance as well as attending Class Collaborate sessions), as well as asynchronous (viewing lecture recordings, downloading class slides, and engaging with additional materials uploaded to Blackboard) learning activities.

## 2. Class attendance post-Covid

In October 2024, a questionnaire on students' class attendance patterns, motivations on attending class, and reasons for absenteeism was distributed to all undergraduate UFS students (see **Appendix A**). In addition to multiple choice, multiple response, and Likert-scale questions generating quantitative data, students were asked to provide their definition of class attendance in an open-ended question in the questionnaire. Additionally, an open-ended question was included at the end of the section asking students why they attend class, to allow them to include any reasons not listed in the Likert-scale questions. The same was done in the section asking students why they do not attend class. Qualitative data was coded and thematically analysed, where AI seemed to have generated open-ended responses, these responses were excluded from the analysis. This report draws on the survey responses of 3012 undergraduate students from across all faculties and campuses at the UFS.

As we are comparing some of the 2024 results with 2019 results in this report, it is important to note that in 2019, the sample was larger and consisted of 5044 student responses<sup>1</sup>. Faculty distribution included almost a third (32%; N=1631) from Humanities, 27% (N=1381) from Education, 16% (N=812) from Natural and Agricultural Sciences, 14% (N=688) from Economic

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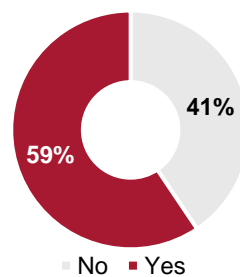
<sup>1</sup> The full 2019 report can be viewed [here](#).

and Management Sciences, 6% (N=298) from Law, 4% (N=203) from Health Sciences, and 1% (N=31) from Theology and Religion. The majority of participants are studying on the Bloemfontein campus (N=3471), followed by the QwaQwa campus (N=1272), and 301 respondents from South campus.

## 2.1 To what extent are students attending in-person classes?

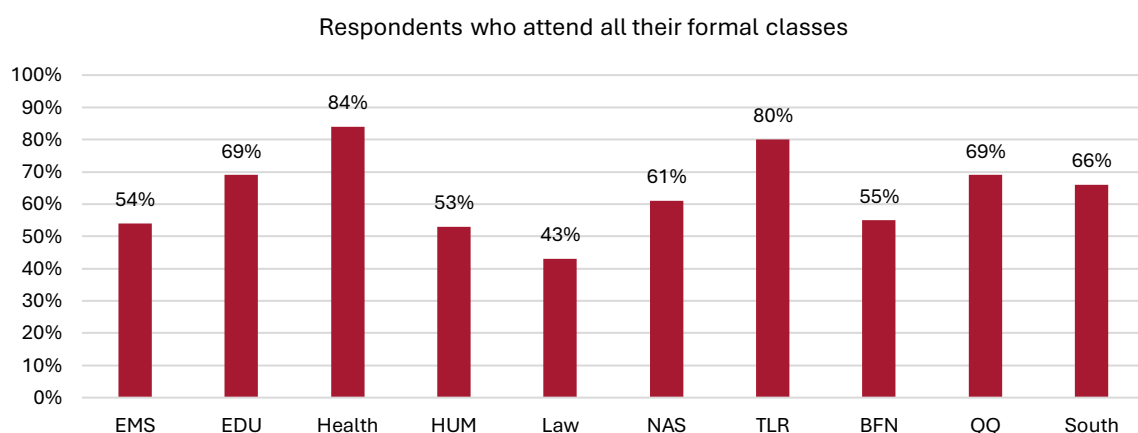
As shown in **Figure 1**, the majority of respondents (59%) indicated that they attend all their formal classes. This is higher than the 2019 cohort we surveyed, of which 27% indicated that they attend all their formal classes.

Do you attend all of your formal classes?



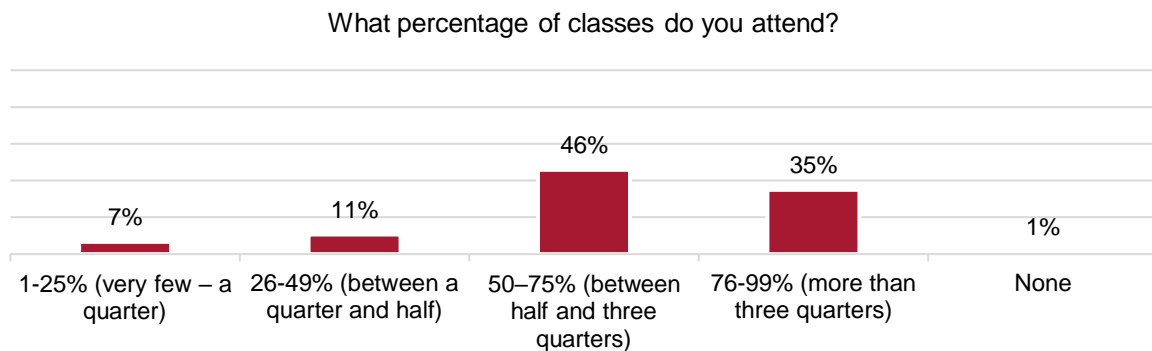
**Figure 1: Percentage of survey respondents indicating that they attend all their face-to-face classes**

**Figure 2** shows the percentage of students who attend all their formal classes per faculty and campus. In all faculties, except the Faculty of Law, more than half of the respondents indicated that they attend all their classes. The faculties of Health Sciences (84%) and Theology and Religion (80%) had the highest percentage of respondents indicating that they attend all their classes. When comparing class attendance across different campuses, the highest percentage of respondents on Qwaqwa campus indicated that they attend all their classes (69%).



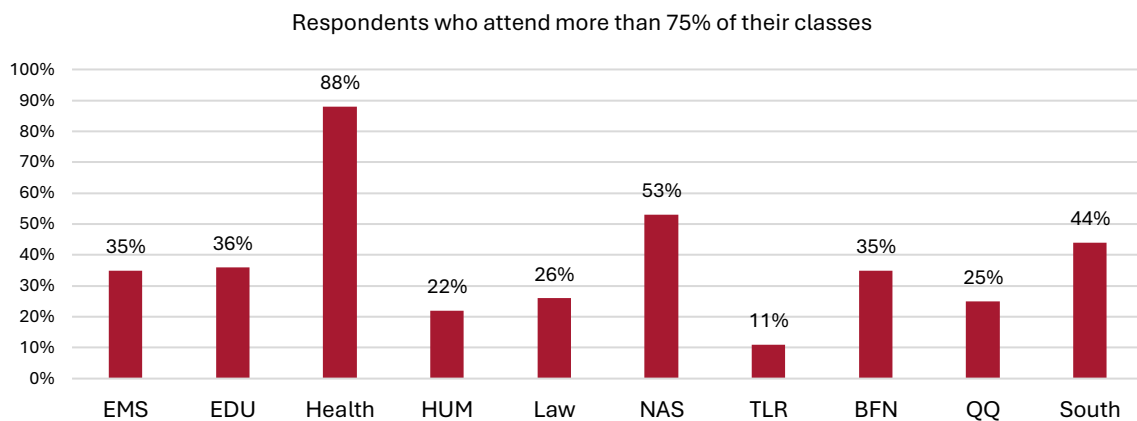
**Figure 2: Percentage of students who attend all their classes per faculty and campus**

Of the 41% of students who do not attend all their classes, 35% attend more than three quarters of their classes while the remaining 65% attend 75% or less of their classes (see **Figure 3**).



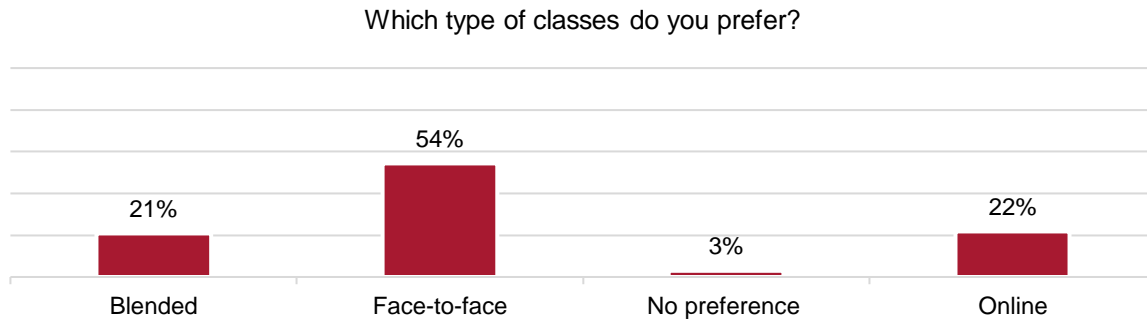
**Figure 3: Percentage of classes students attend**

**Figure 4** shows a breakdown per faculty and campus of the percentage of students who do not attend all their classes, but attend more than 75% of their classes. Only in the faculties of Health Sciences and Natural and Agricultural Sciences did more than half of the respondents who do not attend all their classes indicate that they attend more than 75% of their classes.



**Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who attend more than 75% of their classes per faculty and campus**

**Figure 5** shows the type of classes students prefer. The majority of students prefer face-to-face classes (54%), while 22% prefer online classes and 21% prefer blended classes.



**Figure 5: Student class type preferences**

## 2.2 Engagement with synchronous and asynchronous Blackboard activities

A comparative analysis of the survey respondents’ Blackboard use in 2024 showed that students who attend more than 75% of their classes also spend more time on Blackboard. We compared the time spent on both asynchronous and synchronous activities. Asynchronous activities refer to activities on Blackboard that students can participate in in their own time, such as downloading class slides, viewing a video uploaded to Blackboard, participating in a discussion forum etc. Synchronous activities, on the other hand, refer to activities on Blackboard in which students participate at a specific time, where all students participating need to be on Blackboard at the same time, such as attending an online lecture through Class Collaborate. For this analysis we used Blackboard data as an additional data source to analyse survey respondents’ Blackboard use.

On average, students who attend more than 75% of their classes spent 99 hours on asynchronous activities on Blackboard in 2024 (January – October), compared to an average of 91 hours spent by students who attend less than 75% of their classes. Students who attend more than 75% of their classes spent an average of 9 hours on Class Collaborate and attended an average of 13 sessions, compared to the average of 6 hours and 42 minutes students who attended less than 75% of their classes spent on Class Collaborate, attending an average of 11 sessions (see **Table 1**).

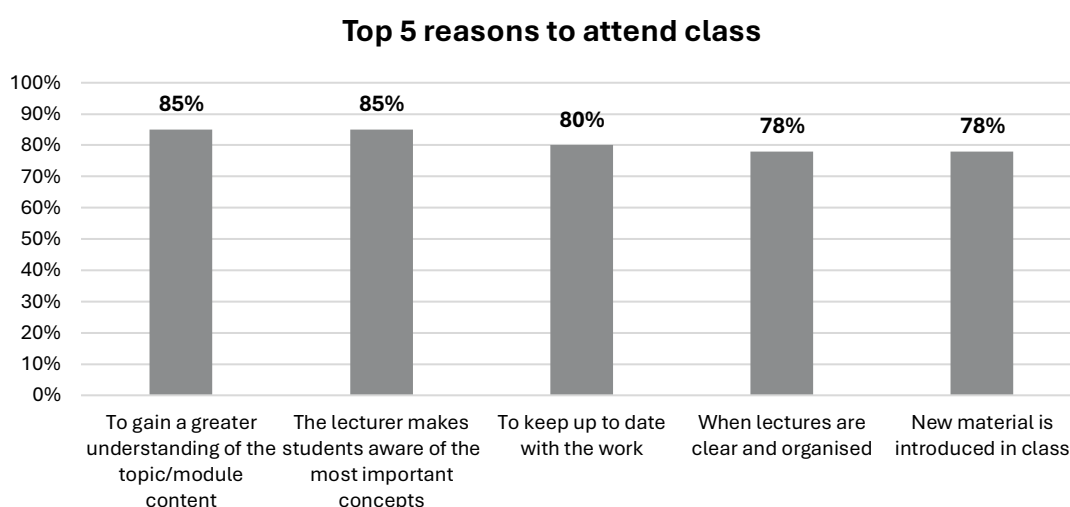
**Table 1: Average time spent on Blackboard on synchronous and asynchronous activities**

	<75% attendance	75%+ attendance
<b>Asynchronous Blackboard activity</b>		
Average time spent on Bb	91 hours	99 hours
<b>Synchronous Blackboard activity</b>		
Average time spent on Bb Collab	6h42 min	9 hours
Average nr of Bb Collab sessions attended	11	13

### 3. Class attendance and student motivations

#### 3.1 What motivates class attendance

**Figure 6** shows the top five reasons students attend class based on the percentage of students who indicated that these reasons are “applicable to me” or “very much applicable to me”. These reasons are aligned with students definition of class attendance discussed earlier in this report and emphasise the importance of gaining a greater understanding of the content by attending class, keeping up with the work, and being made aware of the most important topics.



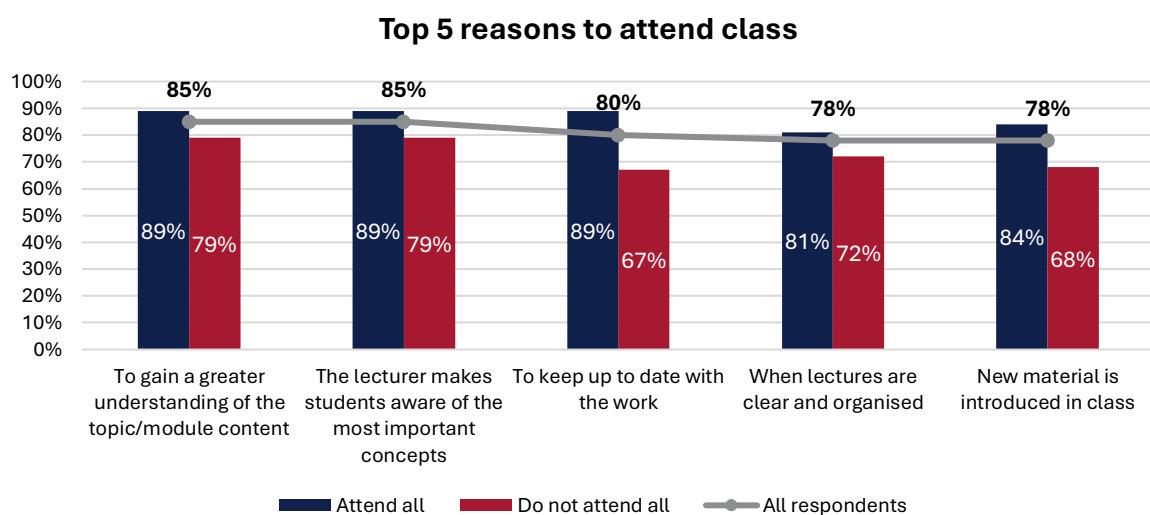
**Figure 6: Top five reasons why students attend class**

When comparing the results of this survey with the results of the 2019 class attendance survey, the top three reasons overlap in both surveys. In 2019, the following were the top five reasons for attending class:

1. To gain a greater understanding of the topic/module content (also ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in this survey);
2. The lecturer makes students aware of the most important concepts (also ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in this survey);
3. To keep up to date with the work (also ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in this survey);
4. To learn how to answer test/ exam questions (ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in this survey);
5. Additional explanations are given which are not in the textbook (ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in this survey).

It is important to note that in this survey, the majority of respondents indicated that they attend all their formal classes compared to only 27% of the respondents in the 2019 survey who attended all their classes. It is thus important to keep in mind that if we look at the overall motivations for class attendance in this survey, we are including more students who attend class regularly than those who do not. The top five reasons for all respondents combined are shown in order in **Figure 6**, however, differences can be seen if we compare students who attended all their classes with those who did not attend all their classes as shown in **Figure 7**. The reasons identified as the top five reasons for attending class overall were more applicable to students who attend all their classes than to students who do not attend all their classes. When we rank the top five reasons for attending class of students who *do not attend all their classes*, the first two reasons (gaining a greater understanding of the module content and being made aware of the most important topics) still come out as the top 2 reasons, but the other 3 reasons are:

3. To get test/ exam scopes;
4. When lectures are clear and organised (also 4<sup>th</sup> overall when all respondents are included);
5. Class attendance is compulsory.



**Figure 7: Top five reasons for attending class of students who attend all their classes and those who do not**

Following 20 Likert-type questions where participants could choose reasons for attending classes, they were given an open-ended question to elaborate on any of the reasons provided or

provide additional reasons not on the list. A total of 913 responses were analysed and the following themes, aligned with the top five reasons for class attendance emerged:

○ **To gain better understanding of content:**

- *"To ask the lecturer questions and understand better" ;*
- *"I get the opportunity to ask questions if something is not clear enough for me";*
- *"The lecturer helps us when we have any queries during class";*
- *"To seek clarity on the module content";*
- *"To have a better understanding of the module material and understanding methods used in the module".*

○ **To keep up to date with the work:**

- *"Some students thrive on routine. Establishing a regular schedule that includes attending classes can help them stay organized and balance their academic workload";*
- *"Helps a student maintain a structured routine which is important for time management and staying organized";*
- *Attending classes are very important because they helps us as students to not be left behind with our academic work";*
- *"Attending classes helps students stay accountable and motivated to keep up with coursework".*

Additional reasons mentioned in the open-ended comments, not related to the top five reasons for attending class include **getting feedback from the lecturer**, as indicated in the quotes below:

- *"To get feedback from a past test";*
- *"I tend to learn more from asking questions and getting feedback from the lectures, it helps boost my confidence and makes me see where I stand in terms of readiness for writing Tests and Exams or any other schoolwork or assessments";*
- *"I tend to learn more from asking questions and getting feedback from the lectures, it helps boost my confidence and makes me see where I stand in terms of readiness for writing Tests and Exams or any other school work or assessments".*

Students also explained that they attend class to **connect or communicate with others**. These comments are interesting because among the reasons for attending class, reasons related to interacting with others ranked at the bottom (see section 3.2 for an elaboration on this). The

quotes below are examples of students who mentioned interaction with others as reasons for attending class:

- *"Attending classes also builds my confidence so that I can be able to communicate with others";*
- *"To interact with my classmates";*
- *"To socialise with other students";*
- *"I only go to campus to see my friends because human beings crave connections".*

### 3.2 What are the reasons for absenteeism

Students were provided with a list of 32 possible reasons for absenteeism (see Appendix A). The top five reasons are shown in **Figure 8**. More than half of the survey respondents indicated that the need to study for tests in other subjects, as well as falling behind and needing to catch up on academic work as reasons for missing class. The other three reasons include preferring self-study, doing other subjects' assignments, and poor teaching skills. These reasons overlap with the reasons provided in the 2019 survey for not attending class, although a larger percentage of students indicated that these are 'often' or 'very often' a reason for them than in the 2019 survey. This shows that the reasons for not attending class have not really changed in the last five years, but that students feel stronger about them than they did in 2019.

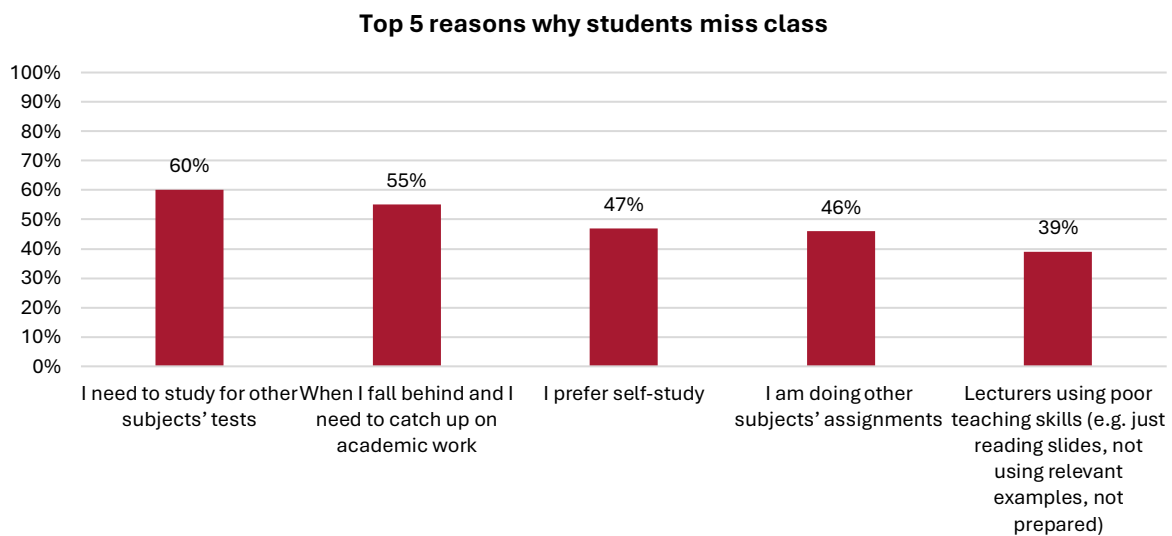


Figure 8: Top five reasons why students miss class

Following 32 Likert-type questions where participants could choose reasons for not attending class, we provided an open-ended question to better understand these reasons or additional reasons not included in the list. A total of 463 responses were analysed to identify the themes that serve as further explanations and or additional reasons for missing class. In the open-ended responses students further elaborated on some of the top five reasons they do not attend class. These include:

○ **Competing responsibilities, especially related to assessment:**

- *"Attending classes takes up so much time of the day and within 2 hours of a lecturer having a discussion in class, I could have finished at least 1000 words of an assignment"*
- *"When I'm writing another module's semester test then I have to sacrifice my other classes attendance"*
- *"Sometimes I struggle to balance my due dates for my assignment and homework with my attendance so I decide not to attend a class at that particular day so that I will be able to finish my assignments at time"*
- *"A common reason I do not attend 100% of my classes is the assignments I have. My course does not have exams, so there are a lot of assignments, and they all need time. So, I spend most of my time on those tasks I get."*

○ **Instruction methods:**

- *"Lecturers facilitate a module as if they are doing revision or as if it's something that you already know and they don't put much effort in teaching you and making you understand."*
- *"Lecturers reads slides which makes the class or session not engaging enough."*
- *"I feel like lecturers read slides instead of explaining and engaging in a conversation with us. Why should wake up at 7am so I can go to class for 45 minutes and the lecturer just reads the slides without any further any explanation or examples. I can literally do that in comfort of my own room."*
- *"They don't explain clearly in some modules they just play the slides, the rest they inform you it is self-study."*
- *"Sometimes you will wake up and go attend the 8am class. Only to find that it's just announcements that could have been posted on Blackboard"*

An additional reason for not attending class raised by students in the open-ended comments is **mental health challenges** where students specifically mention depression, dealing with personal challenges, and social anxiety as illustrated in the quotes below:

- *"I have anxiety. Crowded spaces or places where I get to be with a lot of people gives me anxiety. Also, I've been battling with my mental and emotional health.";*
- *"I tend to fall into a state of depression and I don't have the courage or energy to do anything.";*
- *"I'm fatigued and just tired. I'm depressed and poor...I can go on and on...sometimes class is just not the only thing I'm dealing with...life itself is the problem";*
- *"I have social anxiety and I get too overwhelmed when I am around people"*
- *Sometimes my mental health gets the better of me. I tend to fall into a state of depression and I don't have the courage or energy to do anything.*

Some students also mentioned they do not attend class to **avoid interaction with their peers and the lecturer**. This is sometimes due to social anxiety as the quotes below illustrate:

- *"I have social anxiety and it is very difficult for me to focus in class ....and I'm scared that the lecturer may ask me to answer in class ...and I can't speak English fluently so I will be laughed at.";*
- *"Lecturers are making students to be scared to attend classes because they would ask students to answer questions by force in front of everyone which sometimes decreases the self-esteem of that student if they don't know the answer.";*
- *"This thing of lecturers liking to ask questions and randomly picking students to give an answer is so not fair, because I believe if a student knows the answer and wants to respond then they'll do so. I feel like being picked whereas maybe you don't actually know the answer to the question is so embarrassing and decreases ones self-esteem.";*
- *"One of the reasons is that of a lecture pointing individuals out to give an answer to a questions instead of students voluntary opting to give an answer".*

Another theme that emerged from the qualitative data, is that many students miss class because they prefer self-study, as the quotes below show:

- *"I also learn better while self-studying than I do by being taught in a lecture room, so going on campus for lectures is time I could've used to learn on my own in my own environment"*
- *"It feels like a waste of time attending the class whereas I can self-study and be more productive. Attendance should not be compulsory".*

The issue of not wanting to participate in class, or wanting to avoid interaction, is also reflected in the quantitative data. Compared to the 2019 class attendance survey, the percentage of students who indicated that they attend class because they benefit from interacting with their peers dropped with 5%. When ranking all 20 Likert-scale items with reasons to attend class, the social aspects of class attendance are at the bottom:

- To benefit from the interaction with other students in class (ranked 13<sup>th</sup> out of 20);
- To participate in hands-on exercises or practical examples (ranked 15<sup>th</sup> out of 20);
- To participate in interactive discussions (ranked 16<sup>th</sup> out of 20);
- To make contact with group members for group projects (ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of 20);
- To catch up with my friends (ranked 20<sup>th</sup> out of 20).

### 3.3 Student definition of class attendance

A thematic analysis of the open-ended responses to the question: “what is your definition of class attendance? (describe what you view as class attendance in no more than 100 words)” revealed five main themes:

- **Class attendance is synchronous but can be in a face-to-face or an online space:** "Going to class to sit in a lecture and learn by listening to a Lecture"; "Having to physically or electronically attend a lecture session or practical session"; "Class attendance refers to the act of being physically present in scheduled classes or lectures"; "Being physically present in class or online class".
- **A class is a place where you gain knowledge beyond the textbook and/or study material:** "Sharing of knowledge, a lecturer gives new information not only from textbooks but from their academic journey as well"; "the lecturer sometimes gets a chance to expand on the topic and apply it to a real life situation".
- **Class attendance requires participation:** "One must participate in asking/answering questions or class activities and participate in class."; "It involves not just being present but also actively participating and engaging with the material being taught."; "It involves not just being physically present but also engaging with the material, interacting with the instructor and peers, and contributing to discussions. Attendance is more than just showing up; it reflects a commitment to learning, being prepared, and staying attentive throughout the class"; "Ask questions where you don't understand and taking notes when the lecturer speaks of what you deem important"; "Not only is it about being physically present but you need to be there mentally as well and applying yourself".

- **The aim of class attendance is to leave the class with a better understanding of the content and being more prepared for assessments:** "Going to every class to gain a better understanding of what's presented to the slides"; "ask the lecturer to make it clear and never leave the lecture room without a clear understanding."; "lecturer helping students understand their work better"; "being able to understand the material provided as there will be interaction with the lecturer"; "A way to learn and understand the work better than on textbook"; "Being in class with other learners and lecture discussing the concept and better up our knowledge"; "And also I see it as getting taught something that you will not easily forget"; "Class means that you attend classes to be better equipped for assessments".
- **Recording of students' presence in a lecture:** "Class attendance is when a student attends lectures and it is recorded that they were present."; "Marking a register in class to record attendance marks"; "The record of students attending academic lectures."

To a lesser extent, asynchronous online participation can be viewed as class attendance. A few participants expanded on their definition to add self-study and utilisation of asynchronous materials as part of class attendance, although, it should be mentioned, that this was not included in the definition of the majority of respondents.

- **Asynchronous online participation should be considered as class attendance:** "It should rather be module attendance, that way you can be judged on the amount of time you spend on a particular module and not how often you attend classes because it is no use if I am going to zone out in class. Blackboard can show lecturers who was engaging with the module and when. The university should use that."; "For me class attendance would be the completion of an online class or alternatively listening to the recorded (or a recorded) lecture. Live, online classes should not be the only indication of attendance, completing a recorded session should also be considered attendance"

In order to better understand the themes that emanated from students' definition of class attendance, students responses to the reasons they attend class, as well as the open-ended question, "are there any other reasons you attend class?" were analysed. The top five reasons for attending class (see section 3.1 for a more detailed discussion on this) include 'gaining a greater understanding of the module', 'new material is introduced in class', and 'the lecturer makes students aware of the most important concepts'. These items are aligned with the second theme identified "a class is a place where you gain knowledge beyond the textbook" and the fourth

theme “the aim of class attendance is to leave the class with a better understanding of the content and being more prepared for assessments”. The open-ended responses in which students motivated ‘other’ reasons for attending class not listed in the Likert-scale questions, also show alignment with the themes identified in students’ definition of class attendance:

- **A place where you interact and communicate with others:** "Attending classes also builds my confidence so that I can be able to communicate with others"; "I understand better where there's interaction."; "to interact with my classmates"; "To participate in class discussion"; "To socialize with other students" – **aligns with theme 3 “class attendance requires participation”**
- **A place where you get feedback:** "To get feedback from a past test"; "I tend to learn more from asking questions and getting feedback from the lectures, it helps boost my confidence and makes me see where I stand in terms of readiness for writing Tests and Exams or any other school work or assessments" – **aligns with theme 4 “the aim of class attendance is to leave the class with a better understanding of the content and being more prepared for assessments”**
- **A place where you can get clarity or understanding:** "To seek clarity on the module content."; "To have a better understanding of the module material and understanding methods used in the module." – **aligns with theme 4 “the aim of class attendance is to leave the class with a better understanding of the content and being more prepared for assessments”**

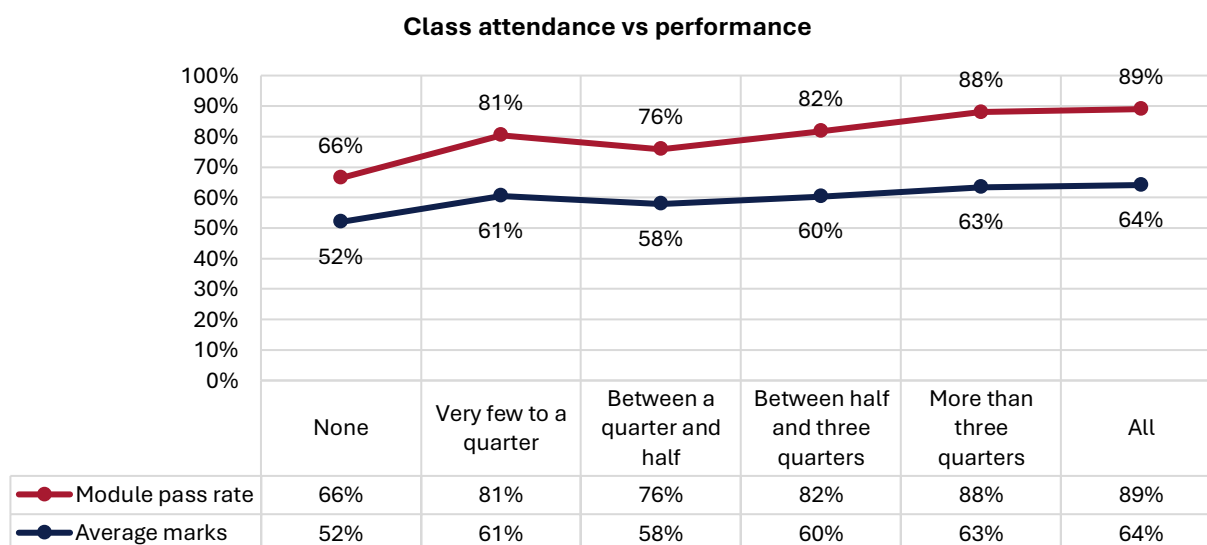
The following is put forward as a student definition of class attendance:

Class attendance is a synchronous online or face-to-face activity where lecturers and students share personal experiences and practical examples beyond the prescribed textbook or content of the module. This enhances students’ understanding of the module and prepares them for the assessments. Class attendance requires participation and engagement from students in various ways, such as asking questions, interacting with the lecturer and peers, taking notes and actively listening. Classes are scheduled and students’ presence is recorded in some way.

## 4. Class attendance and academic performance

### 4.1 Relationship between class attendance and academic performance

**Figure 9** shows the relationship between class attendance and academic performance based on a comparative analysis of the module pass rate and class attendance, as well as average marks and class attendance. Data were analysed by calculating the overall module pass rate and average final marks of students in different categories of class attendance frequency (e.g., those who attend none of their classes, those who indicated that they attend very few to a quarter of their classes etc. up to those who indicated that they attend all of their classes). Students who attend all their classes obtain higher module pass rates (89%) than students who do not attend any of their classes (66%). Additionally, students who attend all their classes have a higher total average mark (64%) than students who do not attend any of their classes (52%). Even when comparing academic performance of students who attend all their classes with those who attend more than 75% of their classes, but not all of their classes, students who attend all their classes fare better.



**Figure 9: Relationship between class attendance and academic performance**

**Table 2** provides a breakdown of the relationship between class attendance and academic performance per faculty and campus. Students who attend all their classes have significantly higher module average marks than those who do not in all faculties except the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Theology and Religion. In four of the seven faculties, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between the module pass rate of students who attend

class compared to those who do not. There is a significant positive correlation between class attendance and module pass rate on all three campuses, and on the Bloemfontein and South campuses there is also a significant positive correlation between class attendance and average module marks. However, on the Qwaqwa campus, there is a positive, non-significant, correlation between class attendance and average module marks. It is important to note that the correlation coefficients in most cases, though significant, are weak. This indicates that although there is a relationship between class attendance and academic performance, other variables likely also play a role in academic performance. We know that academic performance is complex, with many factors that influence it, so this is not particularly surprising. However, it is worth noting that there is a definite relationship between class attendance and academic performance.

**Table 2: Relationship between class attendance and academic performance per faculty and campus**

	Nr of respondents (n)	Correlation		p-value		Significant
		Passed Modules	Avg Module Marks	Module pass rate	Avg Module Marks	
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2730</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>4.0e-16</b>	<b>2.3e-18</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Faculty</b>						
EMS	602	0.11	0.10	0.01	0.02	Yes
EDU	523	0.15	0.15	5.1e-04	7.8e-04	Yes
HSC	100	-0.03	0.17	0.76	0.16	No
HUM	590	0.21	0.17	4.3e-07	4.1e-05	Yes
LAW	244	0.09	0.15	0.16	0.02	Partially
NAS	641	0.16	0.17	7.2e-05	2.0e-05	Yes
THL	30	-0.11	0.05	0.56	0.78	No
<b>Campus</b>						
BFN	1876	0.16	0.19	1.5e-12	2.4e-17	Yes
QWAQWA	497	0.11	0.08	0.02	0.09	Partially
SOUTH	348	0.26	0.22	7.9e-07	3.4e-05	Yes

## 4.2 Relationship between Blackboard engagement and academic performance

**Table 3** shows the relationship between total time spent on asynchronous activities on Blackboard and academic performance. Total asynchronous activity on Blackboard includes engaging with content (e.g., items on Blackboard, files, audio, video etc.), and asynchronous interaction (e.g., discussion boards and wikis). There is a statistically significant positive correlation between asynchronous activity on Blackboard and module pass rates in all faculties

except the Faculty of Health Sciences (although in both these cases, there is a non-significant positive correlation). In four of the seven faculties there is a statistically significant positive relationship between asynchronous activity on Blackboard and average module marks, in the remaining three faculties there is a non-significant positive correlation. When comparing campuses, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between time spent on asynchronous activities on Blackboard and both module pass rate and average final marks on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses. On the South campus, there is a non-significant positive relationship between asynchronous activity on Blackboard and module pass rate, as well as average module marks.

**Table 3: Relationship between asynchronous activity on Blackboard and performance per faculty and campus**

	Correlation		p-value		Significant
	Module pass rate	Avg Module Marks)	Module pass rate	Avg Module Marks)	
<b>Overall</b>	0.12	0.12	9.0e-11	9.0e-11	Yes
<b>Faculty</b>					
<b>EMS</b>	0.25	0.25	6.4e-10	2.9e-10	Yes
<b>EDU</b>	0.11	0.03	0.02	0.53	Partially
<b>HSC</b>	0.11	0.17	0.28	0.09	No
<b>HUM</b>	0.17	0.20	2.4e-05	6.2e-07	Yes
<b>LAW</b>	0.20	0.31	1.6e-03	8.9e-07	Yes
<b>NAS</b>	0.08	0.15	0.03	1e-04	Yes
<b>THL</b>	0.59	0.66	6.8e-04	8.4e-05	Yes
<b>Campus</b>					
<b>BFN</b>	0.14	0.13	3.1e-09	4.1e-09	Yes
<b>QWAQWA</b>	0.11	0.12	0.02	8.6e-03	Yes
<b>SOUTH</b>	0.01	0.02	0.89	0.71	No

**Table 4** shows the relationship between time spent synchronous Blackboard activity (i.e., Class Collaborate) and academic performance. Although there is an overall positive significant correlation between synchronous Blackboard activity and academic performance, only in two faculties (Economic and Management Sciences and Education) and on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses do we see a significant positive correlation between synchronous Blackboard activity and both module pass rates and average marks. In the Faculty of the Humanities, there is only a significant positive correlation between synchronous Blackboard activity and average module marks but the correlation is not significant between synchronous Blackboard activity and module pass rate (although the slope is positive). The remaining faculties, as well as the South campus results show a positive correlation between synchronous Blackboard activity and academic performance (both metrics) but this correlation is insignificant.

**Table 4: Relationship between synchronous Blackboard activity and academic performance per faculty and campus**

	Correlation		p-value		Significant
	Module pass rate	Avg Module Marks)	Module pass rate	Avg Module Marks)	
<b>Overall</b>	0.11	0.17	2.3e-07	7.6e17	Yes
<b>Faculty</b>					
<b>EMS</b>	0.19	0.33	2.2e-05	2.0e-14	Yes
<b>EDU</b>	0.14	0.18	1.5e-03	8.3e-05	Yes
<b>HSC</b>	0.10	0.14	0.36	0.19	No
<b>HUM</b>	0.04	0.13	0.38	0.01	Partially
<b>LAW</b>	0.00	0.07	0.95	0.25	No
<b>NAS</b>	0.05	0.04	0.29	0.36	No
<b>THL</b>	0.32	0.16	0.15	0.49	No
<b>Campus</b>					
<b>BFN</b>	0.11	0.19	2.4e-05	4.3e-14	Yes
<b>QWAQWA</b>	0.10	0.12	0.04	0.01	Yes
<b>SOUTH</b>	0.12	0.10	0.07	0.14	No

### 4.3 Practical implications

The data indicates a strong positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance across most faculties and campuses. Students who attend all their classes have significantly higher module pass rates (89% vs. 66%) and average marks (64% vs. 52%) compared to those who do not attend any classes. It is important to note that the correlation between class attendance and academic performance does not automatically imply causality. While it is possible that regular class attendance can contribute to academic success, it can also mean that students who are already performing well academically are more motivated to attend class.

Similarly, increased engagement with asynchronous activities on the institutional Learning Management System (LMS), such as Blackboard, is correlated with better academic outcomes. In several faculties and campuses, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between time spent on these activities and both module pass rates and average marks. This suggests that students can benefit from interacting with online content and participating in discussions outside of scheduled class times. The relationship between synchronous online activities and academic performance is also noteworthy. Although significant correlations are observed primarily in the Faculties of Economic and Management Sciences and Education, as well as on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses, the positive trends indicate that real-time online interactions can enhance learning for certain student groups. Similarly to the relationship between class attendance and academic performance, it should be mentioned again that correlation does not

automatically imply causality. It is possible that students who are already performing well are more engaged on Blackboard as well. However, even the latter is the case, it does tell us something about the profile and behaviours of a student who performs well academically.

These findings highlight the necessity for an enabling blended learning environment that supports both in-person and online educational experiences. To facilitate this, it is recommended that the following tools be leveraged to create an optimal blended learning environment:

- **Institutional LMS:** Enhance the LMS to better support asynchronous learning activities, content delivery, and student engagement.
- **Cirrus for Online Assessment:** Implement Cirrus to streamline and secure online assessments, providing timely feedback to students.
- **Class 2.0 for Synchronous Online Activity:** Utilise Class 2.0 to improve real-time online interactions, making virtual classes more interactive and accessible.
- **Panopto for Large Classes:** Adopt Panopto for recording lectures and managing large classes, allowing students to revisit complex material at their own pace.
- **Feedback Fruits for Participation and Engagement:** Incorporate Feedback Fruits to foster active participation and deeper engagement with course content through interactive assignments and peer feedback.

By integrating these tools into the learning ecosystem, the university can create a more flexible and holistic educational environment. This approach not only caters to diverse learning preferences but also encourages consistent engagement, thereby potentially improving academic performance across all faculties and campuses.

## 5. Discussion of results

The findings from the survey on student class attendance at the UFS post-COVID indicate notable changes in attendance patterns and motivations. Most notably, 59% of students reported attending all formal classes, a significant increase compared to only 27% in the 2019 survey. It is observed that students attending more than 75% of their classes were more engaged with both synchronous and asynchronous Blackboard activities compared to those with lower attendance, hinting at a positive relationship between class attendance and engagement with learning tools.

The preference for face-to-face classes remains dominant, with 54% of respondents favouring in-person lectures. Despite the growth of online and blended learning, this trend highlights a sustained value that students place on physical classroom settings, potentially linked to factors such as better engagement with peers and instructors or the structured learning environment that in-person classes provide. How classes are structured and presented, however, also play an important role in whether students choose to attend class or not.

The comparison of attendance preferences between students who attend all their classes and those who do not revealed nuanced differences. While both groups acknowledged that gaining a better understanding of content was a key motivator, those attending all classes also placed more emphasis on keeping up with coursework and gaining insight into essential concepts. For students with lower attendance, practical factors such as getting test scopes and lectures being compulsory played a greater role. These findings suggest that students who regularly attend are more intrinsically motivated by learning outcomes, whereas those with inconsistent attendance are influenced more by extrinsic requirements or convenience.

The relationship between attendance and academic performance is also noteworthy. Students who attended all their classes consistently achieved higher module pass rates and total average marks compared to those who attended less frequently. This positive correlation is indicative of the importance of regular attendance in supporting student success, possibly due to more opportunities for interaction, real-time feedback, and clarification of difficult concepts. Furthermore, the analysis of Blackboard usage showed that students with high attendance rates also spent more time engaging with both asynchronous and synchronous activities, further supporting the link between participation and better academic outcomes.

The survey also revealed persistent barriers to class attendance. The top reasons for absenteeism remained consistent with those identified in 2019, including the need to study for other subjects, completing assignments, and poor instruction methods. In the 2024 survey, mental health challenges emerged as a significant factor, with several students mentioning anxiety and depression as reasons for missing classes. This highlights the ongoing need for mental health support services within the university to help students balance their academic responsibilities with personal well-being. The preference for self-study, also cited as a reason for absenteeism, indicates that some students may find independent learning more effective or less stressful than traditional lectures, suggesting a need for more flexible learning options.

In terms of practical implications, these findings offer valuable insights for enhancing teaching and learning practices at UFS. The preference for face-to-face classes and the higher engagement observed among students attending regularly underscore the importance of maintaining a strong in-person teaching component. However, despite students' preferences for face-to-face learning the analyses showing the positive relationship between academic performance and not only in-person class attendance but also engagement on Blackboard, emphasises the importance of creating an enabling blended learning environment at the UFS. In terms of the way classes are presented, efforts should be made to ensure that lectures are interactive, engaging, and well-organised to maintain high attendance levels. Additionally, targeted support could be provided to students facing mental health challenges or struggling with balancing their academic workload.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Although the sample size of over 3,000 students is substantial, it represents only about 10% of the undergraduate population at UFS. Moreover, the sample is skewed towards students who attend class more frequently, as these students are likely more engaged and therefore more inclined to complete surveys. This bias does not diminish the value of the findings but instead provides a clearer picture of the experiences and motivations of students who do attend classes. While lecturers anecdotally report that many students do not attend class or do not actively participate, these results do not necessarily contradict those observations. Instead, they shed light on the experiences of those who do attend, offering insights into what drives their attendance and engagement.

A second phase of this research will commence in 2025 which will include a more in-depth, qualitative exploration of students' motivations behind class attendance and reasons for absenteeism. This phase of the research will also include experiences of staff to gain a more balanced and holistic understanding of class attendance and its effects at the UFS.

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## Appendix A

### CLASS ATTENDANCE QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Section 1: Informed consent

We ask for your student number in this survey to link your responses to institutional data, however, your responses will be anonymised before we report on the results of the survey. We will not identify you in any reports or publications. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty. Your responses will not be included in the analysis if you withdraw from the survey without submitting your answers.

Do you agree to participate in this survey on class attendance at the University of the Free State?

Yes/ No (if 'no' is selected, the participant is routed out of the survey)

#### Section 2: Class types

1) Please provide your student number:

2) Do you attend ALL your formal classes? Yes  No  (If yes, route to section 4 and skip section 3 and rest of section 2)

3) If no, which percentage of your classes do you attend: none; 1-25% (very few – a quarter); 26-49% (between a quarter and half); 50 – 75% (between half and three quarters), 76% - 99% (more than three quarters) (if 'none' skip section 3 and skip rest of section 2)

4) How many of your classes are face-to-face? None; none; 1-25% (very few – a quarter); 26-49% (between a quarter and half); 50 – 75% (between half and three quarters), 76% - 99% (more than three quarters); all

5) How many of your classes are online? None; none; 1-25% (very few – a quarter); 26-49% (between a quarter and half); 50 – 75% (between half and three quarters), 76% - 99% (more than three quarters); all

6) How many of your classes are hybrid/blended (combination of face-to-face and online components)? None; none; 1-25% (very few – a quarter); 26-49% (between a quarter and half); 50 – 75% (between half and three quarters), 76% - 99% (more than three quarters); all

7) In how many modules can you download or watch lecture recordings (e.g., Blackboard Collaborate recordings or lecture videos uploaded by the lecturer)? None; none; 1-25% (very few – a quarter); 26-49% (between a quarter and half); 50 – 75% (between half and three quarters), 76% - 99% (more than three quarters); all

8. Which type of classes do you prefer? Face-to-face, online, blended, no preference

### Section 3: Reasons for absenteeism

9. Research has shown that the list below are reasons why other students don't go to class. WHICH OF THESE REASONS ARE APPLICABLE TO YOU WHEN YOU ***DON'T GO TO CLASS?***

	Never a reason for me	Sometimes a reason for me	Often a reason for me	Very often a reason for me
I work full time or part time				
I need to study for other subjects' tests				
I am doing other subjects' assignments				
When I fall behind and I need to catch up on academic work				
I oversleep				
I do not get enough sleep				
I struggle to balance my personal and academic time				
I'm not in the mood for class				
I'm hanging out with friends				
I have other university-related responsibilities (e.g. sport, cultural activities, residence committees, student societies, etc.)				
I am not interested in the subject				
Illness or other health issues				
Traffic or transport problems (excluding the cost of transport)				
Family responsibilities (e.g. having to take care of siblings, children, or other responsibilities)				
Financial issues impacting class attendance (e.g. not having money for transport; having to look for work in order to buy food; feeling self-aware because of clothing)				
Class attendance is not compulsory so I don't have to go to class				
Timetable clashes				
Attending lectures makes no difference in the marks I achieve				
If I'm already failing a subject I stop attending				
When the subject is easy I don't go to class				
The lectures are boring				
Lecturers using poor teaching skills (e.g. just reading slides, not using relevant examples, not prepared)				
The lecture content is irrelevant/useless for my future work aspirations				
The content and the way it is presented is not preparing me for the required assessments				
The lecture content is not challenging				
I don't like the lecturer				
There are no negative consequences if I don't go to class				

	Never a reason for me	Sometimes a reason for me	Often a reason for me	Very often a reason for me
Breaks before or after class are too long (which means I have to hang around campus)				
I am able to get contents of lectures on Blackboard or other means (e.g. from friends, handouts, module guide)				
I prefer self-study				
The time which classes are scheduled (too early or too late in the day)				
The size of the class (overcrowded)				

10) Any other reasons not included in the list above? Please specify.

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11) From the list of reasons provided in question 2, please indicate the **top 5** reasons why you **don't** attend classes

#### Section4: Reasons to attend class

12. Research suggests that the list below are reasons other students have given why they *choose to go to class*. WHICH OF THESE REASONS ARE APPLICABLE TO YOU **WHEN YOU CHOOSE TO GO TO CLASS?**

	Not applicable at all to me	Somewhat applicable to me	Applicable to me	Very much applicable to me
I find classes interesting				
Class attendance is compulsory				
I get marks for class attendance				
New material is introduced in class				
The lecturer provides practical examples of applying information				
The lecturer relates content to real world issues				
When lectures are clear and organised				
To gain a greater understanding of the topic/module content				
To get test/exam scopes				
Additional explanations are given which are not in the textbook				
The lecturer makes students aware of the most important concepts				
To benefit from the interaction with other students in class				
To keep up to date with the work				
To learn how to answer test/exam questions				

	Not applicable at all to me	Somewhat applicable to me	Applicable to me	Very much applicable to me
My marks are better when I attend class				
To catch up with my friends				
To make contact with group members for group projects				
To participate in hands-on exercises or practical examples				
To participate in interactive discussions				
To participate in community-based projects or service-learning activities				

13) Any other reasons not included in the list above? Please specify.

---

14) From the list of reasons provided in question 2, please indicate the **top 5** reasons why you **attend** classes

**Section 5: Class attendance definition**

15. What is your definition of class attendance? (describe what you view as ‘class attendance’ in no more than 100 words)

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Thank you for your participation!!

## Appendix B

Reasons why students attend class per faculty and campus (top five reasons highlighted per faculty and campus)

	EMS	EDU	Health	HUM	Law	NAS	TLR	BFN	QQ	South
I find classes interesting	68%	76%	61%	73%	66%	68%	75%	69%	76%	71%
Class attendance is compulsory	71%	81%	99%	76%	55%	84%	88%	75%	80%	83%
I get marks for class attendance	56%	69%	37%	63%	38%	53%	65%	54%	67%	64%
New material is introduced in class	74%	82%	78%	76%	75%	79%	86%	77%	80%	79%
The lecturer provides practical examples of applying information	74%	79%	82%	80%	75%	74%	88%	76%	82%	75%
The lecturer relates content to real world issues	70%	80%	76%	78%	68%	64%	88%	72%	80%	68%
When lectures are clear and organised	77%	81%	73%	79%	79%	74%	82%	76%	83%	77%
To gain a greater understanding of the topic/module content	84%	91%	80%	84%	87%	81%	90%	84%	90%	83%
To get test/exam scopes	59%	75%	75%	72%	80%	75%	86%	71%	71%	73%
Additional explanations are given which are not in the textbook	71%	80%	73%	76%	76%	76%	84%	74%	80%	77%
The lecturer makes students aware of the most important concepts	82%	85%	89%	84%	85%	88%	87%	84%	88%	86%
To benefit from the interaction with other students in class	55%	70%	57%	62%	52%	53%	82%	56%	72%	58%
To keep up to date with the work	78%	89%	75%	79%	76%	78%	92%	78%	88%	80%
To learn how to answer test/exam questions	80%	81%	75%	81%	82%	79%	88%	79%	83%	81%
My marks are better when I attend class	61%	68%	56%	63%	57%	58%	71%	59%	72%	64%
To catch up with my friends	17%	24%	41%	20%	17%	23%	46%	20%	24%	26%
To make contact with group members for group projects	48%	65%	54%	48%	24%	44%	69%	44%	63%	56%
To participate in hands-on exercises or practical examples	57%	64%	72%	56%	38%	58%	76%	54%	66%	62%
To participate in interactive discussions	54%	65%	52%	60%	46%	47%	78%	52%	68%	58%
To participate in community-based projects or service-learning activities	33%	46%	55%	39%	29%	32%	60%	34%	49%	43%

## Appendix C

Reasons why students miss class per faculty and campus (top five reasons highlighted per faculty and campus)

	EMS	EDU	Health	HUM	Law	NAS	TLR	BFN	QQ	South
I work full time or part time	9%	9%	0%	13%	8%	8%	22%	10%	11%	5%
I need to study for other subjects' tests	62%	46%	76%	59%	71%	60%	80%	62%	56%	49%
I am doing other subjects' assignments	41%	44%	41%	54%	65%	33%	40%	48%	45%	33%
When I fall behind and I need to catch up on academic work	60%	46%	53%	55%	64%	49%	70%	57%	53%	46%
I oversleep	14%	19%	24%	15%	14%	17%	40%	16%	21%	12%
I do not get enough sleep	23%	27%	41%	30%	24%	29%	30%	26%	28%	31%
I struggle to balance my personal and academic time	32%	29%	29%	27%	29%	28%	0%	28%	28%	34%
I'm not in the mood for class	12%	14%	18%	17%	12%	15%	20%	14%	13%	14%
I'm hanging out with friends	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%
I have other university-related responsibilities (e.g. sport, cultural activities, residence committees, student societies, etc.)	3%	3%	1%	4%	6%	2%	2%	4%	2%	3%
I am not interested in the subject	7%	4%	18%	4%	3%	7%	20%	6%	3%	9%
Illness or other health issues	16%	21%	24%	26%	17%	20%	40%	20%	18%	27%
Traffic or transport problems (excluding the cost of transport)	8%	18%	0%	12%	7%	11%	9%	8%	22%	14%
Family responsibilities (e.g. having to take care of siblings, children, or other responsibilities)	1%	11%	6%	8%	4%	4%	0%	5%	7%	5%
Financial issues impacting class attendance (e.g. not having money for transport; having to look for work in order to buy food; feeling self-aware because of clothing)	17%	24%	12%	21%	13%	14%	18%	17%	20%	22%
Class attendance is not compulsory so I don't have to go to class	10%	10%	6%	11%	12%	9%	20%	12%	5%	6%
Timetable clashes	14%	17%	0%	21%	10%	17%	20%	14%	30%	14%
Attending lectures makes no difference in the marks I achieve	24%	21%	53%	25%	22%	21%	20%	24%	20%	24%
If I'm already failing a subject I stop attending	9%	7%	0%	4%	4%	6%	20%	6%	5%	7%
When the subject is easy I don't go to class	13%	11%	6%	10%	7%	7%	10%	10%	10%	5%
The lectures are boring	16%	12%	41%	17%	9%	17%	30%	16%	10%	18%
Lecturers using poor teaching skills (e.g. just reading slides, not using relevant examples, not prepared)	42%	33%	41%	41%	34%	38%	50%	40%	32%	37%
The lecture content is irrelevant for my future work aspirations	7%	9%	0%	7%	4%	7%	0%	7%	5%	9%
The content and the way it is presented is not preparing me for the required assessments	21%	16%	6%	19%	16%	14%	40%	18%	14%	18%
The lecture content is not challenging	7%	9%	0%	5%	5%	3%	0%	6%	5%	6%
I don't like the lecturer	3%	1%	0%	3%	2%	3%	0%	3%	1%	1%
There are no negative consequences if I don't go to class	10%	10%	0%	7%	7%	9%	10%	8%	11%	9%
Breaks before or after class are too long (which means I have to hang around campus)	24%	25%	12%	23%	30%	25%	60%	26%	19%	26%
I am able to get contents of lectures on Blackboard or other means (e.g. from friends, handouts, module guide)	26%	25%	24%	28%	28%	20%	10%	27%	24%	16%
I prefer self-study	47%	43%	53%	51%	47%	44%	40%	48%	41%	43%
The time which classes are scheduled (too early or too late in the day)	33%	34%	29%	31%	35%	31%	60%	34%	28%	28%
The size of the class (overcrowded)	18%	21%	21%	19%	17%	13%	0%	8%	17%	11%