*Presentation*

# “Why don’t my students come to class?”

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**Abstract**

Students' academic success is positively correlated with attending teaching activities. Despite this, not all students attend regularly. As a teacher, having students not show up may feel like a personal failure; is it my teaching that is uninspiring (blame the teacher)? Or are the students just lazy (blame the students)? Perhaps the students don’t think attendance is important to academic success (blame the education system)? Or do they have to prioritize other activities, such as work (blame socio-economic factors)? Maybe they have health issues (blame bad luck)? In this study we explore the answers from 54 students in the geoscience bachelor program at the University of Oslo to a survey on their views on attendance, and their reasons for attending or not attending. We use inductive thematic analysis to investigate what entices students to attend and what makes them stay away, and discuss potential measures to increase attendance.

Nøkkelord:
Student attendance, academic success, geoscience education, inductive thematic analysis

# 1 Introduction

In discussions among geoscience instructors at the University of Oslo following the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been increasing concern about students not attending teaching activities such as lectures and practicals. Most of us see a strong correlation between student attendance and student retention and success. This should come as no surprise; in a meta-study of the importance of class attendance, Credé et al. (2010) found that "*class attendance [is] a better predictor of college grades than any other known predictor of academic performance, including scores on standardized admissions tests such as the SAT, high school GPA, study habits, and study skills*".

This testifies to the many benefits of attending teaching activities, from supporting students in managing their time to cognitive (learning), social (collaborating and building relationships and networks) and affective benefits (engagement, identity and belonging). While it may be reassuring for teachers that class attendance makes a difference, it makes it that much more concerning when students are absent. Indeed, in the two 1st year geoscience courses is not uncommon that up to one third of the students are absent from any given lecture.

In the 1st year of the geoscience bachelor, the importance of attendance for success is repeatedly brought up, both during the introduction to the bachelor program and at the start of the introductory geoscience courses. So why don't all students attend all teaching activities all the time? A study of class attendance from the US asking 333 students about 1633 courses (in social sciences) suggests that attendance was unrelated to age, gender, distance of living quarters to campus, tuition fees, or the number of credits the students enrolled for. In fact, the authors found that the one thing attendance correlated to was the grade point average (GPA) - and who is to say if this reflects that successful students tend to attend class, or that students who attend class tend to become successful (Friedman et al. 2001)?

This piqued our interest - what about our students? We decided to try to find out what the students think about class attendance, and if there potentially is something we can do to improve attendance rates. Our research question is therefore: what are students' reasons for attending or not attending geoscience classes at Oslo University?

# 2 Method

It is difficult to ask students who do not show up why they are absent. We therefore decided to use the first lecture of the semester, which is mandatory, to ask students about their attendance in the previous semester. In January 2024, we asked teachers of bachelor-level geoscience courses to provide their students with a voluntary anonymous survey regarding their class attendance, and reasons for attending or not attending. Eighty-seven students who took bachelor courses during the semester were invited to participate in the survey, and 54 responded. Here we present answers to 6 closed questions and 2 open questions (Figure 1 and 2).

In April 2024 the authors of this paper met up for a workshop (9 geoscience teachers and 1 administrative staff) and performed an inductive thematic analysis of the text answers to the open questions (building on Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The answers given by the students were short and to the point, and each answer was split into the specific reasons. In all, the answers provided 117 reasons for why students attend classes and 97 for why students do not attend classes. These reasons were then coded at a semantic level (but screened for irony and similar). The workshop participants divided into three groups to organise these reasons into themes, which were subsequently compared and discussed. Some preliminary results from our workshop are presented below.

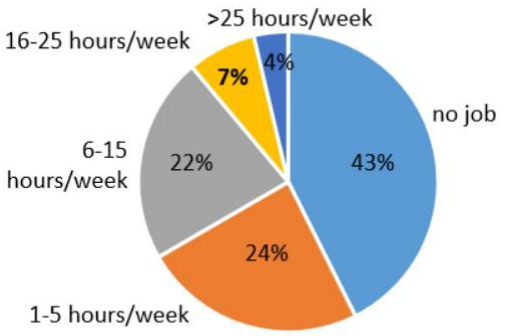
The research did not require approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) since all data were gathered anonymously. The open answers were screened by AML and KB for information that might inadvertently reveal the identities of the respondents prior to thematic analysis.

# 3 Results

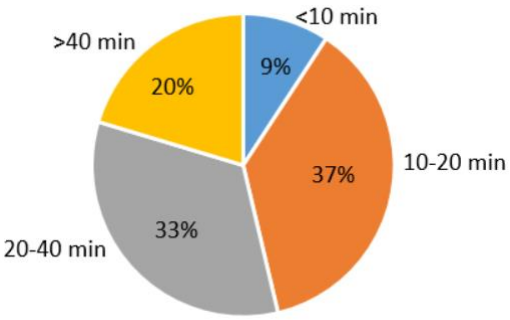
## *3.1 Quantitative questions*

Of the 54 respondents 42 had signed up for 30 ECTS (corresponding to a full-time study progression) in the previous semester (fall of 2023), 4 had signed up for fewer and 6 for more credits. Fifty-seven percent of the students worked during the semester (Figure 1). More than half of the students (54%) reported living more than 20 minutes travel distance from lectures. Nearly all respondents thought it was very important or important to attend lectures (96%), and most respondents thought it was very important or important to attend other non-compulsory teaching activities such as exercises and labs (70%). When asked to reflect on a specific geoscience course from the previous semester and the grade they aspired to achieve, most respondents had aimed for a C, corresponding to an average performance (54%) or better (37%). When asked about how many lectures they attended in that specific geoscience course, 70% indicated that they had attended most lectures, but 20% had attended less than half.

a) Do you work outside studies?




b) How long is your commute?




c) How important do you think it is to attend lectures (very important [light blue] to very unimportant [dark blue])?

d) How important do you think it is to attend other non-compulsory course activities (very important [light blue] to very unimportant [dark blue])?

Think of a geo-course last semester:

e) What minimum grade were you aiming for in that course (A [light blue] to E [dark blue])?

f) How many of the lectures did you attend (just the 1st; <half; >half; most).

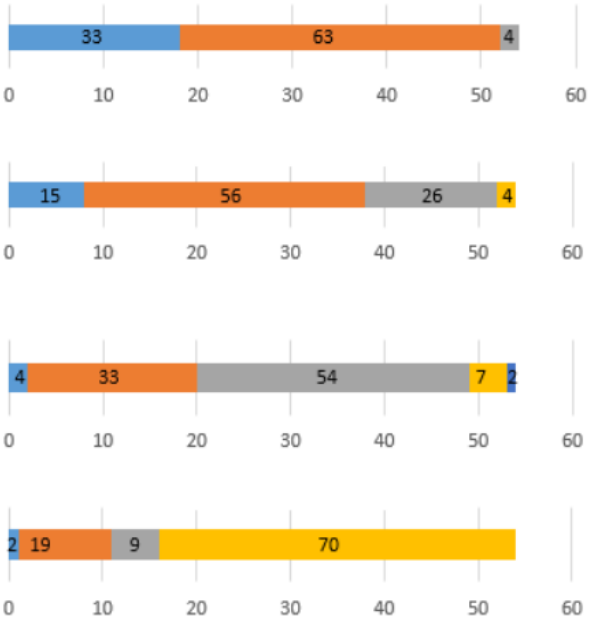



*Figure 1. Responses to survey questions on work outside studies; commute time; perceived importance of attending lectures; perceived importance of attending other non-obligatory teaching activities; aspiration for grade in previous geo-course; approximate lecture attendance in that course. All pie and bar diagrams nominally show 5 ranges as denoted by colours (from light blue, via orange, grey, and yellow to dark blue) and labels. Absence of a colour field indicates zero responses in that range. Bar diagrams show number of responses (x axis) and % responses (in diagram).*

## *3.2 Open questions*

The three workshop groups made three different thematic analyses that were compared and discussed. One group also mapped out relations between themes based on the discussion, and organised these around the value students see of attending, and their ability to attend (Figure 2).

The value students see of attending lectures include both intrinsic ("*it's fun*" was mentioned by 7 respondents) and extrinsic motivations ("*to know what was relevant for the exam*" was mentioned by 5 respondents). Many respondents highlight positive social

aspects (n=16), but some also note social pressure, "*it's noticeable when I'm not there*" and it is "*important to come to not affect others negatively*". The respondents also see a unique value in attending lectures that include e.g. the possibility to ask questions, understand what is expected of students in the course, take part in practical demonstrations, and learning from the teacher ("*easier to understand the teacher than the book*"). Several students also mention that attending helps them structure their studies ("*force myself to not fall behind*"; n=6).

On the flip side, lectures can be boring (n=9) or difficult to understand (n=3). Health features prominently as a reason not to attend (n=11), as does work (n=9) and commuting (n=6). Several respondents reported aspects of teaching organisation at the department as reasons for not attending, including scheduling collisions, e.g. with deadlines for obligatory assignments, that they prioritized some courses over others due to the workload, or that early morning lectures made it difficult to attend (n=13). Some respondents state that they were simply lazy (n=1) or prioritised leisure (n=4).

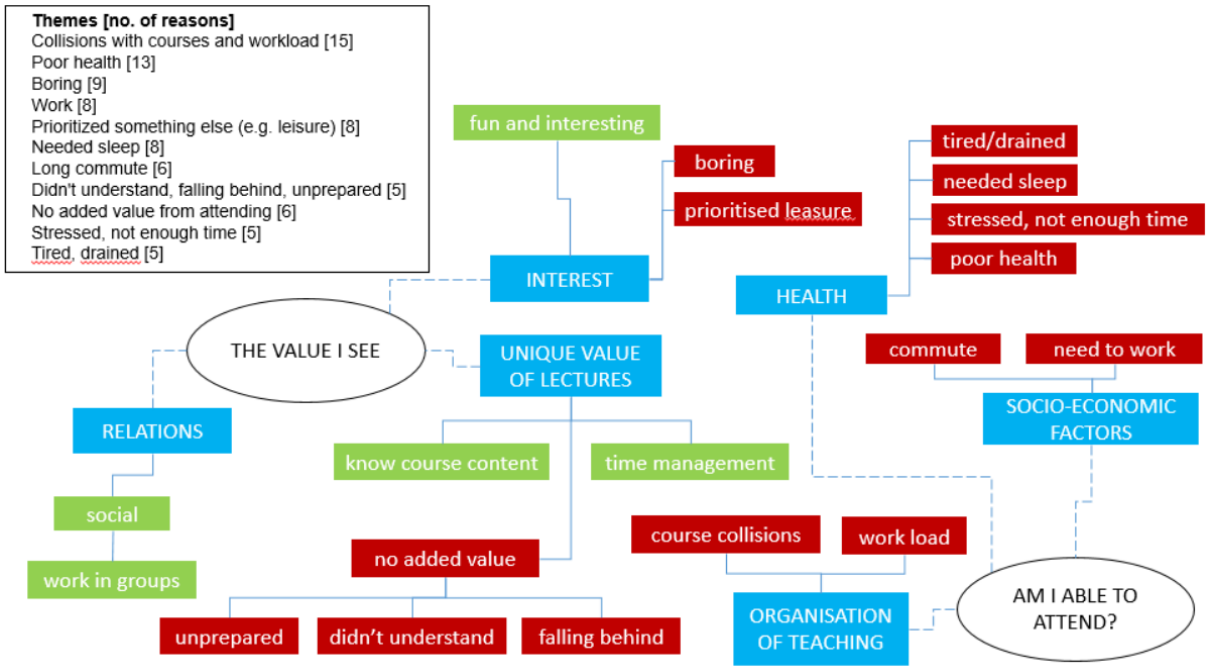



*Figure 2. Themes from "why I do attend" (green boxes), and from "why I don't attend" (red boxes), forming overarching topics (capitalized, blue boxes). These in turn reflect the value the students see in attending on the one hand, and impediments to attending on the other (dashed lines). Inset shows example of themes from "why I don't attend".*

# 4 Discussion

## *4.1 Why do students (not) attend classes?*

Our results show that the students share our view that lecture attendance is very important or important (96% of respondents). The main reasons that students give for attending are related to interest and enjoyment, building and maintaining relations, and profiting from the unique value of lectures.

The self-reported attendance, on the other hand, reveals a bimodal distribution where most students (70%) attend most lectures, but a significant minority (20%) report that they attended less than half of the lectures. In this group, 9 of 10 students report that they think attending lectures is important or very important, only one report thinking it is neither important nor unimportant. Also, all but one report that they aimed for a C grade, with one student aiming for a B. So why didn't these students attend more lectures?

Two students reported that work stopped them from attending, one of them also had parental duties. For one student it was a combination of a long commute and early morning lectures. Two reported that they struggled with understanding the lectures (one fell behind, the other struggled with the language). Two reported that the lectures were boring, and one of these felt they could do better studying on their own. One of them had issues with course collisions, one simply prioritized other courses in the semester, and one dropped out of the course.

These results are similar to the overall picture painted by the respondents: when students do not attend lectures, it tends to reflect health reasons, socio-economic reasons (working and commuting), and how the teaching is organised (scheduling and workload). However, finding the lectures boring and prioritizing leisure also makes some students skip lectures.

### *4.2 Can we improve student attendance?*

Our results suggest that there is no silver bullet to increase student attendance; illness, having to work and long commutes mostly fall outside of what teachers and the department can directly influence. The solution for students having to work to get by in Oslo is increasing student grants from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånekassen). Even so, the department could provide more opportunities for students to work as research and teaching assistants, work that can support geoscience learning rather than hinder it. Similarly, though broken legs and colds are a fact of life, teachers and the department can support students in dealing with and reducing stress. One way could be to support students to become more efficient at learning and in managing their studies, e.g. by employing senior students to share their best study habits with new students, and giving students explicit advice and examples in the 1st year courses.

The organisation of teaching at the department can (at least partially) be addressed by teachers, e.g. by making sure that major project deliveries and obligatory course work are spaced out. However, the collisions between courses some students refer to likely reflect that they do not follow the intended study progression; collision proofing all subjects across the bachelor is simply not possible. One partial remedy that is mentioned by some students is video-recording lectures. However, many of us teachers have the suspicion that though this would be helpful for students who cannot attend, it may reduce attendance even further among those who can. The suggestion of making lessons mandatory was raised in our discussions. The upshot is evident, all students who wish to pass a course must attend. Yet this would stop students who can only attend some lectures due to e.g. work or having parental responsibilities from even attempting to take our courses.

Also, Self Determination Theory, widely used to investigate and explain motivation, suggests that making lessons mandatory could reduce the intrinsic motivation to participate (i.e., it is less fun to do something you are forced to do than something you choose to do; Deci and Ryan 2012). Another argument against mandatory attendance is

that students should be given the opportunity to learn and practice self-regulation, i.e., setting goals, exercise control, monitor progress, evaluate and adjust when necessary (Wingate, 2007). Despite these arguments, mandatory attendance does appear to have small positive impacts on grades (Credé et al. 2019). Also, anecdotal evidence gathered from conversations with students at the iEarth Geolearning Forum 2024 in Tromsø suggests that many of them had a favourable view of the mandatory attendance policy at their department.

In all, three students reported struggling with understanding the lectures, two of them attended less than half of the lectures, and (partly) attributed this to falling behind and struggling with the language. Neither reason implies that the students cannot become accomplished geoscientists; our results hints that we could look for students who struggle among those who fail to attend lectures regularly, to provide support.

The final point to raise is the potential to build on the values the students see in attending. By leveraging interest, relations and the unique values of lectures to students we can increase the motivation to attend, and try to address the "boring" aspects of teaching. That said, it is unlikely that all the things we expect a geoscientist to learn can be intrinsically interesting to all students, luckily, we're all different! This should not stop us from trying!

# Acknowledgment

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# Referances

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