.Individual and Learning Environment Factors Influencing Attendance Decisions within an Irish College of Further Education

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OFSTED	Office for Standards of Education, Children's Services and Skills
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
TEL	Technology Enhanced Learning

Abstract

Many educational institutions today are concerned with rising levels of learner absenteeism. Research has shown that increased absenteeism can negatively impact on learning for those absent whilst simultaneously proving disruptive to those present. Research into attendance in an Irish context is limited and within the further education sector is scant. This research aims to explore a number of factors relevant to topic of absenteeism and asks 'What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education?' The review of literature assisted in identifying potentially significant factors that were investigated through the use of a survey questionnaire completed by respondents selected using convenience sampling within an Irish college of Further Education. The resultant data was subjected to statistical methods to identify a range of factors influencing learner attendance. Individual factors found to influence attendance decisions include age, first language, place of residence, commute time and work status. Learning environment factors found to influence learner attendance decisions include assignment pressures, the quality of learner-teacher relationships, the nature of the course being undertaken and the availability of a virtual learning environment. Further education colleges are already engaging in practices designed to improve learner attendance and these need to be reinforced, for example, integration of assessments to reduce assignment pressure. However, there are further actions that colleges could take that may impact positively on learner attendance decisions, for example improved pre-entry information for learners and improved policies to address the issue of late assignments.

Keywords: Attendance, absenteeism, Further Education, Ireland, individual learner, educational environment, NFQ

Introduction

This chapter provides some background to the research problem, the context within which the aims and objectives of the research were identified, a summary of the research approach taken and an outline of the structure of the dissertation.

Absenteeism, in the context of education, refers to a failure to regularly "attend timetabled sessions such as seminars, lectures, and practical or laboratory classes" (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, p. 228). Absenteeism has been researched as far back as the early 1990's in the United States and is now an issue of global concern (Ekstrand, 2015). Barlow and Fleischer (2011), citing Longhurst (1999), define the problem as follows "Student absenteeism is a matter of concern because it can result in inadequate learning on the part of those missing, and a degree of disruption to the conduct of classes for those students who are present" (p. 228).

Attendance is often linked to learner performance, with class attendance suggested as statistically significant and having "a reasonably large effect" (Kirby and McElroy, 2003, p.318) on learner grade. A positive relationship between academic performance and attendance was also found in studies by Lamdin (2001), Paisey and Paisey (2004) and Wigley (2009). However, Reid (1999), as cited by Ekstrand (2015), found no linear relationship between attendance and grades. This was also the finding of Rodgers (2002) and Snyder and Frank (2016). Despite the lack of clear evidence of a link between attendance and performance, the topics of attendance and absenteeism remain important for both practitioners and academics alike.

It is within this context that the research is being undertaken. If it is the case that attendance is a key contributor to learning, and non-attendance hampers that process, then the antecedents of a learner decision not to attend are central to any discussion regarding attendance rates.

Ideally, learners would attend for all timetabled classes on a consistent basis thereby maximising their potential to learn. However, the research shows that simply doesn't happen and much work has already been done to attempt to understand why that might be the case. Research in an Irish context has been somewhat limited, and within the further education context has been scant. This research is being undertaken in order to explore and extend understanding of the factors influencing learner attendance decisions, specifically with regard to the further education context in Ireland.

The further education and training (FET) sector serves to meet the needs of the labour market, provides a pathway for learners seeking progression to further study and provides opportunities for social mobility (Prospectus, 2018). It is overseen by the further education and training authority SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna). According to the SOLAS 2018 Further Education and Training (FET) Services Plan, the sector was expected to deliver education and training opportunities to over 337,000 learners in 2018. Within this provision lies the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme, which provides the "largest component of full-time further education and training (FET) provision in Ireland" (ESRI, 2018, p.viii). The PLC programme serves over 30,000 learners at an annual cost of over €160m (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2018). The majority of these PLC courses are delivered across 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

This research was conducted in a college of further education that operates under the auspices of an ETB and provides PLC courses at NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) levels five and six to a diverse range of learners. The researcher is a practitioner within this context, with over 13 years' experience and a strong interest in why learners choose to attend or not attend the timetabled classes at the core of their learning journey.

The literature suggests several themes underpinning a learner's decision in this regard. For example, Reid (2008) suggests that a decision not to attend could be based on input from the home setting, the school or college environment, or something that pertains to the individual learner. Relationships with teachers and other staff, timetabling issues assessment pressures, school/college policies and technology enhanced learning (TEL) are often cited as relevant learning environment factors (Kottasz, 2005, Reid, 2008, Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, Kelly 2012, Ekstrand, 2015). Personal problems, employment, learner identity, living conditions and transport frequently arise as individual factors influencing attendance (Kirby and McElroy, 2003, Reid 2008, Lese, 2010, White O'Connor and Hamilton, 2010).

This research is guided by the literature and explores issues relating to the learning environment and the individual learner as they pertain to attendance. Its aim is to identify specific factors that influence learner attendance decisions within a further education context, a vibrant and diverse sector within which research is currently deficient.

Inductive research was conducted, based on a survey of adult further education learners, utilising an anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire design was guided by the literature and with particular reference to primary research undertaken on the topic by Kirby and McElroy (2003), Kottasz (2005) and Kelly (2012). The research question posed was: What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish College of Further Education? Dependent variables were identified as (i) the number of days absent in the month preceding data collection and (ii) the number of classes missed in the week preceding data collection. Independent variables related to a variety of individual learner and learning environment factors. Data was collected over a period of 10 days from March to April 2019, using convenience sampling and, after data checking for errors and non-responses,

yielded 100 completed questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis identified those factors significant to the attendance decisions of the further education learners surveyed.

This dissertation is structured in chapters providing a path through the research undertaken. The upcoming chapter discusses Irish and international literature in the field of attendance. It includes a discussion of a range of individual learner and learning environment factors framed around Bronfenbernner's bioecological theory, identifying relevant gaps in current research and providing a rationale for the research conducted. This is followed by a section pertaining to the research question, defining the topic, context and variables of interest that led to the research question. The methodology section introduces the philosophical position of the researcher and outlines the research approach, including a description of research participants and the procedure used to gather the data. A discussion of potential ethical issues pertaining to the use of human participants in the research is included in this section. The results chapter reports on the output of the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis undertaken, explaining why the results are relevant, significant or insignificant. The discussion chapter offers some insights into the results gathered, its relevance to the further education context and outlines the limitations of this research. Finally, the future perspectives chapter concludes the dissertation, providing a discussion of factors warranting further investigation, identifying some surprising results and making suggestions for further education colleges wishing to address some of the issues raised by the research.

Literature Review

The research question is as follows: What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education? This chapter seeks to provide an overview of literature relevant to this research question, presented within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (1995). It is hoped that this literature review will help contextualise the investigation and subsequent findings within a body of academic research relevant to the complex topics of attendance and nonattendance.

The literature review opens with an overview of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory and its application within the realm of learner development. This will provide an overarching framework within which a number of relevant concepts, theories and factors influencing learner attendance decisions can be addressed. We will explore the concept of absenteeism, leading to a discussion of the literature pertaining to the two specific factors to be investigated as part of the research question, namely (i) individual factors and (ii) factors connected to the learning environment that may impact on learner attendance decisions. The final section of the literature review will address gaps identified as part of the review of literature and the rationale for this research.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's seminal text 'The Ecology of Human Development' (1979) provides a valuable framework from which to begin to view the elements that influence the developmental potential of human beings. Initially, Bronfenbrenner's work focused more on the contexts within which humans developed. He identified four different ecosystems that interact to impact human development. The microsystem relates to the individual's immediate environment, for example, a learner's class group, the facilities of the college and activities associated with college life, the

learner's relationships with others in the college environment and with their own family. The mesosystem relates to the relationship between the various immediate contexts of the individual, for example, how a learner's part-time job may impact on their ability to attend timetabled classes. The exosystem relates to elements that may not directly impact the individual but may have a significant impact nonetheless, for example, the state of the economy impacting future labour market needs and government policy in relation to funding for FET. Finally, the macrosystem relates to the socio-historical norms that underpin the wider environment. This may relate to pervading customs and beliefs within the learner's context that determine, for example, what knowledge is valued by society.

By the mid 1990's Bronfenbrenner had already expanded his earlier thinking. The inclusion of a chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) reflected the influence of time on the other four contexts, and by 1998 subsequent amendments to Bronfenbrenner's initial theory had created the bioecological model known as the Process-Person-Context-Time model (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). This bioecological model acknowledged the impacts of both individual characteristics and context on human development, within given time frames. The term process relates to the interaction between the individual and objects and/or people within the environment. Person relates to the individual's motivation, intelligence, personality and other characteristics. Context relates to the ecosystems within which the individual operates, for example, the microsystem or mesosystem. There are a number of different timespans accommodated within this bioecological model, namely, microtime (what is taking place during a particular activity, for example, what learning strategy is employed during a timetabled class), mesotime (whether or not activities take place consistently over a period of time, for example, whether the same teacher delivers a particular module over the course of an academic year) and

macrotime (the impact of socio-historical factors impact on development, for example, the changing role of educators over a period of centuries).

Application to Learner Development

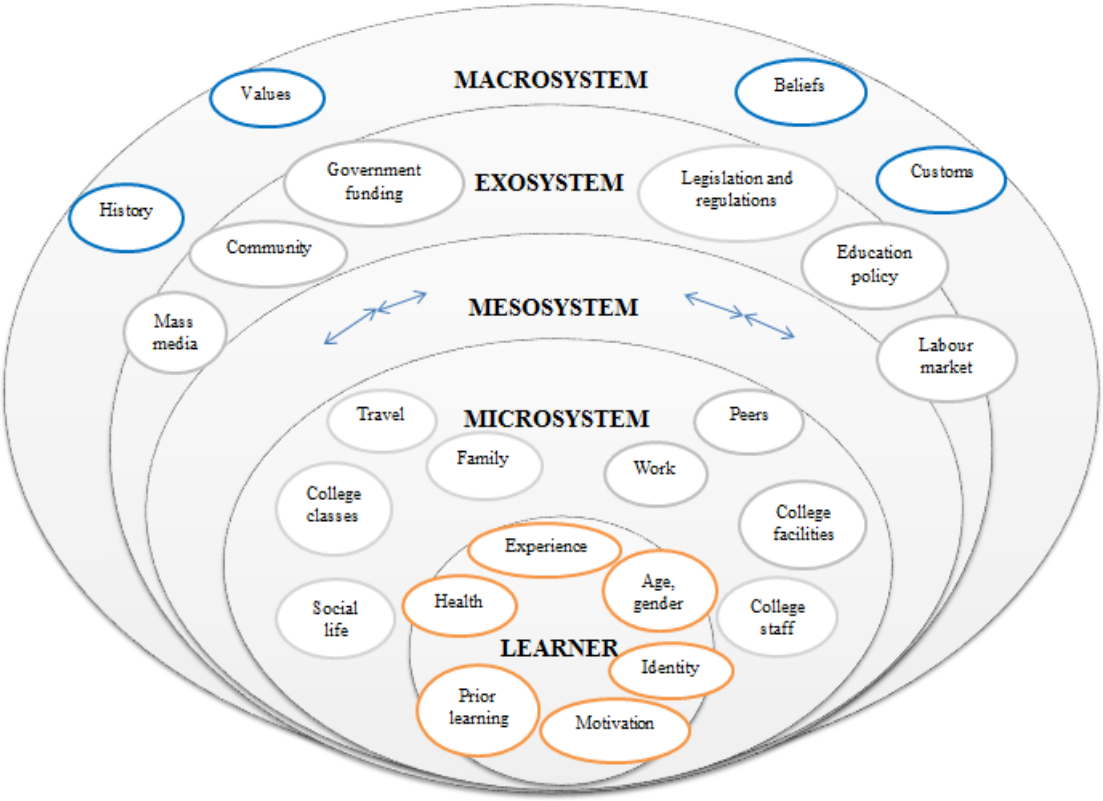
Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory can readily be applied to the realm of learner development, as evidenced in the work of Greene and Moane (2000), Renn (2003), Swick and Williams (2006), Christensen (2010), Lewthwaite (2011) and Stebleton (2011). Within the context of the learner and the learning environment, process can be related to relationships between the learner and other learners, college teachers and staff. It may also be related to the impact of physical aspects of the learning environment. Person can be related to the individual learner's motivation, intelligence, personality and other characteristics. Context may refer to the microsystem of the learning institution, the mesosystem of interactions between home and college, the exosystem of the availability of government funding for the education of learners and the macrosystem of the cultural norms of the state. Microtime may be related to the activities taking place within a particular timetabled class, mesotime can relate to all of the activities and interactions the learner engages with during an academic year, whereas macrotime may reflect a change in educational policy within the state over a period of decades.

Application to Research Question

The research seeks to identify a number of individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions in the context of a college of Further Education in Ireland. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework can assist in clarifying the factors that lie within the scope of this research and those outside of it. This research predominantly inhabits the realm of the individual learner, the learner's microsystem and, to some extent, the mesosystem of relationships between microcontexts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development



Individual factors influencing learner attendance.

Although now 21 years old, the work of Martinez and Munday (1998) provides an appropriate starting point for reviewing the variety of individual factors that potentially impact on learner attendance. According to the authors, this was, at that time, the largest study of learner persistence and drop-out ever undertaken in the U.K., sampling more than 9,000 students and staff across 31 F.E. colleges. Although it is a study of why some students drop out of F.E. whilst others complete their programme of study, I believe it is still relevant to the discussion at hand as poor attendance is often seen as a precursor to drop out (Kelly, 2012). Martinez and Munday's (1998) study of F.E. learners and staff identified a number of individual factors affecting drop-

out and persistence including gender, first language, travel time to college, unrealistic course expectations, ability to form peer relationships, personal circumstances, health and/or financial problems. Many of these factors are still to be found in more recent research conducted in a variety of contexts from primary to secondary to tertiary education, as evidenced by the work of Kirby and McElroy (2003), Kottasz (2005), Barlow and Fleischer (2011), Kelly (2012), Ekstrand (2015) and Snyder and Frank (2016).

Personal problems

Reid's (2008) study of over 281 education professionals uncovered a number of reasons why learners miss class and two of these related to home and psychological difficulties. Home difficulties identified included lack of sleep, poverty and a range of parent-related issues, such as lack of parental support. Psychological issues included school phobia, attention deficit and related syndromes, as well as low self-concept and emotional disturbance. Barlow and Fleischer (2011) relate attendance to student adjustment, ability to form new attachments and the development of self-reliance. Their research found that difficulty in adjustment to independent learning, an inability to easily form relationships with peers, a disorganised approach to learning and a lack of self-reliance may promote absenteeism. Illness is also identified by Barlow and Fleischer (2011) and Ekstrand (2015) as a factor influencing non-attendance. Ekstrand's (2015) meta-analysis of 155 international peer-reviewed papers, citing a number of sources, included smoking, binge drinking and cannabis use as likely to lead to non-attendance. It is obvious from the literature that much of the research in the field relates non-attendance to personal issues on the part of the learner.

Employment

According to Leese (2010) higher education institutes are seeing a new type of student where over 70% are working and spending less than 15 hours per week on campus. Anecdotally, it appears that employment and hours worked might negatively impact on learner attendance. This is reflected in the research of Kirby and McElroy (2003), which examined attendance of first year economics students at University College Cork and found that one of the principal factors affecting attendance rates are the hours worked by learners. However, they found the effect of hours worked "although significant, is modest" (p.316). Similarly, Kottasz (2005) found that the students in that study who worked part-time were no more likely to miss lectures than those who didn't work. Kelly's (2012) research undertaken at the colleges of Science in University College Dublin found that employment status neither damaged nor benefitted learner attendance. However, the study did find that those students who had a job were affected by whether or not the lecture was interesting and it is proposed that these students may have "a wider range of life experiences that needs to be acknowledged in the learning situation" (Kelly, 2012, p. 33).

Travel, transport and living conditions

Kirby and McElroy's (2003) study found that a principal factor effecting attendance rates is travel time to college. Their research showed that learners travelling more than 30 minutes to university have an attendance rate of 8.6% greater than those learners travelling less than 10 minutes to college. They speculate that this is because the longer commute times are more likely to encourage learners to stay on campus. Kelly (2012) also identified college commute time and transport problems as factors that impact on learner attendance, specifically when related to bad weather conditions. With some conditions, both Kirby and McElroy (2003) and Kelly (2012)

found that learners living on campus and those assumed to live at home (based on commute times) were more likely to attend class. Similarly, Barlow and Fleischer (2011) found that younger students who are living away from home for the first time can find this challenging and this may potentially have an impact on learner attendance.

Motivation

Learner motivation is addressed in much of the research. Kottasz (2005) views attendance as a personal decision based on motivation and ability. Learner extrinsic motivation relates to receiving good grades, and intrinsic motivation relates to learner personal satisfaction and a desire to succeed. Her research found that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation were the most important reasons for not missing either a lecture or tutorial. Kelly (2012) also suggests that attendance often reflects learner motivation and attitude towards their course. Indeed, citing Moore et al. (2008), Kelly (2012) states that when engagement in social activities is given as a reason for non-attendance it is "classified as indicative of low motivation" (p. 19). Barlow and Fleischer (2011) found that some students often start a course with good intentions but then lose motivation and start to deselect from their course, whilst other students were highly motivated and "treated their degree like a job" (p. 231) in terms of attending classes.

Learner planned behaviour, attitude and expectations

Barlow and Fleischer (2011) relate attendance to student expectations and preparedness. In this context the learner is viewed as having an expectation of immediate gratification and orientation towards being entertained. This certainly poses a challenge to learner attendance in a context where perhaps teaching methods are of a more traditional approach. Preparedness refers to the ability of the learner to taking personal responsibility for their lives. Barlow and Fleischer (2011) believe that many learners haven't been adequately prepared for the challenges of third

level education. Citing Barefoot (2007), Barlow and Fleischer, place the responsibility for this shortcoming at the feet of parents.

Pownall (2012) argues that a learner intending to attend a class will do so based on the subjective norm of the learner, their emotional attitude, their perceived behavioural control and their ability to perform successfully. The role of the learner's emotions and attitudes can also be seen in the work of Snyder and Frank (2016) who found that learners with high affective learning, based on a positive attitude towards a subject, have an increased motivation to learn.

Learner Identity

Stryker and Burke (2000) define identity in three different ways. Identity can refer to the culture of a people, a common identification with a collective or social category, or it can refer to the meanings that people attach to the multiple roles they play in society (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

White, O'Connor and Hamilton (2010) posit that given how important their identity as a student is to many learners the issue of role identity may be a factor impacting on attendance decisions. This relates to the learner's own perception of required behaviours as a students, as well as what is the norm for the groups of students they identify with. Citing Biddle, Bank and Slavings (1987), the authors claim that the impact of role identity on the intention of learners to behave in a certain way has already been established in the context of attendance. This is in keeping with the findings of Kottasz (2005) who reported a significant number of learners "claimed to feel obliged to go to lectures only because friends or peers attended as well" (p. 10).

White, O'Connor and Hamilton (2010) furthermore state that the influence of the in-group that the learner identifies with is very important in determining member behaviour. Their research found that both role identity and in-group identification significantly predicted

attendance decisions. The impact of in-group identification is in keeping with the work of Barlow and Fleischer (2011) who cite the ability of learners to feel part of an academic community as materially significant.

Summary of individual learner factors

The literature provides a rich source of individual factors that may relate to learner attendance decisions and informs those factors selected for exploration in the research undertaken. Individual factors relating to sensitive personal issues feature in much of the literature, for example, home and psychological difficulties. However, issues such as these are not the focus of this research, primarily on ethical grounds. Anecdotal evidence suggests that learners within an F.E. context frequently cite issues such as illness, employment and transport as those contributing to their non-attendance. This research will investigate these factors in addition to others such as age, gender and first language effects.

Learning environment factors that influence learner attendance

The literature offers some interesting insight into issues pertaining to the learning environment that may function as either an enabler of or a barrier to learner attendance. On-site relationships feature heavily, as does the content and delivery of classes. Other factors raised in the literature relate to the pressure of assignments, unsuitable timetables, inappropriate attendance policies and the rise of TEL as a potential alternative to attending class in person.

Relationships with teachers and other staff

According to the research undertaken by Reid (2008), poor relationships with teachers and other staff are among the issues raised by pupils who dislike coming to school. The impact of the communication style of educators features in much of the literature. Ekstrand (2015) refers to the importance of positive pupil-teacher relationships characterised by care, respect and

encouragement in the attendance decisions of learners. Snyder and Frank (2016), citing Ellis (2004), found that the classroom environment can be enhanced though positive classroom communication that leads to mutually beneficial relationships. Verbal aggressiveness has been defined as "a hostile communication behavior in which the instructor directs attacks intended to impact students' self-concepts and make them feel badly about themselves" (Snyder and Frank , 2016, citing Infante and Wigley, 1986, p. 109. Rocca (2004), cited by Kelly (2011) found instructor "verbal aggressiveness to be negatively related to attendance" (p. 19). However, Snyder and Frank's (2016) research found no relationship between these variables. Despite this, Snyder and Frank's (2016) work on affective learning finds that instructors who engage in positive communication with learners can improve the attitude a learner has towards a specific subject, which may positively impact on attendance.

Timetabling and competing assessment pressures

Kottasz (2005), citing Fleming (1992), found that in a study of absenteeism in Lincoln University the timing of the lecture accounted for 16% of absences. Similarly, Ekstrand (2015) found that absenteeism can arise as a "result of an inconsistent schedule with empty time slots between lessons" (p. 462). Kelly (2012) in her 2008 study of attendance at the Colleges of Science in University College Dublin found that although there was very little difference in attendance between morning and afternoon classes, there was very poor attendance in classes on Friday and Monday classes appeared to have the highest attendance levels.

Kelly (2012), citing Moore et al. (2008), found that a significant number of learners reported absences due to "putting higher priority on completing other assignments" (p. 19). This is also reported by Ekstrand (2015) citing Jonsson's (1990) emphasis on 'pedagogical truancy' where learners absent from timetabled class in order to prepare for, or avoid, assessment. In

Kottasz's (2005) research 61% of learners surveyed reported their major reason for missing lectures as "they needed to work on assignments" (p. 8, 10).

Kottasz (2005) found that learner work overload was a factor relevant to absenteeism in a university context, with overload referring to either work volume or difficulty. Citing Cooper et al. (1982), Kottasz (2005) states that over load can manifest in low self-esteem and motivation, both of these having a negative impact on attendance.

Teaching and learning

The issue of poor teaching was raised as a barrier to attendance in the research of Reid (2008). Poor lecture content, where learners couldn't perceive any value in attending lectures was reported by Kottasz (2005). Her learners reported missing lectures because they did not see a value in attendance, describing the lectures as "boring", "a waste of time" and "unnecessary" (p. 8). This reflects the research of Reid (2008) who found that absenteeism was likely to be higher amongst learners who reported that their classes weren't stimulating.

Staff attitudes and capacity also featured in the research of Ekstrand (2015) who argues that "a predisposition towards students' capacity to develop, to recover and to return" (p. 469) is imperative in encouraging truants to return to the educational environment. Furthermore, Ekstrand (2015) makes the point that whilst teacher upskilling often focusses on improving subject matter knowledge there exists an equally important requirement for educators to be encouraged to improve their skills in areas that may improve attendance, for example, undertaking CPD addressing issues around cultural difference.

School culture, facilities and policies

Ekstrand (2015) found that a positive school culture with supportive adults positively contributed to learner attendance, finding "a democratic school, a school culture characterised by

good relations, a positive social climate, respectful treatment, and opportunities to bond with adults increase pupils' motivation and their desire to learn" (p. 472). Reid (2008) reported that educational professionals believe that a lacking school culture played a part in absenteeism, may also be related to socio-economic location. However, an Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) (2013) report offers a word of warning stating that colleges offering catch-up sessions and other resources aimed at those who miss classes may create a "culture where learners feel it is acceptable to attend poorly and catch up later" (p. 15).

School buildings, facilities and opportunities for socialising often arise within learner feedback given for absenteeism. Reid (2008) found that improving school building and facilities was important in improving attendance. Kelly (2012), citing Blaney and Mulkeen (2008), notes that one of the reasons students gave for non-completion related to negative experiences of the social aspect of college life and the environment itself. This is in keeping with Kelly's (2008) research which found that students valued their weekend socialising activities; however her research found no correlation between social activities and absenteeism.

Reid (2008) stated that colleges may unwittingly exacerbate the problem by having an inconsistent approach to dealing with the problem of absenteeism. Barlow and Fleischer (2011), citing Bowen at al. (2005), reported that 75% of students surveyed felt that the college should monitor student attendance and most of these students felt that the college should alert them if their attendance was unacceptably low. This was interpreted as a desire on the part of learners for the college to "take responsibility for their learning by ensuring attendance" (p. 233). Barlow and Fleischer (2011) conclude that colleges need to provide clear policies on attendance, where learners know what is expected of them and educators are supported in implementing attendance policies. In keeping with this, Snyder and Frank (2016) found that students aware of a potential

grade-related sanction for non-attendance performed better than learners with no such sanction, and determined that one way of improving learner attendance is by implementing college policies that punish non-attendance.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

A significant change to the educational landscape is the advent of technology enhanced learning, often through the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs). This is reflected in the SOLAS/ETBI (2016) Strategy for Technology Enhanced Learning in Further Education and Training (2016-2019) where successful strategic implementation is expected to result in learners who are skilled and confident in using technology, technology being used appropriately as part of all teaching and learning, and learners being more engaged in their learning. Within this strategy, technology is expected to enhance learning by, for example, 24/7 access to learning resources and assessment, and more active learning by means of interactive technologies. However, Harvey (2017) suggests that there is 'still resistance to the use of technology enhanced learning within academia' and ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) will be required to optimally leverage the potential of digital technology in education (Lifelong Learning Platform, 2014). The question could also be asked 'does it empower the already empowered?', leaving behind those who still find technology unaffordable or those without basic literacy/numeracy skills (Lifelong Learning Platform, 2014). Similarly, the idea that learners are 'Digital Natives' simply isn't true for all learners. As Guri-Rosenblit and Gros (2011) point out the ability of 'millenial' learners to download music files and play online games doesn't necessarily translate into a ability or willingness to engage with or manage their own learning through a VLE.

Barlow and Fleischer (2011) view VLEs as a medium "which provide a practical way to offer 24-hour access to lecture notes and supplementary learning material" (p. 228). According

to Kottasz (2005) 38% of students claimed that they would miss a lecture if they could access the material some other way. A VLE bridges that gap for many learners, with Barlow and Fleischer (2011) finding that many learners relied on the VLE to provide them with class resources and others making a strategic decision not to attend some classes where the material was available through a VLE. They suggest that institutions "could clarify the role of VLEs and the ways in which they may be used as a legitimate alternative to attendance" (p.234).

Summary of learning environment factors

Reid (2008) suggests that the range of learning environment factors that impact on learner attendance decisions is vast. This is certainly evidenced by the literature reviewed and provides a valuable source of potential environmental factors for the purposes of this research, for example, in relation to assignment pressure, the nature of the course undertaken, the quality of relationships built and the importance of technology enhanced learning. This is particularly important to the research as learners (and parents) often contribute non-attendance to predominantly learning environment factors (Reid, 2008).

Gaps in the research

Despite the breadth and depth of research available on the topics of attendance and absenteeism, some gaps remain. As previously discussed, much of the research available is situated in an international, rather than an Irish context and, where available, the Irish research predominantly pertains to learners in third level education rather than in a further education context. With over 30,000 learners undertaking PLC courses within the FET provision (DES, 2018) it seems entirely justifiable that additional research be undertaken within this specific context.

The factors investigated in this research have largely been identified as a result of the review of literature. However, even within the literature there is some disagreement as to exactly which individual and learning environment factors impact on learner attendance decisions and this research seeks to identify which factors may impact within an Irish further education context.

Furthermore, both learner employment and learner identity factors have been identified within the literature as worthy of further research in the context of absenteeism. Kirby and McElroy (2003) determined that their dataset contained "insufficient details to permit examination of factors that determine hours worked by students". Kelly (2012) found the interaction between attendance and part-time work "an interesting one requiring further exploration" and in relation to learner identity, White, O'Connor and Hamilton (2000) stated that "a consideration of identity influences as determinants of student decision making is a useful avenue for future examination". Within the survey questionnaire, questions have been crafted to gather data relating to work status, hours worked and learner identity influences, amongst other factors, in order to bridge this knowledge gap.

Research Question

Defining a topic

As an experienced practitioner within the F.E. context I have long been interested in the area of learner attendance. Having reflected on my own experiences within the education field, opening discussions with colleagues and learners, and undertaking a preliminary review of literature, I decided that (i) the topic of choice for my research would relate to attendance, (ii) the learner needed to be at the centre of this research, and (iii) the research should include factors other than the learner that potentially impact on attendance. However, these factors would be limited to the microsystem of the learning environment and the mesosystem of the learner, for example the interaction between the learning environment and part-time employment.

Context

As a practitioner within further education it was self-evident that my research would be grounded in that particular context. The preliminary review of literature uncovered both Irish and international research attempting to identify underlying reasons for learner non-attendance. However, despite being a progressive, inclusive and innovative sector within the Irish education system, literature relating to attendance from an Irish further education perspective was scant. In order to address this deficit, the research was conducted within a college of further education, whose learners undertake a variety of courses at NFQ levels five and six.

Variables of interest

What I wished to understand was why learners attend or don't attend timetabled classes. As the learners within my context are adults, and attendance is not legally mandatory for this cohort, it follows that learners are autonomous in deciding whether to attend or not. Therefore,

the variables of interest to me were attendance rates and those factors that impacted either negatively or positively on a learner's decision to attend.

The dependent variables relate to attendance, (i) the number of days missed by a learner in the month preceding data collection and (ii) the number of classes missed by a learner in the week preceding data collection. These dependent variables were chosen by the researcher in order to capture both days missed due to e.g. acute health issues but also to capture instances where learners 'cherry picked' classes to attend during an academic week. The independent variables chosen relate to the individual learner and the learning environment. The literature review identified potential factors across both of these strands. Some individual factors related to demographics, residence and commute, whereas learning environment factors included the quality of relationships, assignment pressures and the availability of a virtual learning environment.

Defining a research question

Through my research, I hoped to understand what factors influenced learners' decisions in relation to attendance and/or non-attendance, and if possible, identify some suggestions that may prove actionable within our context. Having refined the topic of interest, decided upon a research context, undertaken a preliminary literature review, identified the variables of interest and the purpose of the research, I decided upon the following research question: What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education?

Methodology

Within this section the guiding paradigm, ontology and epistemology of the research will be addressed. In order to assist with replication of this study, the nature of the participant population and sample will be discussed, as well as a detailed description of the procedure used to access the primary data gathered as part of this research

Research Philosophy

Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as a "worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choice of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (p.195). The concept of paradigm is an important starting point as it raises awareness of researcher assumptions that may impinge across the research decision-making process; and the philosophical position of the researcher has a significant impact on research design. Each paradigm has a particular ontology, epistemology and methodology, all of which must be aligned. Ontology refers to "the study of what exits" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 5), or the question of 'what can we know?' whereas epistemology addresses the 'how can we know?' question (Wright et al. 2016, p.97). The methodology aspect of the paradigm will determine how best to approach achieving the research objectives. As per Scotland (2012), methodology refers to the strategy that determines the research methods whereas the methods themselves refer to the specific techniques that will be used to collect and analyse the data.

At one extreme of ontology lies the position of realism, seen as a scientific view of reality, where phenomena are capable of measurement and experimentation and the researcher mode is "passively detached" (Dillon and Wals, 2006, p. 553) in order to surface a reality that exists independently of the researcher. At the other extreme of ontology lies relativism, often seen as a more 'on faith' based approach, where not every phenomenon is capable of scientific

measurement and instead a phenomenon may be perceived and interpreted by researchers in different ways.

Ontology is important because it drives epistemology, "the rules for discovering what exists" (O'Leary, 2017, p. 6). An ontological position of realism is aligned to an epistemological position of objectivism and a positivist approach to social science. Positivism views the researcher and the research topic as "independent entities" (Scotland, 2012, p.10). From a positivist perspective the preferred way to gather data is through the use of objective means that can be scientifically verified (Scotland, 2012). A post-positivism paradigm has similar ontological and epistemological perspectives as positivism but acknowledges that understanding of the truth is simply based on current tested hypothesis, where scientific theories can never be proven true and research requires more than just empirical data (Scotland, 2012). In this approach "individual and contextual differences are viewed as moderating factors of the operation of the universal laws" (Kaplan, 2015, p.2).

A researcher with an ontological position of relativism is aligned to an epistemological position of subjectivism and an interpretive approach to social science. From the perspective of an interpretive paradigm reality is "constructed out of the interaction between humans and their world" (Scotland, 2012, p.12) and the preferred way to gather data must recognise multiple realities, based on differing researchers' perspectives. A critical paradigm, related to social constructivism, follows a historical realism ontological position, with an epistemology that is subjective (Scotland, 2012).

As outlined by Holden and Lynch (2004) objectivism has been increasingly criticised as being unsuited to the study of human beings, whereas subjectivism is seen as lacking

comparability, based on the relativism of its participants. Consequently, they conclude that there is “no right or wrong philosophical stance” (p. 12).

My chosen research question as follows: What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education? This researcher’s ontological position is one of realism, with an epistemology that is objectivist. This led me to a scientific paradigm that is predominantly positivist but may also include some post-positivist elements (O’Leary, 2017). Another researcher approaching the same research question from an ontological perspective of relativism and an epistemology that is subjective would apply an interpretive paradigm, whereas a researcher approaching this question from an ontological perspective of historical realism and an epistemology that is subjective would apply a critical paradigm.

In deciding on an appropriate research methodology the research question, objectives and participant access have to be considered. From an epistemological perspective, the objectives of the research are of primary importance. My research seeks to identify a ‘truth’, not explain or seek meaning in a phenomenon. My research simply seeks to identify individual and learning environment variables that impact on attendance learner decisions, so a quantitative approach is an appropriate one for my positivist research paradigm. However, this approach precludes an opportunity to understand the complexity underlying these learner decisions, which could have been provided had this researcher taken a more qualitative approach, in line with an interpretive paradigm. Of course, researchers can also seek to gain the ‘best of both worlds’ by taking a mixed methodology, utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches to a particular research question. Had the opportunity arisen, for example, had the study been longitudinal, my preferred approach would have been one of a mixed methodology.

Research approach

As ontology and epistemology drive the research paradigm, so does the paradigm drive the methodology. The scientific approach of my positivist paradigm often relies on a deductive methodology, based on hypothesis testing. This was the basis of my initial research proposal. However, due to the descriptive nature of my research, and the possibility of generating additional variables of interest, this researcher decided upon an inductive, rather than a deductive, approach.

Researchers coming from an interpretive paradigm usually favour an inductive approach but would be more inclined to utilise action research, ethnography and phenomenology, amongst others. Based on my chosen scientific methodology, my research method had to be capable of gathering empirical data from as great a number of participants as possible, whilst minimising the impact on each individual participant. For this reason a survey was undertaken, using a questionnaire as the data collection tool. Researchers coming from an interpretive paradigm would be more interested in depth, rather than breadth, of data. For this reason their data collection tools used might include interviews, observation and any other data collection tools suited to small scale investigations (O'Leary, 2017) and the resultant data may relate more to motivations, underlying reasons and opinions. Based on my chosen research method, a survey using a questionnaire, these underlying learner motivations, reasons and opinions are likely to remain uncovered.

Participants

Population

The population of interest was adult learners within an Irish college of Further Education. Adult learners were defined as those aged 18 years and older; those younger than 18 years were

excluded from the study. The only other requirement for this study was that learners had to be enrolled on any full-time course of study, rather than a part-time course. All adult learners within the college meeting these requirements were deemed eligible for the study, irrespective of NFQ level of the programme, gender, age or whether the learner's first language was English. No incentives were offered to any potential respondent.

Sampling Strategy

As a census of college learners would have been impractical, it was decided to survey a sample of learners. Although college registers were available to be used as a sampling frame for the purposes of probability sampling, convenience sampling was chosen in order to maximise the number of respondents.

Once the researcher had received approval for the research from the college Principal, class tutors were approached, informed about the research and asked about the possibility of the researcher conducting research with their class group. All class tutors agreed to support the research and assist in data collection if required. Although efforts were made to gain data from as wide a variety of class groups as possible within the college, two classes groups proved unavailable during the data collection period due to competing commitments.

It had been recognised that over the course of a college week some timetabled classes are better attended than others. With this in mind, and as it was important to maximise the number of respondents, data collection across class groups took place during classes periods with optimal attendance. Exactly which class periods were best suited to this purpose was at the discretion of the researcher, based on both personal and colleagues' experience of the various class groups within the college. Once a class group had been selected by the researcher, and an optimal class

period selected, all students present in the class at that particular time were invited to participate in the research. That particular class group was then precluded from any further data collection.

Access to potential respondents did not prove particularly problematic as the researcher is an educator with ongoing interaction with a significant number of class groups within the college. For other class groups, the class tutor and/or a colleague conducted the research on the part of the researcher. Although it had been hoped to secure responses from 80 to 100 learners, 116 completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher.

Procedure

This section provides an overview of the design of the data collection tool, how the instrument was piloted and how data was subsequently collected. This is followed by an overview of how the data analysis was conducted and the section concludes with a discussion of how ethical concerns were addressed.

Questionnaire design

The design of the questionnaire was guided by the literature and previous studies in the field of learner attendance. In particular, the primary research undertaken by Kirby and McElroy (2003), Kottasz (2005) and Kelly (2012) proved extremely helpful. Each of these studies addressed the topic of attendance using the survey method and their prior work informed not only the draft questions but also potential response categories. The work of Kirby and McElroy (2003) and Kelly (2012) were of particular interest as their research took place within an Irish context, albeit within university settings.

During the development phase, one past student, four current students and three educators were asked for their opinion as to the factors they believed impacted on learner attendance

decisions. These contributors were chosen based on judgement sampling and their feedback was incorporated into the initial design of the questionnaire.

The initial questions were drafted based on the dependent and independent variables of interest in this study, namely attendance (or non-attendance) levels as the dependent variable, and individual and learning environment factors as the independent variables (See Appendix A for operationisation of variables). Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development assisted in identifying the variables that lay within the scope of this research. Process relates to the relationships the learner has with others in their context and a number of questions were crafted to address this important aspect of the learning journey, for example, the relationship the learner has with teachers, other staff and peers. Person refers to the learner at the centre of this research and a range of individual factors were reflected in the questionnaire, for example, age, gender, health and learner identity. Context in relation to this research was confined to the microsystem of the learning environment and the mesosystem of interactions between the learner and other relevant environments. The microsystem of the learning environment was addressed in questions relating to, for example, the facilities and social aspects of college life, commute time, family and employment status. The nature of the relationship between, for example, work status and college life assisted in addressing issues relating to the learner mesosystem. Time was reflected in questions pertaining to (i) the number of days the learner was absent from college in the month preceding data collection and (ii) the number of classes missed by the learner in the week preceding data collection.

To minimise respondent fatigue a maximum of 30 questions was decided upon, almost all were structured as closed questions, with many of the responses sought on a six point Likert scale for most of the questions. With the assistance of the thesis supervisor, the proposed

questionnaire underwent five iterations, primarily related to question and scale design, before it was suitable for piloting.

Piloting

Piloting of the questionnaire took place between 20th and 22nd March (inclusive). It was undertaken by the researcher using both convenience and judgement sampling. The college principal, deputy principal and two teachers were chosen for the pilot on the basis of their expertise and experience. Seven learners were chosen based on both judgement and convenience sampling. Four learners were chosen on the basis of NFQ level, class group and history of balanced contribution during classes. Three learners were chosen at random from a group of learners using the library on the final day of piloting. As a result of the pilot the order of three questions was changed, two questions were amalgamated and the wording of a number of questions altered to enhance clarity for respondents. The final version of the questionnaire contained 29 questions, three open questions and 26 closed questions, generating predominantly quantitative data with just one question generating qualitative data (See Appendix B for the final version of the survey questionnaire, which commences with a declaration of informed consent).

Data collection

Data collection took place in the college between 25th March and 3rd April 2019. As previously noted, the population of interest was adult learners enrolled on a full-time programme of study and convenience sampling was chosen in order to maximise the number of respondents. Most of the data collection was undertaken by the researcher. However, a number of colleagues were also involved in the distribution and collection of the survey questionnaires.

Although not advertised within the college, many class groups were already aware that the research would be taking place, as this researcher had often spoken to these class groups

about the importance of lifelong learning, the course of study being undertaken by the researcher and the likely direction of the primary research required for this course of study.

The questionnaire was paper-based, as to use online survey software, e.g. SurveyMonkey, would limit data collection opportunities to those where learners were timetabled in a computer room. However, practical classes had been chosen as the most suitable for data collection in order to minimise any pressure learners may have felt to complete the questionnaire. Although this was the case for the vast majority of class groups, two class groups completed the survey questionnaire in a non-practical setting.

During the data collection process, the survey administrator introduced the study, explaining the anonymous and voluntary nature of the study. Each learner within the class group was given a Participant Information Sheet and sufficient time to read it (See Appendix C for the Participant Information Sheet). Learners who agreed to participate in the study were invited to complete the questionnaire, those choosing not to do so simply continued with their class work and returned the questionnaire unmarked.

Once all questionnaires were returned to the survey administrator, the entire group was debriefed. Based on the number of learners present and the number of completed surveys returned, it appeared that the non-response rate was less than 5%.

Data analysis

116 completed questionnaires were returned and the resultant data was coded and input into MS Excel in the first instance, where it was examined for completeness & consistency. (See Appendix D for the code book). 14 respondents were excluded due to non-response to questions 9 and/or 10, both of which related to absence from college. A further two respondents were excluded as their responses to questions 9 and/or 10 were not within the range of logical answers

to these questions. After data checking for errors and non-responses, 100 respondents were accepted into the data set for the purposes of this research, which was then uploaded to IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) GradPack 25.0 Standard.

Descriptive statistics were utilised to summarise the quantitative data e.g. distribution, central tendency and dispersion. Inferential statistics were utilised to ascertain the relationships between the variables of interest. Initially, tests for normality were conducted and based on that output, non-parametric tests for difference were applied, including Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney *U* tests and Indepdendent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis tests.

Only one question generated qualitative data and the resultant data was transcribed into an excel file. The qualitative data was then organised according to themes, the most common ones relating to the independent variables under investigation. However, a few responses were outside these variables, for example the weather and specific mental health issues. These themes were analysed to ascertain the frequency of response for each.

Ethical Issues

Ethical safeguards must be provided to all human respondents, and whether undertaking quantitative and scientific research or qualitative interpretive research all respondents must give informed consent, be afforded their privacy/confidentiality and come to no harm howsoever arising from their interaction with the research process.

My population of interest is adult learners in an Irish college of Further Education. Irrespective of whether my paradigm was predominantly positivist or interpretive, the impact of my status as 'teacher' with my population of interest has to be acknowledged. In this regard I followed NCI's research ethics procedures. All participants in my research were given a Participant Information Sheet and had an opportunity to ask questions about the research before

consenting to participate (See Appendix C for Participant Information Sheet). As per O'Leary (2017), informed consent was sought of those learners over the age of 18 only. However, a perceived or real power differential may have a significant impact on informed consent, for example, leading some learners reluctant to withdraw from the research fearing reprisals as a result of the researcher's status in their learning journey. In this regard, it was of critical importance that learners understood that their engagement with this research was entirely voluntary and there would be no negative consequences arising from a decision not to participate. This was made clear within the Participant Information Sheet. In addition, the anonymous nature of the questionnaires was stressed with participants, in the hope that it might address any reluctance on the part of learners to withdraw or provide honest responses.

Research is rarely "value free" Scotland (2012). Although trying to be unobtrusive, researchers almost invariably bring their own subjectivities, biases and world views with them to the research process. This is the case whether the researcher is undertaking quantitative or qualitative research. For example, in both cases, the researcher will decide what variables/attributes should be studied and how the data collected should be interpreted.

In terms of data collection, my survey questions were carefully framed to minimise the risk of harm arising howsoever through the use of e.g. potentially embarrassing or sensitive questions. However, my world view of what is potentially embarrassing may be at variance with the view of the learner and this would be the case whether my paradigm was predominantly positivist or interpretive. As my research was quantitative, surveys were eminently suitable for data collection. The surveys were anonymous and practical classes were chosen for data collection so that it was less likely that those choosing not to participate would feel under pressure to do so. Researchers coming from an interpretive paradigm would seek depth, rather

than breadth, of data. As their data collection tools used might include, for example, interviews and observation, a degree of anonymity is lost. This may in turn undermine the credibility of the data through, for example, social desirability bias on the part of the research participant.

Attendance, or non-attendance, is a personal choice on the part of the learner and may arise for a wide range of reasons, some of which may be sensitive. My decision to take a quantitative approach was, in some small part, an attempt to ameliorate any possible discomfort on the part of research participants.

The hard copy data received from respondents was examined solely by the researcher and was secured in a locked cabinet that can only be accessed by the researcher. Computer files are similarly only available to the researcher and are password protected. As it is not envisaged that this data will be used for secondary data analysis, the data will continue to remain securely stored and will be destroyed after a period of five years has elapsed, in line with NCI's Data Retention Policy.

Results

This section provides an overview of the findings from the statistical analysis undertaken in this research. The research question is 'What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions in an Irish college of Further Education?' The variables of interest are individual and learning environment factors (independent variables) impacting learner attendance (dependent variable). The dependent variables are (i) the number of days missed in the month preceding data collection and (ii) the number of classes missed in the week preceding data collection. The dependent variables were chosen in order to capture absences relating to full days, for example, acute illness or family issues, as well as absences from specific classes during the academic week, for example, where learners deselect from certain subjects. These timeframes were chosen in order to minimise recall bias, where respondents erroneously report on past events. Although it might be expected for respondents to remember how many days they were absent in the month preceding data collection, it may be unreasonable to expect accuracy with regard to classes missed over the same timeframe.

Exploring the dependent variable

Tests for normality

Using SPSS, tests for normality were conducted for both dependent variables, namely (i) days absent in the previous month, and (ii) and classes absent in the previous week. For days absent, normality was suggested through both skewness and kurtosis data in the range of -1 to +1, and the 5% trimmed mean was close to the original mean scores. However, for classes absent, both skewness and kurtosis data were outside the range of -1 to +1, and the 5% trimmed mean was not close to the original mean scores (See Table 1, Appendix E).

Visual inspection of the histograms and Normal Q-Q Plots for both dependent variables indicated that the data was not normally distributed (See Appendix E)**.** Furthermore, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic for both dependent variables produced a Sig. not greater than .05, as per the following SPSS output (Table 1).

Table 1

Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilks Tests for Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Days absent	.122	100	.001	.911	100	.000
Classes absent	.147	100	.000	.847	100	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The above tests suggested violation of the assumption of normality for both dependent variables; therefore parametric statistical tests were not appropriate. Instead, non-parametric statistical techniques were applied to further statistical analysis. Mann-Whitney *U* tests were used when there were just two groups of an independent variable being compared for statistically significant difference. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used when more than two groups of an independent variable were being investigated for statistically significant difference.

Mean and standard deviation

The dependent variable days absent in the previous month reported a mean of 4.295 with a standard deviation of 3.6370. The dependent variable classes absent in the previous week reported a mean of 5.265, with a standard deviation of 4.6572 (See Table 2, Appendix E).

Correlation

Non-parametric correlation analysis was utilised to analyse the potential relationship between the dependent variables i.e. days absent in the previous month and classes absent in the previous week. There was found to be a medium positive correlation between these variables, $R_s = .497$, $n = 100$, $p < .01$ (See Table 1, Appendix F). This indicates that a high rate of absenteeism in terms of days absent in the preceding month is somewhat associated with a high rate of absenteeism in terms of classes missed in the preceding week.

Tests for difference

Independent samples tests were conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between multiple mutually exclusive groups across a range of independent variables. The independent variables related to (i) individual learner factors and (ii) learning environment factors. Independent samples tests were run for two dependent variables in turn. The dependent variables were (i) days absent in the previous month and (ii) classes missed in the previous week.

Independent samples tests revealed statistically significant differences between the dependent variables and a number of independent variables, as follows: NFQ level, age, first language, place of residence, commute time, work status, relationships with teachers, relationships with other staff, interesting course content, good college social activities, the availability of Moodle (VLE) and assignment pressures. SPSS standard deviation and mean rank data for these statistically significant independent variables can be found in Appendix G. A substantial number of independent variables did not provide a statistically significant result. SPSS standard deviation, median and mean ranks data for these non-statistically significant independent variables can be found in Appendix H.

Data familiarisation and results summary

Rates of absenteeism

The summary statistics for days absent show that 73% of respondents are absent for up to 7 days per month with 27% of respondents absent for in excess of seven days per month. In terms of classes missed, 71% of respondents miss up to seven classes per week; with 26% of respondents missing between 7 and 16 classes per week and 3% of respondents missing all classes the week before the study (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2

Summary Statistics Pertaining to Days Missed in Previous Month

Variable		*n*	%
Days absent last month	0 days	23	23
	1-3.99 days	25	25
	4-6.99 days	25	25
	7-9.99 days	12	12
	10-12.99 days	15	15

Table 3

Summary Statistics Pertaining to Classes Missed in Previous Week

Variable		*n*	%
Classes absent last week	0 classes	12	12
	1-3.99 classes	27	27
	4-6.99 classes	32	32
	7-9.99 classes	13	13
	10-12.99 classes	11	11
	13 - 15.99 classes	2	2
	All classes	3	3

Demographics and NFQ level

Of the 100 participants accepted into the data set, 28 were male and 72 female. 80% of respondents were undertaking NFQ level five courses and 20% were undertaking a programme

of study at NFQ level six. 68 respondents were native English speakers and 32 non-native English speakers. 78 respondents reported as under the age of 30, with 22 respondents aged 30 and above (see Table 4).

Table 4

Summary Statistics in Relation to Age

Variable		*n*	%
Age	Under 20	47	47
	20-29	31	31
	30-39	4	4
	40-49	8	8
	50 and above	10	10

NFQ course level and rates of absenteeism

As there were just two groups of the independent variable (NFQ course level) under investigation, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted to ascertain whether NFQ course level was statistically significant in terms of absenteeism. It was found that there was a statistically significant difference in days absent between respondents who undertook a course at NFQ level five *(Md* = 4.00, *n* = 80*)* and those who undertook a course at NFQ level six *(Md* = 2.75, *n* = 20*), U* = 543.33, *z* = -2.234, *p* = .025, *r* = .22. Furthermore, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in classes missed between respondents who undertook a course at NFQ level five *(Md* = 5.00, *n* = 80*)* and those who undertook a course at NFQ level six *(Md* = 2.00, *n* = 20*), U* = 347.50, *z* = -3.916, *p* = .000, *r* = .39 (See Table 1, Appendix I).

Age and rates of absenteeism

The impact of age on attendance was investigated for five groups of this independent variable. Therefore, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was applied. As outlined in Table 5, a significant difference was found between the ages of learners and attendance levels in terms of

both days missed and classes missed, with younger learners recording the highest median non-attendance. For example, learners up to and including the age of 20 reported a median absence of 5.0 days and 6.0 class periods, whereas learners in the 30-39 age group reported a median absence of 1.5 days and 2.5 classes, and leaners aged 50 and above reported a median absence of zero days and 1.5 class periods.

Table 5

Kruskal-Wallis test results for age range

	Age (years)	*Median (Md)*	*Sample Size (n)*	*Test Statistic (χ2)*	*Degrees of Freedom (df)*	*Asymptotic Significance (p)*	*Effect Size (r)*
Days Absent	*Under 20*	5.000	47	22.401	4	.000	2.24
	20-29	3.000	31				
	30-39	1.500	4				
	40-49	.000	8				
	50 and above	.000	10				
Classes Absent	*Under 20*	6.000	47	20.243	4	.000	2.02
	20-29	4.000	31				
	30-39	2.500	4				
	40-49	1.750	8				
	50 and above	1.500	10				

English as a first language and rates of absenteeism

A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that native English speakers were more likely to absent for full days (*Md* = 4.00, *n* = 68) than non-native English speakers (*Md* = 3.00, *n* = 32) *U* = 769.50, *z* = -2.374, *p* = .018, *r* = .24. It was also the case that native English speakers missed more classes (*Md* = 5.00, *n* = 68) than their non-native English speaking peers (*Md* = 3.75, *n* = 32) *U* = 692.50, *z* = -2.935, *p* = .003, *r* = 0.29 (see Table 2, Appendix I).

Gender and rates of absenteeism

A Mann-Whitney *U* test found no statistically significant difference between gender and learner absenteeism in terms of either days missed the previous month or classes missed in the previous week (See Table 1, Appendix J).

Residence and commute time

75 % of respondents reside at home/with family. 67% of learners spend up to 60 minutes commuting; with 33% of learners having a commute time in excess of 60 minutes (see Table 9).

Table 9

Summary Statistics in Relation to Commute Time

Variable		*n*	%
Commute time (single journey)	Under 30 mins.	26	26
	30-59 mins.	41	41
	60-89 mins.	20	20
	Over 90 mins.	13	13

Place of residence and rates of absenteeism

A Mann-Whitney *U* test found that there was a statistically significant difference in both days absent and classes missed between those learners who were living at home and those not living at home. Learners living at home were absent for a median of 4.0 days and 5.0 classes relative to those learners not living at home who were absent for a median of zero days and just 2.0 classes (see Table 3, Appendix I).

Commute time and rates of absenteeism

Commute time was investigated using a Kruskal-Wallis test which revealed a statistically significant difference between commute time and days absent only. Those learners with a

commute time of 30-59 minutes missed a median of 5.0 days, whilst those travelling for under 30 minutes missed a median of 2.0 days. No significant difference was found in classes absent (see

Table 10

Kruskal-Wallis test results for days absent and classes absent in relation to commute time

	Commute time (minutes)	*Md*	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Under 30*	2.000	26	13.613	3	.003	1.36
	30-59	5.000	41				
	60-89	4.000	20				
	90 and above	5.000	13				
Classes Absent	*Under 30*	3.750	26	2.459	3	.483	0.25
	30-59	5.000	41				
	60-89	3.500	20				
	90 and above	5.000	13				

Employment

57 respondents reported engaging in paid work outside of their programme of study. Of these 57 respondents, 36.8% of respondents work in excess of 20 hours per week (see Table 11).

Table 11

Summary Statistics in Relation to Average Hours Worked per Week

Variable		*n*[a]	%
Average hours worked per week	Under 10	13	23
	10-19 hours	23	40
	20-29 hours	17	30
	30-39 hours	3	5
	40+ hours	1	2

[a]*n* = 57

Although only 57 respondents stated that they engage in paid work outside of their course (question 7), 67 responded to the question pertaining to tiredness as a result of work, with 52.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they sometimes miss class as a result of their job. The difference here may be as a result of non-remunerated work being included in respondent answers (See table 12).

Table 12

Summary Statistics pertaining to College and Work Related Absences

	I sometimes miss class because I'm tired as a result of my job[a]	
	n	%
Strongly agree	10	14.9
Agree	25	37.3
Neutral	11	16.4
Disagree	15	22.4
Strongly disagree	4	6
Can't say	2	3

[a] n = 67-

Work status and rates of absenteeism

A Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted to ascertain whether work status was statistically significant in terms of absenteeism. It was found that there was a statistically significant difference between respondents who undertook paid work (Md = 4.00, n = 57) and those who did not work (Md = 3.00, n = 43), U = 926.00, z = -2.103, p = .035, r = .21. However, work status is only statistically significant as it pertains to days absent, and not classes missed. Work status was not statistically significant in terms of classes missed (see Table 1, Appendix K).

Hours worked, tiredness due to employment and attendance rates

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between learner absenteeism in terms of either days absent or classes missed and hours worked (See Table 2, Appendix J). Furthermore, no statistically significant difference was found between absenteeism and tiredness due to employment across either days absent or classes missed (See Table 4, Appendix J).

College relationships

82% of respondents believe that they have either good or very good relationships with peers, 90% of respondents believe that they have either good or very good relationships with teachers and 56.5% of respondents have either good or very good relationships with other staff (see Table 13).

Table 13

Summary Statistics Relating to College Relationships

	Relationships with other learners		*Relationships with teachers*		*Relationships with other staff*	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*[a]	%
Very good	45	45	43	43	23	23.2
Good	37	37	47	47	33	33.3
Neutral	16	16	8	8	36	36.4
Poor	0	0	0	0	3	3
Very poor	1	1	1	1	0	0
Can't say	1	1	1	1	4	4

[a]*n* = 99

Relationships with teachers and rates of attendance

Kruskal-Wallis test results found that the quality of relationships between learners and teachers is only statistically significant as it pertains to days absent (Gp1, *n* = 43: very good, Gp2, *n* = 47: good, Gp3, *n* = 8: neutral, Gp4, *n* = 0: poor, Gp5, *n* = 1: very poor, Gp6, *n* = 1:

can't say), $\chi 2$ (4, n = 100) = 9.909, p = .042. There was no statistically significant relationship found between the quality of the relationships between learners and teachers and classes missed. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, those learners who reported that they had a good relationship with their teachers missed a median of 5.0 days, whereas those who responded 'neutral' missed a median of 3.5 days and those who responded 'can't say' missed a median of zero days (see Table 2, Appendix K).

Relationships with other college staff and attendance rates

Learners can interact with a range of other college staff, for example, Principal and Deputy Principals, career guidance staff, administration staff and porters. A Kruskal-Wallis test shows that the quality of the relationship between learners and other college staff is only statistically significant as it pertains to classes missed (Gp1, n = 23: very good, Gp2, n = 33: good, Gp3, n = 36: neutral, Gp4, n = 3: poor, Gp5, n = 0: very poor, Gp6, n = 4: can't say), $\chi 2$ (4, n = 99) = 10.429, p = .034. Those learners who responded 'can't say' missed the most classes, with a median of 6.5 classes and those who responded 'very good' missed the fewest classes, reporting a median of just 2.0 (see Table 3, Appendix K).

Relationships with other learners and attendance rates

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between learner absenteeism in terms of days absent or classes missed and the reported quality of relationships between learners and their class peers (See Table 3, Appendix J).

Course content and timetable

78% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that their course is interesting, 63% either agree or strongly agree that their course is challenging and 83% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that their timetable suits them (see Table 14).

Table 14

Summary Statistics Relating to Course Content and Course Timetable

	The course content is interesting		*The course content is challenging*		*The timetable suits me*	
	n	%	*N*	%	*n*	%
Strongly agree	26	26	23	23	25	25
Agree	52	52	40	40	58	58
Neutral	18	18	29	29	11	11
Disagree	3	3	7	7	6	6
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Can't say	1	1	1	1	0	0

How interesting the course is perceived to be and attendance rates

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to investigate the relationship between attendance and how interesting learners perceived their course to be. Whether a learner found the course to be interesting or not was insignificant on the days absent dimension but was statistically significant on the dimension of class absences (Gp1, $n = 26$: strongly agree, Gp2, $n = 52$: agree, Gp3, $n = 18$: neutral, Gp4, $n = 3$: disagree, Gp5, $n = 0$: strongly disagree, Gp6, $n = 1$: can't say), $\chi 2$ (4, $n = 100$) = 12.328, $p = .015$. Learners who responded 'can't say' actually missed the least number of classes, with a median of 1.5 classes missed. Those learners who responded 'disagree' missed the largest number of classes with a median of 9.0, followed closely by those who responded 'neutral' with a median of 5.5 classes missed (see Table 4, Appendix K).

How challenging the course is, suitability of timetable and rates of attendance

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between learner absenteeism in terms of either days absent or classes missed and how challenging learners perceived their course to be. Furthermore, no statistically significant difference was found

between the suitability of the timetable and either days absent or classes missed (See Table 4, Appendix J).

College environment

Table 15 summary statistics show that just 36% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that both the social activities and facilities of the college are good.

Table 15

Summary Statistics Relating to College Environment

	The social activities of the college are good		*The college facilities are good*	
	n	%	*n*	%
Strongly agree	4	4	4	4
Agree	32	32	32	32
Neutral	30	30	33	33
Disagree	22	22	22	22
Strongly disagree	3	3	7	7
Can't say	9	9	2	2

Social activities in the college and attendance rates

This variable showed a result of statistical significance only as it pertains to classes missed, and not in relation to days missed, as per a Kruskal-Wallis test (Gp1, $n = 4$: strongly agree, Gp2, $n = 32$: agree, Gp3, $n = 30$: neutral, Gp4, $n = 22$: disagree, Gp5, $n = 3$: strongly disagree, Gp6, $n = 9$: can't say), $\chi 2$ (5, $n = 100$) = 12.521, $p = .028$. Those who strongly disagreed that the college social activities were good missed the highest number of classes, with a median of 13.0 classes. However, those learners who strongly agreed that the college social activities were good missed a median of zero classes (see Table 5, Appendix K).

College facilities and attendance rates

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between how learners view the facilities of the college and either days absent in the previous month or classes missed in the previous week (See Table 4, Appendix J).

Belonging, identity and competence

66% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that they have a lot in common with the other learners in their class. However, 40.4% of respondents either disagree or strongly disagree that other learners in the class group attend class most of the time. 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they are confident in their ability to succeed in their course, and 73.7% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that attendance is critical to academic success (see Table 16).

Table 16

Summary Statistics in Relation to Belonging, Identity and Competence

Variable		*n*	%
I have a lot in common with other students enrolled on the course	Strongly agree	12	12
	Agree	54	54
	Neutral	23	23
	Disagree	8	8
	Strongly disagree	2	2
	Can't say	1	1
The others learners in my class group attend class most of the time[a]	Strongly agree	6	6.1
	Agree	17	17.2
	Neutral	34	34.3
	Disagree	33	33.3
	Strongly disagree	7	7.1
	Can't say	2	2

Table 16 (continued)

Variable		*n*	%
I am confident that I can succeed in this course	Strongly agree	25	25
	Agree	55	55
	Neutral	16	16
	Disagree	4	4
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Can't say	0	0
I consider attendance at class critical to my academic success[a]	Strongly agree	18	18.2
	Agree	55	55.6
	Neutral	21	21.2
	Disagree	4	4
	Strongly disagree	0	0
	Can't say	1	1

[a]*n* = 99

Belonging, identity and competence and rates of attendance

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between learner absenteeism in terms of either days absent or classes missed and commonality with other learners, the attendance rates of other learners, perceived self-efficacy or relationship between attendance and academic success (See Table 4, Appendix J).

College related absences

Table 17 addresses two college and work-related reasons why learners choose not to attend college. 33% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they may miss class when they can access class notes via the Moodle VLE. It is certainly noteworthy that 73% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they may sometimes miss class due to working on other assignments.

Table 17

Summary Statistics pertaining to College Related Absences

	I sometimes miss class because I can get class notes from Moodle		*I sometimes miss class because I have to work on assignments*	
	n	%	*n*	%
Strongly agree	7	7	21	21
Agree	26	26	52	52
Neutral	13	13	9	9
Disagree	39	39	13	13
Strongly disagree	11	11	3	3
Can't say	4	4	2	2

Availability of Moodle (VLE) and attendance rates

A Kruskal-Wallis test showed a result of statistical significance only as the availability of Moodle pertains to classes missed, and not in relation to days missed (Gp1, $n = 7$: strongly agree, Gp2, $n = 26$: agree, Gp3, $n = 13$: neutral, Gp4, $n = 39$: disagree, Gp5, $n = 11$: strongly disagree, Gp6, $n = 4$: can't say), $\chi 2$ (5, $n = 100$) = 11.421, $p = .044$. Those who strongly agreed with the statement that they sometimes miss class because they can get class notes from Moodle were the cohort with the highest number of absences from class, a median of 6.0 classes. The lowest number of classes missed comes from the 'can't say' respondents, with a median of 1.0 classes missed (see Table 6, Appendix K).

Assignment pressure and rates of attendance

Table 18 outlines the findings of a Kruskal-Wallis test for difference based on whether or not the learner feels the need to miss days and/or classes to work on assignments. This suggested that assignment pressure was statistically significant on the dimensions of both days missed in the preceding month and classes missed in the preceding week. Those who responded 'strongly

agree' to the statement missed a median of 4.5 days and 6.0 classes. Those who responded 'strongly disagree' with the statement missed a median of zero days and 1.5 classes.

Table 18

Kruskal-Wallis test results for missing class to work on assignments

			Md	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*I sometimes miss class because I have to work on assignments*	Strongly agree	4.500	21	16.187	5	.006	1.62
		Agree	4.000	52				
		Neutral	.000	9				
		Disagree	2.000	13				
		Strongly disagree	.000	3				
		Can't say	3.000	2				
Classes Absent	*I sometimes miss class because I have to work on assignments*	Strongly agree	6.000	21	20.408	5	.001	2.04
		Agree	5.000	52				
		Neutral	2.000	9				
		Disagree	2.000	13				
		Strongly disagree	1.500	3				
		Can't say	.000	2				

Social and personal related absences

Table 19 shows that only 16% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their social life may adversely impact on attendance, whereas 45.5% agree or strongly agree that health reasons may be a factor in missing classes and 33.3% agree or strongly agree that family issues may result in the learner missing classes.

Table 19

Summary Statistics pertaining to Social and Personal Related Absences

	I sometimes miss class because of					
	Socialising the previous night		*Health Reasons*		*Family Reasons*	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Strongly agree	1	1	10	10.1	11	11.1
Agree	15	15	35	35.4	22	22.2
Neutral	15	15	20	20.2	17	17.2
Disagree	43	43	25	25.3	37	37.4
Strongly disagree	23	23	8	8.1	9	9.1
Can't say	3	3	1	1	3	3

Social and personal related absences and rates of absenteeism

A Kruskal-Wallis test found no statistically significant difference between learner absenteeism in terms of either days absent of classes missed and socialising, health issues or family (See Table 5, Appendix J).

Other reasons why learners sometimes miss class

An open question was placed at the end of the questionnaire that asked learners for any other reasons why they might not attend college. 23 respondents provided responses to this open question. There are 30 responses collated below, as some respondents provided multiple reasons for why they may sometimes miss class. The responses were transcribed and arranged into broad themes. Some of the answers given in this open question related back to the independent variables already reported upon but for completeness have been recorded in Table 20, which shows the breakdown of answers received.

Table 20

Summary Statistics Relating to Other Reasons Why Learners Sometimes Miss Class

Variable	*n*	%
Apathy on the part of the learner	3	10.0
Boring classes	2	6.7
Commute time	3	10.0
Don't feel it necessary to attend/can work at home on class material	2	6.7
Mental health issues	7	23.3
No canteen	1	3.3
Poor attendance of other learners	1	3.3
Public Transport	5	16.7
Socialising	1	3.3
Studying for exams/work on assignments	1	3.3
Weather	2	6.7
Work	2	6.7
Total	30	100

NFQ level, age range, whether or not the learner was a native English speaker, place of residence and assignment pressure all provided statistically significant results across both dependent variables (days missed in previous month and classes missed in previous week). However, seven independent variables (commute time, work status, relationships with teachers, relationships with other college staff, how interesting the course was, how good the college social activities were and the availability of the Moodle VLE) produced a statistically significant result in just one of the dependent variables. No statistically significant difference was found for 14 independent variables. Table 21 provides an overview of the variables investigated as part of this research and the relationship between each of the independent variables and the two dependent variables (i) days absent in the preceding month and (ii) classes missed in the preceding week.

Table 21

Overview of independent variables and their relationship to days absent and classes missed

Variable	*Statistically significant in terms of days absent*	*Statistically significant in terms of classes missed*
NFQ level	✓	✓
Age	✓	✓
English as a first language	✓	✓
Gender		
Place of residence	✓	✓
Commute time	✓	
Work status	✓	
Hours worked		
Tiredness due to employment		
Relationships with teachers	✓	
Relationships with other college staff		✓
Relationships with other learners		
How interesting the course is		✓
How challenging the course is		
Suitability of learner timetable		
Social activities in the college		✓
College facilities		
Commonality with other learners		
Attendance of other learners		
Perceived self-efficacy		
Perception of attendance as critical to academic success		
Availability of Moodle (VLE)		✓
Assignment pressure	✓	✓
Socialising		
Health issues		
Family issues		

The next section provides an opportunity to discuss the meaning of these findings and the implications arising from them, as well as the limitations associated with this research.

Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of how the findings relate to the literature, the significance of the findings and the implications for practice. Potential interrelationships will be discussed as well the limitations of the research. This chapter will commence with a discussion of the findings relating to individual learner factors, and will then proceed to factors pertaining to the learning environment. Within each of these sections, factors of statistical significance across both dependent variables will be addressed first, followed by factors of statistical significance across one of the dependent variables, and lastly by factors that did not appear statistically significant. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of some of the limitations of this research.

The research question was as follows: What are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education? The primary research undertaken indicated that there were a variety of individual and learning environment factors statistically significant to the attendance decisions of learners.

Individual learner factors

Statistically significant across both dependent variables

The research showed that age impacted on both days absent and classes missed, with younger learners having higher rates of absenteeism across both, findings in line with OFSTED (2013). Younger learners generally are less satisfied than older learners with their choice of course, its content and delivery and this may be related to stepping away from the more structured environment of secondary school, in addition to struggling with issues of time management and independent learning (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Similarly, a lack of resilience and preparedness on the part of younger learners may undermine their learning journey

(Barlow and Fleischer, 2011) and leave them more prone to absenting when course content isn't immediately gratifying or assessment pressure looms. Still, this result is significant as 47% of respondents were under the age of 20 and this is a pattern likely to be replicated in many colleges of further education. This may indicate that support for younger learners within this context needs to be further strengthened. Younger learners may benefit from opportunities to set realistic expectations before they enroll in college, for example, through links with partner schools, bridging programmes/taster sessions and specialist guidance during the enrollment phase (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Younger learners who were less than successful in secondary school may require additional support in numeracy and literacy to further enable the transition to a higher level of learning, in conjunction with time management and study skills. Learners in a minority with respect to age, i.e. older or younger than the majority of learners, within class groups also need to be supported in order not to feel marginalised (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Although Barlow and Fleischer (2011) suggest that a lack of resilience on the part of younger learners lies more within the remit of parental responsibility, Martinez and Munday (1998) suggest that parental involvement during open days and the enrolment process may be of benefit in setting expectations. Finally, some of the learners attending colleges of further education range from 16-18 years of age and OFSTED's (2013) research looked at whether raising the minimum age for participation would improve attendance. However, this was deemed unlikely to impact on learners for whom employment was not a possibility.

Native English speakers also appeared to absent more than non-native English speakers, across both dependent variables. This echoes the findings of Martinez and Munday (1998) where non-native English speakers were more likely to complete their chosen further education course. This was potentially linked to "particularly highly motivated first or second generation

immigrants" (p.33). Notwithstanding this possibility, this may be somewhat at variance with OFSTED (2013) which raised the issue of specific additional pressures for non-native English speakers, for example, "acting as an interpreter for family members" (p. 17) amongst other family duties that may negatively impact on the attendance of non-native English speakers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-native speakers may be more likely to attend class in order to gain one-to-one time with teachers, ask questions, understand subject-specific terminology and gain clarification regarding new concepts. It may be the case that native English speakers do not feel the need to attend to the same degree as those who may face challenges with the English language and find college attendance beneficial in that regard.

The research suggested that learners living at home/with family were more likely to be absent for both full days and specific classes. This is at variance with the research of Kelly (2012), who found no difference in the attendance levels of university students living on campus to those living off campus. It is also at variance with the findings of Kirby and McElroy (2003) who found that those learners assumed to live at home had higher rates of attendance than those who did not, and suggested that this may be related to parental encouragement to attend class. However, both these studies took place within the context of third level education. This is certainly different to the home environment referenced by Reid (2008) who drew a link between increased absenteeism in F.E. and a challenging home environment, often characterised by a distinct lack of parental support. The role of work may offer some insight here. Barlow and Fleischer (2011), citing Fleischer, Chalkley, & O'Connell (2008) found that many learners need to work to cover accommodation costs. Kelly (2012), citing Devadoss and Foltz (1996) and Dolnicar (2005) suggest that these learners may be more motivated by the self-financing nature of their study and this may in turn lead to higher attendance on the part of those who do not live

at home. For those learners whose attendance is being impacted by a less than supportive home environment the provision of pastoral guidance or specialist support, either internal or external to the college, may prove beneficial to the learner (Martinez and Munday, 1998), and learners should be made aware of how these services can be accessed.

Statistically significant across one dependent variable only

Commute time appeared significant as it pertains to days absent only, with learners commuting less than 30 minutes to college missing substantially less days than those commuting for 30 minutes and longer. This is in contrast to Kirby and McElroy (2003), who reported that and attendance rates were higher for those travelling more than 30 minutes to college than those commuting for shorter periods. Indeed, Kelly (2012) found no difference in attendance between those living on campus, which involved no commute, and those living off campus. However, OFSTED (2013) suggested that learners who travelled long distances to college were more likely to weigh up the impact of a long commute against the opportunity to study at home. This was of importance to learners who did not like a specific teacher or teaching style and chose to miss those classes. This may be linked to Kirby and McElroy's (2003) research, which speculated that those commuting more than 30 minutes tend to stay in college for the full day. However, it contrasts with the research findings which show no statistically significant relationship between commute time and classes missed in the preceding week. Another aspect of interest may relate to the cost of travel, with those commuting for longer times potentially under financial pressure as a result of their commute. This is certainly borne out by anecdotal evidence that suggests that some learners may not always be able to afford the cost of travel to college and miss days as a result. Some of the literature suggests that if the learner's commute results in the learner arriving late to college the learner may be reluctant to present for class (OFSTED, 2013). Although no clear link

between the two has been established, colleges may be able to encourage these learners through providing a supportive class environment where such incidences are handled in an empathic manner. Finally, colleges could consider timetabling as many class periods as possible outside of peak travel times to facilitate a shorter commute time for learners.

Whether or not the learner worked was found to be significant as it pertained to days missed in the preceding month only and there was no statistically significant impact on classes missed in the preceding week. The timing of the research may have had an impact on these results, where learners reduced their workloads in the week preceding data collection as assessment and exams drew nearer. Indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence to support this viewpoint. The research indicates that those learners who work miss a greater number of days than those who are not engaged in paid employment. This is consistent with the findings of Barlow and Fleischer (2011) and OFSTED (2013) but is not supported by the findings of Kottasz (2005) who found no relationship between work commitments outside of the course and absenteeism, and Paisey and Paisey (2004) who found that employment had only a limited impact on attendance. Interestingly, this research suggested that the number of hours worked by the learner had no significant impact on either dependent variable and this is at variance with Kirby and McElroy's (2003) research which found hours worked to have a small effect on learner attendance. Similarly, the research suggests that tiredness due to work was not statistically significant to either days missed or classes missed. Internal college survey data suggests that over 43% of our learners work day shifts during the college week. This would suggest that many learners are absenting themselves for full days when they are called upon to work day shifts. Despite anecdotal evidence that other learners may attend late or leave early in order to accommodate working within their college timetable, the research does not find classes

missed statistically significant. It may be that the reason for undertaking the work is significant; for example, financial pressure to pay for accommodation or provide for a family, and this supersedes the importance of attending college. However, despite this Kelly (2012) suggested that increased activity based learning may foster increased attendance amongst those learners who have a job.

Factors not statistically significant across either dependent variable

The research suggests that learner gender has no statistically significant impact on either days absent or classes missed. This is contrary to much of the literature which suggests that male learners exhibit a greater propensity to absent from class and, in some cases, to drop out (Martinez and Munday, 1998, Paisey and Paisey, 2004, Woodfield, Jessop and McMillan, 2006). A limited impact in terms of attendance at tutorial sessions was found by Kirby and McElroy (2003), with females are more likely to attend tutorials but not lectures. However, Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd and Thomas (2008) found that male learners attended more frequently than women but the difference was not found to be statistically significant.

Whether nor not the learner reported as confident in their ability to succeed in their course was found not to be statistically significant. The literature reports both positive and negative impacts of a lack of confidence on the part of the learner and absenteeism. Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, report a learner's experience as follows "When I have gone [to lectures] it's knocked my confidence back" (p.232), whereas Kottasz (2005) found a lack of confidence had a positive impact on tutorial attendance, possibly as an attempt on the part of the learner to access greater support. However, this finding did not extend to attendance at lectures. There may also be some connection between learner confidence and whether or not the learner believed that attendance was key to academic success, another factor that was found not to be statistically

significant. It may be the case that more confident learners felt capable to undertaking independent learning outside of timetabled classes. There is some suggestion that confidence building activities may play an important role in retaining learners, especially those who are finding it difficult to settle into a course, and colleges could potentially do more in this regard (Martinez and Munday, 1998, Ekstrand, 2015).

Although the research found that neither health nor family issues were statistically significant in terms of attendance, this is at variance with much of the literature. Martinez and Munday (1998) found that younger learners (aged 16-18) were more likely to report changes in family circumstances and health issues during the academic year. Illness features heavily in the literature as a cause of non-attendance (Paisey and Paisey, 2004, Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, Ekstrand, 2015), with many colleges reporting an increase in learners with health issues, including mental health issues, that impact on their ability to attend consistently (OFSTED, 2013). Kottasz (2005) suggested that illness was being used as an excuse for low motivation and associated non-attendance, whereas White, O'Connor and Hamilton (2011) found that even the most diligent of learners are likely to be absent from class as a result of health or family issues. It appears that younger learners acting as carers for older or younger family members may be particularly at risk of missing class time (OFSTED, 2013) and this is something that appears to be increasing within our own context. Similarly, anecdotal evidence suggests that parents with childcare issues struggle to attend class consistently, particularly early morning and late afternoon classes. This is consistent with Paisey and Paisey (2004), citing Winn (2002) who found late afternoon classes particularly challenging for parents.

Learning environment factors

Statistically significant across both dependent variables

The NFQ level of the course undertaken by respondents was significant in terms of both days absent in the preceding month and classes missed in the preceding week, with learners undertaking courses at level five reporting more absences than those undertaking level six courses. Kelly (2012) also found higher attendance rates at higher levels of study and proposed that this may be related to learners having already committed to a particular field of study. Martinez and Munday (1998) suggested that learners undertaking foundation or intermediate level courses often attended further education colleges as they did not know what else to do and therefore may be less motivated to attend, many subsequently dropping out of their course. OFSTED (2013) drew a distinction between those courses at levels one and two (foundation and intermediate) and those at level three. However, its work incorporated the age of the learner and found that the attendance of younger learners (16-18 years) undertaking level one courses was falling whereas attendance levels of adults (19 years and older) undertaking level one courses had improved. It is worth noting that foundation and intermediate levels in England and Northern Ireland correspond with NFQ levels three and four in an Irish context (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017) and therefore may have limited applicability. There may well a contributing age impact in this research, as our level six courses are often populated by learners slightly older than their level five counterparts. In addition, many level six courses include a significant ongoing work placement element, relevant to the learner's course of study. The work placement may help to contextualise the learning and engagement with a desirable employer may encourage the learner to continue to attend class. If this is the case, then perhaps a greater effort needs to be made to provide the same sense of connection and engender a similar sense of commitment for

level five learners. For NFQ level 5 learners improved pre-entry information for learners, combined with admissions processes that surface the learner's long term goals and an induction that improves learning and study skills may ameliorate some of these issues (Martinez and Munday, 1998).

The impact of assignment pressures affected both dependent variables, with the research showing higher absences reported amongst learners agreeing or strongly agreeing that they sometimes miss class to work on assignments. This result is well reflected in the literature. Martinez and Munday (1998) reported learners in further education struggle more with the volume of assessments than their complexity and suggested that both the scheduling of assessments and enforcement of assessment deadlines be managed in a fair but compassionate way. Upcoming assessment submission dates often had a negative impact on attendance (Paisey and Paisey, 2004, and Moore et al, 2008, cited by Kelly, 2012). Kottasz (2005), citing Fleming 1992, referred to learners having more to gain by working on assignments rather than attending class and this was reflected in her own research which found 61% of respondents missed lectures to work on assignments. An associated variable and one not specifically addressed as part of this primary research is the issue of overall workload. Martinez and Maunday (1998) and OFSTED (2013) reported on the negative impact of work overload on learner attendance. However, Kottasz (2005) found workload to be a factor in both attendance and non-attendance, Pownall (2012) found that learners felt able to manage workload and the consequences of non-attendance and Ekstrand (2015) found that a low workload also related to increased learner absenteeism. In light of the significant impact of assessment pressure and inappropriate workload on learners, colleges should continue to provide clear assessment briefs and rubrics, and streamline assessment whenever possible. This may include staggering assessment deadlines, maximising

integration of assessment and implementing equitable and transparent parameters and procedures for late submission of assignments.

Statistically significant across one dependent variable only

This research indicates that the learner-educator relationship has a statistically significant impact on the number of days absent, although it does not have a significant impact in terms of classes missed. However, the results here are mixed and, perhaps unusually, learners who reported a good relationship with teachers missed more days than any other response category. The importance of positive learner-teacher relationships is covered in much of the literature (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd and Thomas, 2008, Reid, 2008), with Kottasz (2005) finding that learners were more likely to attend if the educator had a positive, respectful attitude towards learners. This is reflected in a learner's feedback on absenteeism as follows "At school you skip the subjects you don't like; at college you skip the teachers you don't like" (OFSTED, 2013, p. 18). These findings are more consistent with the research of Snyder and Frank (2016) who found a positive relationship between educator dynamism and learner absenteeism, where dynamism refers to clarity, charisma and energy of the teacher. They concluded that their findings may relate to the dynamism of the educator enhancing message clarity and learners feeling that they are absorbing enough material during the classes they're present for as a result. Yet, this doesn't fully explain our results. It may be that there is a different type of "tacit contract" (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, p. 233) at play between certain cohorts of learners and teachers. Those persons party to a 'good' teacher-learner relationship may be less focused on presence and more focused on participation within the college setting.

Relationship with other college staff was significant as it pertained to classes missed only, and not days absent. Those who reported a very good relationship with other college staff missed

the fewest number of classes, whereas those who responded ‘neutral’ or ‘can’t say’ were absent for the greatest number of classes. Learners have cited poor relationships with other staff and poor pastoral care as reasons for absenteeism (Reid, 2008). Perhaps the reason for the interaction may be relevant to the research. The Principal, Deputy Principal, administration or student services staff, for example, career guidance, financial support and learning support staff often deal with more complex academic and non-academic issues. These issues may relate to discipline, bullying, drugs, mental health and financial pressures, amongst others. These may be difficult issues for the learner to navigate and negatively impact on how they viewed the relationship, despite possibly engaging with the service provider on a more frequent basis. If this is indeed the case, then colleges need to be especially sensitive in their dealings with learners in this regard.

How interesting the course was perceived to be by learners was significant in terms of classes missed, but not days absent. Learners who agreed or strongly agreed that the content of their course was interesting reported missing fewer classes than those in other response categories. This is in keeping with a wide body of research that suggests absenteeism increases when classes are not sufficiently stimulating (Martinez and Munday, 1998, Paisey and Paisey, 2004, Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, OFSTED, 2013). Kelly (2012) found this to be particularly relevant to those learners who also had a job. However, some of the literature found only a limited relationship between interest in the subject and attendance (Kirby and McElroy, 2003). Nonetheless, this result is in keeping with expectations, and colleges should attempt to address the issue in order to reduce absenteeism. This could be affected through the use of a range of teaching strategies, for example, including a greater incidence of activity based learning, improved linking of theory to practice and inclusion of guest speakers.

The research shows that dissatisfaction with college social activities negatively impacted on the number of classes attended. Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed that the social activities of the college were good reported significantly higher rates of classes missed than those of other response categories. However, college social activities did not impact on the number of days missed. There is some evidence in the literature to suggest that a poor social aspect to college life negatively impacts on the learner experience and may be related to learner non-completion (Martinez and Munday, 1998, Kelly, 2012, citing Blaney and Mulkeen 2008). It also appears that recreational activities may engender a sense of belonging and assist in building good peer relationships and a sense of enjoyment of college life (Martinez and Munday, 1998). It may be the case that a perceived lack of college social activities factors into an overall dissatisfaction with the college and reduces the motivation to attend classes. Colleges could do more to address this deficit through, for example, establishing clubs and societies of interest to learners (Martinez and Munday, 1998). This could be achieved in conjunction with learners and with the assistance of the student union or student council. It may also be the case that activities are available for learners but they are unaware of their existence and colleges could potentially do more to highlight what is available through, for example, college newsletters, noticeboards and online media. In the research learners were also asked about socialising in general, and whether tiredness from socialising impacted on attendance. No statistically significant impact was reported in terms of either days or classes missed, which is at variance with White (2010), citing Longhurst (1999) who reported that social activities had prevented learners from attending class.

The research found the availability of Moodle (VLE) had a statistically significant impact on attendance as it pertained to classes missed only and not in relation to days absent. However,

the median and mean rank data returned divergent results. The mean rank data suggested that those who missed the most classes were learners who disagreed that they sometimes miss class because they can get notes from the VLE. However, the median data suggested that those who missed the most classes were those learners who strongly agreed that they missed class due to the availability of the VLE. Anecdotal evidence would suggest the latter to be more likely. The use of VLEs has been often been linked to attendance, with some learners deciding not to attend class when relevant material is available through the VLE, however this may also be related to the quality of teaching on offer (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011, OFSTED, 2013). It may also be related to other factors surfaced in this research, for example, how interesting the learner found their course to be. There is a concern among educators that learners may be wrongly assuming that VLE use can adequately replace the classroom where in fact the educator has designed the material as supplemental (Barlow and Fleischer, citing Barrett et al., 2007). Colleges potentially have a role to play in clarifying the contribution of the VLE within a specific context, where the material is designed to support timetabled class and if/when the available material replaces the requirement to be physically present for the associated class (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, Pownall, 2012, citing Traphagan, Kucsera and Kishi, 2010).

Factors not statistically significant across either dependent variable

Three interconnected variables associated with learner identity do not appear statistically significant in this research, namely the quality of the relationship with other learners, whether learners felt that they had a lot in common with peers and whether other learners attended class regularly. Therefore it appears that this finding is at variance with much of the literature in the field of learner identity (White, O'Connor and Hamilton, 2010). This is somewhat surprising.

An internal college survey suggested that almost 82% of our learners find their course challenging, however, this result is not statistically significant in terms of days or classes missed. Similarly, learner satisfaction with college facilities appeared insignificant in relation to attendance. This is contrary to much of the literature that suggested that poor facilities may increase absenteeism. Martinez and Munday (1998) suggested that, in particular, a lack of computer and library facilities may encourage the learner to return home. However, they also conclude that degrees of satisfaction with facilities are a poor predictor of learner attendance, with students who dropped out of their course rating college facilities higher than those who completed.

Timetabling issues have long been discussed as having a negative impact on learner attendance, with gaps in the timetable cited by many learners as reasons for absenteeism (Martinez and Munday, 1998, Kelly 2012). The research found timetabling issues insignificant in relation to attendance; however this may be influenced by the fact that, according to internal student survey data, over 82% of learners were happy with the timing of classes on their timetable.

Limitations

A number of limitations pertain to the research. This work is limited by the size of the sample. A larger sample size may have yielded a greater variety of responses and a greater opportunity for analysis across different demographic segments. Despite over 25% of enrolled learners completing the survey, respondents were chosen via convenience sampling, and two class groups were unavailable for inclusion due to competing demands. Therefore we cannot be sure that this sample accurately reflects the views of the population of the college, nor can we be

certain that our research reached a sufficient number of habitual non-attenders. This potentially was also a function of the timing of the study. As attendance has been reported to reduce over an academic year (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd and Thomas, 2008) the decision to conduct the research towards the end of the academic year may have impacted on the resultant data. Had time allowed, a longitudinal study would have been preferred. A survey questionnaire was chosen as the data collection tool in order to minimise the burden for respondents. However, this limited the number of questions that could reasonably be posed and a lack of open questions may have stymied the opportunity to gain a depth of understanding across a number of factors. The self-reported nature of the study may have engendered respondent bias when reporting attendance and despite the best efforts of the researcher non-native English speakers subsequently reported difficulty understanding some of the questions posed. In addition, in asking learners to recall how many days were missed in the preceding month and how many classes were missed in the preceding week, an element of recall bias may have been introduced. Although the choice of questions included in the survey was guided by similar prior research it could be argued that the biases of the researcher impacted on the ultimate choice of factors studied and questions included in the study. The questionnaire itself was anonymous but the use of educators in the data collection process may have inhibited responses in relation to non-attendance whilst asserting pressure on learners to participate in the study, despite the assurances of the participant information sheet that participation was entirely voluntary.

Future Perspectives

The research sought to answer the question "what are the individual and learning environment factors that influence learner attendance decisions within an Irish college of Further Education?'. The results identified a number of individual and learning environment factors that impact on one or both of the dependent variables, days absent in the preceding month and classes missed the week preceding data collection. Age, first language, place of residence, NFQ level of the course and assignment pressure appears particularly significant, impacting on both dependent variables. The research attempted to address gaps in the literature pertaining to hours worked and certain identity issues, neither of which appeared statistically significant.

In the course of this research a survey questionnaire was developed, guided by the literature and previous studies in the field of learner attendance. In particular, the works of Kirby and McElroy (2003), Kottasz (2005) and Kelly (2012) were invaluable during the design process, which was both challenging and rewarding. The questionnaire was designed to investigate a wide range of individual and learning environment factors impacting on learner attendance decisions, and the survey questionnaire itself proved one of the significant outputs of this research. Whilst it may provide a framework for those attempting similar research within this sector in the future, there is the potential for the survey to be further developed to better understand our learners and the decisions they make in terms of whether to attend timetabled classes or not.

Improvements may be sought in the design of questions across both the independent and dependent variables. A number of questions could potentially be added to the survey. As commute time was statistically significant in relation to days absent, future research could include a question that investigates the impact of the cost of travel for learners, an aspect not

addressed within this current research. Another potentially related variable worth including in a future survey questionnaire is the impact of weather conditions on attendance decisions. This was raised by two respondents in the research and may relate to an increased commute time due to poor weather conditions or the weather itself impacting on learner motivation to attend. Although assessment pressure was addressed within the questionnaire, overall course workload impact was not and may be an interesting addition to a future questionnaire. Similarly, as work status impacted on days absent, additional questions could be posed to surface why learners work during term time, if this is linked to accommodation costs and if the time of the work undertaken, for example, day, evening or night shifts, impacts on attendance. Surprisingly, issues of learner identity, belonging and self-efficacy appeared not to be statistically significant. Although based on just one body of learners there may be an argument to be made for the removal of the survey questions relating to learner identity, belonging and self-efficacy or at least a reduction to the number of questions posed in this area. However, as these results are at variance with much of the literature it would be of interest to see if future studies in the F.E. context returned similar results. Questions relating to the dependent variables could also be modified. This research investigated the impact of a number of factors on (i) days absent in the month preceding data collection and (ii) classes missed in the week preceding data collection. The different timeframes were chosen to surface absences relating to full days in addition to absences from specific class periods during a college day. However, this choice created an overlap between the outputs from the questions relating to the two dependent variables, and this could be better addressed in a future survey questionnaire.

Other suggestions for future research may include attempting a longitudinal study of learner attendance with primary data gathered at different points during the academic year. A

mixed methods approach could be utilised to gain both breadth and depth of data. A longitudinal study may also offer the opportunity to include the views of educators and other college staff. Data protection legislation permitting, future research could include a mapping of actual attendance to self-reported attendance levels, to address any concerns in that regard. It appears that there may be interrelationships between some of the variables identified as independent and these may be worthy of further investigation. For example there may be potential relationships between NFQ level and age, college social activities and peer relationships, the use of VLEs and the quality of teaching. A multi-level logistic regression analysis could correlate responses over time in a longitudinal study, address data hierarchies and provide an understanding of group effects.

The F.E. context has provided a progressive, inclusive and innovative context for learners and many colleges have worked hard to address issues in the learning environment that may negatively impact on learner attendance. Although pedagogical issues were not specifically addressed in the research it may prove an interesting avenue for future investigation. If learners decided which classes to attend based on how interesting they are then a variety of teaching strategies need to be employed to address this issue. Improved pre-entry information for learners, an enrollment process that sets realistic expectations and allows for parental involvement, combined with time management and study skills support may help NFQ level five learners transition more easily to the F.E. context. Assignment pressure appears a significant in learner attendance decisions and to address this issue colleges need to continue to provide detailed assignment briefs, rubrics and streamline assessment where possible, including how assessment is scheduled, integration of assessment and procedures for dealing with late submissions. Finally,

the appropriate use of VLEs can contribute much to the learning journey. However, colleges may need to identify for learners how it can be best used to improve learning outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: Operationalisation of Research Variables

Independent Variables		Category of Data	Measurement
Individual learner			
	Course NQF level	Ordinal	Dichotomous
	Gender	Nominal	Nominal scale
	Age	Ratio	Ratio scale
	Native English speaker	Nominal	Dichotomous
	Residence	Nominal	Dichotomous
	Commute time	Ratio	Scale
	Employment	Nominal	Binomial
	Hours worked	Ratio	Ratio scale
	Confidence in ability to succeed	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Attitude towards attendance	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Socialising impact	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Job-related tiredness	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Ill health	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Family issues	Ordinal	Likert scale
Learning Environment			
	Relationships with peers	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Relationships with teachers	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Relationships with other staff	Ordinal	Likert scale
	Interesting course content	Ordinal	Likert scale

Challenging course content	Ordinal	Likert scale
Suitable timetable	Ordinal	Likert scale
Commonality with peers	Ordinal	Likert scale
Other learners' attendance	Ordinal	Likert scale
College social activities	Ordinal	Likert scale
College facilities	Ordinal	Likert scale
Availability of VLE	Ordinal	Likert scale
Assignment pressure	Ordinal	Likert scale

Dependent Variables	Category of Data	Measurement
Days absent in preceding month	Ordinal	Frequency
Classes missed in preceding week	Ordinal	Frequency

APPENDIX B: Survey Questionnaire

DECLARATION I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. I understand that participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and that by completing the questionnaire I am consenting to participate in the research. If you require any additional information about this research please contact me at *(email address provided).*

I agree to participate [ ] I do not agree to participate [ ]

An investigation into factors influencing learner attendance decisions

Please tick one box for each of the following statements:

Q1. Is your course NFQ Level 5 or Level 6? Level 5 [ ] Level 6 [ ]

Q2. What is your gender? Male [ ] Female[ ] Non Binary [ ]

Q3. What is your age? Under 20 [ ] 20-29 [ ] 30-39 [ ] 40-49 [ ]

50 and above [ ]

Q4. Are you a native English speaker? Yes [ ] No [ ]

Q5. Do you live at home (e.g. with parents/guardians/family)? Yes [ ] No [ ]

Q6. What is your commute time for a <u>single</u> journey to college (either going to or coming from college)? Under 30 minutes [ ] 30-59 minutes [ ] 60-89 minutes [ ]

over 90 minutes [ ]

Q7. Do you have paid work outside of your programme of study?

Yes [ ] No [ ] (If no, skip next question)

Q8. On average, how many hours do you work per week?

Under 10 hours per week [ ] 10-19 hours per week [ ] 20-29 hours per week [ ]

30-39 hours per week [ ] 40+ hours per week [ ]

Q9. How many <u>days</u> were you absent <u>last month</u> (excluding college holidays)? _____

Q.10 How many timetabled <u>class periods</u> did you miss <u>last week</u> (excluding any classes that were rescheduled or cancelled by the college)? _____

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

Q11. How would you rate your relationships with other learners in your class?

Very good [ ] Good [ ] Neutral [ ] Poor [ ] Very poor [ ] Can't say [ ]

Q12. How would you rate your relationships with your teachers?

Very good [ ] Good [ ] Neutral [ ] Poor [ ] Very poor [ ] Can't say [ ]

Q13. How would you rate your relationships with other staff?

Very good [ ] Good [ ] Neutral [ ] Poor [ ] Very poor [ ] Can't say [ ]

Q14. The content of the course is interesting

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q15. The content of the course is challenging

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q16. I am confident that I can succeed in this course

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q17. The timetable suits me

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q18. I have a lot in common with other students enrolled on the course

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q19. The other learners in my class group attend class most of the time

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q20. The social activities of the college are good

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q21. The college facilities are good

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

Q22. As a student enrolled in this college I consider attendance at classes critical to my academic success

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q23. I sometimes miss class because I can get class notes from Moodle

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q24. I sometimes miss class because I have to work on assignments

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q25. I sometimes miss class because I'm tired from socialising the previous night

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q26. I sometimes miss class because I'm tired as a result of my job (Please skip this question if you do <u>not</u> work outside of your programme of study)

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q27. I sometimes miss class because of health reasons

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q28. I sometimes miss class because of family issues

Strongly Agree [ ] Agree [ ] Neutral [ ] Disagree [ ] Strongly Disagree [ ]

Can't say [ ]

Q29. If there are other reasons why you sometimes miss class please specify below

_____

_____

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this research

APPENDIX C: Participant Information Sheet

Introduction

My name is Karen Abberton and I currently completing a Masters of Arts, in Learning & Teaching, at the National College of Ireland (NCI). As part of my studies I am undertaking a research project entitled *'The factors influencing attendance decisions in an Irish college of Further Education',* under the supervision of Dr. Yvonne Emmett.

What is this research about?

The aim of this study is to attempt identify possible enabler and barriers to learner attendance within a Further Education context. This study will benefit schools and learners by identifying where changes could be made in order to facilitate increased learner attendance.

What are you being asked to do?

You are invited to take part in a single, self-report survey that will be carried out via questionnaire. All participants will be asked to provide their formal consent before completing the survey.

How will you protect my privacy?

This survey is anonymous and the information given by you will be stored securely. All information given will remain confidential and only the researcher will have access to the completed questionnaires. The findings of this study will be submitted as part of my Masters of Arts and will be represented in a form that does not allow any participant to be identified. In addition, the raw data will be held in compliance with NCI's Data Retention Policy.

What are the benefits and risks of taking part in this study?

By sharing your views on the topic of learner attendance you will benefit future learners of this College. There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. However, the Guidance Counsellor is available to any participant who becomes distressed as result of the study data collection process.

Can I refuse to take part in this research?

This research study is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time without penalty.

Contact details for further information:

If you have any further questions regarding this research study please feel free to contact me at (*email address provided).* ***Thank you.***

APPENDIX D: Code Book

	Code = 1	Code = 2	Code = 3	Code = 4	Code =5	Code = 6
Q1.	Level 5	Level 6				
Q2.	Male	Female	Non Binary			
Q3.	Under 20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50 +	
Q4.	Yes	No				
Q5.	Yes	No				
Q6.	Under 30	30-59	60-89	over 90		
Q7.	Yes	No				
Q8.	Under 10	10--19	20--29	30--39	40+	
Q9.	***OPEN***					
Q.10	***OPEN***					
Q11.	Very good	Good	Neutral	Poor	Very poor	Can't say
Q12.	Very good	Good	Neutral	Poor	Very poor	Can't say
Q13.	Very good	Good	Neutral	Poor	Very poor	Can't say
Q14.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q15.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q16.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q17.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q18.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q19.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q20.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q21.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q22.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say

Q23.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q24.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q25.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q26.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q27.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q28.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Can't say
Q29.	***OPEN***					

APPENDIX E: Tests for Normality

Table E1

Tests for Normality for Days Absent and Classes Absent

		Statistic	Std. Error
Days absent	Mean	4.295	.3637
	5% Trimmed Mean	4.117	
	Skewness	.547	.241
	Kurtosis	-.767	.478
Classes absent	Mean	5.265	.4657
	5% Trimmed Mean	4.794	
	Skewness	1.740	.241
	Kurtosis	4.430	.478

Table E2

Descriptive Statistics for Days Absent and Classes Absent

		Statistic	Std. Error
Days absent	Mean	4.295	.3637
	Median	4.000	
	Variance	13.228	
	Std. Deviation	3.6370	
	Minimum	.0	
	Maximum	12.5	
	Range	12.5	
Classes absent	Mean	5.265	.4657
	Median	4.000	
	Variance	21.689	
	Std. Deviation	4.6572	
	Minimum	.0	
	Maximum	23.0	
	Range	23.0	

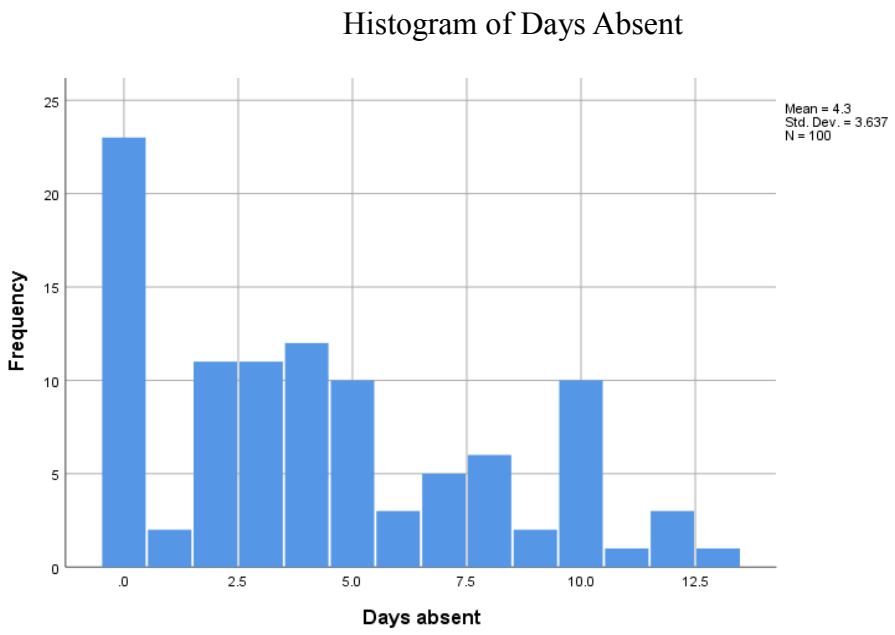

Figure 1. Histogram showing the frequency of days absent in the previous month (SPSS output)

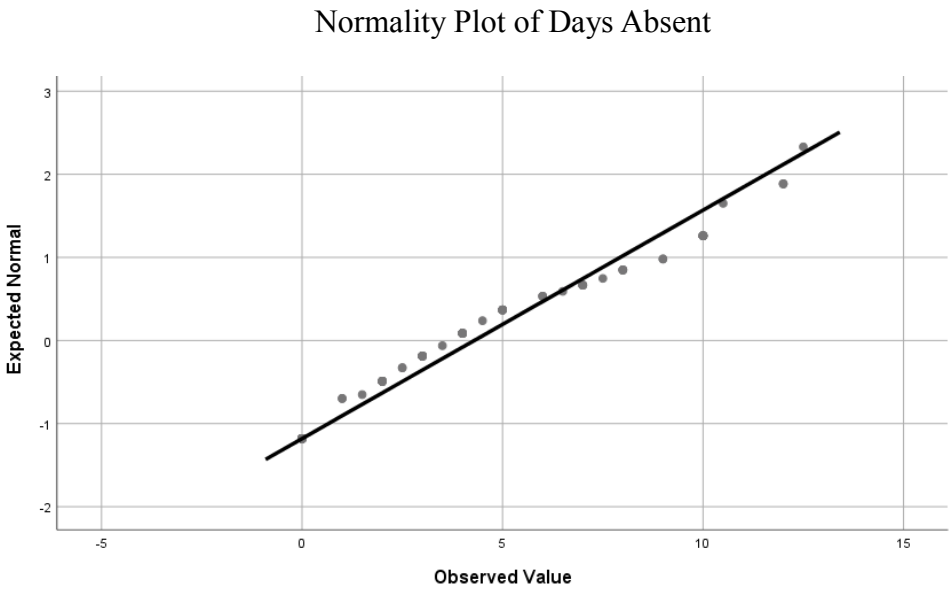

Figure 2. Normal Q-Q plot of days absent in the previous month (SPSS output)

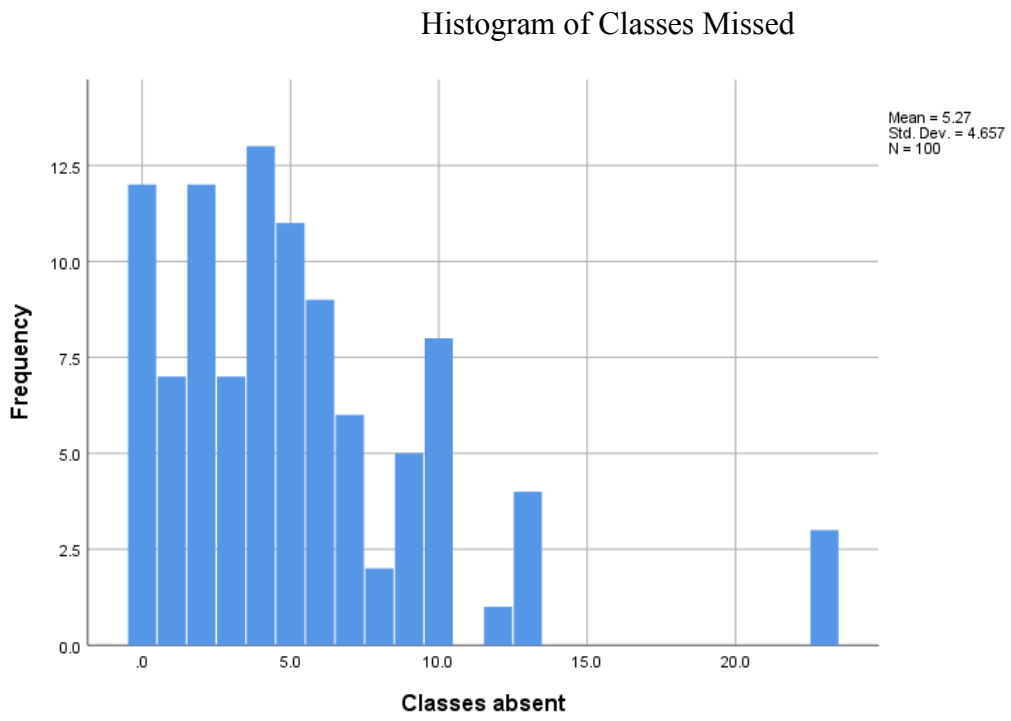

Figure 3. Histogram showing the frequency of classes missed in the previous week (SPPS output)

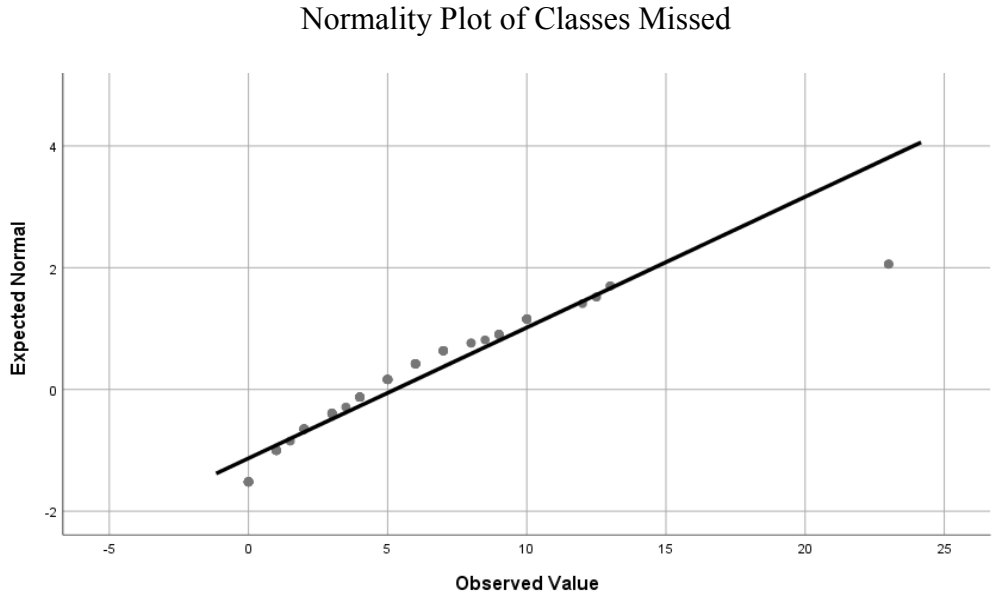

Figure 4. Normal Q-Q plot of classes missed in the previous week (SPSS output)

APPENDIX F: SPSS non-parametric statistical correlation

Table F1

Correlation between days absent in the previous month and classes missed in the previous week

			Days absent	Classes absent
Spearman's rho	Days absent	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.497**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	100	100
	Classes absent	Correlation Coefficient	.497**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	100	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

APPENDIX G: SPSS standard deviation and mean ranks for statistically significant independent variables

Table G1

Standard deviation and mean rank for NFQ level

Days absent

NFQ Level	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Level 5	4.700	80	3.6996
Level 6	2.675	20	2.9257
Total	4.295	100	3.6370

Classes absent

NFQ Level	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Level 5	6.025	80	4.8129
Level 6	2.225	20	2.1304
Total	5.265	100	4.6572

Table G2

Standard deviation and mean rank for age

Days absent

Age	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Under 20	47	3.5014	5.745
20-29	31	3.5552	4.048
30-39	4	2.8723	2.250
40-49	8	2.3299	1.500
50 and over	10	1.9465	1.300
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Classes absent

Age	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Under 20	47	4.8003	6.894
20-29	31	4.5732	4.758
30-39	4	2.8868	2.500
40-49	8	3.3461	3.125
50 and over	10	2.3570	2.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G3

Standard deviation and mean rank for native versus non-native English speakers

Days absent

Native English speaker	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Yes	4.875	68	3.6736
No	3.063	32	3.2818
Total	4.295	100	3.6370

Classes absent

Native English speaker	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Yes	6.007	68	4.6517
No	3.687	32	4.3269
Total	5.265	100	4.6572

Table G4

Standard deviation and mean rank for place of residence

Days absent

Residence	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
At home/with family	4.927	75	3.5333
Not at home/with family	2.400	25	3.3292
Total	4.295	100	3.6370

Classes absent

Residence	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
At home/with family	5.993	75	4.3971
Not at home/with family	3.080	25	4.8190
Total	5.265	100	4.6572

Table G5

Standard deviation and mean rank for commute time

Days absent

Commute time	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Under 30 mins	26	2.2793	2.154
30-59 mins	41	3.9615	5.488
60-89 mins	20	3.8088	4.425
Over 90 mins	13	2.8442	4.615
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Classes absent

Commute time	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Under 30 mins	26	5.1187	4.808
30-59 mins	41	3.5316	5.183
60-89 mins	20	6.6036	5.650
Over 90 mins	13	3.5554	5.846
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G6

Standard deviation and mean rank for employment status

Days absent

Paid work outside programme of study	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Yes	4.991	57	3.8283
No	3.372	43	3.1793
Total	4.295	100	3.6370

Classes absent

Paid work outside programme of study	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Yes	5.886	57	5.3976
No	4.442	43	3.3260
Total	5.265	100	4.6572

Table G7

Standard deviation and mean rank for relationships with teachers

Days absent

Teacher relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Very good	43	3.4319	3.244
Good	47	3.6663	5.404
Neutral	8	3.1820	4.125
Poor	0	.	.
Very poor	1	.	3.000
Can't say	1	.	.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Classes absent

Teacher relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Very good	43	3.7743	4.430
Good	47	5.4928	6.287
Neutral	8	2.3566	4.875
Poor	0	.	.
Very poor	1	.	.000
Can't say	1	.	1.500
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G8

Standard deviation and mean rank for relationships with other staff

Days absent

Other staff relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Very good	23	3.4209	2.957
Good	33	3.7313	4.621
Neutral	36	3.4362	4.583
Poor	3	3.5119	6.667
Very poor	0	.	.
Can't say	4	4.9666	6.000
Total	99	3.6294	4.338

Table G8 (continued)

Standard deviation and mean rank for relationships with other staff

Classes absent

Other staff relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Very good	23	3.3291	3.087
Good	33	3.7862	5.091
Neutral	36	5.7575	6.778
Poor	3	2.5166	4.333
Very poor	0	.	.
Can't say	4	4.7500	6.625
Total	99	4.6791	5.278

Table G9

Standard deviation and mean rank for course content

Days absent

Interesting content	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	26	3.6885	3.750
Agree	52	3.4090	4.144
Neutral	18	3.8510	5.278
Disagree	3	5.2520	7.167
Strongly disagree	0	.	.
Can't say	1	.	.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Classes absent

Interesting content	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	26	3.1904	3.173
Agree	52	4.1109	5.413
Neutral	18	6.6492	7.722
Disagree	3	3.7859	7.333
Strongly disagree	0	.	.
Can't say	1	.	1.500
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G10

Standard deviation and mean rank for college social activities

Days absent

Good social activities	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation
Strongly agree	3.000	4	2.4495
Agree	4.422	32	3.7805
Neutral	4.700	30	3.8632
Disagree	4.773	22	3.4007
Strongly disagree	1.667	3	2.8868
Can't say	2.778	9	3.4921
Total	4.295	100	3.6370

Classes absent

Good social activities	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	4	1.0000	.500
Agree	32	4.4502	5.297
Neutral	30	3.5430	4.583
Disagree	22	5.2060	6.432
Strongly disagree	3	9.5044	13.333
Can't say	9	3.0000	4.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G11

Standard deviation and mean rank for VLE (Moodle) availability

Days absent

Moodle	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	7	4.4894	6.786
Agree	26	3.7532	4.442
Neutral	13	3.0445	4.962
Disagree	39	3.4761	4.333
Strongly disagree	11	3.5291	2.364
Can't say	4	2.8723	1.750
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Table G11 (continued)

Standard deviation and mean rank for VLE (Moodle) availability

Classes absent

Moodle	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	7	4.1975	5.571
Agree	26	4.6251	5.365
Neutral	13	3.0382	5.308
Disagree	39	5.4239	6.269
Strongly disagree	11	3.0234	2.591
Can't say	4	1.9149	1.500
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

Table G12

Standard deviation and mean rank for assignment pressures

Days absent

Assignments	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	21	3.3365	5.071
Agree	52	3.5492	4.962
Neutral	9	3.3458	1.778
Disagree	13	3.7944	3.308
Strongly disagree	3	.0000	.000
Can't say	2	4.2426	3.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295

Classes Absent

Assignments	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean
Strongly agree	21	6.2248	7.048
Agree	52	4.1554	5.952
Neutral	9	3.0185	3.111
Disagree	13	2.9450	2.885
Strongly disagree	3	1.0408	1.167
Can't say	2	.0000	.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265

APPENDIX H: SPSS standard deviation, median and mean ranks for non-statistically significant independent variables

Table H1

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for gender

Days absent

Gender	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation	Median
Male	4.732	28	4.2174	4.000
Female	4.125	72	3.4023	4.000
Total	4.295	100	3.6370	4.000

Classes absent

Gender	Mean	*n*	Std. Deviation	Median
Male	5.625	28	3.8215	5.000
Female	5.125	72	4.9616	4.000
Total	5.265	100	4.6572	4.000

Table H2

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for hours worked

Days absent

Hours worked	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Under 10	13	3.3627	4.654	4.000
10-19	23	3.8842	4.717	4.000
20-29	17	4.1927	5.382	4.000
30-39	3	2.6458	8.000	9.000
40 and above	1	.	.000	.000
Total	57	3.8283	4.991	4.000

Table H2 (continued)

Classes absent

Hours worked	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Under 10	13	4.6209	4.962	4.000
10-19	23	6.1199	6.543	5.000
20-29	17	5.5327	5.882	4.000
30-39	3	3.2146	6.333	5.000
40 and above	1	.	1.500	1.500
Total	57	5.3976	5.886	4.000

Table H3

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for relationships with other learners

Days absent

Learner relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Very good	45	3.5882	4.000	3.500
Good	37	3.6332	4.378	4.000
Neutral	16	3.8986	5.281	5.000
Poor	0	.	.	.
Very poor	1	.	3.000	3.000
Can't say	1	.	.000	.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

Learner relationships	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Very good	45	5.3805	5.644	4.000
Good	37	4.3115	5.378	5.000
Neutral	16	3.1198	4.500	4.500
Poor	0	.	.	.
Very poor	1	.	.000	.000
Can't say	1	.	1.500	1.500
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H4

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for challenging content

Days absent

Challenging content	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	23	3.3976	3.457	3.000
Agree	40	3.8789	4.825	4.000
Neutral	29	3.5775	4.069	4.000
Disagree	7	2.9358	5.571	5.000
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	1	.	.000	.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

Challenging content	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	23	5.2152	4.696	4.000
Agree	40	4.3544	5.225	4.500
Neutral	29	5.0646	5.690	4.000
Disagree	7	3.1320	6.143	6.000
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	1	.	1.500	1.500
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H5

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for college facilities

Days absent

College has good facilities	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	4	2.5000	4.250	3.000
Agree	32	3.9177	4.172	3.500
Neutral	33	3.7607	3.924	3.500
Disagree	22	3.2984	4.886	4.750
Strongly disagree	7	3.8668	5.571	7.000
Can't say	2	2.1213	1.500	1.500
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Table H5 (continued)

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for college facilities

Classes absent

College has good facilities	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	4	2.5820	3.000	3.000
Agree	32	4.7247	4.766	4.000
Neutral	33	4.6884	4.818	4.000
Disagree	22	5.0795	6.909	6.000
Strongly disagree	7	3.8914	5.857	5.000
Can't say	2	1.4142	5.000	5.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H6

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for suitability of timetable

Days absent

Timetable suits me	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	25	4.2119	3.640	2.000
Agree	58	3.3566	4.431	4.000
Neutral	11	3.4792	3.864	3.000
Disagree	6	3.9370	6.500	6.000
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	0	.	.	.
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

Timetable suits me	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	25	2.8243	3.820	4.000
Agree	58	5.4428	5.914	5.000
Neutral	11	2.7502	4.182	4.000
Disagree	6	4.0988	7.000	7.500
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	0	.	.	.
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H7

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for belonging/identity

Days absent

I have a lot in common with other learners	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	12	3.7967	4.375	4.000
Agree	54	3.4168	3.991	3.000
Neutral	23	3.6637	4.174	4.000
Disagree	8	4.0438	7.313	7.000
Strongly disagree	2	.0000	.000	.000
Can't say	1	.	7.000	7.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

I have a lot in common with other learners	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	12	6.3142	8.625	8.000
Agree	54	3.8648	4.546	4.000
Neutral	23	4.9511	4.826	4.000
Disagree	8	4.6828	6.750	9.000
Strongly disagree	2	.3536	1.750	1.750
Can't say	1	.	9.000	9.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H8

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for attendance of other learners

Days absent

Other learners attend class most of the time	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	6	1.4053	3.750	3.000
Agree	17	4.7096	5.647	4.000
Neutral	34	3.5779	3.824	3.500
Disagree	33	3.2016	4.212	4.000
Strongly disagree	7	2.0354	1.857	2.000
Can't say	2	.7071	9.500	9.500
Total	99	3.6093	4.237	4.000

Table H8 (continued)

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for attendance of other learners

Classes absent

Other learners attend class most of the time	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	6	4.3865	4.083	3.000
Agree	17	3.5614	5.441	6.000
Neutral	34	5.4824	5.059	4.000
Disagree	33	4.8234	6.000	5.000
Strongly disagree	7	1.8803	2.929	2.000
Can't say	2	3.5355	7.500	7.500
Total	99	4.6791	5.278	4.000

Table H9

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for self-efficacy

Days absent

I am confident that I can succeed in this course	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	25	3.5430	3.640	2.500
Agree	55	3.4780	4.573	4.000
Neutral	16	4.0300	4.406	4.000
Disagree	4	5.6624	4.125	2.000
Strongly disagree	0			.
Can't say	0			.
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

I am confident that I can succeed in this course	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	25	3.2178	4.100	4.000
Agree	55	4.8736	5.373	5.000
Neutral	16	5.9082	6.594	5.000
Disagree	4	3.0957	5.750	5.000
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	0	.	.	.
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H10

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for the importance of attendance to academic success

Days absent

Attendance is critical to my academic success	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	18	3.5645	3.000	1.000
Agree	55	3.5830	4.364	4.000
Neutral	21	3.6146	5.262	4.000
Disagree	4	4.7610	5.000	5.000
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	1	.	.	.000
Total	99	3.6548	4.288	4.000
Attendance is critical to my academic success	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	18	3.1354	3.083	3.000
Agree	55	4.1643	5.155	5.000
Neutral	21	6.1317	7.548	6.000
Disagree	4	5.4467	5.500	4.500
Strongly disagree	0	.	.	.
Can't say	1	.	4.000	4.000
Total	99	4.6752	5.288	4.000

Table H11

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for missing class due to work

Days absent

Miss class as tired as a result of work	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	10	4.0308	4.550	3.500
Agree	25	4.1259	5.760	4.500
Neutral	11	3.9560	4.500	5.000
Disagree	15	2.8465	3.567	3.000
Strongly disagree	4	1.7078	1.750	1.500
Can't say	2	.0000	.000	.000
Total	67	3.8078	4.470	4.000

Table H11 (continued)

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for missing class due to work

Classes absent

Miss class as tired as a result of work	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	10	7.5895	9.600	6.000
Agree	25	3.5646	5.540	5.000
Neutral	11	6.1537	5.727	4.000
Disagree	15	3.9590	4.433	4.000
Strongly disagree	4	2.0817	2.500	2.500
Can't say	2	1.0607	.750	.750
Total	67	5.0778	5.604	4.000

Table H12

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for impact of socialising the previous night

Days absent

Miss class as tired from socialising	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	1	.	10.000	10.000
Agree	15	4.3624	4.067	3.000
Neutral	15	3.2415	5.100	4.000
Disagree	43	3.6865	4.605	4.000
Strongly disagree	23	3.1321	3.087	3.000
Can't say	3	3.7859	4.333	6.000
Total	100	3.6370	4.295	4.000

Classes absent

Miss class as tired from socialising	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	1	.	10.000	10.000
Agree	15	3.3392	5.900	6.000
Neutral	15	2.4265	4.567	5.000
Disagree	43	6.0513	6.419	5.000
Strongly disagree	23	2.2757	3.239	3.000
Can't say	3	5.1962	3.000	.000
Total	100	4.6572	5.265	4.000

Table H13

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for impact of illness

Days absent

Miss class due to health reasons	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	10	3.2387	4.900	4.5000
Agree	35	3.1163	3.743	4.000
Neutral	20	4.3148	5.975	6.750
Disagree	25	3.8500	4.520	3.500
Strongly disagree	8	1.7728	1.500	1.000
Can't say	1	.	.000	.000
Total	99	3.6548	4.288	4.000

Classes absent

Miss class due to health reasons	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	10	6.1664	8.050	7.000
Agree	35	5.2912	5.057	4.000
Neutral	20	3.4221	6.000	5.000
Disagree	25	4.1107	4.720	4.000
Strongly disagree	8	2.5877	2.875	3.000
Can't say	1	.	.	.000
Total	99	4.6726	5.237	4.000

Table H14

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for impact of family issues

Days absent

Miss class due to family issues	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	11	4.2683	5.227	4.000
Agree	22	2.8635	4.159	4.25
Neutral	17	4.1868	4.176	3.000
Disagree	37	3.4376	4.405	4.000
Strongly disagree	9	5.1357	3.500	1.000
Can't say	3	3.0551	3.333	4.000
Total	99	3.6548	4.288	4.000

Table H14 (continued)

Standard deviation, median and mean rank for impact of family issues

Classes absent

Miss class due to family issues	*n*	Std. Deviation	Mean	Median
Strongly agree	11	4.1952	5.000	3.000
Agree	22	4.9094	5.568	5.000
Neutral	17	5.4745	5.294	4.000
Disagree	37	4.7631	5.703	5.000
Strongly disagree	9	3.1402	3.889	3.000
Can't say	3	2.8868	1.667	.000
Total	99	4.6726	5.237	4.000

APPENDIX I: SPSS Mann-Whitney U tests for independent variables impacting on both days absent and classes missed

Table I1

Mann-Whitney U test results for NFQ level

		Median (Md)	*Sample Size (n)*	*Test Statistic (U)*	*Standardised Test Statistic (z)*	*Asymptotic Significance (p)*	*Effect size (r)*
Days Absent	*NFQ Level 5*	4.00	80	543.33	-2.234	.025	0.22
	NFQ Level 6	2.75	20				
Classes Absent	*NFQ Level 5*	5.00	80	347.50	-3.916	.000	0.39
	NFQ Level 6	2.00	20				

Table I2

Mann-Whitney U test results for native versus non-native English speakers

		Md	*n*	*U*	*z*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Native English speaker*	4.00	68	769.50	-2.374	.018	0.24
	Not a native English speaker	3.00	32				
Classes Absent	*Native English speaker*	5.00	68	692.50	-2.935	.003	0.29
	Not a native English speaker	3.75	32				

Table I3

Mann-Whitney U test results for place of residence

		Md	*n*	*U*	*z*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Living at home*	4.00	75	526.00	-3.304	.001	0.33
	Not living at home	.00	25				
Classes Absent	*Living at home*	5.00	75	441.50	-3.965	.000	0.39
	Not living at home	2.00	25				

APPENDIX J: SPSS Non-parametric statistics for independent variables not impacting either days absent or classes missed

Table J1

Mann-Whitney U test results for gender

		Md	*n*	*U*	*z*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Male*	4.00	28	958.00	-.387	.699	0.04
	Female	4.00	72				
Classes Absent	*Male*	5.00	28	876.50	-1.014	.311	0.10
	Female	4.00	72				

Table J2

Kruskal-Wallis test results in relation to hours worked[a]

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	4.242	4	.374	0.56
Classes Absent	2.266	4	.687	0.30

[a]n = 57

Table J3

Kruskal-Wallis test results in relation to relationships with other learners

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	3.142	4	.534	0.31
Classes Absent	3.708	4	.447	0.37

Table J4

Kruskal-Wallis test results for challenging course content, college facilities, belonging/identity, attendance of other learners, self-efficacy, importance of attendance and impact of work

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	*r*
Content of the course is challenging				
Days Absent	5.065	4	.281	0.51
Classes Absent	3.605	4	.462	0.36
College facilities are good				
Days Absent	3.480	5	.626	0.35
Classes Absent	6.375	5	.271	0.64
The timetable suits me				
Days Absent	4.139	3	.247	0.41
Classes Absent	4.053	3	.256	0.41
I have a lot in common with other students				
Days Absent	9.168	5	.103	0.92
Classes Absent	10.283	5	.068	1.03
Other learners in my class attend most of the time[a]				
Days Absent	8.329	5	.139	0.84
Classes Absent	5.887	5	.317	0.59
I am confident that I can succeed in this course				
Days Absent	1.631	3	.652	0.16
Classes Absent	2.569	3	.463	0.26
I consider attendance key to my academic success[a]				
Days Absent	6.132	4	.189	0.62
Classes Absent	9.374	4	.052	0.94
I sometimes miss class because I'm tired as a result of my job[b]				
Days Absent	8.741	5	.120	0.98
Classes Absent	10.507	5	.062	1.28

[a]n = 99
[b]n = 67

Table J5
Kruskal-Wallis test results for the impacts of socialising, illness and family issues

	χ^2	*df*	*p*	*r*
I sometimes miss class because of socialising				
Days Absent	6.017	5	.305	0.60
Classes Absent	9.542	5	.089	0.95
I sometimes miss class because of health reasons[a]				
Days Absent	10.743	5	.057	1.08
Classes Absent	10.291	5	.067	1.03
I sometimes miss class because of family issues[a]				
Days Absent	2.179	5	.824	0.22
Classes Absent	3.827	5	.575	0.38

[a]n = 99

APPENDIX K: SPSS tests of difference for independent variables impacting on just one dependent variable

Table K1

Mann-Whitney U test results for work status

		Md	*n*	*U*	*z*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Working*	4.00	57	926.00	-2.103	.035	0.21
	Not working	3.00	43				
Classes Absent	*Working*	5.00	57	1089.00	-.954	.340	0.10
	Not working	4.00	43				

Table K2

Kruskal-Wallis test results for learner relationships with teachers

			Md	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Relationships with teachers*	Very good	2.500	43	9.909	4	.042	0.99
		Good	5.000	47				
		Neutral	3.500	8				
		Poor	-	0				
		Very Poor	3.000	1				
		Can’t say	.000	1				
Classes Absent	*Relationships with teachers*	Very good	4.000	43	6.520	4	.164	0.65
		Good	5.000	47				
		Neutral	5.500	8				
		Poor	-	0				
		Very Poor	.000	1				
		Can’t say	1.500	1				

Table K3

Kruskal-Wallis test results for learner relationships with other college staff

			Md	n^a	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Relationships with other staff*	Very good	2.500	23	6.301	4	.178	0.63
		Good	4.000	33				
		Neutral	4.000	36				
		Poor	7.000	3				
		Very Poor	-	0				
		Can't say	6.000	4				
Classes Absent	*Relationships with other staff*	Very good	2.000	23	10.429	4	.034	1.05
		Good	4.000	33				
		Neutral	5.500	36				
		Poor	4.000	3				
		Very Poor	-	0				
		Can't say	6.500	4				

[a]n = 99

Table K4

Kruskal-Wallis test results for interesting course content

			Md	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Content of the course is interesting*	Strongly agree	2.750	26	5.172	4	.270	0.52
		Agree	3.750	52				
		Neutral	5.000	18				
		Disagree	7.000	3				
		Strongly disagree	-	0				
		Can't say	.000	1				
Classes Absent	*Content of the course is interesting*	Strongly agree	3.000	26	12.328	4	.015	1.23
		Agree	5.000	52				
		Neutral	5.500	18				
		Disagree	9.000	3				
		Strongly disagree	-	0				
		Can't say	1.500	1				

Table K5

Kruskal-Wallis test results for social activities

			Md	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*Social activities of the college are good*	Strongly agree	3.000	4	4.854	5	.434	0.49
		Agree	4.000	32				
		Neutral	4.500	30				
		Disagree	4.250	22				
		Strongly disagree	.000	3				
		Can't say	2.000	9				
Classes Absent	*Social activities of the college are good*	Strongly agree	.000	4	12.521	5	.028	1.25
		Agree	4.500	32				
		Neutral	3.750	30				
		Disagree	5.000	22				
		Strongly disagree	13.000	3				
		Can't say	4.000	9				

Table K6

Kruskal-Wallis test results for Moodle impacts

			Md	*n*	*χ2*	*df*	*p*	*r*
Days Absent	*I sometimes miss class because I can get notes from Moodle*	Strongly agree	8.000	7	9.224	5	.100	0.92
		Agree	4.000	26				
		Neutral	5.000	13				
		Disagree	4.000	39				
		Strongly disagree	.000	11				
		Can't say	.500	4				
Classes Absent	*I sometimes miss class because I can get notes from Moodle*	Strongly agree	6.000	7	11.421	5	.044	1.14
		Agree	5.000	26				
		Neutral	5.000	13				
		Disagree	5.000	39				
		Strongly disagree	2.000	11				
		Can't say	1.000	4				