Abstract: This literature review explores the main causes and effects of absenteeism in a post-secondary educational context, as well as strategies that can potentially be used by such educational institutions to tackle absenteeism. With this aim, the literature review defines absenteeism in post-secondary educational institutions, also discussing its reconstituted definition in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also highlights the main causes of absenteeism, its potential consequences, as well as examples of practice and recommendations on how this phenomenon can be curbed. Given the complex and multifactorial nature of the phenomenon, absenteeism cannot be tackled by simple intuition-based methods and is not a one-tool fix. Indeed, effectively addressing absenteeism requires a combination of strategies and involves various actions and stakeholders. Evidence shows that a strong support system that shows interest in individual students’ life and behaviour has a significant effect on students’ attendance.

Keywords: Absenteeism; post-secondary education; combating absenteeism

Introduction

Student absenteeism is becoming an increasingly major concern in post-secondary education. ‘Freedom’ is considered as one of the benefits of being in post-compulsory educational institutions,1 but this becomes problematic when students express this by missing classes deliberately. This phenomenon might seem incomprehensible given that in most countries students pay for these courses. The reality is that enrollment in paying institutions does not only give students access to classes and learning but also to an exciting social world which otherwise they would not have access to (Wyatt 1992). When they miss a contact session, students do not only miss on the subject content but also the opportunity to engage in meaningful relationships with their peers and lecturers, as well as develop a sense of belonging (Menedez Alvarez-Hevia, Lord, and Naylor 2020).

It is a known fact that absenteeism rates in further and higher education are high, at times rampant. Class attendance varies considerably across countries. Attendance rates in Finnish universities have been found to be as low as 40 to 50% (Kolari, Savander-Ranne, and Viskari 2018). An average absence rate of around 20% was reported in studies on absenteeism in universities in the UK and USA, with particular absenteeism patterns evident, such as more students absent on Fridays, more absenteeism in lectures early in the morning or late in the afternoon, and higher absenteeism rates as the semester progressed (Marburger 2001; Paisey and Paisey 2004). Absenteeism tends to be less frequent among students who

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1 ‘Freedom’ here is not referring to the possibility of skipping lectures without justification. Most post-compulsory institutions, even locally, oblige students to attend all lectures. However, students are still ‘free’ in the sense that they are normally not pushed by parents or the school administration to attend, but they do that out of their own free will.
are not in their first year of a course, a possible hypothesis being that when compared to students initiating a course, such students feel greater responsibility regarding their studies (López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla 2015). On the other hand, this could result from the fact that the students with a high intensity of absenteeism had already dropped out of the course (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

Although the main focus of this literature review is post-compulsory education, it is worth noting that absenteeism statistics throughout the Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) learning journey in the United States show that around 14% of the student population can be classified as chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education 2016), with absences peaking in Grade 12 (age 16-17 years) (Bauer, Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Shambaugh 2019; Chen and Rice 2017). 34% of NYC high school students were reported to miss one month of school or more throughout the year 2010-11 (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012). Moreover, those schools that cater for students in special education, alternative education, and vocational education have a higher probability of having extreme levels of chronic absence (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018). Statistical records in Malta show that, in Maltese secondary schools, the average absence per student in 2016-17 was of 11.5 days (approximately 7% of school days), with this peaking in the last year of formal schooling (Form 5) at 19.7 days (NSO 2018), which is alarmingly high.

Unfortunately, statistical reports and policy documents rarely make reference to post-secondary education. The realities in primary and secondary schools are often different from that of post-secondary schooling. Further and higher educational institutions have to take matters in their own hands when it comes to addressing absenteeism. In saying this, it is worth pointing out that policy documents and research studies that target secondary schools can still inspire practices and strategies that can be adopted in post-compulsory educational institutions.

**Defining Absenteeism**

Absenteeism refers to the practice of missing classes or days from school. Although a lack of consistency is present when defining absenteeism, the term ‘chronic absenteeism’ is commonly defined as being that of missing 10% or more of school days for any reason, be it excused or unexcused (Attendance Works 2013; Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021; Balfanz and Byrnes 2014; Chen and Rice 2017). The ‘10 percent’ is the equivalent of two days every month; this operational definition allows early detection and action to improve attendance (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

Setting off a specific cut-off for defining chronic absenteeism is useful as it provides a common definition that allows comparisons across different regions or countries. It can be used to communicate the severity of missing school to educators, families, and public (Attendance Works 2013; Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021; Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018; Gottfried and Hutt 2019). Additionally, exceeding this threshold can trigger early intervention by schools from the start of the year, helping schools in directing their resources to prevent students from crossing this threshold. Given that absences are cumulative, greater attendance pressure can be put at the beginning of the academic year on those students who become chronically absent, having one to five additional absences, and those students whose attendance was critical the previous year (Bauer et al. 2019). Indeed, chronic absenteeism in a prior year has shown to matter far more than personal characteristics or school characteristics. Namely, Balfanz and Byrnes (2007) found that poor attendance in middle school (The Official Website of the City of New York n.d. a) and

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2 An extreme level of school absenteeism is defined as 30% of students, or more, being chronically absent.

3 10.8 days of authorised absences and 8.8 days of unauthorised absences.
later on in high school (MacIver 2011) are good indicators as to whether a student will drop out before completing high school. In addition, chronic absence during the first month of school has also been shown to be a good predictor of chronic absenteeism (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018). This directs the scope for school-specific policies to targeting chronic absenteeism reduction (Bauer et al. 2019) as knowing the share of students who are absent and knowing the level of their absenteeism can help making the decision on the type and intensity of support needed (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

On the other hand, a defined cut-off can be deceiving because people tend to think that negative effects of missing school are present just once this cut-off point is reached or crossed (Gottfried and Hutt 2019). Typically, schools that use the truancy response wait too long before they act, as they wait for the unexcused absences to pile up before sending a warning letter (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

This literature review provides the analysis of what constitutes absenteeism, including its reconstituted definition in the context of Covid-19. Furthermore, it explores the main causes and effects of absenteeism in post-secondary educational institutions, as well as strategies that can potentially be used by such educational institutions to tackle absenteeism.

**Absenteeism in the Covid-19 era**

School levels of chronic absenteeism have the tendency to remain relatively stable over time, unless there are significant changes in practice or external conditions such as increase in poverty levels or a natural disaster, etc. (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequential move to distance and blended learning had a significant impact on:

1. the availability of comparable and high quality data on attendance and chronic absenteeism; and
2. what constitutes absenteeism in the context of remote learning.
   (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021).

Prior to the adoption of education longitudinal data systems (ELDS), attendance was registered via pen and paper. Still, even when ELDS became widespread, it took a number of years before it became evident that it is insufficient to produce reports on truancy or average daily attendance instead of chronic absenteeism (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021; Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

When documenting attendance in remote learning, notating the fact that a student has logged into an online class is not a sufficient proof of students’ academic attendance. The traditional definition of attendance is not sustainable in the remote learning context, where available resources (recorded lectures, notes, slides, etc.) are commonly shared via virtual learning environments in order to support, or indeed replace, students’ presence in contact sessions. For this reason, the concept of engagement is used to demonstrate students’ attendance (Menedez Alvarez-Hevia et al. 2020). Therefore, a school must demonstrate that a student participated in class, was engaged in an academically-related activity such as a contribution in an online discussion, or initiated a contact with a faculty member regarding a course-related matter (Federal Student Aid 2016). For this purpose, Madibane, Dandadzi, Mathiba, Hungwe, Ndobe and Mafike (2021) suggest utilising the capacity of

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4 An education longitudinal data system

- collects and keeps detailed and high quality student- and staff-level data;
- links these data crosswise entities and, over time, providing for each student a complete academic and performance history; and
- allows access to data through reporting and analysis tools.
technology innovations in registering attendance and integrating that with students’ formative marks.

Evidence shows that students start being regularly absent from school when they are facing underlying health, social, familial, or financial difficulties, bearing out Maslow’s basic hierarchical needs theory (1943). Consequently, when the basic needs of health, food, shelter, and stability are not satisfied, this is often reflected in low school performance. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, these difficulties have become more accentuated. The students who have thrived in the home-learning environment are mostly the same ones who thrive in the classroom-learning environment. They have personal computers to follow lessons on, engaged parents to help them with things they do not understand, and a safe, healthy, and secure home environment. Meanwhile, students who were already struggling and prone to absenteeism found themselves suddenly isolated from their peers and school support system, and hence even more disengaged than usual.

In U.S., those students who had the highest absenteeism rate in the school year 2017-18 were among the student population with the highest absenteeism rate during Covid-19 (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021). In Malta, this problem was possibly made worse by the fact that the government suspended the law which stipulated the obligatory attendance of children to school (Farrugia 2022). For a while, parents were allowed not to send their children to school without facing any consequences. This meant that parents who did not give priority to education did not care to put that extra effort for online learning. Schools were not obliged to keep track of who was logging on to online lessons, and even if they did, there were limited means to pursue the issue of absenteeism, because officially this was not a problem anymore. Being an educational institution catering for students of age 16 and above, MCAST did not fall under this umbrella. Instead, MCAST continued applying the same pre-Covid 19 attendance regulation.

**What Causes Absenteeism?**

Absenteeism is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon. In the light of the fact that absenteeism can have considerable unfavourable effects on students and educators alike, it is worth exploring the causes of absenteeism in order to help raise concerns for educational institutions and help them act on these factors to improve attendance rates.

‘Motivation to attend’ is a salient dimension underlying students’ attendance. Moreover, understanding students’ ‘motivation to attend’ entails nothing less than probing the reasons for non-attendance and looking into why attendance costs seem to surpass attendance benefits for students (Moore, Armstrong, and Pearson 2008: 18). Asking students to provide rationales for absenteeism can help educators construct a more far-reaching picture into students’ motivations, values, orientations, and perspectives on their learning experiences (Moore et al. 2008). It can also highlight the possible discrepancies between students’ responses to current higher educational contexts and the way the teachers interpret these responses. The latter may be of crucial importance when considering potential changes in higher education, such as legal framework, values, processes, and outputs, as it allows us to anticipate students’ reactions to this new constellation in accordance with their values, motivation and expectations (Moore et al. 2008). It can help educators understand student cohorts more comprehensively and predict attendance or non-attendance patterns in a broad sense. As Moore et al. (2008: 22) succinctly put it, ‘[s]uch reasons contain …important insights, not just about what is going on in students’ heads, but also how universities might respond meaningfully to those states of mind.’

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5 Of particular relevance here is motivation theory, which explores issues like ‘what initiates behaviour, what maintains behaviour and what causes behaviour to stop’ (Moore et al. 2008:18).
Taking attendance can provide for the early detection of problematic behaviors and deteriorating performance on the part of students to assist in timely interventions.' (Westerman, Perez-Batres, Coffey, and Poud 2011: 61).

**Teaching Factors**

In most further and higher educational institutions, attendance is not mandatory and gives students freedom to make their own choices. López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla (2015) distinguish between voluntary absenteeism, which results from students’ own will, and involuntary absenteeism, which results from students’ incapability to attend lectures (health reasons for example). In their study on the causes of absenteeism given by 139 third-year students in a tourism degree, factor analysis was used to deduce distinct dimensions of absenteeism, out of which ‘Teaching Style’ was rated with the highest average score. Students attributed the teachers’ teaching methods and teaching competences (lesson monotony, teachers’ classroom methodology, teachers’ demotivation) as the main factor behind their absenteeism.

The teaching quality, or at least a perception of this, also rated highest in a study by Romer (1993), who investigated absenteeism in economic university courses. In this study, students also claimed being absent from lectures due to the course size (with lower absenteeism rates in smaller classes). It was also noted that absenteeism was lower in courses with a significant mathematical content. Romer (1993) suggests that students might be missing lectures because, in their view, attending would only lead to minimal learning (Mendez Alvarez-Hevia 2020; Méndez-Suárez and Mariano Méndez-Suárez, and Crespo-Tejero 2021). This is a result of low-quality lectures, prior mastery of the content, and preference for other methods of studying. Romer (1993) also hypothesised that, although absenteeism might indeed affect learning, some students would be absent anyway as they attach little importance to learning and believe they can use their time better. These results indicate that absenteeism might be incurred by the low value that students are placing on class attendance.

Indeed, Sial, Humayun and Humayun (2018) show that regular attendance is an indicator of the students’ perception of the effectiveness and usefulness of the lectures. Among 308 medical students, the most common reasons given for absenteeism from lectures were: self-studying preferred over attending lectures (n=123, 46.0%), poor teaching style by lecturers (n=128, 47.9%), and health-related issues (n=104, 38.9%). Students can feel disengaged and frustrated during lectures of poor quality (Sial et al. 2018).

Similar conclusions were reached by Thekedam and Kottaram (2015, as cited in Magobolo and Dube 2019) and Wyatt (1992), where absenteeism was associated with a lack of interest in the subject and poor teaching strategies. In the study by Wyatt (1992), first-year college students at a paying institution were more likely to miss classes they dislike than classes they like. Students expressed ‘dislike’ for classes where the lecturers are not well-prepared and when they do not see the relevance of the course content (López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla 2015; Mendez Alvarez-Hevia 2020; Méndez-Suárez and Crespo-Tejero 2021; Romer 2003). Among the negative effects of absenteeism on teachers’ performance, research highlights teachers’ decrease of motivation (Stoner and Fincham 2012) and the difficulty to meet diverse learning needs of students, make classes interactive, and build students’ engagement when a large number of students is absent (Ancheta, Daniel, and Ahmad 2021; Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes 2018).

Other justifications rated by university students as main causes of absences are the timing of classes (large gaps between classes) and students’ academic commitments (Bakrania, Whittington, Anderson, and Nates 2018; Paisey and Paisey 2004), pointing to the need for better time management by students and re-scheduling of lectures.
Health Limitations and Income Status

Bauer et al. (2019) explored the correlation between absenteeism, health limitations, and income status by using the data from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Health Interview Survey from 2012-16. The authors categorized all students in groups according to their health limitations, then they compared whether chronic absenteeism varies between poor and non-poor students within the same group. As expected, in nearly all of the (health) categories, those students that are poor were considerably more likely to be chronically absent than the students who are not below the poverty line. In addition, students in poverty were much more likely to have conditions (like chronic disability, serious disease, or visual/audial impairment) that contribute to chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, 26% of students who had asthma or allergies had their absenteeism rated just higher than the national average. In general, approximately one quarter of chronically absent students had asthma or allergies. This strong correlation between low-income status and chronic absenteeism is in line with the study of Tash (2018) among high school students, where poverty was found to be one of the key factors that triggered chronic absenteeism. On the same lines, another study on high school students’ absenteeism confirmed that parents’ low educational levels and lower socio-economic status (low score in family factors) contribute to higher absenteeism (Balkis, Arslan, and Duru 2016).

In their study that analysed the data of the U.S. Department of Education in connection with students, parents’ and schools’ characteristics together with various forms of parental involvement in school activities aiming to explore how these factors influence absenteeism of K-12 students in U.S., Islam and Shapla (2021) found that parental education, school type, ethnicity, and poverty significantly affect K-12 absenteeism.

Internet and Alcohol Addictions

Other factors such as the abuse of alcohol and excessive Internet usage have been explored in the last decade. A study by Austin (2012) conducted with a sample of high-school age students (14-17 years old) provides evidence that abuse of alcohol and binge drinking have a very detrimental effect on school attendance (Saar and Trasberg 2021). A similar conclusion was reached by Wyatt (1992) in his study among first-year university students. Wyatt emphasises that administrators and educators should be aware of the effect of alcohol on absenteeism and in turn educate students about this problem.

Given that Internet use is rampant among young people, concerns about its impact on school attendance are very relevant and might inform policy decisions by stakeholders in the educational system. Austin and Totaro (2011) explore the effect of Internet usage on high school students’ absenteeism and how this differs gender-wise. Results show that excessive Internet use has a significant effect on high school students’ absenteeism. Data collected showed that intense Internet use increases the number of voluntary absences for both male and female students, but with females much more likely to skip classes due to intense Internet use. The authors hypothesise that this disparity might be due to the nature of Internet use; while boys mainly use Internet for gaming and music, girls use it to socialise, and this might be more time-intensive and thus bring about more absenteeism.

Although there are conflicting findings, in general, research supports the claim that excessive Internet use is more of a male phenomenon (Wellbeing 2015). The amount of time spent online per se is not necessarily an indicator of problematic behaviour. In order to distinguish between excessive and problematic Internet use, one should consider the context in which Internet is being used, the problems that result from such use, as well as the way that these problems are affecting different spheres of one’s life (National Centre for Freedom from Addictions 2015). Indeed, in a local study carried out in 2015 with the aim
of understanding the phenomenon of problematic Internet use and its related variables among 18-30 year olds, it was found that single, well-educated participants who were 18-21 year old were actually the most prone to increased Internet use (National Centre for Freedom from Addictions 2015).

Nalwa and Anand (2003) also studied the effect of Internet use on the performance of a group of 16-18 year olds who had Internet addictions. The authors found that these students spent less time sleeping and delayed other work to spend more time on the Internet (Kindt, Szász-Janocha, Rehbein and Lindenberg 2019). Both factors can possibly lead to increased absenteeism.

**Students’ Individual Characteristics**

Students’ individual characteristics can also be contributing factors to absenteeism. There are many realities in students’ lives (emotional, physical, social, financial) that need to be considered in order to understand, to address and, where necessary, to tackle absenteeism’ (Moore et al. 2008: 21). The decision not/to go to school is multidimensional and absenteeism does not impact all students in the same way (Arulampalam, Nayor, and Smith 2012).

A study by Balkis et al. (2016) among 423 high school students (age 15 to 18 years old) explored the relationship between personal factors, student absenteeism and academic achievement. The results show that students who had negative academic self-perception, negative attitudes towards teachers and the school, lack of a goal, and lack of motivation were more likely to have higher rates of school absenteeism. These results suggest that special intervention programmes that target these particular traits and attitudes in students might help improve students’ attendance.

Similarly, results reached by Wyatt (1992) on analysis of his data collected from first-year university students show that students who study and have good grades miss fewer classes, suggesting that such students are highly motivated to attend classes so as not to lower their grades. Correspondingly, negative effects of absenteeism are more pronounced for this group of students (Arulampalam et al. 2012). This points to the importance of promoting good study habits among students, and finding ways of making academic life more intrinsically motivating to encourage low-achieving students to attend more (Triado-Ivern, Aparicio-Chueca, Elasri-Ejjaberi, Maestro-Yarza, Bernardo, and Presas Maynegre 2021).

Moore et al. (2008) also explored the phenomenon of student absenteeism in the context of a business studies degree programme. Their research included 230 third-year students. Based on their responses on the factors behind their absenteeism, all students were classified into the following three groups: non-attendance justifications that indicate low student motivation to attend (60%); non-attendance justifications that indicate medium student motivation (23%); and non-attendance justifications that indicate high student motivation (17%). The study shows a negative correlation between motivation levels to attend and the number of lectures attended. The authors concluded that the existing low motivation to attend could originate from the fact that the students did not perceive lectures as being useful or maybe they were able to access the content delivered during lectures by other means (Romer 1993). If lectures are not seen as ‘worthwhile, relevant or useful experiences’, students are more likely to skip lectures (Moore et al. 2008: 20).

However, what is seen as worthwhile and useful might vary across the student cohort, with Moore et al. (2008) pointing out that reducing the importance of lectures would act as a threat to equal educational opportunities. While for ‘non-traditional students’
(which include students from low-income households) attending a lecture might be an opportunity to access the information they are less likely to be able to access elsewhere, academic progression of more privileged, ‘traditional’ students’ is less dependent on the content delivered during the lecture because they typically have greater levels of access to other resources which support their academic performance (Moore et al. 2008).

**Conflicting Evidence**

Participation in part-time employment has been linked to a lack of attendance in a number of studies that focus on post-secondary education (Devadoss and Foltz 1996; Paisey and Paisey 2004). Devadoss and Foltz (1996) showed that the number of hours worked by students on jobs outside their studying had a negative effect on their academic performance, a possible hypothesis being that employment might not allow students to allocate sufficient time for their academic work. However, this contrasts with the results found by Wyatt (1992), which show no correlation between employment and absenteeism among a sample of first-year university students. Working students did not miss class more often, neither did they suffer academically.

In a similar vein, students’ participation in extra-curricular activities does not seem to lead to absenteeism; on the contrary, it is associated with higher grades and less absenteeism (Wilson 2009). This finding is supported with the results of Sial et al.’s (2018) study, where the majority of students did not link absenteeism to involvement in extra-curricular activities. Indeed, the authors claim that such involvement ‘may help students raise self-esteem, feel relaxed and pay more attention toward studies’ (Sial et al. 2018: 137).

Conflicting evidence is also presented with regard to relationship between stipends and absenteeism. In the study of Magobolo and Dube (2019) on absenteeism of student nurses in work placements, the majority of students (63.8%) justified their high rate of absenteeism from work placements when compared to that of lectures by the fact that they are not funded for working (but are funded for studying). However, results from another study (Simelane 2013, cited in Magobolo and Dube 2019) claim that stipend and absenteeism are not related.

**The Effects of Absenteeism: Should Attendance be Mandatory?**

It is claimed that if no action is taken to curb absenteeism, this can lead not just to academic failure but possibly to drop-outs from education (Sial et al. 2018). Although a positive correlation between class attendance and students’ academic performance has been reported in number of studies (Ancheta, Daniel, and Ahmad 2021; Balfanz and Byrnes 2013; Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka 2010; Devadoss and Foltz 2006; Khalid 2017; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas, and Seppälä 2016; Paisey and Paisey 2004; Shenawi, Yaghan, Almarabheh, and Shenawi 2021; Tash 2018), the relationship between class attendance and students’ performance is not as straightforward as it seems. Instead, complex interactions between a number of individual and institutional factors ought to be considered (Menedez Alvarez-Hevia et al. 2021). As pointed out in earlier sections, student attendance in higher education institutions is often not exogenous, and it is students who decide whether to attend or not, as often it is not possible to isolate the effect of attendance on learning (Romer 1993). Consequently, it is significant to ask: Does absenteeism actually have a substantial impact on learning? Does mandatory attendance actually have more benefits on learning and performance?

An experimental study by Marburger (2006) focused on the impact of an enforced attendance policy on absenteeism and exam performance. The policy prohibited students from missing more than twice the number of lectures scheduled during a week in one
semester, in which case the student would fail the course. The data from the study showed significant differences in absenteeism between classes who had an attendance policy, and classes who did not have such a policy enforced (an average of 11.6% compared to 20.7%). This gap in absenteeism widened as the semester progressed, with the percentage of students in the no-policy class being absent more than doubling, increasing from 13.8% at the beginning of the semester to 27.2% towards the end. Although the mandatory attendance policy did impact absenteeism rates, when examining the impact of the mandatory attendance policy on the students’ actual exam performance, this proved to be minimal. The performance of the students in the policy classes was slightly better, but this difference was not substantial. In a study that utilised mediation analysis, Büchele (2021) found that tutorial attendance and engagement seem to have more effect on examination performance than the lecture attendance.

Romer (1993) explored the relationship between mandatory attendance and improved learning through a controlled experiment in an American college. His analysis concludes that there is a strong statistical relationship, possibly a causal one, between attendance and performance. In view of this, Romer (1993) suggests that institutions should consider actions to increase attendance, initially through verbal exhortations, followed by policies that make attendance mandatory. In order to support students to take responsibility for their own behaviour (Barlow and Fleischer 2011) attendance policy must be clear and explicite (Marburger 2006; Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al. 2021). Still, there is a concern that intensifying accountability measures to promote attendance could limit students’ academic freedom and infantilise them instead of developing their capacity to make informed decisions as adults (Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al. 2021).

Moore et al. (2008: 17) point out that even though evidence shows a significant and positive correlation between attendance and academic performance in higher education, these same findings do not mean that ‘lecture attendance is either necessary or sufficient in support of academic performance’. Students who are academically more interested, skilled or focused, work hard, and participate actively are usually the ones who conform the most to the requirements of institutions, which include attendance to lectures (Méndez-Suárez and Crespo-Tejero 2021; Moore et al. 2008; Romer 1993). According to Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al. (2021), attendance is a situated decision that can be expressed in relation to two sets of factors. The first set refers to institutional imperatives such as achievement, retention, attendance, and employability, and the second set refers to complexity of students’ realities, like family, relationships, finances, employment, etc.

A difference in performance might be a reflection of high motivation rather than an effect of attendance (Moore et al. 2008; Romer 1993). Therefore, two additional questions need to be considered: whether in the different years of a degree absenteeism equally affects academic performance; and whether all students are affected by attendance policies.

In their study, Méndez-Suárez and Crespo-Tejero (2021) found that the effect of absenteeism on academic performance of University students decreases by year. Absenteeism had the greatest impact on academic performance of first and second-year undergraduate students, a moderate effect on academic performance of third-year and fourth-year students, and a negligible effect on academic achievement of fifth-year students. Correspondingly, Triado-Ivern et al. (2021) found that students’ reasons that affect absenteeism differ with regard to their year and degree of study. In the first year, students mainly attribute absenteeism to external sources such as non-obligatory attendance; the second-year students are more focused on teaching methodology and on their own planning; while in the latter years students put more accent on their learning methodologies. The authors add that reasons for absenteeism increase with the course level. Therefore, application of attendance policies does not seem relevant to those students who usually attend classes, as well as those
students who frequently avoid classes. For this reason, Triado-Ivern et al. (2021) suggest that teachers investing more effort to spark student’s engagement in the early years of the degree seems like a more far-reaching solution.

In brief, although we acknowledge the potential negative effects absenteeism, an increase in class attendance does not necessarily lead to an increase in academic performance. This is because, firstly, as discussed earlier, students might skip classes simply because they do not give importance to class attendance. Secondly, there are other factors that contribute to high academic performance, such as personality, intelligence, motivation, determination and biological factors. Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al. (2021) argue that debates about attendance need an approach that is more holistic and situational with focus on intersection of individual-contextual and institutional-pedagogical factors that affect how key actors conceptualise attendance.

Lectures provide students with information and skills that they are less likely to access outside. Lecturers tend to provide important pointers to students and help them understand salient areas for successful academic progression (Moore et al. 2008). Students who are absent miss on direct learning, verbal assistance and emphasis on certain concepts or examples (Moore et al. 2008; Sharmin, Azim, Choudhury and Kamrun 2016). Absenteeism restrains students from obtaining practical skills necessary for effective learning (Ancheta et al. 2021; Sharmin et al. 2016). Specifically, class attendance equips students with application skills and work-related skills that lead to better professional opportunities, such as determination, problem-solving, and the ability to work collaboratively to achieve specific objectives (Ancheta et al. 2021; Kearney 2008).

Absenteeism has a deterring effect on the teaching-learning environment in class and the well-being of other students in class (Barrow and Fleischer 2011). To say the least, rampant absenteeism can create negative learning conditions which frustrates both lecturers and students alike. Classes provide a space where students can interact with their lecturers, observe them and recognize them as examples (Mendez Alvarez-Hevia 2020); such positive teacher-student interactions can eventually affect the students’ professional growth (Sial et al. 2018).

Addressing Absenteeism - Effective Policies and Practices for Improving Attendance

Given the complexity of absenteeism, this phenomenon cannot be tackled by simple intuition-based methods (López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla 2015). Addressing absenteeism is a continual process which entails identifying chronically absent students, understanding the reasons for their absenteeism, identifying interventions that address this issue, applying them, analysing their effectiveness, and adjusting as needed (Sanchez 2012).

The report Attendance Works (2013), a U.S. national state initiative that pushes for better policy and practice to curb absenteeism, recommends a three-tiered approach that schools should adopt, starting off with preventive programmes for all the students in the school, moving on to intervention programmes to reach students at risk for chronic absence, before finally resorting to more costly interventions on students who are chronically absent. At the school level, the report suggests five strategies to promote attendance and address causes of absenteeism (2013: 13-14):

1. **Positive reinforcement systems** that recognise and reward good and perfect attendance. One particular initiative, also commended by Talbert-Johnson and Russo (2013) and Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), is a campaign in New York City where students received wake-up calls from celebrities as a reward for good attendance. Such initiatives can
act as excellent incentives for students. Research also suggests implementing a reward system on students who regularly attend lectures and those who perform well (Madibane et al. 2021; Wyatt 1992), e.g. awarding of points for attendance and giving pop quizzes that assess and reward students who are present during lectures.

2. **Engage students and parents.** As Chen and Rice (2016) insist, making parents aware of the importance of school attendance and sharing information on absenteeism can be helpful as an early intervention practice. Although it is questionable whether the parents can really get involved in the private life and educational choices of a full-grown adult, it is worth noting that Islam and Shapla (2021) found that parental involvement factors like attending a school event or a meeting with a carrier advisor, and taking part in fundraising are statistically significant in connection to the K-12 absenteeism.

3. **Use attendance data to inform practice.** This includes a school team that meets regularly to review attendance data and be in charge of efforts that curb absenteeism. Identifying patterns of absences through effective monitoring of attendance data can be crucial to help schools work on early interventions to prevent chronic absenteeism (Bauer et al. 2019; Rice 2015; Talbert-Johnson and Russo 2013).

4. **Provide personalised early outreach** (intervention programme for students who are at risk of chronic absence). The data on attendance and absenteeism can be utilised to initiate outreach to students and their families. This way a) everyone can give their impute on how best to address lost learning opportunities and b) feeling of belonging and connection can be nurtured that is crucial to improve attendance, especially in the Covid-19 era (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021).

5. **Identifying barriers to attendance and developing appropriate solutions,** for instance by providing mentoring services and transport.

On the same lines, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) identify the characteristics of successful initiatives that curb absenteeism, mainly: rewarding good attendance, measuring and tracking absenteeism and the reasons behind it, developing a problem-solving capacity to help address these problems, maintaining a good relationship with students who are experiencing absenteeism, connection with the community, and a commitment to learn what works and what does not, as well as to replicate and expand effective programmes.

**The Case of Mentors**

An example of an inter-agency approach that showed how absenteeism can be significantly curbed when educational institutions use attendance data to inform their action and to help students overcome barriers of attendance are the NYC Success Mentor Corps (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012). Together with weekly student success meetings and a number of other initiatives, success mentors formed part of a campaign organised by the New York City interagency task force. This task force was made up of all agencies that were related to youths, shared data and worked on different incentives, with the aim of decreasing chronic absenteeism. This campaign has been praised in the national reports on absenteeism (Attendance Works 2013; Balfanz and Byrnes 2012). The success mentors are described as ‘an innovative, research-based, data-driven mentoring model that seeks to improve attendance, behaviour and educational outcomes for at-risk students in low-income communities’ (The Official Website of the City of New York n.d. b). Their role was to keep in contact with the students, interact with them individually and in groups, encourage them to attend school regularly, identify causes of their absenteeism and help them in problems which might be hindering this (Attendance Works 2013).

Four Success Mentor models were piloted and all of them apply central practice components:

- **External Mentors** involve community partners.
- **Internal Mentors** are composed of selected and trained school staff. Each of them, on average, is matched with 10-15 students whom they meet at least three
times a week; their responsibilities are defined by practices proven effective for engaging high-risk students and their families, such as personally greeting students when they arrive to school in order to make them feel welcomed and noticed, contacting parents every day a student is absent, and connecting students and their families with existing services that can help them tackling challenges which contribute to chronic absenteeism.

- **High School Peer-to-Peer** model involves senior students assisting ninth graders via an integrated school programme, where senior peer leaders take part in a leadership training course for the whole year and are awarded the school credit.

- **Transition Coaches** are specialised mentors supporting those students who are returning from suspensions, foster care, juvenile justice facilities, etc.

During a three-year initiative, those students who were previously chronically absent, gained, with support of Success Mentors, 92,277 additional days compared to students who attended a comparison school without mentor services (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013). This model has also been implemented on a smaller scale in a number of districts across the U.S. (National Student Attendance, Engagement and Success Centre n.d.).

This campaign, together with other successful initiatives, shows that absenteeism can be curbed significantly when educational institutions use attendance data to inform their actions and to help students overcome barriers of attendance (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012).

Prioritising Students: The Role of Educators

It is worth noting that research has found that when a new policy is introduced, those in charge of implementing it are prone to continue with practices that resemble those that they previously used. Therefore, it is of key value to make, not only students and parents, but also teachers aware of the importance and necessity of students’ class attendance (Bauer et al. 2019; Reid 2003). For this reason, it is imperative that addressing absenteeism becomes a whole-school approach, with educators assuming an active role in addressing absenteeism (MEDE 2014).

In light of the aforementioned discussion on the claimed relationship between absenteeism and the quality and style of teaching, Sial et al. (2018) stress the crucial role of lecturers in curbing absenteeism, noting the need for teacher training on teaching methodologies and communication skills. Such skills are needed to make lecture content more interesting, engaging and relevant to students’ former knowledge and to real-life examples, and to improve lecture presentation and interactivity with the use of technology (Büchele 2021). López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla (2015) echo the need for ongoing teacher training, teacher innovation and valuation of teaching activity within institutions. The authors believe that increasing the quality and frequency of student-teacher interactions is the key to reducing absenteeism, and they attribute high absenteeism rates to overcrowded classes. In this sense, they propose the need for ‘greater coexistence, greater transmission of vital contents, direct experiences, mentors and reference professionals, guides and guidance and living examples’ (López-Bonilla 2015: 193).

In addition to this, it is evident that strategies where educators show more interest in individual students’ life and behaviour affect attendance significantly (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013). Intervention programmes that seek to develop a better rapport with students and parents, with the purpose of uncovering and addressing issues that keep students from attending school, have been reported to have successful results, with absenteeism rates going down drastically after adopting such initiatives (Flammia 2016). This successful programme developed incentive systems for students, communicated with parents
regarding students’ absenteeism, and held action plans to address absenteeism. Similarly, in a Californian school where teachers put more effort to show more affection to their students, chronic absenteeism was decreased by 43% in one year (Killian 2015).

The most effective interventions to curb absenteeism adopt practices that are sensitive to the needs of the students (Tash 2018). Absenteeism statistics in schools should be used to address individual cases rather than as an aggregate for a total amount. Tash (2018) warns that implementing statewide programmes is not sufficient to control chronic absenteeism due to the individual characteristics of students. Instead, educational institutions should focus on inexpensive strategies, that can be controlled by the school that discourage chronic absenteeism within the context. One such strategy is bringing teachers, students, and parents together for regular meetings in order to: a) identify and address issues that might be causing absenteeism and b) establish corrective action plans (Tash 2018).

Weekly student success meetings, introduced as part of the New York City interagency task force campaign, set a good example for such school-based effort that involves relevant parties in order to tackle absenteeism in an extensive, collaborative, and strategic fashion (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013). These meetings are principal-ed and attended by the school staff, success mentor team leader, and external stakeholders (where needed). They aim at a data-driven joint problem solving, monitoring and discussing cases of absenteeism and finding ways to help them increase their attendance (Attendance Works 2013). Meetings usually involve reviews of student-level and school-wide data and planning of joint intervention and assessment (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013).

### Targeting Vulnerable Groups

The stories behind who skips school and how that affects them are complex and nuanced. As discussed earlier, students that come from low-income backgrounds have a higher tendency to be absent from school (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021; Islam and Shapla 2021). Therefore, efforts to reduce the rates of chronic absenteeism have strong egalitarian implications (Gatherer and Manning 1998; Gottfried and Hutt 2019). An overall rate of chronic absenteeism might disguise high rates of chronic absenteeism among student subgroups. In light of this, attendance records need to incorporate these variations in order to avoid muddying key areas of risk. To eliminate this possibility, schools should be accountable not merely for the overall rates of chronic absenteeism but also among select subgroups of adequate size (Bauer et al. 2019).

In Malta, this variation in absenteeism is present too. Although there are no published statistics regarding absenteeism of students in post-secondary institutions as per now, NSO (2018) statistics show that in 2017-18, amongst the students in formal schooling, those residing in Ħ’Attard had the lowest average days of absence per student, with an average of 7.5 days. On the other hand, the locality with the highest average number of absences per student was Cospicua, registering an average of 23.7 days. The statistical report clearly shows that students from the Southern Harbour district have higher absenteeism rates (NSO 2018: 45). These results support research by Gatt (2019) who reports that the Southern Harbour district shows the highest percentages of early school leavers, high rates of unemployment, as well as low levels of education and schooling.

A possible solution for this might be that of setting an attendance threshold for all subgroups of students. Still, it is important to highlight the potential dangers of setting such a threshold. As Bauer et al. (2019: 8) warn, ‘when a measure becomes a target, it sometimes ceases to be a good measure’. The authors stress that in spite of the strong negative correlation between chronic absenteeism and educational success, if schools seek to increase attendance just to meet a target stipulated in a national strategy, without
exploiting teaching time to improve achievement, the actual measure will lose in its meaning⁶ (Bauer et al. 2019).

The Role of Stakeholders

Schools should not tackle the absenteeism issue alone. Policymakers play an important role in searching for scalable and replicable ways to reduce absenteeism (Gottfried and Hut 2019). Policy-makers are urged to encourage ‘capacity building’, which refers to the building the knowledge and skills of all stakeholders regarding what chronic absenteeism is, how to calculate it, what practices can be used to promote class attendance, and the importance of using prevention and early intervention practices before resorting to more expensive punitive measures (Attendance Works 2013).

Likewise, the research community should contribute by exploring efficacy of already existing interventions and their cost-efficiency (Gottfried and Hut 2019). For example, although both successful, the mentoring service costs $500 per additional day of attendance generated (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013), while the parent text-messaging costs only $6 per additional day of attendance generated (Rogers and Feller 2018).

Attendance Works (2013: 22) further urges schools to create an ‘interagency forum’; a space where different public agencies and community organisations can share chronic absence data and discuss its implications for action and policy. Indeed, in order to create a strong support system to tackle school absenteeism, aside from utilizing its own resources, schools need to involve the community, as shown in specific examples earlier on. Above all, directly involving parents in students’ absence reduction is an approach that is potentially highly-effective, and can complement other student-focused interventions. The first step to support this connection is to raise parents’ awareness of various consequences of school absenteeism and providing them with tools and tips instead of just providing information and statistics alone (Gottfried and Hutt 2019). The fact that parents are active investors in their sons'/daughters’ human capital makes them particularly powerful targets for interventions that communicate personalized information designed with the aim of changing student behaviour (Bergman and Rogers 2017). Although this parental involvement may not be feasible in the post-secondary context, research in this area can still raise salient points that are worthy of consideration.

Research shows that communicating with parents regarding students’ attendance results in improvement in attendance rates of students (Bauer et al. 2019; Rogers and Feller 2019). One of the ways to do it is via school-parent texting programmes, which has the advantage of being a ubiquitous, low-cost practice that can take place in real time (Gottfried and Hutt 2019). In a large-scale randomised experiment in 203 schools, Rogers and Feller (2018) evaluated the effect on student absenteeism of an intervention in which mail-based messages were sent to parents to inform them about tips and consequences of absenteeism, as well as the total and/or relative absences of their sons/daughters. The intervention also targeted key misbeliefs that are common to parents of high-absence students about their absences.⁷ The authors confirmed that students whose parents received the messages with

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⁶ Bauer et al. (2019: 8) refer to Goodhart’s law which states that ‘[w]hen stakes are attached to a measure, schools can use strategies to raise their performance in ways that do not necessarily align to the broader goal, thereby undermining the accuracy of the measure itself’.

⁷ Households were assigned in an equal number to a control group or (1 of 3) treatment groups that received up to five rounds of treatment e-mails during the academic year. Reminder treatments only informed parents of consequences of absenteeism and their capacity to tackle it. Total absences treatments included, together with the reminder, information about students’ total absences. Relative absences treatments further added information how their child’s absenteeism compares to their classmates. At the end of the academic year, parents were surveyed in order to assess whether assignment to treatment condition influenced their beliefs on how their children’s absences compare to those of their classmates as well as affected students’ actual absenteeism.
the number of absences considerably decreased their absenteeism by around 10% as well as reduced parents’ biased beliefs regarding their students’ total absences. Parents who were only given tips and informed of possible consequences did not improve their beliefs regarding the consequences of absence and their role in reducing absence. In addition, the authors found modest evidence that the intervention had the greatest impact in the week immediately following the delivery of each round of treatment compared with the two following weeks.

The essential step that allows the main stakeholders to take informed action with the aim of helping students, their schools and families to tackle the barriers to getting to school is making attendance data publicly available in a transparent and timely manner (Attendance Works and Everybody Graduates Centre 2021).

Attendance Policies in Maltese Post-Secondary Institutions

It is every school’s responsibility to set up a school attendance policy that students can refer to, and to enforce such policy accordingly. Hereunder is a summary of the attendance policies of the five main post-secondary educational institutions in Malta, indicating expected attendance behaviour together with consequences for lack of adherence.

Between 2016 and 2018, The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) had the Student Learning Agreement in place, where students who were approaching the 20% overall absentee rate for a particular academic year were called for a meeting and a signed learning agreement was drawn up to agree on attendance targets. In cases where the learning agreement was not adhered to by the student, s/he might not be certified and the student could either be barred from attending further assessments in that year, or halted permanently from the course. The students’ learning agreement could also be extended to identify clear targets which the student needed to achieve in order to be certified (Foundation College Programme Regulations 2018). From 2019, a different strategy was used whereby students are urged to attend all classes and fully involve themselves in their programme of study. Students are notified in case of repeated absences and they might be stopped from carrying out assessments. Stipend rates are also deducted according to the attendance data. If absenteeism persists, they will be considered as having resigned from the course (Student-Induction Handbook 2019-2020).

The G.F. Abela Junior College imposes compulsory attendance for all sessions. The College has in place a four-layer notification system, where letters, notifications, and texts are sent to students, their parents/guardians based on the students’ pattern and regularity of absenteeism. A cautionary letter is issued to those students that exhibit irregular absence patterns, and in case that within a four-week period a student misses a substantial amount of sessions without a justification, a Notification of Unauthorised Absences letter is sent to them. Furthermore, when the level of unauthorised absences accumulated from the beginning of the school year starts going up, students will initially receive a First Warning letter, and when this level gets close to 10% of the total number of sessions in an academic year, a Second Warning letter is issued. Finally, if students fail to attend 10% of their sessions during the school year without justification, they are considered to have abandoned their course they and are not allowed to sit for their end-of-year examinations. Students and parents/guardians are informed accordingly in a Dismissal Letter (Università ta’ Malta: G.F. Abela Junior College 2022).

The attendance policy of the Giovanni Curmi higher secondary school states that it is obligatory for students to attend lectures, tutorial and practical sessions regularly according to their school timetable. If a student misses one lecture without justification, the day’s full stipend is deducted. If habitual absenteeism continues, this leads to dismissal from school and eventually to termination of the studies. Parents are informed about students’ habitual
absences (in spite of the fact that this is post-compulsory education). Students who miss more than 70% of lectures in one term are not allowed to sit for end-of-term assessments (and might be asked to terminate registration). On the other hand, end-of-year assessments can only be completed by students who obtain a minimum of 70% attendance (Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School 2022).

The Institute of Tourism Studies also obliges students to attend all timetabled sessions, including classes during weekends or holidays. Failure to attend sessions without justification results in deductions from the stipend and may be subject to disciplinary measures. Authorised absences will not count towards absence percentage. Core modules require an 80% attendance per semester. Non-core modules require a minimum of 50% attendance per semester and a minimum of 80% attendance overall across modules. If this threshold is not reached, the student will be barred from assessment and will need to re-do the module, unless the Student Cases Board decides otherwise. Students who fall under 80% attendance in a semester will receive a written warning by e-mail. If at the end of the semester the student does not attain an average of 80% attendance in all modules, s/he will be terminated from the course. When a module is offered via the e-learning platform, the record of time spent logged in the system will be recorded and taken into consideration for attendance purposes. Students who are absent without authorisation for three consecutive weeks will also be terminated from their course (Institute for Tourism Studies 2022).

The University of Malta regulations for undergraduate studies specify that attendance for classes and work placements is obligatory. In case of students who fail to satisfy the attendance requirement, a lecturer may decide to bar them from being assessed in that study-unit. These students will not be allowed for supplementary assessment unless approved by the Board of Examiners, in which case the students would need to make up for the missed teaching sessions. Lecturers are advised to keep a record of attendance and to send a warning to students who are habitually absent (Università ta' Malta 2022).

**Conclusion**

It is undebatable that absenteeism is a common problem in post-secondary education. Whether this is an issue that needs resolution is not as clear. Although research evidence shows that improving students’ attendance could be the key tactic to improve educational outcomes (Gottfried and Hutt 2019), and improved academic performance does not seem to be the only benefit of class attendance, the relation between attendance and performance is complex and a number of individual and other factors need to be considered (Menedez Alvarez-Hevia 2021).

This review highlights the main causes of post-secondary absenteeism, its possible effects, as well as recommendations on how this phenomenon can be curbed. Indeed, addressing absenteeism is not a one-tool fix. Effectively addressing absenteeism requires a combination of strategies and involves various actions and stakeholders.

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