

Between Formal Attendance and Academic Disengagement: Student Absenteeism in Lectures

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Abstract:

Student absenteeism has become one of the major challenges facing higher education today, due to its significant impact on the quality of learning, academic achievement, and the effectiveness of educational systems. This article provides an in-depth conceptual analysis of student absenteeism in lecture-based courses, highlighting its multidimensional determinants and its forms of manifestation within the specific context of Algerian universities. Absenteeism is approached as a complex academic behavior resulting from the dynamic interaction of individual, pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural factors. Through a psychosociological and pedagogical perspective, the article sheds light on the transformations in students' relationship with academic knowledge and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach focused on improving teaching practices, strengthening student engagement, and enhancing the quality of the university environment.

Keywords: Student absenteeism; Higher education; Academic engagement; Pedagogical practices; Algerian university.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, higher education has undergone profound transformations driven by the massification of university systems, the diversification of student profiles, and the rapid evolution of socio-professional demands. These changes have deeply altered teaching and learning conditions, while simultaneously reshaping students' relationships with academic knowledge, higher education institutions, and traditional modes of pedagogical transmission (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Trow, 2007).

Within this context, absenteeism from lecture-based courses has emerged as a concerning indicator of dysfunctions in teaching–learning processes. Long regarded as a matter of discipline or administrative regulation, student absenteeism is now increasingly recognized as a complex phenomenon that reflects broader forms of academic disengagement. Repeated absence from lectures not only raises questions about the pedagogical effectiveness of lecture-based teaching, but also challenges the meaning students attribute to their presence at university and to academic participation more generally (Kahu, 2013; Tinto, 2017).

Several studies have been conducted in Algeria on workplace absenteeism (Benhabib, 2018; Boudarene, 2019). However, regarding absenteeism at the university level, the scientific literature has long remained scarce, with only a few journalistic articles and the study by S. Cheikh (2012) published on the ASJP platform, entitled *How to Address Absenteeism and Academic Failure in Algerian Universities*. More recent research has begun to examine this issue. For instance, a 2023 study at the University of Khenchela conducted by A. Ibbou and M. R. Si Ali investigated student absenteeism in the post-pandemic context, highlighting causes related to confinement, adaptation difficulties, and pedagogical practices. In response to these challenges, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) introduced hybrid teaching modalities, combining face-to-face and online instruction (MESRS, 2024).

Yet, despite the reduction in teaching hours and the flexibility offered by hybrid learning, universities continue to witness high levels of absenteeism, with lecturers often facing empty classrooms and lecture halls. Excessive absenteeism has thus become a major institutional concern, prompting alerts and corrective measures aimed at strengthening student engagement and academic success.

This article adopts an analytical perspective that seeks to understand student absenteeism as a multidimensional academic phenomenon. Rather than adopting a normative or blame-oriented interpretation of absence, the study aims to examine its structural, pedagogical, and psychosocial determinants, while taking into account the specific characteristics of the Algerian higher education context. The objective is to offer an integrative reading that contributes to a better understanding of contemporary

challenges related to student engagement in higher education and to inform reflections on the renewal of pedagogical practices and institutional policies.

2. Conceptualizing student absenteeism in higher education

2.1. Definition and conceptualization of student absenteeism

Student absenteeism can be defined as a repeated or regular absence from scheduled academic activities within the university curriculum, particularly from lecture-based courses. It differs from occasional or justified absence in that it reflects a relatively stable and enduring behavioral pattern, indicative of a gradual withdrawal from academic demands and institutional expectations (Tinto, 2017).

The literature identifies several forms of absenteeism. *Overt absenteeism* refers to the student's physical absence from the classroom, whereas *latent absenteeism* describes a situation in which students are formally present but display low levels of cognitive, emotional, and motivational engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). This latter form, often less visible, is particularly problematic, as it reflects a silent disengagement that can severely compromise deep learning processes and long-term academic development (Kahu, 2013). In this regard, mere physical attendance cannot be considered a sufficient indicator of meaningful learning or academic involvement (Astin, 1999).

2.2. Absenteeism as an indicator of academic disengagement

Student absenteeism is closely associated with the concept of *academic disengagement*, defined as a reduction in students' investment in learning activities at behavioral, cognitive, and emotional levels (Fredricks et al., 2004). Contemporary models of student engagement emphasize attendance as a core behavioral dimension, alongside active participation, persistence, and effort in academic tasks (Appleton et al., 2008).

Disengagement may precede absenteeism when declining motivation, reduced perceived relevance of course content, or weak pedagogical interaction progressively lead students to avoid attending lectures (Kahu, 2013). Conversely, absenteeism may also exacerbate disengagement, as repeated absences can hinder content comprehension, increase academic difficulties, and reinforce feelings of incompetence or academic inadequacy (Tinto, 2017). Absenteeism should therefore be understood as part of a *dynamic and reciprocal process*, shaped by students' overall university experience, their sense of belonging, and the quality of teaching and learning environments (Astin, 1999).

From this perspective, absenteeism cannot be reduced to an individual behavioral issue; rather, it constitutes a meaningful indicator of broader pedagogical and institutional challenges in higher education. Its analysis requires an integrated approach that takes into account teaching practices, institutional organization, and students' psychosocial experiences within the university context (Kahu, 2013).

3. General Regulatory Framework Governing Lectures within the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS)

The functioning of higher education institutions in Algeria is governed by a comprehensive body of legal and regulatory texts issued under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS). These regulatory instruments structure academic organization, define teaching modalities, and specify the rights and obligations of both faculty members and students.

Among the various forms of instruction established within the Algerian university system, the lecture (*cours magistral*) occupies a central position. It constitutes a fundamental pedagogical mechanism for the structured transmission of theoretical knowledge, particularly within undergraduate (Licence) and graduate (Master) cycles. Its organization does not merely reflect institutional practice; rather, it is embedded within a precise normative framework that determines its objectives, allocated teaching hours, assessment procedures, and the respective responsibilities of academic stakeholders.

The regulatory framework governing lectures is anchored in the national legislation on higher education, notably the Higher Education Orientation Law and its implementing decrees, which organize the LMD system (Licence–Master–Doctorate). Within this context, the lecture is defined as a predominantly theoretical teaching unit, generally delivered in an amphitheater setting, aimed at presenting the conceptual, methodological, and scientific foundations of a given discipline in a structured manner.

Lectures are integrated into a pedagogical architecture composed of Teaching Units (*Unités d’Enseignement, UE*), which are themselves structured into lectures (*CM*), tutorial sessions (*TD*), and practical sessions (*TP*). Through ministerial decrees regulating accredited training programs, the MESRS determines the total teaching hours, the distribution among *CM*, *TD*, and *TP* formats, and the number of credits assigned to each teaching unit in accordance with the nationally adapted ECTS credit system.

4. Multidimensional determinants of student absenteeism

4.1. Individual factors

Individual factors encompass a range of psychological and personal variables, including academic motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, learning strategies, and stress management abilities. Research consistently shows that students whose motivation is primarily extrinsic or instrumental that is, oriented toward grades, credentials, or examination outcomes are more likely to prioritize assessment-related activities at the expense of regular lecture attendance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1997). In such cases, attendance is perceived as optional when it is not directly linked to evaluation.

In addition, psychological difficulties such as anxiety, fatigue, and demotivation significantly contribute to absenteeism by reducing students’

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emotional and cognitive availability for learning (Credé et al., 2010). Personal and professional constraints also play a critical role. In many higher education contexts, particularly in developing countries such as Algeria, a substantial proportion of students combine their studies with family responsibilities or paid employment, which limits their time resources and negatively affects attendance and academic engagement (Salamonson & Andrew, 2006). These cumulative pressures often lead students to adopt selective attendance strategies as a means of coping with competing demands.

4.2. Pedagogical factors

Pedagogical practices occupy a central position in the analysis of student absenteeism. Lecture-based teaching characterized by a transmissive approach, limited interactivity, and a predominance of unidirectional knowledge transmission has been shown to generate progressive disengagement among students, particularly in large class settings (Bligh, 2000; Kahu, 2013). When students perceive lectures as passive, repetitive, or disconnected from their learning needs, their motivation to attend regularly tends to decline.

Moreover, the perceived redundancy between lectures and available instructional materials such as handouts, slide presentations, or digital resources contributes to the normalization of absence (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). In contrast, active learning approaches, which emphasize participation, dialogue, problem-solving, and the contextualization of knowledge, are consistently associated with higher levels of student engagement, satisfaction, and attendance (Prince, 2004). These findings highlight the role of pedagogical innovation in fostering meaningful presence rather than mere physical attendance.

4.3. Institutional factors

Institutional determinants refer to the broader organizational features of higher education systems, including timetabling, class size, attendance policies, infrastructure, and institutional climate. Large lecture halls, often characterized by anonymity and minimal interaction, may intensify students' sense of disconnection from both instructors and the institution itself (Tinto, 2017). Such environments can weaken students' sense of belonging, which is a key predictor of persistence and engagement.

Rigid or poorly adapted institutional arrangements, combined with a lack of formal recognition of attendance, may further legitimize absenteeism as an acceptable behavior. Additionally, the absence or insufficiency of academic advising, pedagogical support, and psychological counseling services increases students' vulnerability to disengagement and withdrawal (Thomas, 2012). From this perspective, absenteeism reflects not only individual choices but also institutional shortcomings in supporting student success.

4.4. Sociocultural and economic factors

In the Algerian context, socioeconomic conditions, transportation constraints, and social representations of higher education strongly influence students' attendance patterns. For some students, university education is primarily perceived as a space for credential acquisition rather than as a setting for deep intellectual engagement and knowledge construction. This perception has been documented in sociological and educational research, where attendance and engagement are often shaped by the instrumental value of degrees (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Becker, 1968). Recent Algerian studies confirm this trend: surveys at the University of Khenchela and Tipaza show that more than 60 % of students rely on shared notes and digital materials instead of attending lectures, reflecting a certification-oriented logic (Ibbou & Si Ali, 2025; Benziane, 2025). Similar findings have been reported in international contexts, where students optimize their efforts according to assessment demands rather than intrinsic intellectual engagement (Massingham & Herrington, 2006).

Absenteeism may therefore be interpreted as an adaptive strategy in response to structural constraints and limited resources, reflecting a rationalization of effort based on students' perceptions of the academic system's demands and rewards (Becker, 1968). In this sense, absenteeism does not necessarily indicate indifference or lack of interest, but rather a pragmatic adjustment to socioeconomic realities and institutional expectations.

5. Manifestations of student absenteeism in the Algerian university context

Student absenteeism in Algerian universities is primarily manifested through irregular attendance of lectures, a marked increase in attendance during examination periods, and a widespread reliance on alternative learning resources such as printed handouts, shared summaries, and digital platforms. These practices reflect a significant transformation in students' relationship with academic knowledge, wherein a certification-oriented logic often takes precedence over a learning-centered approach. Attendance is increasingly perceived as instrumental and strategic rather than intrinsically linked to intellectual engagement and knowledge construction. Similar patterns have been observed in other higher education contexts, where students tend to optimize their efforts according to perceived assessment demands and institutional expectations (Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Becker, 1968).

Recent surveys show that absenteeism rates in lecture courses often exceed 40 %, particularly in large amphitheaters where interaction is minimal (Benziane, 2025). A 2023 study at the University of Khenchela revealed that post-pandemic constraints, including commuting difficulties and adaptation to hybrid teaching, contributed significantly to absenteeism, with more than 60 % of students reporting reliance on shared notes and

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digital materials instead of attending lectures. These practices confirm that attendance is increasingly perceived as instrumental and strategic, oriented toward certification rather than deep intellectual engagement (Ibbou & Si Ali, 2025).

This mode of academic functioning suggests that absenteeism should not be interpreted solely as deviant behavior, but rather as a contextually embedded adaptive strategy, shaped by structural constraints, pedagogical practices, and students' representations of success within the university system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Kahu, 2013). This evolution raises fundamental questions regarding the role and pedagogical relevance of lectures within contemporary university training programs, particularly in mass higher education systems. The traditional lecture format, often characterized by large class sizes and limited interaction, appears increasingly challenged in its ability to foster sustained student engagement and meaningful participation. Research in higher education pedagogy emphasizes that when lectures fail to provide added value beyond available learning materials, students are less likely to perceive regular attendance as necessary (Bligh, 2000; Tinto, 2012).

In the Algerian university context, these observations call for a critical reflection on teaching practices and institutional policies aimed at enhancing the educational function of lectures, strengthening students' sense of academic belonging, and promoting active engagement rather than passive presence. Addressing absenteeism therefore requires not only regulatory measures but also pedagogical innovation and institutional support mechanisms that align learning environments with students' academic and social realities (Prince, 2004; Thomas, 2012).

6. Toward an integrated approach to student absenteeism

The analysis of student absenteeism highlights the necessity of adopting a global and systemic approach to understanding this phenomenon. Rather than interpreting absenteeism as an individual deviation or a mere lack of personal motivation, it should be conceptualized as the outcome of complex and dynamic interactions between students, teachers, and institutional structures. Contemporary research emphasizes that academic behaviors such as attendance are shaped by students' perceptions of teaching practices, institutional norms, and their overall university experience, rather than by individual characteristics alone (Tinto, 2012; Kahu, 2013).

From this perspective, absenteeism emerges as a meaningful indicator of broader issues related to student engagement, pedagogical relevance, and institutional functioning. Understanding absenteeism therefore requires moving beyond deficit-based explanations toward an ecological and interactional framework that accounts for the multiple contexts influencing

students' academic trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008).

Such an integrated approach calls for a critical reflection on pedagogical innovation, the development of psychopedagogical support mechanisms, and the improvement of students' learning conditions. Research consistently shows that teaching practices promoting active learning, interaction, and relevance enhance students' motivation and sense of academic purpose, thereby reducing disengagement and absenteeism (Prince, 2004; Bligh, 2000). Similarly, institutional initiatives aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, recognizing student participation, and diversifying instructional modalities constitute key levers for sustaining engagement in higher education (Thomas, 2012; Astin, 1999).

In this regard, combating absenteeism should not rely solely on regulatory or disciplinary measures, but rather on preventive and supportive strategies that place students' academic and psychosocial needs at the center of institutional policies. Such strategies contribute to creating learning environments that encourage regular attendance as a meaningful and valued component of the educational experience (Kuh, 2009).

7. Implications and recommendations for Algerian higher education

The analysis of student absenteeism from lecture-based courses carries several implications for higher education institutions in Algeria, particularly in the context of massification and ongoing reforms. Rather than being addressed solely as an issue of individual responsibility, absenteeism should be understood as a systemic indicator of misalignments between pedagogical practices, institutional organization, and students' lived academic realities. The persistence of high absenteeism rates in Algerian universities carries major implications for institutional policies. National enrollment data indicate that Algeria hosted 1.8 million students in 2024, yet attendance monitoring remains inconsistent across institutions (Statista, 2025). Empirical studies suggest that improving transport infrastructure, flexible timetables, and student advising services could reduce absenteeism by up to 25 % (Ibbou & Si Ali, 2025).

At the pedagogical level, the analysis suggest the need to reconsider the dominant role of traditional lecture-based teaching. While lectures remain a central component of university instruction, their effectiveness could be enhanced through the gradual integration of active and participatory learning strategies. Approaches such as problem-based learning and case studies grounded in local socio-professional contexts have been shown to increase student engagement and attendance (Benziane, 2025). Structured opportunities for interaction may contribute to increasing students' cognitive engagement and perceived relevance of course content.

At the psychosocial level, student absenteeism highlights the importance of fostering a stronger sense of belonging and academic

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integration. Initiatives such as mentoring programs and peer tutoring strengthen students' sense of belonging, particularly in the first years of study where dropout risks are highest. Spaces for dialogue between students and faculty may also enhance students' academic self-efficacy and identification with the university community.

At the institutional level, universities may benefit from greater attention to organizational and structural conditions that indirectly influence attendance. Issues related to timetable rigidity, overcrowded lecture halls, and limited access to academic support services are particularly salient in Algerian universities. Strengthening academic advising, improving coordination between teaching schedules and students' transportation constraints, and promoting more flexible learning arrangements could help reduce structural barriers to regular attendance.

Finally, at the digital and organizational level, educational technologies should be approached as complementary resources rather than substitutes for in-person teaching. Learning management systems, recorded lectures, and online academic resources can support continuity for students facing socioeconomic constraints, while preserving the pedagogical value of physical presence at university.

Overall, these recommendations point toward the necessity of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to student engagement in Algerian higher education. Addressing absenteeism effectively requires moving beyond disciplinary or administrative responses toward strategies that acknowledge the complex interplay of pedagogical, institutional, and psychosocial factors shaping students' academic participation.

8. CONCLUSION

Absenteeism from lecture-based courses constitutes a revealing phenomenon of the contemporary transformations of higher education. In the context of Algerian universities, it invites a reconsideration of pedagogical practices, a strengthening of student engagement, and the promotion of a more inclusive, stimulating, and context-sensitive university environment. These challenges are particularly salient in mass higher education systems, where traditional teaching formats may no longer adequately respond to students' diverse expectations and constraints (Tinto, 2012; Bligh, 2000).

Addressing student absenteeism therefore requires coordinated action among institutional, pedagogical, and psychosocial actors, as well as a shift in prevailing representations of university learning. Restoring meaning to student presence and to the act of learning involves recognizing students as active participants in knowledge construction and creating conditions that support sustained engagement throughout their academic pathways (Astin, 1999; Thomas, 2012).

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