

University students who attend seminars in person enjoy better exam results, according to new research

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Students in a traditional lecture hall. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

University students who attend interactive seminars in person get better exam results than those who do not attend, potentially equivalent to

almost a full grade, new research from the University of Bath School of Management shows.

Researchers assessed a Business Economics module attended by around 200 students per annum, over two separate years. The study—'Seminar attendance, lecture capture, and disability adjustments: intuition and evidence'—examined the relationship between seminar attendance, lecture recordings, and student performance at the postgraduate level, and also shed some light on the effectiveness of strategies designed to level the playing field for students facing disabilities.

"We wanted to test the widespread belief in academia that in-person attendance leads to better exam performance than non-attendance, and/or reliance on recorded lectures. We also wanted to test our intuition on what other factors influence [student](#) performance," said Dr. Rob Branston, Senior Lecturer at the School of Management.

"The study showed that those attending every seminar in the semester resulted in an 8 percent higher result than those who did not attend—this amounts to almost a full grade difference in performance. We also found that moderate or complementary use of lecture recordings was beneficial for [student performance](#), while large-scale use had no significant positive or negative impact," Dr. Branston, who is also a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, said.

Dr. Branston noted that the study could not determine the effect of differing motivational levels amongst students but suggested it was fair to assume that the bulk of post-graduate students paying for their studies would have a reasonable level of motivation.

"One potential explanation for the higher grades associated with seminar attendance could lie in the nature of the seminars themselves—they are interactive, with lively discussion, and contributions from students. It

depends what students bring to the seminar but that interactive nature could be key," said co-author Dr. Marc Betton, who jointly taught the class with Dr. Branston.

The researchers suggested that attending lectures and then catching up on or reviewing certain points that were included, or substituting for the occasional missed lecture, was better than attending without any follow-up of the lecture material or just viewing recorded lectures without attending at all.

"It is hard to concentrate for an entire two hour lecture, even with a brief break in the middle, so it is reasonable to think most students may need to clarify at least some of the content delivered after the lecture and hence reinforce their knowledge," Dr. Branston said.

"Essentially, they are benefiting from the combined learning experience offered by in-person attendance—and the opportunity to discuss or ask questions—with online review of recorded lectures. We think it is the exposure to these two environments that creates an advantage over students who might rely solely on attendance or reviewing video recordings of a lecture, as the latter is a passive, one-way experience," he said.

The course within which data was collected was a one-semester introduction to Business Economics, taken by approximately 200 postgraduate students per annum who were enrolled in a variety of MSc degree programs. The sample consisted of students who undertook the module during either the 2017/18 or the 2018/19 academic years. Attendance at both lectures and seminars was voluntary. The lectures were delivered live and in person, and were also recorded for students to review at their own pace if they wished.

Dr. Branston said the research suggested that academics should promote

both attendance and the use of [lecture](#) recordings, while also highlighting that students would be ill-advised to replace live lectures completely with watching recordings. He said academics should also be given the time and training to investigate their own teaching, particularly in terms of assessing viewing statistics and what they imply for what is succeeding or what students might be struggling with.

"We also looked at the effect of disability and further found an absence of any statistically significant difference in the performance of students with disability access plans relative to other students. That suggests our university's measures to enhance equity for students with disabilities are effective," he added.

Dr. Branston noted however that the sample size was relatively limited in this respect and that it would be valuable to conduct more research in this area, particularly from the point of view of the experience and perceptions of students with disabilities.

Dr. Branston and Dr. Betton were also encouraged to find that students who came from non-English language speaking countries were not at a performance disadvantage, and that prior knowledge of a subject did not appear to influence exam performance, helped by the course being taught from first principles.

"This is important and an area that sometimes causes anxiety amongst students, who might think, will I be at a disadvantage because I haven't studied anything like this before? It was good to find this was not the case," Dr. Betton said.

More information: Seminar attendance, lecture capture, and disability adjustments: intuition and evidence*, *Advances in Economics Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.4337/ae.2022.01.06](https://doi.org/10.4337/ae.2022.01.06)

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