



MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND "NON ATTENDANCE" AT UNIVERSITY: AN ITALIAN CASE STUDY

Silvio Franco

University of Tuscia, Faculty of Political Sciences, Viterbo
Italy
franco@unitus.it

Paola Broccolucci

University of Tuscia, Faculty of Political Sciences, Viterbo
Italy
paola.broccolucci.182@istruzione.it

Clara Cicatiello*

University of Tuscia, Faculty of Political Sciences, Viterbo
Italy
cicatiello@unitus.it

Abstract

The quality of teaching activities at university is a fundamental part of management education which affects the allocation of public funds to universities. In some Italian faculties, we have noticed a decrease in the number of students regularly attending courses. Previous studies show that this affects students' performance and consequently the curriculum quality indicators. In this work, we focus on "non attendance" at the classes of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Viterbo, by analysing its causes and the possible solutions.

A survey was carried out on students enrolled in the postgraduate degree and the answers were treated with multivariate statistical techniques. The results show that only 8% of them attend all lectures, while about 60% do not attend any lessons. A significant cause is the high percentage of working students, although full-timers often miss lectures too. The students' opinion and suggestions are also presented, together with some considerations about the strategies to favour the students' participation in educational activities, and consequently improving the overall curriculum quality.

Key Words: curriculum quality, university system, students' performance, correspondences analysis

Topic Group: management education, training and development

INTRODUCTION

Management education is an activity that has notably grown in significance and influence in the past 25 years. There is a well-established debate about management education that has focused on the extent to which it contributes to the development of effective managers (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Handy, 1987) or to the economic performance of countries (Locke, 1989). A great part of the literature focuses on how to provide management educators with techniques to improve the effectiveness of their teaching (Gibbs, 1992) in different situations. On the other hand, French and Grey (1996) raise a number of challenges regarding the problematical link between management practice and management education.

In general, the idea of management education as functional to management is based on a model of professional training. From this point of view, it is fair to say that a body of knowledge exists, which is central to effective practice (French and Grey, 1996).

This knowledge is produced, protected and transmitted especially by universities. Consequently, the quality of teaching activities in universities is a fundamental part in the education of managers of the private and public sector. For this reason, universities make a constant effort to improve the quality of their curriculum offerings.

The attention towards the quality of the curriculum improves the students' performances and the educational level, provided that they regularly attend classes.

The "non-attendance" at university lectures is a growing phenomenon in many countries, but it is particularly common in Italy, where in most courses attendance is not compulsory.

This study focuses on the Faculty of Political Sciences in Viterbo, which mostly provides education for future managers of public administration and private companies operating in the communication and advertising sector. The aim is to study the non-attendance at postgraduate degree classes, by analysing its causes and the possible solutions.

In the first part of the paper, the link between low attendance at classes and poor students' performance is highlighted. Then, the problem of the allocation of public resources to universities, and to their faculties, which is based on indicators also considering curriculum quality and students' performance, is tackled. Therefore, the vicious cycle that exists between low attendance, level of education and the development of a quality curriculum is shown. The third paragraph introduces the case study, while in the fourth we explain how the research was carried out and what methodology was adopted to process the data; finally, the main results are shown.

In the last part of the paper, some possible strategies are suggested, many of which emerged from the students' feedback during the survey. Such strategies can be adopted to contain the non-attendance phenomenon, therefore improving students' results, their preparation and ultimately their managerial skills and attitudes.

IMPLICATION OF LOW ATTENDANCE ON STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Previous studies show that low attendance at university classes affects students' performance at university, lowering their grades and extending the education period. The earliest researches on this topic come from the USA (Schmidt, 1983; Park and Kerr 1990; Romer 1993; Marburger 2006) and find that attendance has a positive and significant effect on grades. Rodgers (2001) and Kirby (Kirby and McElroy, 2003), by applying different methodologies, have found the same in Australian and Irish colleges, as they state that the

recent tendency towards absenteeism affects students' grades in exams and hinders their knowledge for subsequent courses and future jobs.

Indeed, non-attending students find it more difficult to prepare for exams as compared to their peers who attend university regularly, as they do not benefit from the direct contact with teachers and fellow students.

In Italy, attendance at university classes appears even lower than abroad, also considering that the number of faculties and degree courses with compulsory attendance is lower. There are two fundamental consequences: on one hand the completion of the degree with lower average grades, and on the other hand a longer time to complete the degree. Such evidence derives from periodical research carried out by Alma Laurea, a database managed by a consortium of Italian universities, supported by the Department for Education (Ministero dell'Istruzione), which collects data on all the graduates from the member universities¹.

From the processing of data belonging to the "Profilo dei laureati 2008" ("Profile of graduates 2008", Alma Laurea, 2009), with reference to the postgraduate degrees, a remarkable difference in terms of results can be seen between full-time students and working students, who have a lower attendance or none at all. Such a difference is expressed above all by lower final marks at graduation and a longer time to obtain the degree. On the contrary, the impact on the average of exam grades is less marked. Table 1 shows the attendance situation and the impact on results in all the Italian postgraduate degrees and, specifically, on degrees in socio-political disciplines. In this type of degree course, where the number of working students is greater, a significant worsening of their results can be observed, with an average final degree 3 or more points lower than the full-time students', and an average delay of a year in the completion of studies.

Table 1: Working and full-time students' performances²

| Indicator | All subjects master's degrees | | Socio-political master's degrees | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Working students | Full-time students | Working students | Full-time students |
| Quota of attending students | 44,0% | 83,8% | 29,6% | 75,4% |
| Average exams grade | 27,4 | 27,9 | 27,4 | 28,2 |
| Average final grade | 107,2 | 109,3 | 106,3 | 109,6 |
| Average time to degree | 2,7 years | 2,5 years | 3,0 years | 2,5 years |

Apart from the implications in terms of results, which weigh upon the students' preparation in a direct way, low attendance influences the quality of university education. An aspect to highlight is, for instance, the disincentive for teachers to carefully prepare their lectures when only a few students make use of this service. On the other hand, a smaller presence of students in the faculty can have a positive effect on the (few) students who do attend, as they can benefit from a more direct contact with the teachers and a better upkeep and better use of the facilities.

¹ Started in 1994 as an initiative of the Osservatorio Statistico dell'Università di Bologna (Statistics Observatory of the University of Bologna), AlmaLaurea has grown dramatically, now surveying 65% of the Italian graduates. AlmaLaurea is a database that operates with the aim of favouring the entrance of graduates in the job market, collecting data on all the graduates from the member universities.

² The exam grade is expressed in 30/30. The top final grade is 110/110, if appropriate the "cum laude" can be added. The methodology used by Alma Laurea considers the grade 110 cum laude as 113. The official time of completion for postgraduate degree courses is 2 years.

The consequences of low attendance are therefore many and different, and they can be summarized in table 2 according to their positive and negative effects on university system.

Table 2: Positive and negative effects of absenteeism at university

| POSITIVE EFFECTS | NEGATIVE EFFECTS |
|---|---|
| Teachers can dedicate more time to research obtaining more funds by applying for grants The facilities and the equipment are used less Attending students can always fit in the classrooms and find space in the common areas and in the parking lots Smaller queues in the offices and other facilities (administrative office, libraries, etc.) Positive feedback from the attending students More direct relationship with the teachers, both during lectures and time made available to students to speak with lecturers | Lower grades in exams Lower final grades Longer time to complete the degree Disincentive for the teachers in having fewer students |

STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE AND ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT

Italian universities, especially after the reform on public funding to universities in 2007, have a strong interest in their students getting good grades, since there is a link between the students' performance and the funding the university receives from the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione (Department for Education). From this point of view, the students' choice not to attend classes has also an economic relevance for universities.

Indeed, the criteria given by the ministerial decree DM 246/2007 for the allocation of Funding (Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario), that is to say the main source of funds for public universities³, take into consideration three dimensions of performance: research quality, number of students enrolled and didactic results. For the evaluation of didactic results, the number of credits obtained by the students is considered. As it has been pointed out before, greater attendance results in greater performance. Moreover, the quality indicators determine the allocation of another funding quota to the most deserving universities⁴ (decree DM 45/2009). In 2009, the total amount of this quota was 525 million euros, anything but an irrelevant figure for universities' budgets.

Therefore, it is clear how the maintenance of high quality level of curriculum, which can be quantified through the students' performance and their ability to complete the degree in time, represents for public universities the way to obtain greater funds and improve further their offerings.

³ The 'Fondo per il Finanziamento Ordinario delle Università' was established by art. 5 of Law 537/93. It is made of two parts: a "basic quota", attributed automatically to Universities, and a "rebalancing quota" that, on the contrary, is assigned according to quantitative parameters.

⁴ Indeed, 7% of the Funding is put aside and distributed as a bonus to the Italian universities that have obtained the best evaluation in terms of curriculum and their research.

Low attendance, which, as we have seen, has a negative effect on students' performance and on the evaluation indexes of the quality of the services offered by universities, weighs upon the funds obtained by the universities as well. The impact of low attendance on research results can be more controversial, as it can be assumed that the teachers of courses attended by a small number of students may be induced to decrease their commitment towards teaching and consequently invest more time and effort in research.

Nevertheless, a vicious cycle can be identified: the students' absenteeism results in poor performance, and consequently in lower curriculum quality indicators, which will determine a smaller number of income to be spent on resources for the university. On the other hand, a university with poor economic resources will hardly be able to guarantee a high quality of curriculum and research, which will lead to a constant worsening of its educational services and its ability to form professionals and managers sufficiently qualified to step successfully into the job market.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Background

In some Italian universities we have noticed a reduction of students regularly attending courses (ISTAT, 2007). This situation, which affects the national high-education system, is more evident in some educational fields. The number of students attending regularly is definitely higher in courses for degrees in technical and scientific disciplines as compared to other disciplines as Economics, Political and Social Sciences, Law and Humanities (Alma Laurea, 2009). Such differences can be clearly seen in table 3, which shows attendance to courses of postgraduate degrees in different disciplines. This phenomenon concerns private universities as well, where there is often a minimum compulsory level of attendance, which does not seem to discourage the students' tendency towards absenteeism (LUISS, 2007).

Table 3: Attendance in postgraduate degrees of different courses

| Subject | Level of students' attendance (% of classes attended) | | |
|-----------------------------|--|--------|---------------|
| | More than 75% | 50-75% | Less than 50% |
| Medicine | 92,7% | 3,4% | 3,9% |
| Engineering | 89,1% | 7,3% | 3,6% |
| Natural Sciences | 84,1% | 8,1% | 7,8% |
| Agricultural Sciences | 78,2% | 11,2% | 10,6% |
| Economics | 76,3% | 14,7% | 9,0% |
| Arts | 67,5% | 18,6% | 13,9% |
| Socio-Political Sciences | 61,3% | 20,6% | 18,1% |
| Law | 53,7% | 26,4% | 19,9% |

Elaboration on data from the Alma Laurea database www.almalaurea.it

Case study

In the academic year 2008/2009, the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Tuscia (Facoltà di Scienze Politiche dell'Università della Tuscia) has extended its educational offerings by introducing the postgraduate degree in "Public communication, enterprise and advertising" ("Comunicazione pubblica, d'impresa e pubblicità "). This new degree is geared

to the graduates in "Sciences of communication" ("Scienze della comunicazione") and "Sciences of public administration" ("Scienze della pubblica amministrazione"), and it aims to educate managers for public administration and private enterprise, with a particular focus on the area of communication.

Despite a good number of students enrolled (140), attendance at lectures appeared very low from the very beginning, with half-empty classrooms and the number of attending students rarely above 20-25. Such a situation triggered a study with the aim of understanding the reasons of a phenomenon that appears to be much more relevant to this discipline as compared to the other faculties of the university or to other postgraduate degrees in socio-political sciences.

In order to analyze the students' tendency towards absenteeism in the Faculty of Political Sciences of Viterbo, a survey was carried out. All the students enrolled were involved by verifying their attendance at lectures and by investigating their reasons not to attend.

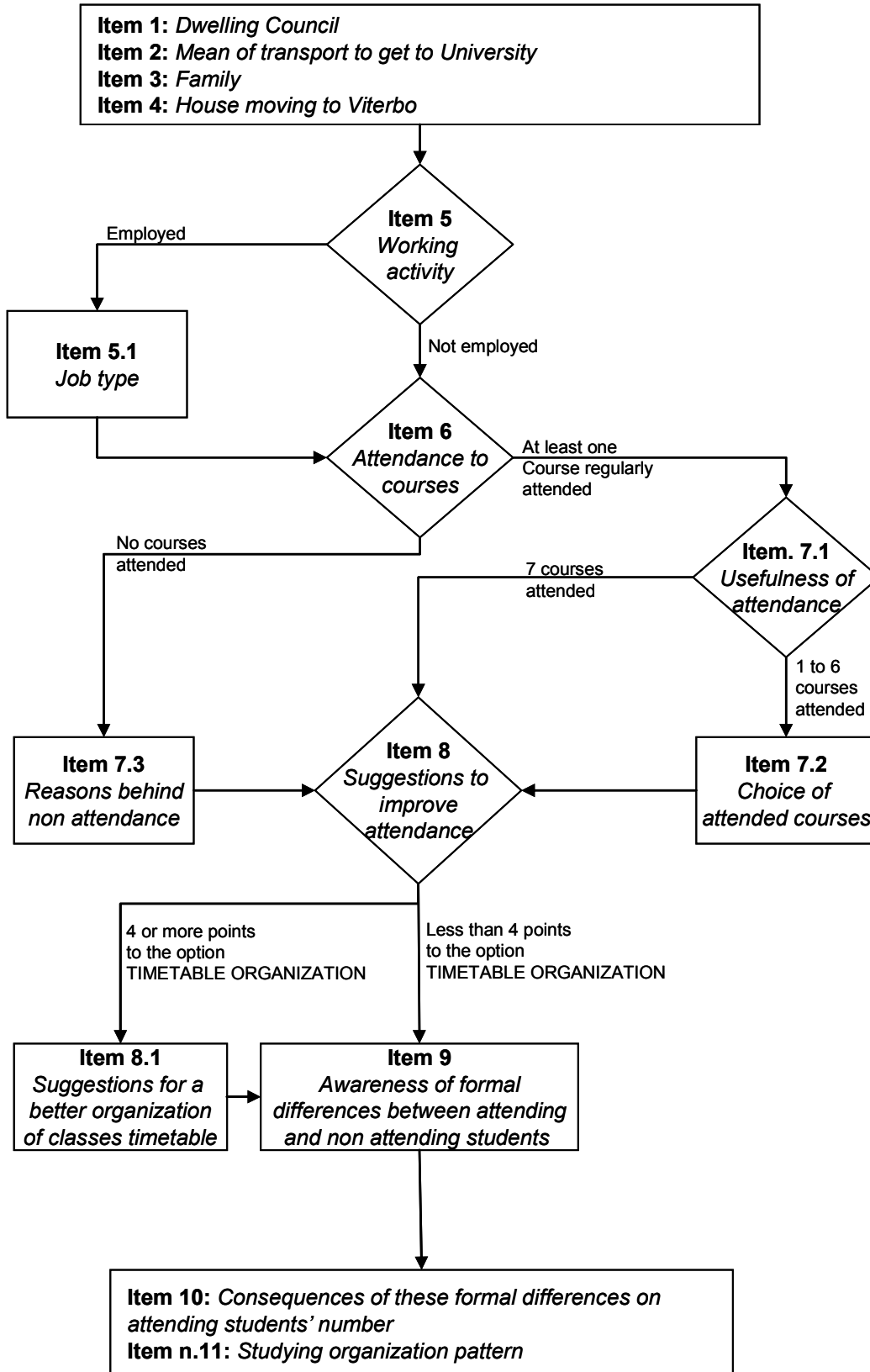
Structure of the questionnaire

The survey was carried out by directly interviewing the students. The questionnaire used in the survey was structured into 4 sections (Migliardi, 2008):

- 1) student data (questions 1 to 5);
- 2) courses attended (questions 6 and 7.1);
- 3) reasons not to attend and advice to increase the participation of students to lectures
- 4) (questions 7.2, 7.3, 8, 8.1);
- 5) approach to study (questions 9 to 12).

The questionnaire includes some secondary questions, which are asked of the interviewee in relation to their previous answers. In particular, it was presumed that different information would be collected from attending and non-attending students through a different set of questions (Cicatiello et al., 2009). Figure 1 shows the flow chart that represents the questionnaire structure. In order to overcome the practical difficulties derived from such a complex structure, the questionnaire was converted into a Microsoft Excel version that streamlined the job of the interviewers, by showing the correct sequence of questions and by transferring the data into the answer database. The investigation involved the entire population of students enrolled in the postgraduate degree course in the academic year 2008/09. The interviews, based on the questionnaire just described, were carried out in person or over the phone (Groves, 1984) in October 2009. Before proceeding with the processing of the answers, the reliability of the data collected was verified through an accurate check that also included the comparison between the attendance at the courses indicated in the curriculum of the postgraduate degree as declared by the students, and the number of teaching evaluation questionnaires filled in by the same students during the courses. This check, despite the inevitable gaps due to the specific moment of survey in the classroom, highlighted a high reliability of the answers to the questionnaire. Indeed, the difference between the total number of students who declared having attended lectures and the number of questionnaires filled out in class amounted to 2% and the correlation coefficient between the two data sets showed a value of 0,88.

Figure 1: Flowchart of the questionnaire structure



Processing of the answers

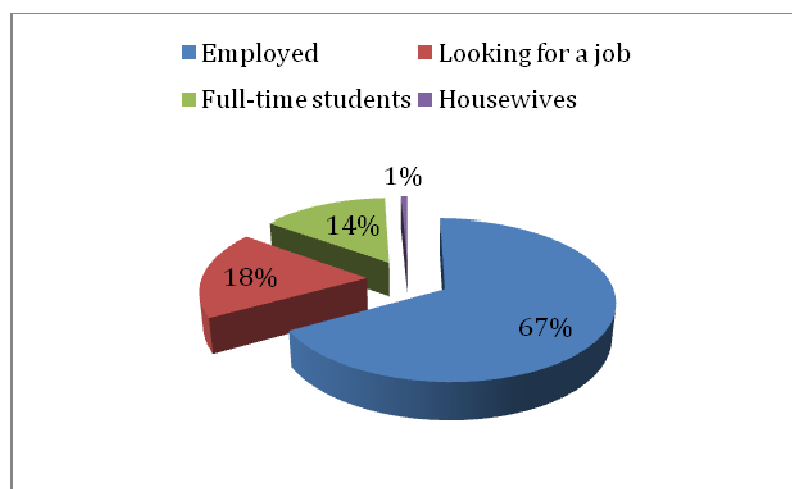
The first data processing involved the descriptive analysis of the population investigated. Out of the 140 students enrolled, 85 are women and 55 men. The students represent different age groups: young people under 25 represent only 42% of enrollments, against respectively 26% and 32% of the so-called "intermediate" and "mature", which represent respectively students between 26 and 30 years old and those over 30. Therefore, there is a majority (58%) of the student population that enrolls in the first year of the postgraduate degree course at a more advanced age than it would be expected under normal conditions.

The students' area of origin is represented mainly by the town of Viterbo (41 students) and its province (65 students). Only a little more than 34 enrolled students come from other provinces and regions, and just 8% of them moved their residence to Viterbo in order to get closer to the university campus.

During the survey, it was found that 7 out of the 140 enrolled students had withdrawn from the course; these students were excluded from the data processing, which therefore makes reference to a total of 133 cases.

The analysis of the working condition of the enrolled students revealed the presence of a remarkable group of working students: the employed are 89 out of 133, which equals 67% of the population (in the following analyses, the only housewife was included among the employed); out of these, 55 have a fixed-term job and 34 a short-term job. Only 14% of the students declare to dedicate themselves to full-time university study.

Figure 2: Students' working condition



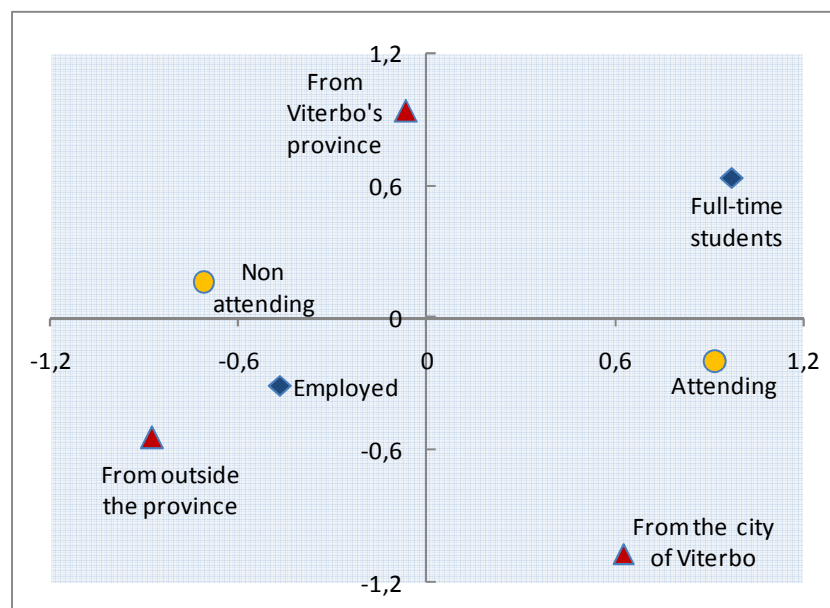
Data processing concerning attendance to lectures clearly confirmed the impression of a low attendance at courses. The "total number of attending students", that is to say, the students who attended all the 7 courses scheduled for the first year of the postgraduate degree course, are only 8 out of 133, which equals just 6% of the students enrolled. The number of attending students rises to 38% only if we consider also the students who attended quite regularly 2 to 6 courses. Consequently, attendance is remarkably lower as compared to the national average for the degree courses in the same discipline areas, which, as previously stated, is above 60%.

For the rest of the analysis, to make the data processing easier, we considered "attending" the students who declared attending regularly the classes of at least two courses, "non-attending" the others. In order to better identify the characteristics of the students belonging

to the two groups, their condition (attending/non-attending) was correlated with other variables, amongst which the place of residence and the working conditions. All this in order to verify the existence of a link between these different aspects that can explain, at least partially, the choice of attending or not attending the courses. At a methodological level, for each pair of variables, an independence test was carried out (Bishop et al., 1975); once the significant dependence between the three variables was verified, a correspondences analysis was performed on the three variables considered, by using a specific statistical software (Wilkinson, 1990). The correspondences analysis allows the identification of the dimensions which lay beneath the structure of the data (the so-called "factors") that summarize the interdependence between the original variables. The result can be effectively expressed by means of a bi-dimensional graphic representation (represented by the first two factors) in order to visualize the closeness, and therefore the connection, between different characteristics in the observations (Greenacre, 1993).

In Figure 3, the first two factors make up 62% of the relationship between the three variables taken into consideration: attendance to lectures, employment conditions and residence. A correlation between the categories of 'non-attending', 'employed' and 'from outside the province' was highlighted. This allows us to affirm that the non-attending students are mainly students who work and reside outside the province of Viterbo. On the contrary, the relationship between attending students, full-time students and residents in Viterbo appears to be weaker exactly because the points that represent these categories on the plan of factors are more distant.

Figure 3: Relationship between residence, attendance and employment conditions



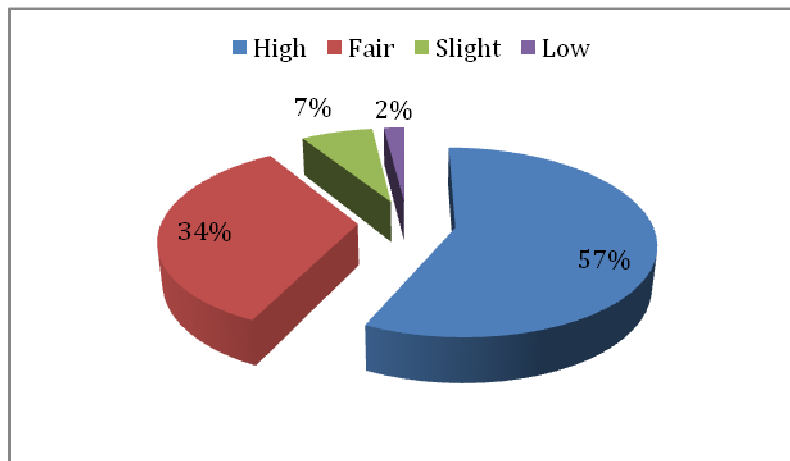
Taking into consideration only the two variables of work and attendance, where the first two factors explain 100% of variability, the same type of association is confirmed: stronger between employed and non-attending, less strong between attending students and full-timers. In other words, it was found that usually workers are not able to attend classes, whereas full-time students do not show an equal commitment to attendance. Therefore, work is not the only cause of absenteeism. Contrary to what we would expect, there is not a significant relation between attendance to classes and a students' age. Consequently, the group of students present in class shows a great variety in age, with interests that can be

very different. Nor is there a relationship between attendance and study preparation. Students, independently from what they do and the way they experience university as attending or non-attending students, plan their study time according to their personal attitudes.

Reasons for attendance and non-attendance

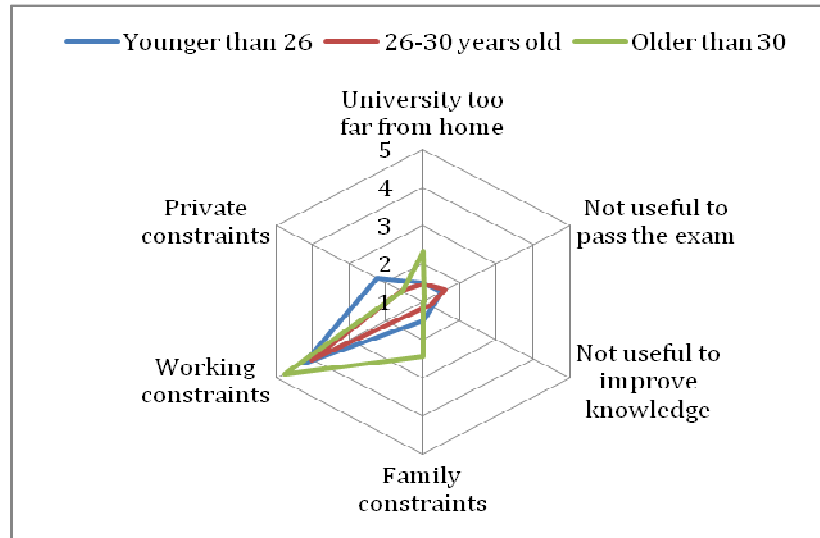
Students who attended only some of the scheduled course were asked what determined their choice. The answers identified as main reasons were the usefulness of attendance in order to pass the exam, and the compatibility of the lecture timetable with their work. The personal interest in the subject weighs quite remarkably, whereas the teacher's skills, the peculiarity of the subject and other individual reasons appear less important. The students were asked to express their opinion on the usefulness of participating in class. The distribution of the answers is shown in Figure 4, which highlights how students believe that attending courses is very useful. Indeed, students express the same positive opinion in the curriculum evaluation questionnaire they fill in during the course (Tanes et al., 2003). Therefore, all the mechanisms to increase attendance that is in anyway considered useful should be implemented.

Figure 4: Usefulness of attendance in the opinion of attending students



Students who did not attend any course were asked to identify the reasons for such a choice. Consistently with the results described above, work scored very highly, both for young people and adults. On the contrary, the possible distance from the university campus does not seem to be perceived as a significant obstacle. There are also differences between students of different age groups, which are shown in Figure 5, in which the average importance given by non-attending students to possible reasons for absenteeism is represented.

Figure 5: Justification of non attendance for students of different ages



Proposals to increase attendance

The analysis of the students' feedback on how to increase attendance indicates the need for a different lecture plan as a priority. Non-attending students in particular ask for a change of the timetable, while all students agree fundamentally on a greater number of workshop and courses with more practical aims. On the contrary, signing in and out of classes, in order to prove attendance, is not considered a useful tool. Contrary to expectations, it is the non-attending students who consider working in groups as more apt to building up a "faculty spirit" which can foster a greater participation to classes, while the attending students care more about the coordination between courses. The proposals regarding changes to the lecture schedule, as gathered by the students who consider useful a different lecture plan, highlight the demand for more afternoon classes (a good 40% of proposals prefer such an option) and classes concentrated in three days (an option which reaches almost 30%). The 20% of proposals demanding classes on Saturdays appears remarkable and perhaps unexpected. Such data, read together with the profiles of the student population, shows a significant presence or very active students who, even if not regularly attending due to real hindrances, experience life at university as a pleasure and a commitment, therefore taking into consideration the idea of dedicating part of the weekend to it. One last aspect analyzed in the questionnaire concerned the students' proposals in order to increase attendance. 57 proposals were collected, a significant number which represents 43% of the enrolled students. It confirms the active participation of the students in the survey, as they showed great collaboration and interest in the topic. The different answers were grouped into four categories.

A remarkable number of proposals involve a greater link between types of courses and the job market, and the implementation of mid-term exams for the attending students. Some students ask for more transparency on the different kinds of final exams for attending and non-attending students. This is due to the fact that attending students believe to be penalized with more work, as compared to non-attending students. Among the other proposals, there are some particular requests such as the introduction of a crèche at the university, for the students with children of pre-school age; the creation of a common room in which teachers and students could meet in an informal setting; and more interactive classes to allow students to participate more.

In order to improve students' participation to university life some of these proposals could be taken into account, trying thus to align the postgraduate degree in Political Sciences to other courses in order to minimize the absenteeism. This would improve the students' performances and the overall curriculum quality, preparing them to enter the job market and to be more satisfied towards the services offered by their University. The consequent improvement of the curriculum quality would cause a virtuous cycle in which the University could benefit of a greater funding, which in turn would further improve the services offered to the students.

To promote such a plan of action it seems more and more important since the University of Tuscia was rewarded in 2009 for the quality of its curriculum. This award is the result of the good performance of students and consists in additional fundings, which could be usefully spent to improve the facilities and the services offered. The spreading of absenteeism could prevent the University of Tuscia to repeat this success.

CONCLUSIONS

The education for managerial positions must be backed by a high-level university that is able to prepare students to their future profession. The quality of the curriculum, the performance of students and the time to complete the degree course are influenced in a negative way by the more and more widespread phenomenon of absenteeism. In Italy, in particular, the less assiduous students are those in socio-political studies, those who are supposed to become, after their postgraduate degree, the future managers of private enterprises and the public administration.

In this paper we tried to analyze this phenomenon with an empirical approach focused on the situation of a postgraduate degree of University of Tuscia where absenteeism is widespread. A survey confirmed that there is a very high number of students who do not attend courses. Results show that only 8% of students regularly attend all the lectures, while about 60% do not attend any.

This situation is still more worrying as, in postgraduate education, courses also include seminars with managers and visits to firms and public offices. Students can thus profit of relationships that connect the University with enterprises and local administrations. To attend courses entails participating to these activities, which can easily be considered one of the most important parts of the education. Moreover, this "informal" part of the management education, instead of formal classes, is more difficult to be replaced with individual study.

Course attendance can also allow students to get in touch with firms to plan internships during their study period. This has something to do with the complex link between management education and management practice we have mentioned in the introduction. We think that internships can be a great opportunity for students to define their interests, thus identifying the economic field that better fits their managerial skills. In such a way management education can affect positively management practice.

In the discussion we have already highlighted the main reasons of absenteeism for our case study. A significant cause is the high percentage of working students, although full-timers often miss lectures too. Nevertheless, students who attended the classes agree in defining them as useful, both in order to pass the exam and as a personal experience. Those who do not attend, on the contrary, indicate their work and family as real obstacles to attendance. According to many of them, attendance could be increased dramatically with a different lecture schedule, in order to be more compatible with working hours.

However, a certain caution must be used when drawing generalizations from the results of this study. First of all, we analyzed a situation which is typical of the Italian education system. Moreover, we focused the survey and the discussion on the socio-political field of study while managers of private and public firms come also from other educational paths, such as economics and law. Given these limitations, it is however possible to plan further researches to improve some methodological issues. It would be interesting to analyze more Faculties of the same University to verify whether the situation of students' absenteeism is similar or not. The same could be done in other Italian Universities. Moreover, it is necessary to repeat the survey to monitor the evolution of absenteeism in the years in order to make the results more reliable

Finally, to test the validity of this methodological approach, it would be very interesting to plan a survey in a two-three years' time-frame interviewing the same students of this study. The objective of this further research would be to monitor their career in order to assess the relation between the quality of their education (also in terms of participation to courses) and the type of job.

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