Maximising First Year Students' Learning from University Lectures

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This paper is about the challenges of *getting students to lectures – and maximising their learning from these*

Background – Dropping Lecture Attendance

- The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (ACER 2008) reveals that less than a quarter of students in Australia and New Zealand spend significant amounts of time on campus.
- In another study, although students seem to believe that attending lectures was important (Cleary-Holdforth 2007, p.1), 60% did not attend all lectures (Shannon 2006).
- Some see students have 'zero tolerance for delay' (Oblinger 2003, p.6) and minds that are on their next part-time job rather than on the 'pleasures of learning' (Ramsden 2003).
- But as attending lectures is important to students' success, it is necessary to attempt to engage students and to help them learn from lectures.

Background – Pressures of Attendance – Changing Lives of Students

▸ Eight years ago, McInnis, James & Hartley (2000) noted a trend of lower attachment, engagement and commitment by students, both to study and to the more general aspects of university life. In 2002, McInnis and Krause suggested that student identity had become a negotiated one and that students' engagement with their learning needed to be much more carefully and deliberately cultured than in the past.

▸ This trend has now deepened as many students work longer hours in paid employment and have a range of other responsibilities such as caring for families – all factors that cut across intentions to attend lectures

• It is clear then that our students' lives and their preparation for tertiary study have changed (Dobson, Sharma & Haydon 1997; James, McInnis & Devlin 2002; Oblinger 2003; Porter & Swing 2006; Mason Webber, Singleton & Hughes 2006, Cameron 2008).
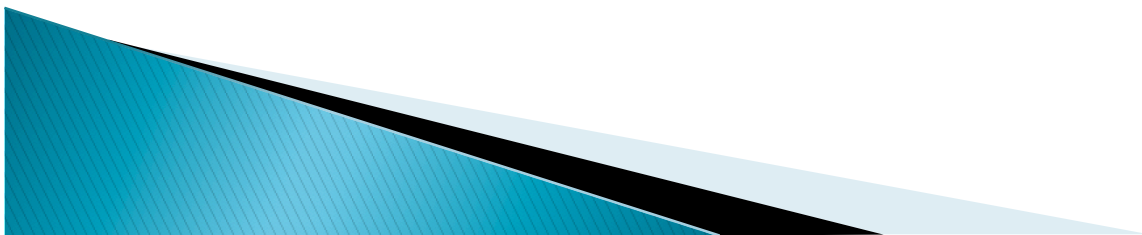
Background – Other Pressures on Attendance

- As well, firmer university guidelines stipulating common periods of assessment appear to have increased pressure on students often meaning students are absent from lectures in some or many crucial weeks. This is disheartening for both lecturers and other students in the class.

- Unfortunately, many first year students also see themselves as part of an anonymous crowd, encouraging perceptions that their attendance, or lack of it, will go unnoticed (White 2006, p. 235). Wilson & Lizzio (2008, p.2) also note 'the pervasive paradox that students often most in need of assistance do not seek it'.

- *So we can no longer take for granted that students most in need of help will attend lectures , be noticed or seek help ,*
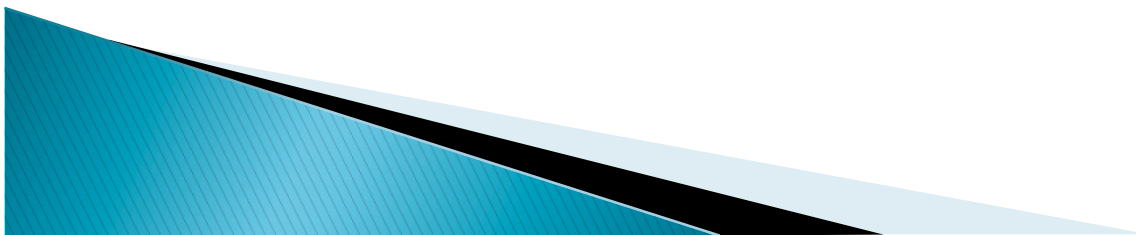
Background – Importance of Student Engagement

Engaged students make time and have energy for their studies and feel a personal commitment and sense of responsibility to do their best.

Committed and engaged students also appreciate that lectures provide invaluable sources of information about assessment as well as about wider intellectual issues.

But not all first year students have developed 'sufficient self-regulation and problem solving capacity' and this has deep implications for their academic success (Wilson & Lizzio 2008, p.1

As first year students have changed, it makes it necessary to acknowledge *both* their lack of engagement and some 'incongruence between staff and commencing students' (Wilson & Lizzio 2008, p.1) .
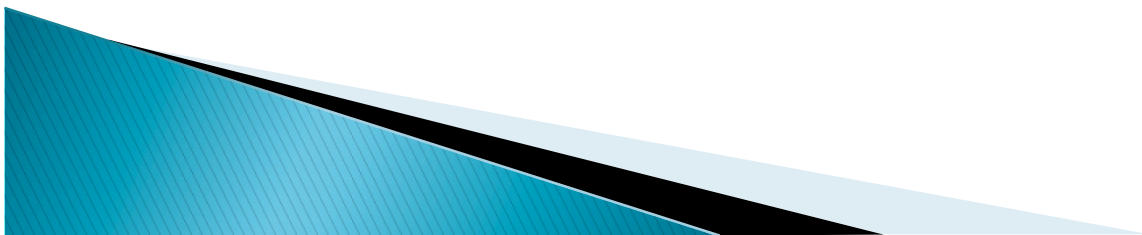
Background - IT Enhancement of lectures

- Academics often now use a range of additional processes to **supplement information** given in lectures such as online PowerPoint slides and U-tube and DVD **to illustrate and entertain** . As well, delivery via podcast or streaming may be offered to **maximise students' access** to the lecture. Perversely these may be seen as **causing drops in actual attendance.**

- Phillips, Gosper, McNeill, Woo, Preston & Green (2007) however, offer a critique of rhetoric linking increased use of web based lecture techniques (WBLT) and students' lower attendance. They suggest that availability of WBLT is only a minor factor in students' lower attendance and instead note their '**changing lifestyles**, their **attitudes to learning** and their **perceptions of the teaching they encounter** as more influential.
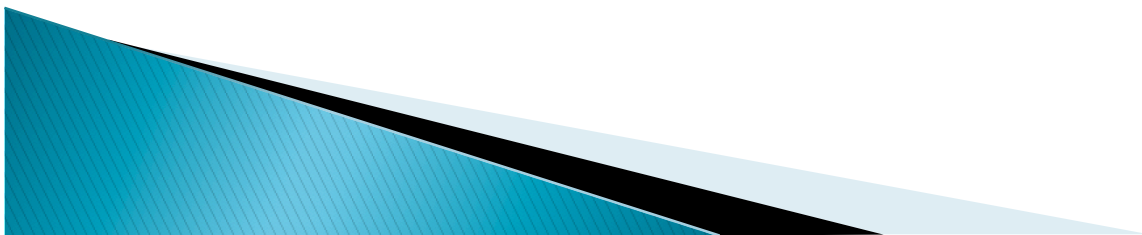
# The Study – What Impacts on Students' Lecture Attendance?

Sampling

- The student sample was gained through an email with the link to a Tell-Us online survey attached. The 180 sample comprised around 60% of the first year students and as such, is large enough for some statistically valid conclusions to be made.

Gender & Age

- There was an 8:2 female to male split – an unsurprising result in social work and other related fields. Ages ranged between 62 and 18, with the majority (65%) in the 20's, 30's & 40's & only 10% between 18/19.

Study Load

- About 67% are full time or over-enrolled. The full-time nature of study is significant in that it means added pressures at assessment points, when four or more assignments may be due within a couple of weeks of each other.
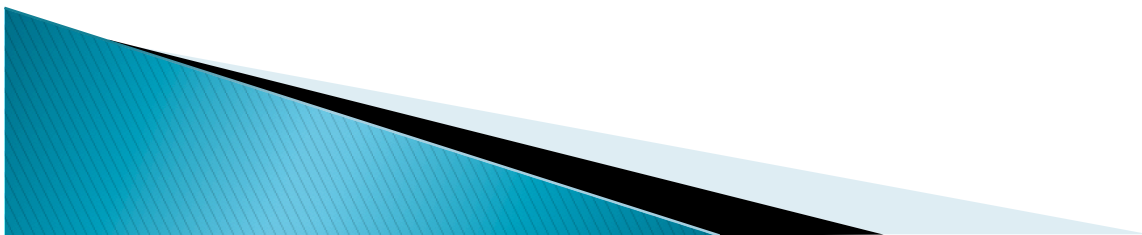
Results – Getting to Lectures

Self estimates of attendance at lectures

▸ The participants were asked to estimate *how many required lectures they attended* and around 70% said they *only missed a few* (15%) said they attended all and 12% said they 'missed about half of them. A small percentage 3%) said they missed most of them' or attended only a few. No one admitted to attending none.

Marks for attending lectures as incentive to attend

▸ Around 60% were sure they would attend anyway and/or that marks for being there would not make any difference but the 40% remainder believe receiving marks (some or a lot!) *would influence them* to attend more lectures. Many thought recording who was there would encourage attendance.
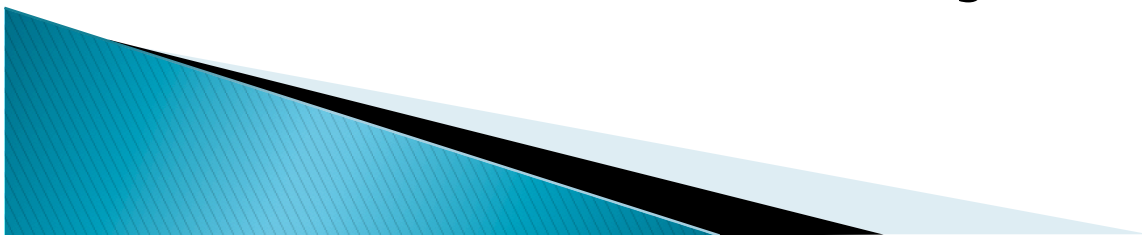
And Concentrating....

Concentrating in lectures
- In this question, 35% said they concentrate really well on what is being said *all the time **but*** 50% said they drift off *sometimes* but *mostly concentrate* quite well
- Another 8% admitted they often miss a lot & think about other unrelated things. About 7% said they often have trouble concentrating and use the time to catch up on reading, writing an essay or on phone messages.
- Only one student said 'I often go to sleep during it'.

Results cont…Slides & podcasts

Use of online slides & Podcasts

▸ Most (80%) said they make good use of slides but around 15% don't bother with them. Another 5% said don't attend if slides and/or podcasts are provided. A complaint was about lecturers not posting slides *before* a lecture. Most students have never had podcast lectures but those who have, like them.

Commentary about slides & podcasting

▸ 'Technology strengthens the learning process. …great for revision' 'The podcasts show me I haven't missed anything (as I go back over the lectures,)..love it!' 'and 'All great for international students, helps me understand the lecture'.

Results cont... Discouraging factors

Strongest themes:

▸ Pressure of assignments – especially when three or four papers were due within a week or so

▸ Negative lecturer qualities –no passion for the topic; poorly organised; unskilled with IT, boring; talking too fast, too softly, reading from slides

▸ Outside pressures – Paid work and family responsibilities; travel – coming in just one hour of lecture;.

▸ Annoying behaviour of other students – not attending; talking to each other/on mobiles during lectures & the inability/unwillingness of lecturers to manage this.

Results – What encourages attendance?

Top scoring issue: 'Lecturer's style of delivery'

'Lecturers who are really passionate about their subject and prepare well'; 'Entertaining and/or humorous lecturers who really make me think' and those who use u-tube clips, videos/DVD, and good guest speakers.

Several brought up **self-motivational issues here** – 'feeling committed', 'wanting to learn', 'I get the most out of the course by attending the lectures and ultimately this helps me with my assignments and the exam.' These engaged students saw how using resources and attending was the first step in maximising their learning from lectures.

A considerable group however, did not attend consistently, had trouble concentrating and did not use PowerPoint slides - and so would have missed opportunities for contextualised learning.
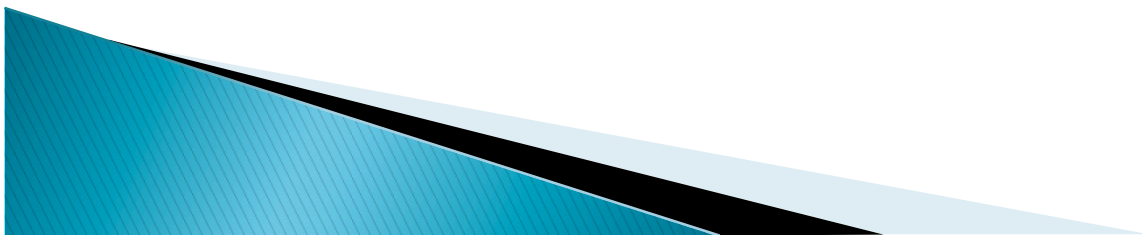
Results – final comments

Some final commentary

- A final the chance to comment again focused on **qualities of the lecturer** – some to say lectures were great when lecturers inspired and uplifted them and had passion for their topic.

- **Some volunteered suggestions** for **raising lecture attendance** by **marking a roll** of those present

- Most see **due dates for assignment** as big squeeze-points, justifying not showing up at lectures. That most participants in this study are full-time students points to the pressured nature of their study.

Blocks to Learning in Lectures

There are several apparent blocks to first year students' learning from lectures and a basic one is the actual attendance problem.

▸ Many students were critical of lecturers that cannot use IT or AV processes efficiently and who fumble about in trying to load or activate these, and saw this discouraged attendance.

▸ They like online *PowerPoint* notes provided in advance as they say this enabled them to listen rather than trying to write down everything – or to not attend at all.

▸ But *self motivated students* attend consistently, make good use of resource and can concentrate well – not the ones many (Wilson & Lizzio 2008, Porter & Swing 2006; or Mason et al 2006) are concerned about.

Blocks to Learning in Lectures

▸ **It is apparent that many first year students lack self-efficacy** (Bandura 1993), believing that **life blocks their attendance** at lectures and that their **concentration falters** because lecturers do not entertain or inspire them.

▸ Some students **attend sporadically**, if at all and appear not to appreciate **how to use slides or other resources** to facilitate learning during lectures, students that Wilson & Lizzio (2008, p.2) say are 'most in need of assistance' and **require targeted intervention.**
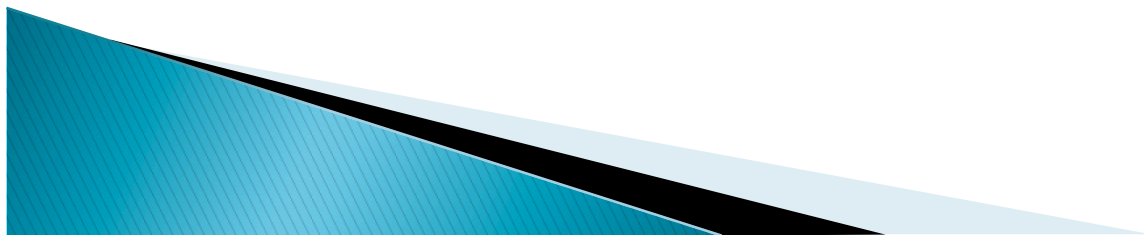
Ways to maximise commencing students' learning from lectures

- *PowerPoint* **slides used well by the lecturer** add structure and focus to a lecture & provide learning hooks.
- **Links between lecture material, assessment activities and tutorials need to be made explicit** to maximise students' learning. Contextual links between lectures, assessment, grading and feedback provides an aligned foundation of students' understanding without which any 'assessment becomes merely a postscript for learning and teaching' (Orrell 2006, p. 441).
- **In lectures, when assessment activities are linked to content points and to related marking criteria students are clearer about these.** Tutorials, usually well attended and seen by students to provide key sources of academic support (Cameron 2008), need to be clearly linked to lectures so these both relate consistently to assessment activities.

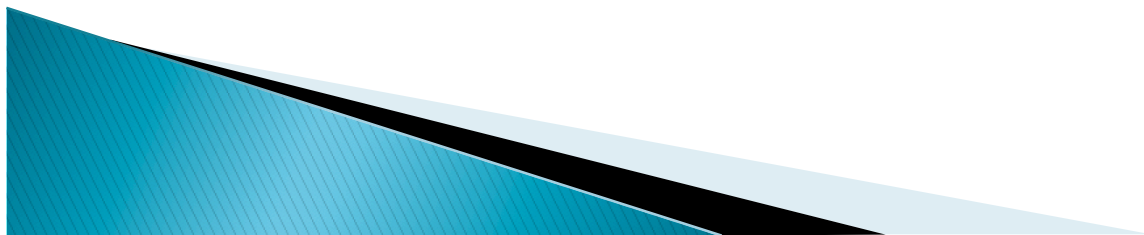# Ways to maximise commencing students' learning from lectures

- *Fostering engaged learning* in lectures includes talking about this as a concept and how it operates in students' lives.

- It may include practical things like demonstrating to first year students **how to make use of online** *PowerPoint* **slides,** how to download and print these in ways that provide room for note taking to maximise more active learning in the lecture and why this matters in terms of their academic results.

- As well, it is important **to discuss self-efficacy** and how becoming an engaged and responsible learner operates beneficially in students' lives.

Ways to maximise commencing students' learning from lectures

Using TurningPoint and **individual clickers** to **quiz students on lecture content issues**, allowing answers to be followed up both *during the lecture* and *by tutors in tutorials.*

Clicker technology used well can better involve students by highlighting **key learning points** from the lecture, relating these to **assessment tasks** and **breaking up the lecture to assist their concentration.**

Clicker technology, as well as **encouraging learning and keeping students better focused**, can also be used to **record who is present at the lecture** and consistently used, this **may encourage better student attendance.**

Ways to maximise commencing students' learning from lectures

- *Finally, Training in presentation skills* for lecturers, in how to speak clearly and with energy and how to use IT processes, is essential. The most consistent student comment underlines the appreciation of lecturers who have energetic delivery, passion for the topic, good organisation and effective use of IT & AV processes.

- Workshops with other more skilled lecturers or specialists in IT and AV processes, can provide opportunities to share techniques and develop teaching excellence. Many lecturers have had little training in public speaking or in using IT procedures and so just keep doing the same ineffective things. *Greater investment in the skills of the lecturer in this range of areas is clearly indicated.*

Summary

‣ This paper culminated in some suggestions for maximising students' learning from lectures.

‣ It is apparent that students expect academic staff to present their lectures with passion, creativity and IT savvy even though many lecturers lack specific training in these areas. Students also need to be actively encouraged to become engaged and responsible learners with self-efficacy.

‣ A range of unique pressures within modern universities, combined with first year students' diverse needs, will continue to place demands on academic staff. Orrell (2006, p.454) points out that 'Institutional procedures and practices are required to support constructive, non-defensive teaching reform and collaborative action by teaching groups' and this is central to supporting the engagement of first year students, especially where the battle for space in their lives means many do not prioritise lecture attendance as a key feature of their learning.

Thanks for listening: Helen