

Motivation or Demotivation: Botswana and Nigerian Higher Institutions' Attendance Policies and Academic Literacy Students' Perceptions in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Received: March 10, 2026

Accepted: April 30, 2026

Online Published: May 8, 2026

doi:10.11114/jets.v14i3.8790

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v14i3.8790>

Abstract

Policies are sometimes made in the education sector. At higher institutions of learning, students' attendance policies differ. Most departments leverage the university policy on attendance to promote students' learning. Understanding the peculiarity of a period is crucial in adhering to the policy made, which most stakeholders in higher institutions consider while promoting standards and quality. Since the attendance policy in the university could affect the performance of academic literacy students, this paper focuses on the attendance policies in two institutions to identify the key regulations in the attendance policies, investigate the impact of the policies on students' intrinsic motivation, and assemble insights on attendance policies' modifications to improve students' academic success. A qualitative approach, through open questionnaires, was utilized to collect data from 200 students in two institutions. The open questionnaire elicited significant and relevant data for implementing, assessing, and reviewing the student attendance policies for academic literacy courses. The study observes that the attendance policy could motivate and demotivate students in academic literacy courses, and attention should be paid to intervening factors highlighted in the paper. Additionally, the findings indicate that students' attendance policies significantly influence academic performance, and recommendations are made for attendance policies for literacy courses at African higher institutions due to peculiar challenges.

Keywords: assessment, policy, academic literacy, class attendance

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

After the period of educational disruption and damage due to COVID-19, most institutions have normalized blended learning as the ideal and most preferred at higher education level, albeit accompanied by inherent difficulties and challenges (Wang, et al., 2023; Yin, 2022). The process of resolving the challenges brought by COVID-19 has led to policy adjustments that would advance education beyond pandemic limits. Most learners are adjusting to the dictates of the post-COVID-19 period, and they no longer consider navigating the modes as a critical issue in higher education. However, one of the gains of the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector is the opportunity it provides to modify and review teaching and learning policies to address emerging demands (Yin, 2022).

Absenteeism is a common occurrence among learners in both online and in-person formats of course delivery (Wally-Dima et al., 2020). For a long and diverse period, measures have been used to curb this trend among adult learners, especially in the conventional ways of signing attendance lists. With online learning, digital tracking of students' attendance becomes accessible and easy. Both ways of tracking learners' attendance have been brought to question their usefulness and connection with students' engagement, course outcomes and academic performance (Ancheta et al., 2021; Lorrie, 2023). Aside from this, understanding of presentism as an indication of motivation is equally crucial in academic discourse, and the insights are best derived from learners who are expected to attend courses or classes as and when due (Macfarlane, 2014).

In higher institutions of learning, academic literacy courses are crosscutting and non-departmental courses for students, and the impact of absenteeism irrespective of the attendance policy in place is felt more strongly in these courses. Hence, attendance policymakers must know whether they are achieving positive results through the policies. This may be linked to students' performance by analysing their perceptions of class attendance policies in Nigeria and Botswana.

1.2 Motivation

Students tend to engage in learning within and beyond lectures when they are motivated, which is why it is critical to learning and academic success (Francis, 2018). Student engagement is interwoven with motivation. The fact that motivation is linked to the constructive element of instruction evidenced through guidance, inspiration and maintenance to accomplish learning reinforcement (Tran, 2019) could explain why engagement in learning varies from one learner to another.

Intrinsic motivation, motivation to learn, motivation to transfer, expectancy motivation and task values are five relevant types of motivation in learning (Bauer, et al., 2016), while elements of motivation are value, self-efficacy and effectiveness (Tran, 2019). This study considers the motivation types and elements relevant to the current concerns on the use of attendance policies in higher education. On this premise, self-determination theory (SDT) is the chosen theoretical framework for this study to connect the influence of attendance policies on learners' willingness to engage in learning activities and provide individual internalised motivation (Menard et al., 2017). Without self-determination, which posits that students learn more effectively when they experience autonomy and a sense of connection to their learning environment, learners could still beat any attendance policy to achieve presenteeism without any meaningful engagement.

Self-determination theory is the brainwork of Ryan and Deci (2000) in the field of psychology, with a perception that humans have natural tendencies to develop through social nutrients (competence, relatedness and autonomy) and support (Prentice et al., 2019). This paper points to a nuanced but evident relationship between motivation and attendance at higher institutions of learning, as there is need to understand whether attendance policies, in any way, support learners to engage in activities that promote and sustain learning at the higher institutions of learning. The motivational elements that influence students' attendance habits are both internal and external. Considering the current trend toward more digital forms of education, attendance policies are studied, in an empirical manner, to demonstrate whether they motivate or demotivate learners in active learning while attending classes (virtual and physical).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Attendance policies are made to ensure learners participate in activities that assure academic success. Yet, the academic success of students of academic literacy courses means a lot more than having good or excellent grades because they are skills-based courses. Considering that knowledge acquisition and engagement go beyond lectures, there is need for scholarly attention to investigate how attendance policies are implemented in institutions of higher learning towards motivating learners in courses. It is noted that existing studies have examined attendance and motivation in education, focusing on attendance policies for first-year students (Lorrie, 2023); the effects of class attendance on academic performance (Ancheta et al., 2021; Rahm et al., 2017); attendance policy, instructor communication and students attendance (Snyder & Frank, 2016); and the surveillance of learning through attendance policies (Macfarlane, 2013). In contrast, key studies on motivation, have explored the effects of flipped classrooms and learning motivation (Zheng et al., 2020), the effect of e-learning cases on student motivation during COVID-19 (Rahm et al., 2021), and second language learner motivation and knowledge acquisition (Akinkulore, 2013). These studies did not highlight whether elements of motivation are within the operationalization of the attendance policies of the selected institutions in Nigeria and Botswana. Hence, this study will fill the observed gap.

1.4 Objectives

The central question of this research is "Do attendance policies in higher institutions in Nigeria and Botswana demotivate or motivate academic literacy students in the Post COVID-19 era?" On this premise, three specific objectives are identified. They are to:

- identify key regulations in the attendance policies in Botswana and Nigeria's higher institutions.
- investigate the impact of the policies on students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in academic literacy courses.
- assemble insights on attendance policies' modifications to improve students' academic success.

1.5 Hypothesis

To guide this study, a null hypothesis is generated on the key variables thus:

H₀: There is no relationship between students' attendance policies, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in learning among students in the universities.

2. Literature Review

Attendance policy has been a practice in most institutions of higher learning the world over (Ugwuja, & Onu, 2018). Many universities maintain that regular attendance promotes discipline, interaction, and sustained learning, even in contexts where attendance is not compulsory. However, this assumption has increasingly been questioned as learning environments diversify and the access to digital resources expands. Consequently, scholarly attention has shifted from measuring attendance–performance correlations to examining how students perceive attendance policies and their impact on academic performance.

Liugen et al. (2019) examined the effects of attendance policy stringency on student attendance and course grades in both face-to-face (F2F) and online undergraduate courses. Drawing on data from nine courses, the study found that stricter attendance policies significantly increased student attendance, while absences negatively affected course grades. However, mode of course delivery did not predict attendance, participation, or academic performance. These findings suggest that moderately stringent graded attendance policies can serve as extrinsic motivators, encouraging students to attend classes regularly and take greater responsibility for their academic outcomes.

Comparative studies of online and face-to-face learning reveal mixed evidence regarding the role of attendance in academic performance. Shachar and Neumann's (2010) meta-analysis of studies among university students in America indicates that out of 70% of the cases studied, students taking courses by online education outperformed students in traditionally instructed courses (F2F lectures). In contrast, Bernard et al. (2004) reported stronger performance among students in traditional classrooms. These contrasting findings suggest that physical attendance alone may not determine learning outcomes, particularly where students can access course materials online and perform well despite being absent from class (Ancheta et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence on the relationship between attendance and academic performance remains mixed. Several studies conducted in traditional face-to-face learning contexts report a positive correlation between regular attendance and higher academic achievement (Ajiboye & Tellar, 2006; Al Duray et al., 2022). For example, Ajiboye and Tellar's (2006) study at the University of Botswana demonstrated that students with high attendance consistently outperformed those with poor attendance. Such findings are often used to justify graded or mandatory attendance policies, reinforcing the view that physical presence supports student wellbeing, as persistent absence may signal academic or mental health challenges (Macfarlane, 2013; Sahin, 2023). In contrast, Adegoke et al. (2013) reported a weak relationship between attendance and academic performance, finding no significant difference between regular and irregular attendees, as students with poor attendance due to health, employment, learning attitudes, and social factors can still perform highly. Thus, they suggest that attendance policies may function as extrinsic motivators, encouraging students to channel their energies towards knowledge acquisition.

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled a rapid shift to online learning, prompting studies on its impact on students' academic performance. Findings are mixed: while some students reported positive attitudes toward digital technologies, others experienced negative effects. Qutishat et al. (2022) found that although online learning was generally successful, class attendance did not correlate with performance due to challenges such as poor internet connectivity, financial constraints, power outages, limited digital skills and environmental factors. Boubou and Job (2021) found that although e-learning has the potential to enhance teaching and learning in Nigeria's higher education sector, students' academic performance is hindered by these technological challenges. In contrast, Adeyeye et al. (2022) reported that the use of platforms such as Zoom and Moodle positively influenced students' academic achievement in practical courses, particularly where students had prior familiarity with these technologies.

In summary, the related literature reviewed above shows that there are mixed findings on students' perceptions of stringent academic policies and their impacts on academic performance in both traditional and online methods of learning (Shachar & Neumann, 2010). Hence, this study attempts to determine whether students are motivated by stringent attendance policies and whether these policies have a positive impact on their performance since there is a dearth of literature in both Botswana and Nigerian institutions where the study is anchored.

3. Methods

The study was designed to adopt a qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions on attendance policies. By relying on the use of an open questionnaire shared through a Google Form, two hundred students served as research participants based on 100 each from Nigeria and Botswana. This constituted the sample size for the study. The qualitative data were described using simple frequencies and thematic analysis. The data were filtered to exclude irrelevant ideas and responses mentioned by fewer participants, which were considered less significant. However, only those identified by at least two respondents were retained for analysis.

All participants were duly informed of their rights and the aim of the study with strong assurance of confidentiality and total commitment to anonymity and voluntary participation of students, without any offence. The participants were students who had completed a course in academic literacy, and they were randomly selected. Ethical clearance was sought with a promise of communicating the published report with the participating institutions for the benefit of practice and policy modifications. All research subjects received an appreciation note at the end of the study.

4. Results

The tables illustrate an overview of three different perspectives of attendance regulation policies in the teaching of academic literacy courses: their main policies and their effects on students' academics and how institutions can improve

Table 1. Summary Table of the key parameters of attendance policies in Academic literacy (AL) courses

S/N	Themes	No of Responses
1	Compulsory Attendance	15
2	Attendance as a Grading Component	13
3	Strict Consequences for Absenteeism	11
4	Attendance Tracking Methods	9
5	Emphasis on Punctuality	7
6	Attendance Encouraged for Academic Engagement	5
7	Flexible vs. Rigid Policies	5
8	Mandatory Minimum Attendance Threshold	4
9	Valid Reasons for Absence	4
10	Prohibition of Attendance Fraud	4
11	Attendance Communication and Policy Clarity	2
12	Institutional Oversight and Systems	2
	Total	81

In Table 1, the main regulations of attendance policies' parameters in AL courses are stated. It is apparent that the most frequently cited theme is an indication of "compulsory attendance" by 15 respondents and "attendance as a grading component" by 13 respondents. In addition, 11 students expressed "strict consequences for absenteeism" and efforts to track attendance (9 students). Other themes identified in our data include "emphasis on punctuality" (7 responses), "Attendance for academic engagement" (5 responses), "flexible vs rigid policies" (5 responses), "mandatory minimum attendance threshold" (4 responses), "valid reason for absence" (4 responses), "prohibition of attendance fraud" (4 responses), "attendance communication and policy clarity" (2 responses), and "institutional oversight and systems" (2 responses). Other responses are not relevant to the research question addressed through the instrument.

Table 2. Summary Table of the Impact of Attendance Policy on Students' Motivation to Improve Academic Performance in AL courses

S/N	Themes	No of Responses
1	Academic Improvement	64
2	Students' Motivation and Discipline	29
3	Commitment and Focus	21
4	General Policy Impact	18
5	Accessibility of Information	17
6	Consistency	16
7	Students Attitudes	12
8	Assessment	10
9	Interpersonal Interaction and Influence	6
10	Lecturer Influence / Teaching Issues	5
	Total	198

Table 2 portrays how attendance policies motivate students to improve their academic performance in AL courses. The most significant theme was "academic improvement" from 64 respondents. Other highlighted factors are "motivation and discipline" (29 respondents), "commitment and focus" (21 respondents), "accessibility of information" (17 respondents) and "consistency" (16 respondents), "students' attitudes" (12 respondents), "assessment" (10 respondents), "interpersonal interaction and influence" (6 respondents), and "lecturer influence and teaching issues" (5 respondents).

Table 3. Summary Analysis of Suggestions/Recommendations for Institutions

S/N	Themes	No of Responses
1	Strict Attendance Policies and Penalties	52
2	Attendance/Class tracking	31
3	Motivation and Rewards	17
4	Engage Learning Environment	10
5	Flexible Attendance Policies	10
6	Making Attendance Part of Grades / CA	9
7	Compulsory Attendance	8
8	Policy Awareness and Communication	6
9	Support Services	7
10	Leveraging Technology	3
	Total	153

Table 3 portrays suggestions and recommendations for improving attendance policies in higher institutions of learning. The theme with the most frequent suggestion is "strict attendance policies and penalties" from 52 respondents. "Attendance/class tracking" had 31 responses while "motivation and rewards" had 17 responses. Other recommendations are ability to "engage learning environments" (10 responses), "flexible attendance policies," (10 responses), integrating attendance into grades (10), "compulsory attendance" (8 responses), "policy awareness and communication" (6 responses) "support services" (7 responses), and "leveraging technology" (3 responses) to further motivate students.

Overall, the responses indicate a preference for a balanced approach for both control of policies and students' support to improve their engagement and academic performance in academic literacy courses.

5. Discussion

5.1 Attendance Policy

On research question 1, the document review at the public institution in Nigeria (Institution A) indicates that attendance is expected to be at 75%. Some students claim that:

- *The polytechnic has a Student Affairs Portal, which may contain information on attendance policies and other academic regulations; and*
- *RUGIPO also has a Directorate of Student Affairs, responsible for providing services for students' development outside the classroom.*

Yet, there is no strict enforcement, as departments and lecturers vary in determining how students' attendance is managed in relation to their courses. In Botswana, the attendance policy of Institution B is underemphasized, as the focus is on assessment attendance and eligibility for the final examination. The attendance statements in the students' handbooks in both institutions emphasize attendance of over 70%, but there are no strict measures of compliance and penalties. Attendance policies in the tertiary institutions have parameters as understood by participants covering a broad range of monitoring activities.

5.2 Compulsory Attendance

Participants were apt to recognize compulsory attendance as a key parameter of attendance policy in the questionnaire. Hence, they knew that they were expected to show up to each class unless there was legitimate proof of absence such as ill-health and bereavement. They stated thus:

- *Do not miss any class without a valid reason.*
- *Truancy is prohibited.*
- *They encourage us to attend our lessons regularly.*
- *Every student and lecturer must attend, if not, then a valid reason should be provided for the absence.*
- *Attendance is compulsory*
- *Do not miss any teaching session and attend according to the timetable.*

This reflects the institutions' overarching view of class attendance as a form of mandatory participation and highlights the importance of attendance policies in the learning process. This is also supported by some literature that indicates a strong positive correlation between school attendance and academic success (Adegoke et al., 2013). No wonder, Adewole (2021) states that it is advantageous that institutions have policies that are not punitive and overly strict on absences from students that have valid reasons for missing class such as illness and family emergencies.

5.3 Attendance as a Grading Criterion

Participants decried the absence of attendance as a grading component. They expected that attendance should contribute directly to the continuous assessment. This practice is becoming more prevalent in higher education, where attendance is a component of a student's overall grade. However, not all institutions of learning are practising this. The participants opined as follows:

- *Some attendances are used for tests.*
- *While some are to discipline you to become serious students and some attendances are used as add up marks for exams.*
- *To add more mark to CA.*

Ancheta et al. (2021) explain that grade penalties related to attendance not only provide students with a reason to be in class but promote the importance of class participation. By this, research verifies that students will attend class more frequently if attendance is required for grading purposes (Rahm et al., 2017; Liugen et al., 2019).

5.4 Attendance Tracking Policy

Attendance tracking was another parameter noted by the students in the forms of physical and online methods such as roll calls, sign-in sheets, and digital clock-in. Tracking and monitoring through such systems are ways of keeping a record of the presence of students, identifying the absence of students, and the need for action. The students confirmed these points in the following statements:

- *Tracking students' presence in class are either through roll calls or sign-in sheets.*
- *Zoom Attendance: Utilizing Zoom's usage reports or call-and-response methods to track attendance in online classes*
- *attendance sheet*
- *Make sure of taking attendance*

Policy enforcement in the absence of a consistent tracking system may be difficult to achieve, but it is noteworthy that tracking system is essential to the enforcement of a policy system that is aligned with and responsive to the engagement of students (Mackfarlane, 2013). Technology provides the opportunity to capture student attendance in real time for both physical and online learning. Even though learning management systems, mobile applications, and other technological tools can make attendance taking more efficient and lessen administration duties, it is the responsibility of institutions to operate technology legally and responsibly (Boubou & Job, 2021; Qutishat et al., 2022).

5.5 Punctuality

Punctuality is a crucial parameter, and it is a crucial aspect of attendance. The importance of being on time is essential for attendance policies, as students need important information shared in every class. The students espoused the following comments:

- *Don't come late to class*
- *Key regulations of attendance policies are students' punctuality in class and availability.*
- *Punctuality is essential for students in order for the students to be able to perform very well in school of taught*
- *Attend all classes and be punctual*
- *Complete assignments given on time*

This is what Al Duray et al. (2022) have also indicated that students who arrive late to class are more disengaged and will miss more of the content than those who come on time. Moreover, being on time shows that students care about the class, and it reduces distractions. Despite regulations on punctuality, institutions should not be overly severe. Students are entitled to some leeway on reasonable grounds, such as delays in getting to class because of unforeseen situations or delays with transportation.

To address Research Question 2 on the influence of attendance policies on students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for students' academic performance, the research shows that attendance policies positively affect students' academic performance in academic literacy skills, as students were apt to recognize attendance policies as a development structure supporting the learning environment, motivation, and academic engagement. Students' recommendations highlight how attendance policies affect students' attitudes, academic focus, and academic performance overall. The key themes as they relate to the research questions are highlighted in this discussion section.

5.6 Timely Knowledge Acquisition

Evidently, students' attendance enables them to gain knowledge when it is due, as exposure to knowledge presupposes knowledge acquisition. Students can take part in discussions and get clarifications from lecturers, as these improve knowledge retention. The students stated the following:

- *It enhances performance because students learn a lot of knowledge during attendance*
- *It helps the students' performance*
- *Students get to interact with both the Lecturer and other students exchanging knowledge*
- *It helps students during their examination*
- *Attending classes will help students learn a lot consistently, at least for the period of their studies...etc.*

Their opinions are consonant with the argument of Adegoke et al. (2013), who state that consistent attendance in class provides the knowledge that cannot be obtained easily from the pages of a textbook. Also, interacting with other students

in class provides additional knowledge and a better understanding, as students can discuss, ask questions, and gain insights from the different perspectives of their classmates. Interactions in class also provide the students with the opportunity to obtain knowledge and understanding of the content of the class (Macfarlane, 2013). Moreover, this knowledge that students obtain in class improves their performance on exams.

5.7 Motivation and Discipline

There is the impact of an attendance policy as a motivational tool and means of fostering discipline, as mentioned by the students. The following are some of the verbatims from the students:

- *It motivates me to take school seriously*
- *Students are highly motivated by those policies*
- *It pressurises them to attend lessons*
- *It teaches self-discipline, encourages responsibility and promotes interest in modules*
- *It will motivate them*
- *Because it will make the students to be punctual and serious*
- *Be a good student and a fast learner etc.*

If students show up in class, they learn self-discipline, responsibility, and skills they will need to practice as they move through their studies. Students who comply with attendance policies tend to be more serious about their academic duties and sustain motivation throughout the semester. This also supports the findings of Adegoke et al. (2013), who suggested that attendance policies may function as extrinsic motivators that students need to learn to channel their energies towards knowledge acquisition. The accountability aspect of attendance policies helps students not to procrastinate and may encourage them to adopt a positive attitude towards their academic work (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5.8 Commitment and Focus

Improved attendance allows students to achieve their goals and concentrate better in class. When students are compelled to go to class, they are more likely to concentrate on and engage with the material. Students indicated the following:

- *Improve student-teacher relationship in class.*
- *If attendance is taken, no student will want to miss class and the more they will want to listen attentively to lectures.*
- *Listening to lecturer in class helps during examinations because not all examples are in the material.*
- *Students will understand the topic under discussion more as the student will be able to interact with the lecturer... etc.*

Attending class allows students to be committed and focused. It is common for students to not grasp all the material when they study alone (Lorrie, 2023). Also, consistency in class attendance helps students to have better rapport with their teachers, which enhances the atmosphere for learning and gives more chances for academic mentorship. Such mentorship helps students to focus on their studies.

5.9 Constant Engagement

Another major theme that emanated from the data was constant engagement as a specific policy impact. Some respondents pointed out that these policies promote sustained engagement with the course material as a necessity. These are stated in some of their comments below:

- *Encouraging Engagement: Fostering a supportive course climate that encourages active participation and engagement*
- *Attendance policy aims to balance flexibility with accountability, ensuring students attend classes regularly and make academic progress*
- *Consequences that are penalties for excessive absences or tardiness support student success*
- *Students who attend school regularly have been shown to achieve higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance*

Bernard et al. (2004) confirm that attendance policies that encourage sustained engagement in class attendance motivate students to keep up with their academic work, thereby discouraging academic procrastination. With policies in place,

educational institutions can monitor attendance in real time, allowing them to reach out to students encountering complications with attendance, thus providing support before causing any lasting damage to their academic performance. Therefore, attendance policies promote an environment of accountability for learning, which in turn enhances students' capacity to engage with the course and master the content (Ancheta et al., 2021).

5.10 Access to Information

One of the less appreciated yet important benefits of class attendance is the information that can be obtained. According to the students:

- *You get clear information from the lecture*
- *The lecturer may share important information that we as students may not get anywhere*
- *Yes, students get the chance to ask lecturers about the things that they don't understand*
- *Students are not left behind with schoolwork etc.*

It was noted that students who attend classes are more likely to receive important information and are granted updates, clarifications, and insights that are not available through other means. Lecturers may provide additional materials, respond to questions, and give explanations that can aid students greatly in understanding the material. This information directly translates to students' academic performance because they are not missing out on a significant part of the course. As stated by Al Duray et al. (2022), the interaction of the students and the instructors cultivates a platform where students can seek the information they desire and clarify their questions in a manner that deepens their understanding of the course, thereby enhancing academic performance.

5.11 Consistency in Academic Work

The more regular a student's attendance, the more likely they are to establish a consistent pattern of academic work since frequent attendance allows them to assimilate course material in a continuous manner and avoid academic gaps. This was confirmed in the following observations:

- *Attendance promotes consistency*
- *Students won't be able to miss lesson content and such if they attend regularly their performance will improve*
- *Names of students who attended class are written down for proper record.*
- *Students will surely be present in school in order to take attendance etc.*

This pattern makes for more efficient learning and illustrates the importance of exercising time control over one's academic work. Constant attention to course material allows students to engage more profoundly in the subject. Rahm et al. (2017) point out how a positive relationship between examination preparedness and attendance is established as students are continuously educated on the subject and are presented with opportunities for active learning that enhance their applicability of the learning to the exam. Additionally, overall academic achievement that is the result of consistently doing academic work is reflective of the learning that students acquire in a more granular manner over time and can ultimately be attributed to the constant attendance they exhibit.

5.12 Students' Attitudes

While attendance policies are important for improving and enhancing academic achievement, individual students' attitudes also play a role. Some respondents explained that students should actively learn and engage with the content, not just show up for class, for attendance to result in academic improvement. Their comments were as follows:

- *It depends on the students themselves. Some students can use the lecture time more efficiently...*
- *Just because we attend doesn't mean we'll learn anything...*
- *It depends on situations students face*
- *I feel it depends on a particular student... etc.*

The identified theme illustrates the findings of Ajiboye and Tella (2006) that students' attitudes toward learning can either enhance or decrease the effectiveness of attendance policies. Students may not realize academic improvement simply by attending class if they are mentally and behaviorally disengaged. This is not the case, however, for students who participate in class, take notes, and ask questions to clarify difficult concepts, and for those who participate in online classes and listen to recorded contents. Therefore, attendance policies are important, but they should be positioned as opportunities for active learning.

An exploration of Research Question 3 based on participants' responses shows students do not only appreciate attendance

policies but also make recommendations on improving attendance policies. The trend of participants' recommendations shows a move from strict attendance policies to a more adaptable and supportive learning environment. By integrating these suggestions, institutions will be able to identify policies that will improve attendance and uphold academic standards in academic literacy courses as skills-based courses.

5.13 Clear Attendance Policies and Penalties

The implementation of clear attendance policies and penalties is a significant recommendation. Most participants suggested that institutions ought to have strict attendance policies and have penalties. They stated as follows:

- *Make laws and penalties*
- *Take actions for those who don't follow the rules*
- *Make it very strict and take immediate actions for those who do not attend lessons without valid reasons*
- *Sanctions for all offenders*
- *They should take it seriously.*
- *By taking attendance policies so strict and very much more than irrelevant things in the school*
- *There should be strict penalties etc.*

This is in consonance with Adegoke et al. (2013), stating that policies aimed at attendance are necessary to enhance the academic performance of students who are normally absent from class. Though the absence of clearly-stated pre-informed policies and penalties has led to increased absenteeism (Rahm et al., 2017; Wally-Dima et al., 2020), institutions must ensure that the policies are not at the expense of fairness by ensuring that the penalties do not adversely affect students with legitimate issues such as health or family obligations (Adewole, 2021).

5.14 Attendance Tracking

Tracking attendance is an additional suggestion as participants call for roll calls, digital registers, and apps. The students submitted thus:

- *Through strict registration taking during lessons.*
- *Bringing an attendance register for the lesson*
- *by providing attendance registers to lecturers*
- *Technology integration: Mobile Apps*
- *Develop mobile apps that allow students to track their attendance etc.*
- *Taking register during lectures and punishing those who don't attend*
- *Register when a lesson starts and sign out when it ends*
- *I think a clear class register must be collected and reviewed on a weekly basis and students must account for their absenteeism etc.*

Ancheta et al. (2021) note that effective tracking systems provide timely attendance tracking to caution students at risk of absenteeism and failing. When tracking systems are implemented by an institution, lecturers can provide timely support to those students, so they are able to improve their attendance and performance. Additionally, using technology to track attendance is consistent with the increasing use of technology in educational settings to manage student data and enhance student engagement (Bauer et al., 2016).

5.15 Motivation and Rewards

One viable recommendation drawn from the data is implementing motivational tactics and incentives aimed at increasing attendance. Some suggestions included the ability to award students scholarships or academic credits for a satisfactory attendance record. Others are:

- *Reward perfect attendance*
- *Competition amongst classes is also great motivation*
- *Attendance-Based Scholarships*
- *Offer scholarships or grants to students who maintain a high attendance*
- *It should be included in the continuous assessment even if it's just five marks*
- *It gives interest in what the students are doing etc.*

These comments resonate with Lorrie's (2023) research that indicates systems based on attendance rewards that promote students' regular class participation. Moreover, the "attendance scholarships" concept suggested by some respondents resonates with Al Duray et al.'s (2022) research findings, which reveal that offering scholarships and other rewards for exemplary attendance effectively motivates students, resulting in enhanced academic engagement and performance. However, the structure of such rewards should be light enough to avoid pressuring students who are absent for genuine reasons.

5.16 Support Services and Engaging Learning Environment

In addition to enforcement and rewards, attention to support and engagement within the learning environment is necessary to improve student attendance. Respondents suggested the addition of support services, such as mentoring, counseling, and tutoring, to assist students who are chronically absent. Some include the following:

- *Provide additional support services such as tutoring, mentorship programs, and counselling*
- *Attending counselling*
- *Tutoring and mentoring*
- *Helping students etc.*
- *Engaging with students*
- *Engage learners more so that they do the work*
- *Creating a positive and engaging learning environment*
- *Bring some interesting activities that would attract and engage the students*
- *Teaching students through practical will be more motivating etc.*

These recommendations align with findings of Adeyeye et al. (2022), who emphasize the influence of support services on student engagement and, consequently, class attendance. Further, the contributing factors to an engaging, participative learning environment included the relevance of the lessons and higher interactivity of the students, as some respondents suggested. Zheng et al. (2020) documented the impact of various active learning strategies (such as the flipped classroom model) on motivation and learning. With the addition of support services to participation, support systems can assist students in overcoming attendance obstacles and enhance their overall academic success.

5.17 Flexible Attendance Policies

Interestingly, a few respondents highlighted the necessity of having more flexible attendance policies. These include:

- *Students should attend lessons if they want to*
- *Flexibility and autonomy*
- *Flexible schedule*
- *The institution could adopt a more supportive and flexible attendance approach*
- *Online attendance options etc.*

Suggestions were made to include offering online courses and allowing students to choose when to attend classes. This idea illustrates the increasing importance of flexibility when it comes to servicing the diverse needs of students, particularly those in a non-traditional or commuter situation (Bernard et al., 2004). The move towards different learning environments, especially fully hybrid courses, has been shown to yield higher accessibility and assist students in balancing academic pursuits with other commitments (Wang et al., 2023). However, institutions need to find the right amount of balance when it comes to flexibility and accountability because students could be demotivated in their studies due to strict attendance policies.

5.18 Policy Communication and Awareness

Another crucial aspect revealed in this study is attendance policies' communication in the institutions. Researchers have observed that communicating attendance policies and strengthening communication around policies contribute to the student's compliance (Macfarlane, 2014). Hence, students suggested the following:

- *By making it clear to everyone that nobody is above the attendance policy...*
- *Provide information about attendance at the beginning of the semester*
- *By making it known to students every day*
- *Communication between lecturers and students during teaching etc.*

Furthermore, communication through the duration of the course can ease the prioritization of attendance within the course. This can be achieved through reminders, announcements, and attendance tracking portals.

The suggestions of the students indicate that attendance policies could serve as instruments of motivation and demotivation, as the intervening factors are the nature of the attendance policies, penalties, communication of policies, lecturers, students' attitudes, tracking modalities, and rewards or compensation. Irrespective of the institutions' structures and systems for attendance policy, efforts should be geared towards encouraging students to be self-motivated. This aligns with self-determination theory that highlights the importance of the theory in facilitating intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

It is evident that some students will never cooperate with institutional or departmental policies on attendance if they are not intrinsically motivated, but extrinsic motivation could stimulate or trigger intrinsic motivation (Johansen et al., 2023). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that indicated that there is no relationship between attendance policies and students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the learning of academic literacy courses. Students' responses have shown the existence of a strong relationship.

6. Recommendations

Our paper identifies and proposes strategies to increase the effectiveness of student attendance policies and improve student success within higher education institutions. These recommendations incorporate the value of accountability, flexibility, student support, and student motivation to create policies that support student success and foster communication skills acquisition. Even when institutions fail to establish standard attendance policies, departments, particularly academic literacy courses often perceived by students as non-departmental courses, should develop and implement their own attendance policies. However, the best effort is for institutions to adopt attendance mandates within their academic policies. Flexibility with attendance policies is necessary for each individual situation, including illness and family emergencies. Structures for attendance policies should reflect opportunities for students to justify absences to a reasonable extent.

Class attendance should be incorporated into the grading system in a fair and reasonable proportion and not necessarily above 10%, while also recognizing digital attendance, such as students accessing recorded lectures and participating in discussion forum. This approach enhances the value of engagement and encourages students to apply themselves in the course in a more permanent manner. As a result, institutions should implement grading systems that not only include physical attendance but also other domains of reflective and self-paced academic work such as online discussions and projects.

Moreover, institutions of higher learning should have policies and implement consequences regarding habitual absenteeism to protect the sanctity of attendance. For example, administratively removing students, grade penalties, and involuntary course withdrawal policies could be designed to have less of an impact on students with genuine reasons and extenuating life circumstances. Specialized forms of support for affected students, ranging from tutoring and mentoring to mental health and counseling should be utilized. Most importantly, students should be made aware of the specific consequences of attendance and policies related to attendance and absenteeism in a professional, fair, and timely manner.

A comprehensive attendance tracking model is recommended as an important part of the attendance policy, and such an intervention is only possible if there is an effective system in place. Institutions should employ both classic and digital attendance tracking systems. The implementation of effective attendance management systems is important for streamlining remaining administrative tasks and promoting attendance policy, rather than just providing systems to attendees.

Apart from being a grading component, rewards such as credits, scholarships, and course waivers could extrinsically motivate students and encourage positive attendance. On the contrary, reward mechanisms should not be so stringent, such that students who have genuine reasons for missing classes feel undue pressure and get discouraged. The reward system should be structured in a way that accommodates the different range of students' needs so that it does not exacerbate the academic gap. For the greater good, the system should ensure there is no reward of inequity to promote the greater good.

In addition, communication regarding educational attendance policies should highlight the fundamental aspects of the educational attendance policies, specifically the expectations and possible outcomes related to students' attendance. Institutions should incorporate these educational attendance policies into their syllabi, course outlines, and institutional websites to ensure that students are repeatedly notified about their educational attendance policies. Periodic notifications and means for students to seek clarification regarding their attendance expectations can greatly enhance the visibility of these policies and facilitate communication within the academic community.

It is also crucial to recommend engagement because being present is not as important as being engaged in the lesson being taught. To this end, institutions of higher learning should implement active learning strategies and encourage students to participate so that attendance is not only about being physically present but is about making engagement involving the

educational process. Lecturers teaching academic literacy courses can facilitate this by allowing the students to participate in educational discussions and ask questions, as well as facilitating group activities. Also, students will be more committed to their learning and attendance if there are opportunities for feedback and self-assessment to help them take ownership of their learning.

7. Conclusion

The all-encompassing and thoroughly considered approach to attendance policies, supporting both student participation and academic achievement, pays dividends. Institutions of higher learning and departments need to create warm environments and support students' differing needs through custom policy frameworks. With policy frameworks that promote academic achievement, students' well-being and university engagement will create a positive and inclusive atmosphere around attendance. Institutions that adopt this approach will witness better attendance and academic performance alongside improved satisfaction and engagement of the students that promote intrinsic motivation.

Improvement in academic performance can be achieved when students are present in class and are engaged in the course, able to interact with their lecturer, and are able to communicate with their classmates to acquire and interrogate the necessary course material. The benefits of attendance policies are evident and need little emphasis; however, it should be recognized that fairness to students does not depend solely on attendance policies, but on policies that actively promote and encourage meaningful class participation. Fair policies that foster a culture of engagement and attendance will best motivate students to achieve their academic goals.

For academic literacy courses, compulsory attendance, attendance grading, punitive consequences for absences, and efficient attendance tracking methods all play a key role in developing an environment of responsibility and engagement with academic work. These rules and regulations have a positive effect on attendance and academic performance, but they also must be applied with an understanding of fairness to avoid inequitable outcomes when students have competing and unavoidable obligations.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the support of Mr. Jide Ogidan and Mr. Sule Ismaila, who assisted with data collection in Nigeria. They are lecturers at Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Nigeria.

Author contributions

Dr. Akinkulore solely conceptualized the study and supervised the project. The three authors contributed to this work. Dr. Akinkulore, Mrs. Sibusisi, and Dr. Nwaefuna were jointly responsible for data curation, formal analysis, methodology development, drafting of the original manuscript, and the provision of financial resources. Drs. Akinkulore and Nwaefuna were responsible for manuscript review and editing, as well as validation of the study. Mrs. Sibusisi conducted the final proofreading. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

There was no external funding for this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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