

Original article

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Factors Influencing Absenteeism among Medical Students at the University of Zawia, Libya

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ABSTRACT

Attendance of undergraduate medical students is crucial for their medical education, but absenteeism is a growing problem globally due to academic and personal challenges. This study at the University of Zawia surveyed 302 undergraduate medical students, primarily female, to understand the factors influencing their attendance. The study found that, external factors like traffic congestion and high costs of private transportation impacted attendance, while pedagogical factors like preferring home-based learning and dissatisfaction with teaching methods were significant. Social factors like peer influence were less influential, suggesting commitment to the field. Institutional factors like inadequate classroom resources, poor infrastructure, scheduling, and security were major concerns. The college's response to absenteeism was moderate, suggesting that institutional issues may be less critical. The study underscores the complex interplay of external, academic, and personal factors affecting student participation in medical education. Factors like traffic congestion, high costs of transportation, and inadequate infrastructure significantly hinder attendance, while dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods and the belief that non-attendance does not affect grades are notable academic factors. Faculty-related issues, such as unclear explanations and ineffective teaching methods, greatly influence attendance decisions. Study recommendations include improving public transportation, updating teaching tools and classroom facilities, and enhancing teaching quality and engagement to address the complex interplay of factors affecting student attendance in medical education programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Attendance of undergraduate medical students is essential to medical education programs. Professional courses in undergraduate medical education have a high attendance requirement for both theoretical and clinical classes, as these

students will be the future doctors who will be dealing with the health and diseases of the population [1]. Despite the implementation of strict student attendance policies, medical absenteeism is a growing problem in higher education institutions and it is increasing in universities worldwide. Investigating the factors influencing absenteeism in medical students reveals a complex interplay of academic and personal challenges that significantly influence academic performance [2]. Numerous studies indicate that medical students often face overwhelming workloads from both academic and non-academic responsibilities, leading to heightened psychological distress and anxiety, particularly during examination periods. In addition to impairing their performance, this educational stress prevents them from reaching their academic goals [3].

The rise of online learning alternatives is one of the significant factors contributing to college students' reluctance to attend lectures. As educational institutions increasingly offer remote options, students often prefer flexible and convenient online courses [4]. This shift has led to a perception that attending live lectures is less necessary, particularly when recorded materials and lecture notes are readily available online. While some argue that online learning may not produce the desired results due to a lack of interaction with instructors and limited opportunities for campus socialization [5], the immediate accessibility of resources can diminish the motivation to attend in person. Furthermore, students may feel that they can achieve similar academic outcomes without the time commitment of attending lectures, which can further exacerbate attendance issues [6].

Another factor influencing students' attendance at lectures is the perceived irrelevance of lecture material. Many students may struggle to see the connection between what is being taught in lectures and their personal interests or future career aspirations [7]. This disconnect can lead to a lack of engagement and motivation to attend, as students may prioritize other responsibilities or interests over attending lectures that they deem unnecessary [8]. Additionally, when lecture content does not align with their learning preferences or educational goals, students tend to turn to alternative learning methods that they find more relevant and useful. This feeling of irrelevance can have a significant impact on attendance, as students would rather invest their time in activities, they find more valuable [9]. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the factors contributing to medical students' absenteeism among undergraduate students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia in Libya, and to determine the most important ones.

METHODS

Study design

This cross-sectional study was conducted in online mode at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia in May 2023. The sample size of 302 undergraduate medical students from the first to fifth year were included in the study.

Data collection

This study used a self-administered questionnaire. The validity of the study questionnaire was tested by using the expert validity method. The questionnaire was presented to a group of experts with experience in the study field. The researcher considered the majority of the experts' comments to finalize the questionnaire's formulation. The questionnaire was circulated as Google Form in Telegram groups of undergraduate medical students. The duration given to collect responses was two weeks and limited to one response only. The Department of Researches and Scientific Consultations at the Faculty of Medicine ethically approved this cross-section study. Utmost care was taken to maintain the confidentiality of the data and to not disclose any student's identity. Students have known the aim of the study and they without any instructions filled forms voluntarily. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part contained questions about socio-demographic characteristics and lifestyle, including, gender, year of study, residency and the transportation method, and the second part contained the reasons for not attending lectures.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS V27), which includes frequency tables, bar charts, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation to evaluate the responses of the study sample.

RESULTS

Table (1) shows that the sample consisted of 302 participants, with a notably uneven gender distribution. Female participants constituted the majority of the sample (80.1%), while male participants represented a smaller proportion (19.9%).

Table 1. Sample distribution based on gender

Gender	Count	%
Male	60	19.9
Female	242	80.1
Total	302	100.0

Figure 1 shows a varied representation of students at different stages of their educational program. First-year students constituted the largest group (28.1%), followed by fourth-year students (22.5%). Second-year (17.9%), fifth-year (17.2%), and third-year students (14.2%) were represented in roughly similar proportions. This distribution provides a cross-sectional view of the student population, allowing for potential comparisons of lecture attendance factors across different academic levels.

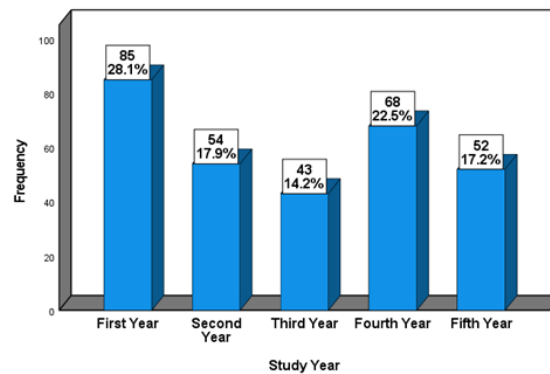


Figure 1. Distribution of students based on their educational program

Table 2 shows that the sample's transportation methods were predominantly characterized by private car usage (70.8%), followed by public transportation (18.2%), and other unspecified modes (10.9%). The high prevalence of private car use suggests that the majority of students have access to personal vehicles.

Table 2. Sample distribution based on transportation

Transportation	Count	%
Private car	214	70.8
Public transportation	55	18.2
Other	33	10.9
Total	302	100.0

Figure (2) revealed that a majority of participants resided within Zawia city (62.3%), while a substantial minority lived outside the city limits (37.7%). This residential pattern suggests that a significant portion of the student population faces potential commuting challenges, which may impact lecture attendance and overall academic engagement.

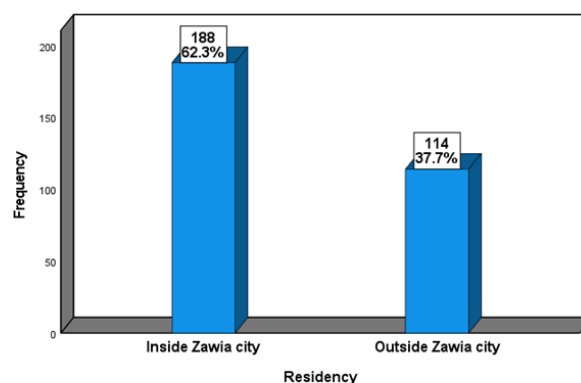


Figure 2. Residency of Surveyed Students

In table 3, the study examined factors influencing lecture attendance among medical students. Results indicate that external factors such as traffic congestion ($M = 3.99 \pm 1.163$), lack of public transportation ($M = 3.88 \pm 1.161$), and high costs of private transportation ($M = 3.71 \pm 1.265$) were rated highly as barriers to attendance. Interestingly, the highest-rated factor was the observation that some non-attendees achieve high grades ($M = 4.08 \pm 1.038$), suggesting a potential disconnect between attendance and perceived academic success.

Pedagogical factors also played a significant role, with students expressing a preference for studying at home with recorded lectures ($M = 3.76 \pm 1.133$) and dissatisfaction with teaching methods ($M = 3.66 \pm 1.120$). The findings highlight the need for institutions to consider both logistical and educational improvements to enhance attendance.

Notably, social factors such as being busy with friends ($M = 2.07 \pm 0.955$) and peer influence ($M = 2.25 \pm 1.083$) were rated low, indicating that personal choices may play a lesser role in absenteeism compared to external and academic factors.

The very low rating for the desire to transfer out of medicine ($M = 1.44 \pm 0.702$) suggests that most respondents are committed to their chosen field of study, despite attendance challenges.

Overall, the results ($M = 2.98 \pm 0.489$) indicate a moderate level of agreement with the various factors influencing lecture attendance, pointing to a complex interplay of external, academic, and personal considerations affecting student participation in medical education.

Table 3. External and personal factors Influencing Student Lecture Attendance in Medical College

No	Statement	Mean	Std	Level of agreement
1	Traffic congestion prevents you from arriving on time for lectures.	3.99	1.163	High
2	Lack of public transportation to and from the college	3.88	1.161	High
3	The high cost of private transportation prevents me from attending daily lectures.	3.71	1.265	High
4	I'm busy with friends and don't want to come alone.	2.07	0.955	Low
5	I am busy studying another subject and I do not want to attend the lecture	3.07	1.208	Moderate
6	It is better to attend lectures in private centers outside the college.	2.96	1.305	Moderate
7	I don't like the teaching method; I find it not enjoyable.	3.66	1.120	High
8	At the moment I am busy with work and I do not have time to attend lectures.	2.41	1.157	Low
9	It is better to study at home and listen to recordings of lectures.	3.76	1.133	High
10	I can pass the subjects without attending lectures.	3.35	1.207	Moderate
11	My colleagues do not attend lectures and I do too.	2.25	1.083	Low
12	I have social problems that prevent me from attending lectures.	2.73	1.233	Moderate
13	I can't wake up early because I often sleep late.	2.31	1.110	Low
14	I have health problems that prevent me from attending lectures.	2.26	1.099	Low
15	The college is very far from where I live.	2.86	1.383	Moderate
16	The road to university is not safe	2.79	1.241	Moderate
17	I have no desire to study medicine and I hope to transfer to another college	1.44	0.702	Very low
18	Some do not attend lectures but they get high grades.	4.08	1.038	High
Overall mean		2.98	0.489	Moderate

In table 4, the study examined institutional factors affecting lecture attendance among students. Results indicate a high overall agreement ($M = 3.61 \pm 0.745$) that institutional factors significantly affect attendance. The most prominent issue identified was the lack of modern educational tools in classrooms ($M = 4.25 \pm 0.931$), rated as very high. This suggests that outdated or insufficient technology may be a major deterrent to attendance. Poor infrastructure was also a significant concern, with students reporting high agreement regarding inadequate bathroom facilities ($M = 4.00 \pm 1.131$) and poorly prepared lecture halls lacking proper air conditioning, ventilation, and lighting ($M = 4.06 \pm 1.121$).

Scheduling and time management issues were consistently rated as high factors affecting attendance. These included insufficient rest time between lectures ($M = 3.81 \pm 1.165$), lack of suitable resting and studying areas ($M = 3.73 \pm 1.306$), and unfavorable lecture schedules ($M = 3.43 \pm 1.266$). Such findings highlight the importance of considering student well-being and practical needs in academic planning.

Interestingly, while overcrowding ($M = 3.20 \pm 1.297$) and campus security ($M = 3.14 \pm 1.213$) were concerns, they were rated only as moderate factors. This suggests that while important, they may be less critical than other institutional issues in determining attendance. The relatively lower rating for the college's response to absenteeism ($M = 2.93 \pm 1.222$) indicates that punitive measures may not be as influential in improving attendance as addressing the higher-rated infrastructural and scheduling factors.

Table 4. Institutional Factors Affecting Student Lecture Attendance

No	Statement	Mean	Std	Level of agreement
1	Classrooms are not equipped with modern educational tools.	4.25	0.931	Very high
2	Lack of school seats and overcrowding in the halls	3.20	1.297	Moderate
3	The lecture schedule and timing are not suitable. It starts early and ends late.	3.43	1.266	High
4	Poor services within the college, such as the lack of usable bathrooms.	4.00	1.131	High
5	Lack of a suitable place to rest and study between lectures	3.73	1.306	High
6	All lectures are given in the same hall and this makes me feel bored.	3.46	1.264	High
7	The college is unable to provide security within the campus.	3.14	1.213	Moderate
8	The halls are not prepared for lectures. There is no air conditioning. Poor ventilation and lighting.	4.06	1.121	High
9	The college does not take any action regarding student absences.	2.93	1.222	Moderate
10	There is not enough time to rest between lectures.	3.81	1.165	High
11	Lack of motivation for regular attendance Lack of guidance from administration and faculty	3.66	1.219	High
Overall mean		3.61	0.745	High

In table 5, the study investigated faculty-related factors influencing student lecture attendance. Results indicate a high overall agreement ($M = 3.56 \pm 0.679$) that faculty-related factors significantly affect attendance decisions. The most critical issues identified were related to teaching quality and methodology. Students strongly agreed that some faculty members do not explain clearly and understandably ($M = 4.31 \pm 0.890$) and do not use modern methods and techniques to improve student understanding ($M = 4.29 \pm 0.897$). Both of these factors were rated as very high, suggesting that the perceived ineffectiveness of teaching methods is a major deterrent to lecture attendance.

There was also high agreement that some faculty members do not encourage effective teaching ($M = 4.00 \pm 1.083$) and that theoretical lectures fail to attract students' interest ($M = 3.99 \pm 1.034$). These findings highlight the importance of engaging pedagogical approaches and the potential need for faculty development in teaching methods.

Interestingly, the treatment of students by faculty members, such as ignoring questions or not providing breaks, was rated only as a moderate factor ($M = 3.28 \pm 1.343$). This suggests that while interpersonal factors are relevant, they may be less critical than the quality and effectiveness of instruction in determining attendance.

Students showed low agreement with the statement that lectures are too easy and therefore a waste of time ($M = 2.18 \pm 0.996$), indicating that perceived simplicity of content is not a significant factor in absenteeism. Conversely, there was moderate agreement that lectures being too difficult could lead to avoidance ($M = 2.87 \pm 1.224$), suggesting a need for balanced content difficulty.

Table 5. Faculty-Related (Academic) Factors Influencing Student Lecture Attendance

No	Statement	Mean	Std	Level of agreement
1	Bad treatment of students by some faculty members (for example) ignoring student questions, not giving breaks during the lecture	3.28	1.343	Moderate
2	Some faculty members do not explain clearly and understandably.	4.31	0.890	Very high
3	Some faculty members do not use modern methods and techniques that improve students' understanding.	4.29	0.897	Very high
4	Some faculty members do not encourage effective teaching.	4.00	1.083	High
5	Theoretical lectures do not attract students' interest.	3.99	1.034	High
6	The lectures are very difficult, so I avoid attending so that I don't exhaust myself by not understanding.	2.87	1.224	Moderate
7	The lectures are very easy and attending them wastes my time because I can understand them by myself.	2.18	0.996	Low
Overall mean		3.56	0.679	High

DISCUSSION

Medical students must attend classes diligently, as they are the future caretakers of public health. Frequent absenteeism not only harms the students but also the entire community, as it compromises their ability to gain the necessary knowledge and clinical skills to meet patient expectations. This study explores the perspectives of medical students on attendance and ways to improve it, representing the views of undergraduates from Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia. First, according to the demographic profile, the study sample predominantly comprised female medical students, reflecting a gender imbalance that is common in medical fields. The diverse representation of students across different academic years provides a valuable opportunity to explore potential variations in lecture attendance patterns based on academic progression. The findings of this study highlight a complex interplay of external, academic, and personal factors that influence student lecture attendance. External factors; transportation challenges, and the high prevalence of private car usage suggest that a significant portion of students rely on personal vehicles for commuting. However, factors such as traffic congestion, high costs of private transportation, and limited public transportation options can hinder timely attendance [10]. Another external factor is residential location, a considerable number of students reside outside Zawia city, potentially leading to longer commute times and increased logistical challenges.

Regarding institutional factors, the study showed that inadequate infrastructure, including poorly equipped classrooms, insufficient bathroom facilities, and unfavorable lecture hall conditions, significantly affects student attendance. Moreover, tight schedules, insufficient rest periods, and a lack of suitable study spaces can contribute to student absenteeism. Similarly, a study has found that medical students struggling with loneliness and depression may find the comforts of home unwelcoming, as the classroom environment can be uncondusive to learning [11]. On the other hand, our study has found regarding the academic Factors that students expressed dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods and a preference for more engaging approaches, such as recorded lectures and modern educational tools. The perception of some students that non-attendance does not influence academic performance is also a concerning factor. In addition, about course content and difficulty while students generally perceive lectures as neither too easy nor too difficult, the need for clear explanations, effective communication, and a balance between theoretical and practical content is evident. In the same way, another study noted that lack of student participation in class can lead to low morale among both students and faculty. To improve class attendance, students have suggested regular assessments, shorter lectures, mentor-mentee programs, small group teaching, pre-exam revision, interactive and test-based instruction, and relevance to clinical content [12]. Additionally, the same study found that poor university infrastructure, crowded lecture halls, long teaching hours, unclear subject matter, and dissatisfaction with teaching methods can contribute to student absences [12]. By addressing these concerns, universities can create a more engaging and effective learning environment for their students. Moreover, according to the study, the quality of instruction, clarity of explanations, and the use of engaging teaching methods are crucial factors influencing student attendance. Faculty members who fail to provide effective guidance and support may discourage students from attending lectures.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance lecture attendance among medical students. First, improve infrastructure and facilities, by investing in modernizing classrooms with advanced teaching technologies. Ensure adequate seating capacity, proper ventilation, and comfortable learning environments.

Provide sufficient and well-maintained restroom facilities, and create dedicated study areas with adequate lighting and comfortable seating. Second, optimize scheduling and time management, allocate sufficient break times between lectures, and consider flexible scheduling options, such as online or hybrid learning, to accommodate diverse student needs. Third, enhance teaching methods and pedagogy, and encourage faculty to adopt innovative teaching methods, such as active learning, problem-based learning, and case-based discussions. Provide opportunities for faculty development and training in effective teaching practices. Promote the use of technology-enhanced learning, including online resources, virtual classrooms, and interactive tools, and foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages student participation and engagement. Fourth, address transportation challenges and collaborate with local authorities to improve public transportation infrastructure and services. Fifth, promote a positive learning culture by implementing strategies to motivate students and foster a sense of academic community, and encourage peer-to-peer learning and collaborative study groups.

CONCLUSION

Medical student absenteeism is an important issue that has an impact on academic performance and the learning process. A complex interaction of external, institutional, teacher, and individual factors influences lecture attendance. As a recommendation of this study, it is imperative to improve public transport infrastructure and eliminate traffic congestion, while also considering financial support for those who have to pay for travel. In addition, investing in modern teaching tools, modernizing classrooms, and creating appropriate learning areas can promote a more conducive learning environment. Addressing teacher-related issues through training programs that improve teaching methods incorporate modern technologies, and increase participation in theoretical lectures is important.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no financial, personal, or professional conflicts of interest to declare.

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تحليل شامل للعوامل المؤثرة على الغياب بين طلاب الطب بجامعة الزاوية، ليبيا

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المستخلص

يُعد حضور طلاب الطب البكالوريوس أمرًا بالغ الأهمية لتعليمهم الطبي، لكن الغياب مشكلة متزايدة على مستوى العالم بسبب التحديات الأكاديمية والشخصية. أجريت هذه الدراسة في جامعة الزاوية على 302 طالب وطالبة طب بكالوريوس، غالبيتهم من الإناث، لفهم العوامل المؤثرة على حضورهم. وجدت الدراسة أن العوامل الخارجية مثل الازدحام المروري والتكاليف العالية للمواصلات الخاصة تؤثر على الحضور، في حين أن العوامل التربوية مثل تفضيل التعلم المنزلي وعدم الرضا عن طرق التدريس كانت ذات أهمية. كانت العوامل الاجتماعية مثل تأثير الأقران أقل تأثيراً، مما يشير إلى الالتزام بالمجال. كانت العوامل المؤسسية مثل عدم كفاية الموارد الصفية والبنية التحتية السيئة والجدولة والأمن من الشواغل الرئيسية. كان استجابة الكلية للغياب متوسطة، مما يشير إلى أن القضايا المؤسسية قد تكون أقل أهمية. تؤكد الدراسة على التفاعل المعقد بين العوامل الخارجية والأكاديمية والشخصية التي تؤثر على مشاركة الطلاب في التعليم الطبي. عوامل مثل الازدحام المروري والتكاليف العالية للمواصلات والبنية التحتية غير الكافية تعيق الحضور بشكل كبير، في حين أن عدم الرضا عن طرق التدريس التقليدية والمعتقد بأن الغياب لا يؤثر على الدرجات هي عوامل أكاديمية بارزة. تؤثر القضايا المتعلقة بالهيئة التدريسية، مثل الشرح غير الواضح وطرق التدريس غير الفعالة، بشكل كبير على قرارات الحضور. تشمل توصيات الدراسة تحسين وسائل النقل العام وتحديث أدوات التدريس ومرافق الفصول الدراسية وتعزيز جودة التدريس والمشاركة لمعالجة التفاعل المعقد للعوامل المؤثرة على حضور الطلاب في برامج التعليم الطبي.

الكلمات الدالة: طلبة الطب الجامعي، الغياب، العوامل التربوية، عدم الرضا.