

Where are they? And does it matter? A study in student engagement

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Introduction

Applied Legal Knowledge (ALK) is a compulsory 2nd year LLB module at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). It is a relatively new module (since 2019/2020 academic year) and seeks to teach application of undergraduates' knowledge of the law to real life. Students can apply for a place on an expanded ALK module (here referred to as ALK Plus), which offers experience in the NTU legal advice centre (NLS Legal) in addition to the classroom-based compulsory module. Less than 40 students are selected, of over 500 2nd year students.

The 2021/22 MySay survey of ALK students was very positive overall. 12% of students responded. Over 85% of students agreed that they were satisfied with the module overall; 87% were overall satisfied with teaching on the module. Yet, attendance of students at ALK seminars is low. Anecdotal evidence from students is that attendance is affected by the belief that: *"no one ever fails this module"*; and, *"it's just common sense"*. MySay comments included suggestions that the module was *"repetitive"*, *"boring and patronising"*. However, this was balanced by comments from other students that the module was *"interesting"*, *"stimulating"*,

Aims

This study seeks to consider whether:

- Low attendance impacts upon ALK summative results; and,
- To adjust the module to encourage greater engagement.

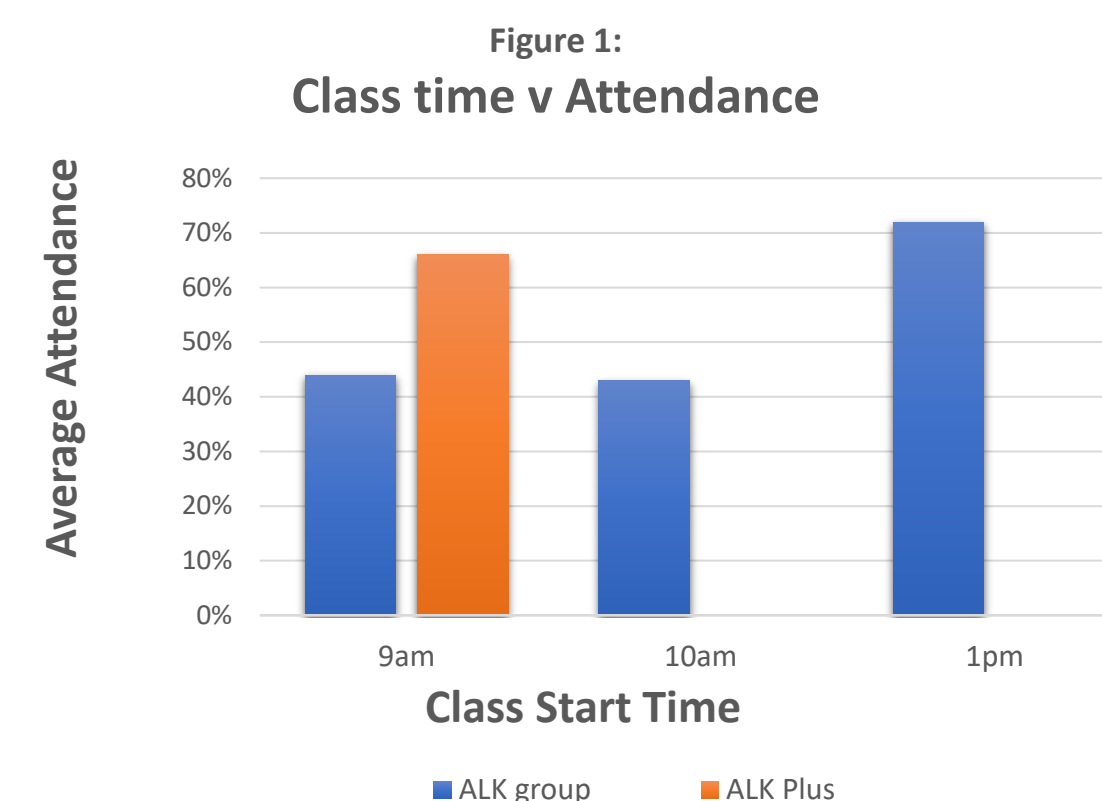
Methodology

Four groups were chosen: three ALK groups and one ALK Plus group (total 56 students) that were taught the same content at 9am, 10am or 1pm. To avoid the personality/teaching style of the tutor being a factor, the groups studied were all taught by the same tutor (the writer). Attendance records for each student at all seminars across the teaching year were used, cross-checked with individual student records within Student Dashboard. Data was readily available and used anonymously: no ethical considerations arose.

Data Analysis: attendance

Figure 1 shows the average percentage of students in each group attending across the 2021/22 year.

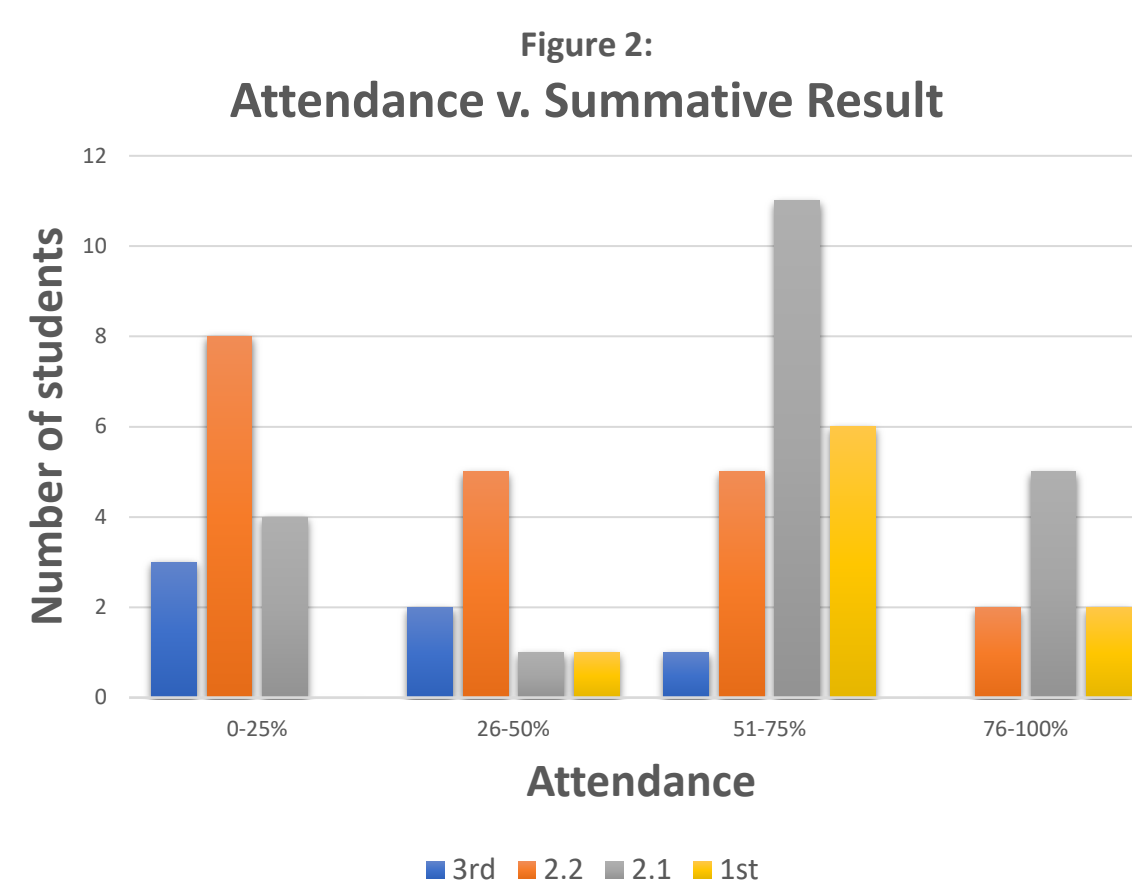
Low attendance cannot easily be explained by lack of Early Intervention, as NTU has a well organised system of early intervention for low engagement¹.



Data Analysis: attendance and summative results

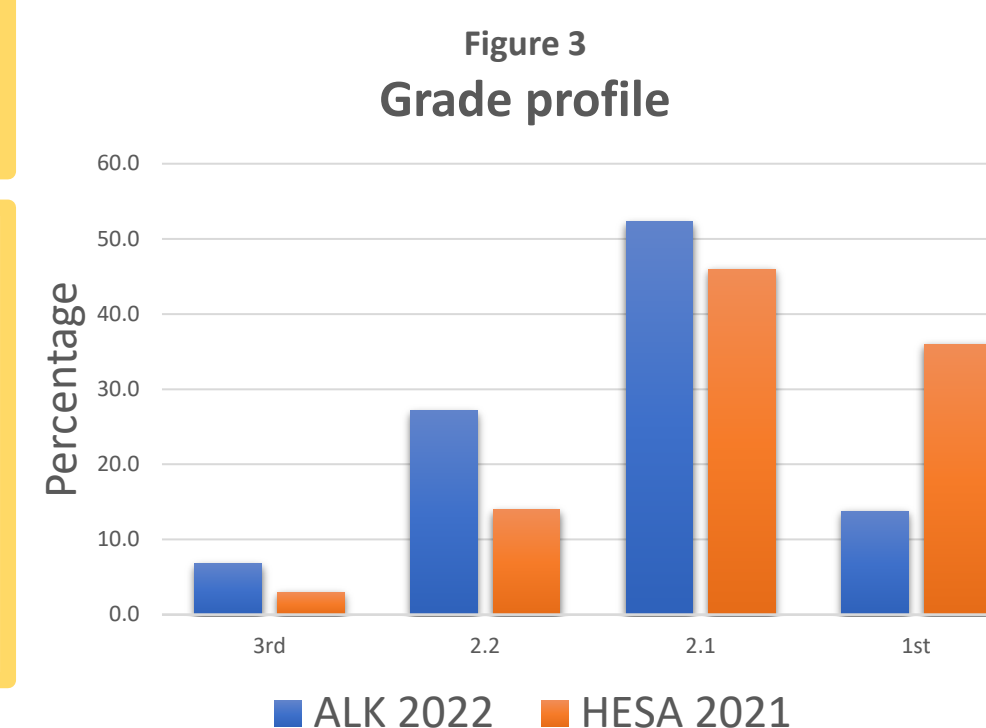
Figure 2 shows attendance data cross-referenced with attainment at the summative exam in 4 quartiles.

- Clear correlation of higher attendance and 1st or a 2.1.
- Clear correlation of reduced attendance and 2.2 or 3rd.



Data Analysis: National results

Figure 3 shows a comparison of 2021/22 summative results of the full cohort of 500+ with HESA figures for final grades awarded nationally in 2020/21 (latest figures)².



Discussion

- **Attendance – effect of session time?** Students in late teens/early twenties have high *"eveningness"* – a tendency of their circadian rhythm to prefer later waking times³. Both morning ALK seminars starting at 9am and 10am had significantly low attendance compared to the afternoon seminar starting at 1pm (See Figure 1).



Attendance at 9am of ALK Plus students was close to that at 1pm: however, these students had applied for a place and may be inherently more motivated. It may also be a factor that Wednesday is a popular social night. However, timetabling is unlikely to alter.

- **Results – Effect of attendance at seminars.** An unsurprising correlation between greater attendance and greater success at the summative level. However, a minority of students achieved good results with limited attendance. (Two students attending less than 10% of seminars achieved 2.1s). This may be explained by the module's practice, under NTU policy, to place all materials online, including answers to exercises undertaken within seminars, and tutor-recorded summaries of seminar content/exercises. Absence from seminars may not mean that content is missed³; significant content online may explain non-attendance, but good results. The presence of such content may in itself be a temptation not to attend.
- **"No one ever fails"?** In the academic year 2021/21, there were indeed no students that failed (of 545 students). In its first 3 years, the number of failing students were 0.2%, 0.5% and 0% respectively. Anecdotally, tutors consider it too easy to gain at least enough marks to reach the passing threshold, however more challenging it may be thereafter.
- **Too easy? "Just common sense"?** Although few have failed, the profile of passes is similar, if in fact overall weighted lower, than national norms. The module's content may not be as easy as perceived. However, several subject group students were able to achieve good results with little seminar attendance (but may still have engaged through online content).

Next Steps

- Is the absence/results pattern repeated in other LLB modules?
- Investigate with students reasons for absence and how better to address issues (eg: through survey and focus groups of students).
- Seek module tutors' perspectives.
- Develop module to address findings/perceptions (eg: by further use of active learning⁵ and SCALE-UP; strengthening passing threshold).

References

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3. Burgess, H; Swanson, L. (2020) *Circadian Rhythms Across the Lifespan*. <https://www.psychiatristimes.com/view/circadian-rhythms-across-lifespan>
4. Skead, N et al (2020) 'If you record, they will not come – but does it really matter?', *The Law Teacher*, 54:3, 349-367. DOI: [10.1080/03069400.2019.1697578](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2019.1697578)
5. Prince, M. (2004), Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93: 223-231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x>

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