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Men come second on attendance

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JUST turning up gives female students an edge over the men. Attendance has emerged as the best predictor of academic performance - better than more commonly studied influences such as intelligence and personality - in a pioneering British study.

And among absent males, those with higher intelligence were the worst offenders, at odds with the theory that fear of academic demands keeps students away from seminars and workshops.

Universities, preoccupied with selecting students by cognitive ability, should attend to attendance, according to Sussex University sociologist Ruth Woodfield and her co-authors.

Their two projects, reported in the journal *Studies in Higher Education*, involved almost 700 undergraduates at Sussex which, unlike many institutions, keeps attendance records. They said most previous work on academic performance focused on cognitive and personality factors and the role of gender in attendance had been "largely ignored".

But the very meaning of attendance was changing as universities opened up virtual lecture halls, said Kerri-Lee Krause, of the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

"The issue is not so much one of attendance but of engagement," Dr Krause said.

"How engaged are students in and with their learning community, whether on campus, online or in the broader community beyond campus?"

In the Sussex study, female students missed, on average, only one in every 8.27 classes while males missed one in 6.32.

Unlike the females, males were less frank with the researchers and under-reported their absences.

Poor teaching, competing academic tasks and paid work were not high on the list of reasons given by absent students. The top excuses were illness, tiredness and "personal reasons".

When pressed, male students admitted that personal often meant social, for example, "wanted to get an earlier ferry to have a longer weekend trip to France".

The male students who were more often absent had higher scores for cognitive ability and extroversion.

"It would seem perverse to conclude that they were absent more often because they feared the social context of timetabled sessions," the researchers said.

Females had higher scores for conscientiousness, motivating them to turn up for class more often.

This fitted the familiar research portrait of the female student as more "conformist" and of the male as more easily distracted.

But conscientiousness alone was not enough to guarantee a superior academic performance for students.

"Something happens within [the classroom] that enhances their overall performance, especially if they are male. This is welcome confirmation of the value added through teaching sessions."

In a study of Australian first-year students, Dr Krause found female students (59.1 per cent) just as likely as males (59.5 per cent) to say they skipped classes. But males were more likely to justify an absence on the basis that lecture notes could be found on the web.

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