

## UNDERSTANDING STUDENT TUTORIAL ATTENDANCE BELIEFS

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### ABSTRACT

*Many reasons are given as to why students are reluctant to attend tutorials for their chosen subjects. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this article aims at exploring three different beliefs - behavioural, normative and control beliefs - to come up with persuasive communication messages that could be used to encourage students to attend tutorials. 166 structured interviews were undertaken with business students on Latrobe university Bendigo campus during semester one 2011. The findings suggest that behavioural and control beliefs are the most different significant beliefs amongst both those attending tutorials (compliers) and those not attending tutorials (non-compliers). Based on these significant differences, several persuasive communication messages are suggested in the paper.*

Keywords: Behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs, control beliefs, persuasive communication messages, tutorial attendance.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing trend for university students to avoid attending tutorial classes (Schmulian, et al., 2011). This is despite a tutorial being an interactive session between the lecturer and student that is critical for learning and for enhancing further understanding of subject-related content. This trend of avoiding tutorial classes has several future negative implications. Students of today are the managers and workforce of tomorrow. It is imperative therefore to improve attendance rates, thus helping to maximise the potential for students to gain an understanding of the information before them, not just having access to it. By attending tutorials, students have the potential to reinforce essential topics and to understand these topics to a deeper level. Tutorial attendance is also critical in building an overall positive learning and attendance culture within universities.

Recent advances in communication theory and research indicate that if we understand what people think about a given behaviour (tutorial attendance), then we will have a better chance of influencing these people to adjust their actions. The aim is to see behaviour through the eyes of substantiated theory. Messages can then be developed and delivered with the goal of influencing people to behave in particular ways, thus allowing better strategic decisions to be made (Ham, et al., 2009). Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this research aims to explore three different beliefs, namely, behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs; in order to derive persuasive communication messages that can encourage better student tutorial attendance. This paper is structured into four sections. First, literature review will be discussed, followed with methodology. Findings and discussions are next. Finally, the paper ends with conclusion and recommendation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relatively low number of university students attending tutorials, and the adverse effects of this phenomenon, has been a much debated topic. There are many suggested reasons for non-attendance, with accompanying diverse ramifications. What is clear is that past research suggests a positive relationship exists between tutorial attendance and overall student performance (Alagiah, *et al.*, 1999).

Kottasz (2005) suggests that student non-attendance in lectures and tutorials is a major concern for universities. Kottasz found that whilst 57% of students claimed not to have missed their weekly tutorial, 35% missed an average of one per week and the remaining students did not attend any tutorials at all. In an effort to understand the trend, students were asked to give reasons as to why they would miss a tutorial. The major reasons included: the availability of lecture material, conflicting tutorial times, illness, transport issues, work commitments, and student indifference.

Van Walbeek (2004) indicates that a positive relationship existed between students attending classes regularly and those consistently receiving above average results. Several other researchers have identified this trend (Durden and Ellis, 1995; Devadoss and Foltz, 1996; Rodgers, 2001; Marburger, 2001; Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Gump, 2005; Sauers *et al.*, 2005; Woodfield *et al.*, 2006; Massingham and Herrington, 2006; Halpern, 2007; Chen and Lin, 2008; Newman-Ford *et al.*, 2008; Horn and Jansen, 2009; Credé *et al.*, 2010).

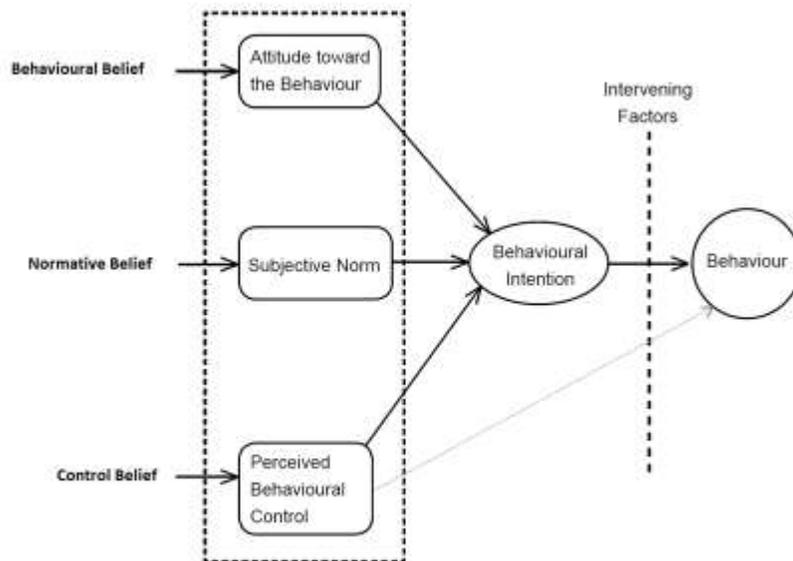
Van Walbeek concludes that students attending tutorials regularly recorded marginally higher results, yet those students having other external and internal commitments did not necessarily record poor results.

Dobkin *et al.* (2010) found that “class attendance significantly improves student performance”. The results confirm that a positive relationship existed between attendance and performance. However, in contrast to other research, Dobkin *et al.* (2010) found that the main reason for non-attendance was not timetable clashes, or travel constraints, but simply that students ‘slept in’. Some literature advises tutors to not only encourage tutorial attendance, but in some cases where performance is lacking, to enforce attendance. To gain above average results, students were encouraged to attend all tutorials.

## METHODOLOGY

166 structured personal interviews were conducted with Latrobe Business students across all years of study during semester 1, 2011. The 10 minute interviews used questions designed around the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and derived from the three differing types of beliefs - Behavioral, Normative and Control as depicted in Figure 1 below.

**FIGURE 1. THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOUR-**



Theory of planned behaviour model (source: Ajzen 1991).

According to TPB, human action is guided by three considerations:

- (1) Behavioral beliefs, or what people believe to be the likely outcomes or consequences of a given behavior, and their positive or negative judgment about each of these possible outcomes;
- (2) Normative beliefs, or how people believe others of importance to them would want them to behave, and their motivation to comply with the wishes of these important others ;
- (3) Control beliefs, or beliefs about the presence of situational and internal factors that make the behavior easy or difficult to do, and how much each factor facilitates or inhibits performing the behavior.” (Ham et al, 2009).

The Theory of Planned Behavior attempts to predict behavior by analysing these three beliefs. TPB “provides a useful conceptual framework for dealing with the complexities of human social behavior. The theory incorporates some of the central concepts in the social and behavior sciences, and it defines these concepts in a way that permits prediction and understanding of particular behaviors in specified contexts.” (Ajzen, 1991). Both compliers and non-compliers made up the sample of individuals who were surveyed. A complier in this case was someone who attended as many tutorials as they possibly could. A non complier attended only some tutorials, if any at all. From our sample, 47.6% of students were compliers and 52.4% were non-compliers. Thus a complier is someone who plays by the rules and 'complies' with regulations to attend tutorials.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**TABLE 1: RESPONDENT PROFILE**

	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Compliers</b>	<b>Non-compliers</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	40 (50.63%)	39 (44.83%)	79 (95.46%)
	Female	39 (49.37%)	40 (45.98%)	79 (95.34%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Age</b>	age 17-20	36 (45.57%)	41 (47.13%)	77 (92.70%)
	age 21-25	33 (41.77%)	40 (45.98%)	73 (87.75%)
	age 26-30	8 (10.13%)	5 (5.75%)	13 (15.87%)
	age 30+	2 (2.53%)	1 (1.15%)	3 (3.68%)
<b>Year of study</b>	First	13 (16.46%)	14 (16.09%)	27 (32.55%)
	Second	35 (44.30%)	25 (28.74%)	60 (73.04%)
	Third	27 (34.18%)	43 (49.43%)	70 (83.60%)
	Fourth	4 (5.06%)	5 (5.75%)	9 (10.81%)
<b>Number of subjects</b>	2	3 (3.80%)	1 (1.15%)	4 (4.95%)
	3	9 (11.39%)	15 (17.24%)	24 (28.63%)
	4	63 (79.75%)	68 (78.16%)	131 (157.91%)
	4+	4 (5.06%)	3 (3.45%)	7 (8.51%)
<b>Where you live?</b>	On campus	14 (17.72%)	11 (12.64%)	25 (30.37%)

	Off campus renting	31 (39.24%)	42 (48.28%)	73 (87.52%)
	Off campus with parents	29 (36.71%)	33 (37.93%)	62 (74.64%)
	Other	4 (5.06%)	1 (1.15%)	5 (6.21%)
<b>Employment</b>	Not working	28 (35.44%)	22 (25.29%)	50 (60.73%)
	Casual	30 (37.97%)	35 (40.23%)	65 (78.20%)
	Part- time	19 (24.05%)	26 (29.89%)	45 (53.94%)
	Full time	2 (2.53%)	4 (4.60%)	6 (7.13%)
<b>Working hours</b>	0	28 (35.44%)	22 (25.29%)	50 (60.73%)
	0 - 14	31 (39.24%)	32 (36.78%)	63 (76.02%)
	15 - 30	19 (24.05%)	28 (32.18%)	47 (56.23%)
	31 - 46	1 (1.27%)	4 (4.60%)	5 (5.86%)
	47 +	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.15%)	1 (1.15%)

**1. What do you see as the *good things* that could occur by attending your chosen tutorial this semester?**

<b>Question 1</b>		<b>Behavioral Beliefs</b>	
<b>Belief Label</b>		<b>Compliers (n=79)</b>	<b>Non-compliers (n=87)</b>
1	Achieving better results	11 (14%)	28 (32%)
2	Good source of assignment / exam Prep	15 (19%)	5 (6%)
3	Achieving better understanding of course content	20 (25%)	12 (14%)
4	Gaining a sounder knowledge	12 (15%)	21 (24%)
5	Having access to help	6 (8%)	10 (11%)
6	Developing a good attendance record	3 (4%)	4 (5%)
7	Developing a good work ethic	12 (15%)	7 (8%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>

The above table represents a condensed set of behavioural beliefs relating to the good things that compliers and non-compliers perceive will result from attending their tutorials.

Responses have been grouped into seven general beliefs, ranging from ‘achieving better results’ to ‘developing good work ethic’. Compliers and non-compliers differed as to what they perceived as the benefits of attending tutorials.

Perhaps surprisingly, 32% of non-compliers listed the good things about attending tutes as ‘achieving better results’, compared to only 14% of compliers. These non-compliers may display

a certain level of denial on their part. Whilst they acknowledge that attending tutorials would result in better results, they don't, or are unable to, do anything about it.

Compliers saw a strong benefit gained of 'achieving a better understanding of course content'. Non-compliers did not. This may indicate a maturity of thought in that compliers see tutorial attendance as a "means to an end". There was a significant difference in the belief that tutorials are a good source of exam and assignment preparation. 19% of compliers listed this as a benefit of tute attendance, yet only six percent of non-compliers thought the same way.

**2. What do you see as the *bad things* that could occur by attending your chosen tutorial this semester?**

<b>Question 2</b>		<b>Behavioral Beliefs</b>	
<b>Belief Label</b>	<b>Compliers (n=79)</b>	<b>Non-compliers (n=87)</b>	
1 Time Wasted	19 (24%)	30 (34%)	
2 Boredom	12 (15%)	13 (15%)	
3 Tutorial Times	5 (6%)	12 (14%)	
4 Work Commitments	8 (10%)	8 (9%)	
5 Friends / Social Obligations suffer	14 (18%)	6 (7%)	
6 Poor Results	6 (8%)	4 (5%)	
7 Poor Tutor / Lecturer Abilities	9 (11%)	9 (10%)	
8 None	6 (8%)	5 (6%)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>	

In contrast to the previous table, some beliefs about what students perceive as being the 'bad things' to occur by attending tutorials, are more convergent between compliers and non-compliers. For example, beliefs two, four, six, seven and eight are all relatively close in their percentages. This suggests that both compliers and non-compliers possess similar beliefs about the negative outcomes - perhaps because both groups have experienced, or observed, this.

In contrast, the beliefs of 'time wasted', 'tutorial times' and 'friends/social obligations' reveal quite different results. These results suggest very different sets of beliefs and may be due to the fact that compliers choose to spend their time in tutorials, and do not view this time as wasted.

For the category titled 'friends/social obligations', an 11% differential exists between compliers and non-compliers. 18% of compliers believe trading off friends and social obligations to be a bad thing, whereas only seven percent of non-compliers felt the same way. This is an interesting anomaly in the data, one that seems to defy reasoning. One would expect that friends would be more important to non-compliers - and hence justify their skipping tutorials. However the data indicates the opposite. Possible reasons for this could be that non-compliers' friends are also non-compliers; therefore they too are not attending the tutorials.

**NORMATIVE BELIEFS**

**3. Who (individuals or groups whose opinions you consider personally influential) do you think would support or approve of you attending tutorials this semester?**

<b>Question 3</b>		<b>Normative Beliefs</b>	
<b>Belief Label</b>	<b>Compliers (n=79)</b>	<b>Non-compliers (n=87)</b>	
1 Classmates	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	
2 Everyone	19 (24%)	20 (23%)	
3 Friends	2 (3%)	3 (3%)	
4 Family	28 (35%)	20 (23%)	
5 Family & Friends	9 (11%)	14 (16%)	
6 Lecturer	4 (5%)	10 (11%)	
7 Lecturer & friends	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	
8 Lecturer & family	6 (8%)	12 (14%)	
9 Work	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	
10 Myself	5 (6%)	0 (0%)	
11 Possibly employers	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	
12 N / A	3 (4%)	1 (1%)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>	

Interestingly, for the first question of the normative beliefs, the results were very similar between compliers and non-compliers. Of particular note is the salient beliefs of ‘everyone’ and ‘family’ as these were the most approving of tutorial attendance. The belief ‘everyone’ is divided into three categories and must fulfil all 3 for it to be classed as ‘everyone’. This category is a combination of differing types of salient beliefs - friends, family and lecturer. Students predominantly put down all three, if they had any at all, thus indicating that there was strong encouragement coming from all three aspects of the significant others, whether they were compliers (24%) or non compliers (23%). ‘Family’ as a sole response was also high, perhaps indicating that there was significant encouragement for both compliers and non compliers to attend tutorials.

**4. Who (individuals or groups whose opinions you consider personally influential) do you think would object or disapprove of you attending your chosen tutorial this semester?**

<b>Question 4</b>		<b>Normative Beliefs</b>	
<b>Belief Label</b>	<b>Compliers (n=79)</b>	<b>Non-compliers (n=87)</b>	
1 Friends	19 (24%)	23 (26%)	
2 Family	2 (3%)	5 (6%)	
3 Family & Friends	2 (3%)	1 (1%)	
4 Work	3 (4%)	7 (8%)	
5 Work & friends	4 (5%)	3 (3%)	
6 Myself	4 (5%)	1 (1%)	
7 N / A	40 (51%)	40 (46%)	
8 Other	5 (6%)	7 (8%)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>	

The second normative belief question centred around who would disapprove or object to the student attending tutorials. The main contributors to this factor were the salient beliefs of ‘friends’ and ‘Not Applicable. Answers here as to who would disapprove, were notably similar between compliers and non-compliers.

## CONTROL BELIEFS

### 5. What factors or circumstances enable or make it easy for you to attend your chosen tutorial this semester?

Question 5		Control Beliefs	
Belief Label	Compliers (n=69)	Non-compliers (n=78)	
1 Own car, convenient timetable	5 (7%)	6 (8%)	
2 Convenient timetable	20 (29%)	20 (26%)	
3 Friends are there	6 (9%)	9 (12%)	
4 Have own car	4 (6%)	0 (0%)	
5 Proximity to home	18 (26%)	29 (37%)	
6 Compulsory	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	
7 Family approval	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	
8 Learning	5 (7%)	3 (4%)	
9 Good grades	4 (6%)	2 (3%)	
10 Not working	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	
11 N / A	2 (3%)	1 (1%)	
12 Motivation	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	
13 Late start	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>78</b>	

Students were asked ‘What enables you to attend tutorials?’ Reasons given were grouped in a narrow band of responses.

The main reason was having a ‘convenient timetable’. A convenient timetable included factors such as classes being blocked together; and classes being on convenient days or at convenient times of the day. The second highest reason was ‘close proximity to home’; where students felt that it was easy to attend tutorials if they lived only a short distance from the university.

### 6. What factors or circumstances make it difficult for you to attend your chosen tutorial this semester?

Question 6		Control Beliefs	
Belief Label	Compliers (n=68)	Non-compliers (n=76)	
1 Waste of time	6 (9%)	7 (9%)	
2 Clashes with other subjects	4 (6%)	4 (5%)	
3 Distance	10 (15%)	6 (8%)	

4	Inconvenience	15 (22%)	0 (0%)
5	Family commitments	2 (3%)	1 (1%)
6	Financial issues	9 (13%)	11 (14%)
7	Heavy work load	4 (6%)	2 (3%)
8	Illness	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
9	No motivation	5 (7%)	4 (5%)
10	Personal reasons	3 (4%)	0 (0%)
11	N / A	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
12	Other commitments	0 (0%)	7 (9%)
13	Bad timetable	0 (0%)	24 (32%)
14	Friends	0 (0%)	4 (5%)
15	Parking is difficult	7 (10%)	5 (7%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>76</b>

Compliers identified a variety of factors that made it difficult for them to attend tutorials. The main reason was ‘inconvenience’ with 22% of students indicating this. When probed further, inconvenience was found to include poorly structured timetables and clashes with other commitments.

Ten students stated that it was difficult to attend tutorials due to the university’s distance from their homes. Nine students found it difficult to attend due to financial issues, meaning they needed to work during the times their tutorials were being held.

Of the 76 students who didn’t attend tutorials, 32% of these blamed a poorly structured timetable. This finding indicates that both compliers and non-compliers find well-structured timetables and living close to university to be the main factors making it easier for them to attend tutorials. Compliers and non-compliers both too had issues with the university’s parking arrangements. Students found it difficult to attend tutorials if they couldn’t find a car park. Financial issues were another significant reason for not attending tutorials. In these cases, student were identifying their need to put work before study.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

### **Conclusions**

There are many reasons why students are reluctant to attend tutorials. The aim of this research has been to explore different beliefs, namely, behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs; in order to derive persuasive communication messages that can encourage better student tutorial attendance. Beliefs have differed, sometimes significantly, between compliers and non-

compliers. However, several unexpected similarities also emerged. 'Achieving better results' was found to be the most significant outcome for non-compliers in the good things that occur from attending tutorials. However, it was found that 'gaining a higher knowledge and understanding' was the main driver in tutorial attendance for compliers. In comparison, the results for the 'bad things that could occur by attending tutes' was relatively similar between compliers and non-compliers. 'Time wasted' was the biggest consideration for both. The control indicated that the determinants making it easier to attend tutorials included 'proximity to university' and 'a convenient timetable'. In comparison, the determinants that made it difficult to attend were 'distance travelled' and 'inconvenient tutorial times'.

### **Recommendation for persuasive communication messages**

Many salient beliefs have emerged for all three of the behavioural, normative and control beliefs. These beliefs include: 'achieving better results', 'gaining a sounder knowledge', 'assignment/exam prep', and 'being encouraged via friends, family and tutors'. 'Having a convenient timetable' and 'living close by' was shown to affect student tutorial attendance.

From the student responses, persuasive communication messages can be created with the end in mind to improve student tutorial attendance.

The major persuasive communication messages that need to be promoted include the increased performance that the students will achieve, from attending tutorials, and the positive encouragement they will receive from their significant others.

Based on the outcomes from this research, below are examples of possible persuasive communication messages that could be used to motivate students to attend tutorials:

**1. *Attend Tutorials and Achieve Greatness!***

*Attending tutorials not only gives me good results; it also teaches me valuable habits that will help me succeed in other areas.*

**2. *Your family, friends and lecturers all want you to attend your tutes!***

**3. *Whose time are you really wasting by not attending tutorials?***

Accompanying this text is the picture of a man about to smash his phone on the ground in frustration at a lost opportunity. This message evokes images of how frustrating it is when things don't work out. Good grades can be achieved by tutorial attendance!

**4. *Attending tutorials not only gives me the knowledge I need, it also shows me how far I have come!***

**5. *I'm only hurting myself if I don't attend tutorials***

**6. *Learning important things will never be a waste of time for me.***



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