A Focus Group Study of Student Attitudes to Lectures

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from focus groups, conducted at Macquarie University, on the attitudes of computing students to lectures. Students felt that two things were vital for a good lecture: (1) that the lecturer goes beyond what is written in the lecture notes; (2) that the lecture is interactive, by which students meant that the lecturer asks if students understand concepts and adjusts the delivery accordingly, and also the lecturer answers the students' questions. The students in the focus groups also discussed what makes for a bad lectures: (1) lecturers reading straight from slides; (2) lecturers who 'blame the students', by saying that students don't work hard enough and are too lazy to turn up to lectures; and (3) lecturers who cover the material too slowly or too quickly. The most prominent reason given for not attending lectures was the timetabling of lectures in such a way that students had too few classes in one day to make the sojourn to university worthwhile. Any university seeking to improve attendance at lectures should perhaps look as much to improving its timetabling practices as it does to improving the practices of its individual lecturers.

Keywords: lectures, student attitudes, focus groups.

1 Introduction

The lecture is possibly both the most iconic element of university education, and the most frequently criticized element of university education. The negative aspects of university lectures are perhaps best summed up in the following well known joke:

The lecture is the process by which the notes of the lecturer are transferred to the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either.

Recognized authorities on university teaching are critical of how lectures are commonly conducted. Biggs (1999, pp. 98–100), citing earlier studies, claimed that attending lectures is a less effective way to acquire information than unsupervised reading, and that lectures are ineffective for stimulating higher order thinking. These problems with lectures, Biggs claimed, are due to the human attention span being limited to 10–15 minutes in passive situations, such as sitting in a lecture theatre. Ramsden (1992, pp. 154–156) made similar claims to

Biggs. Ramsden, however, does end his criticism of the lecture with the following caveat:

I would not want to leave anyone with impression that it is impossible to deliver a good lecture, or that I think good teachers should not lecture (though I do think they should do less of it, and for shorter periods).

Perhaps then lectures are not an impossible method for teaching, but a method that few academics currently do well. Certainly, few university academics have received any formal training in how to lecture, and there is a considerable amount that can be taught about lecturing (Bligh, 2000).

In 2006, the Division of Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) at Macquarie University undertook an investigation into student attitudes to aspects of their learning experience. That investigation was wide ranging and included lectures, tutorials, practicals, assessment procedures and feedback. The university's Centre for Professional Development (CPD) was commissioned to facilitate focus groups representative of all four departments in the division, of which computing was one department (the others being Electronics, Physics and Mathematics).

As a result of that study, the Division decided to focus a second study on their students' attitudes to lectures, as the first study pinpointed lectures as a particularly problematic area. Again, CPD was commissioned to facilitate focus groups that were representative of each of the four departments. This paper reports on the outcomes of this second study on lectures.

2 The Focus Groups

2.1 Recruitment and Composition

The focus groups were conducted in August 2007. The students who participated in the focus group sessions were recruited via email and information posted on websites – thus the participants were self-selecting and this should be taken into account when considering the findings. As an incentive to attend, participants were given movie vouchers.

There were eight focus groups sessions in total, of which three groups were comprised of students majoring in computing – each of these three computing groups comprised students from one of the three years of study. This paper describes the findings from the three computing focus groups. All the illustrative quotes below are from the computing focus groups. The composition of the three computing groups is given below.

2.1.1 First Year Computing Group

- 11 participants
- 2 international students
- 0 female students

2.1.2 Second Year Computing Group

- 10 participants
- 5 international students
- 3 female students

2.1.3 Third Year Computing Group

- 7 participants
- 2 international students
- 0 female students

2.2 Focus Group Questions

While the students were encouraged to raise any issues about lectures, several scripted questions were used by the interviewer to initiate and perpetuate discussion:

- What, to you, makes a good lecture? Why?
- What, to you, makes a bad lecture? Why?
- Why do you attend lectures?
- Why don't you, or others, attend lectures? (think about internal and external factors)
- In terms of lecture structure, what would most assist your learning? Why?
- In terms of lecture content, what would most assist your learning? Why?
- What improvements would you make to the current ICS lectures?
- What supporting material (lecture notes, websites, etc) do you currently have access to?
- What supporting material would most assist your learning? Why?

The following sections summarise the discussion that ensued from these questions.

3 "What to You Makes a Good lecture?"

Students nominated several aspects of a good lecture. The most prominent of these aspects are described in the following subsections.

3.1 Adapting to the Students

Students appreciate lecturers who ask if the students understand the concepts and can adapt the lecture delivery according to the feedback the students' provide:

Student: [nominates a particular lecturer] *would refer to something that we had to learn about in layman's terms, in simple terms. So if we didn't understand it then he would explain it even further with different examples.*

<Third Year Group>

Student: *One thing I do like about* [student nominates a lecturer] *is after every section he gives us things to do – like we've got to do it ourselves. So he's not just teaching us – he's making sure we understand while you're doing it.*

<First Year Group>

Student: *I think it's – yeah – good lectures often when they don't have a specific – OK – 'I have to get to slide 38 by the end of the lecture'. They go at the pace of the class.*

Interviewer: *OK – so they've got that flexibility.*

Student: *Yep.*

Interviewer: *So do you think that flexibility comes from good teaching or from knowing the content or just being comfortable.*

…

Student: *I think kind of judging where the students are at by asking them 'do you understand this', you know, 'do you want me to go over anything?'*

Student: *Like the lecturer sort of has to become part of the class almost.*

<Third Year Group>

3.2 Handling Questions

Students consistently nominated the ability to ask questions as a feature of a good lecturer. Among the more experienced students, there was an acknowledgement of the tension between questions and classroom management:

Interviewer: *Is there anything else that would make up a good lecture?*

Student: *More time, more time for questioning.*

Interviewer: *OK.*

Student: *Sometimes I find the lecturers go over the time allocated spot.*

Interviewer: *Trying to get through the content?*

Student: *Because people ask questions in the middle.*

Interviewer: *Oh, OK.*

Student: *And I think that's what most people are there for. If he goes through something and they're unsure they can ask the lecturer.*

Interviewer: *OK. So just a question time to be allocated into the lecture?*

Student: *Yeah.*

<Second Year Group>

Interviewer: *So when you go to a* [computing] *lecture, what makes it work for you? How do you learn the best?*

Student: *I think things like actual student involvement and getting students – getting us to actually think through different examples or things like that – rather than just sitting there for the whole hour...*

Interviewer: *Mm-hm.*

Student: *I think that's a problem though because a lot of the times that – like – the lecturer will say 'OK let's do this example – does anyone have an answer to it?' – Everyone just doesn't say anything anyway. So while that's – like I think it's a good idea to get student*

involvement ...But the thing is that – I think it's – student involvement – yeah – I think is fantastic but when you have a lecture theatre full of – like – a 150 people or something like that it's very hard to, one, hear what the person has to say if they're answering it, but two, actually get people involved as well.

<Third Year Group>

We note that many lecturers would find an inconsistency between the above student views and their own lecture room experience, where extracting questions from a class can be like extracting teeth.

3.3 Happy, Enthusiastic Lecturers

Students respond positively to lecturers who appear to be happy that they are teaching and are enthusiastic about the material they are presenting.

Student: *... what makes a good lecture is more the lecturer and his attitude towards giving the lecture. ... I've noticed that I've walked out of lectures thinking 'oh that's a good lecture' actually when the lecturer's happy more or less.*

<Second Year Group>

Associated with a positive emotional environment is the notion of humour. Students reported that the occasionally light moment helped refresh their minds:

Student: *... especially when you're doing* [a particular subject] *you are sitting there listening to code and it just doesn't listen to you for the whole hour.*

Student: *Lecturer's ability to bring you out of that for even a second – just say something funny just once in a while.*

Student: *Or even if it's not related just ...*

Interviewer: *Is that like refocussing you almost?*

Student: *Mm. 'Cos they expect us to sit there for an hour and listen to everything and absorb everything-it's kind of hard. But even if it was for like a minute to have a laugh and then you go back to it – it just seems so much better.*

<Second Year Group>

4 "What to you makes up a bad lecture?"

Students nominated several aspects of a bad lecture. The most prominent of these aspects are described in the following subsections.

4.1 Unreadable PowerPoint Slides

Student: *... the graphics of the lecturer's slides. It's – sometimes it's really bad so you can't even see it when you print it out.*

Student: *They can get actually quite complicated sometimes. ... I mean, when you've got code up there fair enough – it's going to be complex. But occasionally you've got something that has like three or four levels of little points and headings and arrows – and it's not very nice to learn from or to read. You're trying to focus on the lecturer but you're also trying to focus and read on the PowerPoint slides. ... Can't do both at the same time.*

<Second Year Group>

4.2 Blame the Students

Students reported feeling alienated by lecturers who make sweeping generalisations about the character of students:

Student: *... I don't turn up to the first week of lectures at all because half of it's ... about how many people failed the last semester, how many people aren't showing up to lectures... they just stereotype the whole group. ... you take it on board quite personally.*

Interviewer: *OK. So they cater towards the people who don't want to learn.*

…

Student: *And obviously the people who have showed up are the ones that do.*

Interviewer: *OK. Well do you guys all go to lectures?*

Student: [several] *Yes.*

<Second Year Group>

4.3 Poor Coordination between Subjects

When lecturers do not have a clear understanding of what the class already know, they may teach too quickly or too slowly:

Student: [Lecturers …] *often they're assuming that – like subjects that we have prerequisites for another subject – they're assuming that because we've done that prerequisite in the past that we know absolutely everything from that subject– there's always going to be things you don't remember perfectly.*

…

Student: *But also on the other hand – sometimes they go over stuff over and over.*

…

Student: *Like we've ... basically conversion methods, like to do with phase conversion and implementation – stuff like that – and all the waterfall methods and all that stuff – I've done that for three years now. Every single lecture it will come up. Its like – OK – I know that – can we move over to something else?*

…

Student: *Yeah ... it just seems like they've got no idea what I've done in the past ...*

Student: *… I find that if I've had the same lecturer through the years like for the subject and then the next one it helps a lot. 'Cos you sort of get to know his style and ... you sort of know what to expect and he knows what he's covered before.*

<Third Year Group>

4.4 The Physical Environment

Students explained that sometimes the lecture room itself was simply unpleasant.

Interviewer: *OK – anything else in your perfect lecture world?*

Student: *Better seats* [laughter]

Student: [several] *Yes!*

<First Year Group>

Another group cited as a problem the poor audio visual capabilities in some rooms.

5 Why do you attend lectures?

It is perhaps reassuring to hear that some students gave a very positive reason for attending lectures:

Student: *I'm more likely to turn up to the lectures for the subjects that I'm interested in …*

<Third Year Group>

Thus reassured, the remainder of this section describes less positive reasons for attending lectures.

5.1 Assessment Hints

Some students said that they went in case the lecturer spoke about assessment tasks (assignments and exams).

Student: *I feel I'm encouraged to go to lectures when subjects offer something a little more. Like – perhaps – I know this sounds a bit* [inaudible] *but sometimes they go into maybe a little bit of the assessment that's gone and they give you good guidelines. What you don't get from each exercise.*

<Second Year Group>

Student: *I think a lot of people come to lectures to come to hear if they say anything about anything that's really examinable. And like I know if I know that the lecture is going to be about the exam then I'll be a hundred percent. So maybe if you want attendance to go up – say each lecture we're going to be giving you something – like letting you know a little about the assignment that's coming up and how you can approach it and stuff like that – instead of just going on and on and on about theory when clearly we've got an assignment coming up. We're thinking about that – we're not thinking about anything else.*

<Third Year Group>

Sometimes a similar sentiment was expressed more positively:

Student: *One of the good subjects I've had was with the assignment – they didn't just give you everything they're going to give you at the start and then go 'Right. Now work it all out for yourself'. They gave you not much at the start but then progressively they give you six weeks to do it or something. And basically every week or whatever they'd give you more information to help you to do it so you weren't just left doing it on your own and trying to work it out. They'd actually tell you how to do stuff you needed to know for the assignment. ... So you'd start – you'd start your assignment when they first gave it to you and there was only so much you could do because you didn't know it all. But then the next lecture they'd tell you more.*

Student: *That's how you learn ...*

<Third Year Group>

5.2 An Absence of Written Materials

In some cases students said that they had to go to lectures because there was not a set of lecture notes, or a textbook.

6 Why don't people attend lectures?

While students in the focus groups conceded that some students do not attend lectures out of laziness, or because of paid casual work, they described several reasons why even committed students cease attending lectures. In general, many students find that lectures are not a good use of their limited time:

Student: *Well the thing is that a lot of people in third year don't even come to lectures anymore. Do you know what I mean? I'll be honest, I don't come to a lot of the lectures either because I know the lecturer who's taking it – I don't get anything out of it anyway so there's no point. So that's why you get – I mean, first year I went to every single lecture, every single whatever. But then you start to realise ... well I really don't need to be here for this – I'm just going to leave.*

Student: *You just get the same amount out of it if you just spend time at home.*

Student: *Exactly.*

Student: *Than making ...*

Interviewer: *Without travel.*

Student: *Yep, that's it.*

<Third Year Group>

6.1 No Value Added to PowerPoint Slides

Students want lecturers who go beyond what is written in the lecture notes:

Interviewer: *Do you guys all go to lectures*?

Student: *Yep*.

Student: *Most of the time* [laughter]

Student: *Most of the time.*

Student: *Except when my lectures clash.*

…

Interviewer: *… do you know people who don't go to lectures and why do you think they don't go*?

Student: *Because most of the time they tend to already know what they're up for and what they need to get done.*

Interviewer: *And why – how do they know that*?

Student: *They read the slides*.

Student: *Yeah*.

Student: *Yeah – they just assume that everything that's taught is going to be off the slides and just learn the slides and what needs to be done.*

Interviewer: *And is that true*?

Student: *Most of the time.*

Student: *Sometimes – yeah.*

Student: *Some of my – well there's one class I haven't been attending ... 'cos I don't feel like I'm learning anything from the lesson.*

<First Year Group>

Student: *I think it's a huge issue. I think it's like – I mean, lectures are supposed to be you listening to the lecturer. I mean, if I wanted to read the slide I'd just read it at home. I wouldn't sit in a lecture room for however many hours to do it. I'm coming to a lecture to hear what they have to say about it.*

<Third Year Group>

Even when the lecturer has an engaging manner, some students will not attend if the lecture if they know the lecturer will only cover the material in the notes:

Student: *... he's actually a good speaker.... But I don't necessarily gain anything more from going to the lecture than just simply reading the textbook or doing the tutorials or things like that. The PowerPoint things that he puts up are fairly good but again, you know, if I read the PowerPoints beforehand I'm OK.*

Interviewer: *There's no value added.*

Student: *Yeah – exactly – there's no value added out of going.*

<div align="right"><Second Year Group></div>

On reading the above, a lecturer might be tempted to improve their lecturer attendance by not making the lecture slides available, but as the students themselves point out, that may cause its own problems:

Student: *The easy solution for that will be the lecturers will go "OK – well we'll stop putting that content up" but that doesn't solve the problem.*

Student: *Yep.*

Student: *Because* [inaudible]

Student: *Yep, that'll just increase failure rate.*

Student: *Yeah, that'll just increase ...*

Student: *I can guarantee that.*

<div align="right"><Second Year Group></div>

6.2   Lecturers with Accents

Students were reluctant to attend a lecture if they knew they would struggle to understand the lecturer's accent, but students are not insensitive to the cultural issues of accents:

Student*: I think another important thing is that the lecturer has a clear voice. ... Sometimes if the lecturer is – you can't hear what he's talking about – not interested in the lecture.*

Interviewer: *OK – so when you say clear voice do you mean – just ...*

Student: *The pronunciation.*

Interviewer: *... not accented or just the way they're talking loud?*

Student: *No, I mean the accent.*

Interviewer: *The accent – OK.*

Student: *I know it's something we can't really complain about because it's the lecturer's background.*

Interviewer: *You can complain about it.*

Student: *Yeah – but accent – especially at* [first year] *level – I found really difficult to understand anything. And I found no point in going to lectures as well if I'm going to sit there and struggle to understand the guy when I know most of it is just reading off the lecture slides. I seriously have no motivation to go at all.*

<div align="right"><Second Year Group></div>

6.3   Class Scheduling

6.3.1   Timing

The times at which classes are scheduled has an impact on student attendance:

Student: *Um − it's not anything really to do with the lecturer – it's sometimes just time. Like – if you have a lecture in the morning and a lecture at night the chances of going in the morning and staying the whole day might be diminished a little bit.*

Interviewer: *OK.*

Student: *Yeah – It's time.*

Interviewer: *Time.*

Student: *Yeah.*

Student: *... Some lecturers – I know it's probably not their fault – but they had one class for that subject and you had to go this, this and this day. And often when you're timetabling you're left with one class in the morning for one hour and the rest of the day off.*

Interviewer: *Mmm.*

Student: *And they're better off thinking, you know, I'll stay at home and read the slides.*

…

Student: *For* [student nominates a particular subject] *I don't know why they separate three one-hour lectures.... in two days. One is eleven o'clock on the Monday and the other one is Tuesday nine o'clock and then one o'clock in the afternoon.*

<div align="right"><Second Year Group></div>

Student: *It's also – some lectures are on really stupid times. Like, I have a lecture on 6pm to 9 pm on a Friday night. For religious reasons I have dinner at home and all those kind of things on Friday nights. And like – who wants to stay at uni from 6–9 on a Friday night? ... we might be computing students where we like to sit at home on our computers but it still doesn't mean that like …* [laughter]

Student: *Even 9 AM starts four days a week.*

Student: *Yeah there's no way I can get here at 9 at a lecture. 'Cos – I don't know – some people live so far away ... I live in the East which is half an hour drive away. But if I'm leaving – if a lecture is at nine o'clock I'm going to be in traffic for at least an hour.*

Interviewer: *I live in the east. I get here at seven to miss the traffic.*

Student: *Yeah – so that's the thing. So it's just a bit of a problem to have ...*

Student: *And it's worse when you come in at – you make the effort and come in at nine and then, like, he just doesn't do anything and it's just a half an hour lecture and then ...*

Student: *You're like, 'why did I just come?'*

…

Student: [Begins by naming a particular class] *There are only thirteen people in the class and they had a lecture at nine o'clock in the morning and they had to move it because ...*

Student: *… No one would turn up.*

Student: *Three people would turn up* [laughter]. *Because for most people it was the only subject they had the whole day so they didn't bother turning up because it'd take them an hour, an hour and a half to get to uni for an hour.*

…

Student: *I've* [classes] *five days a week but two of them I've only have one hour of class.*

Student: *Last semester I had a 9 o'clock class and then I've got* [no classes] *till like 8pm.*

Student: *I've had classes where I've been here from nine o'clock to nine o'clock.*

Student: *I've had nine to nine.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

Student: *Oh yeah, easy.*

Student: *Yeah.*

Student: *I've had that nearly every year I've had that. This semester I've got that – start at ten.*

Student: *I had – one of those times I had a five hour break in the middle of the day.*

<Third Year Group>

6.3.2 Location

Associated with poor timing of lectures is the poor location of lectures:

Student: *Usually most of our classes and most of our activities are around this building here, and then our lectures are so at the end* [of the campus] *…there are a lot of other classes that people can fit in around here instead of all the way over there.*

Student: *Our classes are not big.*

<Second Year Group>

6.3.3 Length

Part of poor scheduling is also the length of lectures:

Student*: I've got lectures that go for a three hour block. And I think it's just – it's – yeah – it's great to get it all done because you don't have to come in the individual days but on the other hand I would rather coming in different days so you don't have to sit through a lecture for 3 hours. I don't know – it gets a bit annoying when it is for that huge block.*

Interviewer: *Yeah – a lot of people doing one-hour lectures in the younger years were saying 'no, no – we want two-hour blocks'.*

Student*: Yeah – I don't know – by 3rd year I just get a bit annoyed because – I don't know – I lose concentration quite quickly and it's just – it gets to be a lot.*

<Third Year Group>

6.3.4 Relationship with Labs/Tutorials

Poor scheduling and location also adversely affects the relationship between lectures and practical sessions:

Interviewer: *… how do your lectures, tuts and practicals fit in with each other? Do they all … you know, do you go to lectures and you learn what you need to do for the tuts and pracs and do they fit nicely together?*

Student: *No – it's not really [inaudible]*

Student: *I just went to a prac and we haven't learnt it yet. … You have a* [subject] *tut and you do the material that you're supposed to learn the next day in that* [subject's] *lecture. So you have no idea what's going on doing* [subject].

Student: *Yeah.*

Student: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *OK.*

Student: *Sometimes you really don't know. Once you finish your class you rush to the tut or before the tut you go to before the lecture and then you're like in totally two different subjects.*

<Second Year Group>

6.4 Assessment Scheduling: Peak Loads

Sometimes the assessment deadlines stop students from attending lectures:

Student: *… sometimes you get big assignments that are due the same week.*

Student: *You get all your assignments at once.*

Student: *Oh, that's a killer.*

Student: *So sometimes you can't go to lectures because you have to sit in the labs doing the assignments for a week.*

Student: *Every semester I get that ... I got it this semester as well.*

Student: *You sit in the labs the entire week and you never turn up to one lecture the entire week because …*

Interviewer: *You're too busy doing all.*

Student: *You've got all your assignments due at the same time.*

…

Student: *Well, yeah, I understand that we should be doing assignments months and months before but let's be honest like a lot of us don't do that because of whatever.*

Student: *But some of them we don't have the knowledge in the lectures.*

Student: *Yeah, yeah.*

Student: *That as well – we don't have the knowledge for it.*

Student: *We get given the assignment and we don't have the knowledge to start it.*

Student: *We only have the knowledge for it when it's due basically.*

Student: *We'll have maybe two weeks worth to ... get given a month for the assignment but we only learn the knowledge two weeks before it's due.*

<Third Year Group>

7 Recommendations by CPD

As noted earlier, these focus group sessions were conducted by the university's Centre for Professional Development (CPD). As a result of these sessions, the CPD made a number of recommendations to the Division,

which are described in the following subsections. These recommendations are taken almost directly from the CPD's report, and were only lightly edited for this paper.

7.1 Professional Development of New Staff

Academics new to teaching, or with less than two years experience in teaching at a tertiary level, undertake some form of professional development in teaching and learning, coordinated by the Centre for Professional Development (CPD).

7.2 Peer Observation

ICS academics take a "professional approach" to teaching, including the incorporation of systematic peer observation of teaching throughout the division.

7.3 Curriculum Review

The division undertake an extensive curriculum review in order to investigate the potential of lectures being more interactive – this could mean more content is available online.

7.4 Recognition of Good Teaching

The Division/Departments recognise and reward good teachers and use them, together with Divisional winners of Macquarie Outstanding Teacher awards as examples of good practice.

7.5 Communication problems

Academics with strong accents/language difficulties are provided with assistance to overcome the problems these pose in the teaching and learning context.

8 Discussion and Further Findings

In this section, we first discuss the CPD recommendations before making some further suggestions of our own.

8.1 Comments on the CPD Findings

With the exception of the recommendation regarding academics with strong accents / language difficulties, the CPD recommendations are not closely related to the evidence in the focus group transcripts. These recommendations are what university Teaching & Learning units across Australia have been advocating for many years.

The CPD recommended professional development of new staff. This is a good recommendation, but we ask '*what in the focus group transcripts suggests that new staff members are a particular problem*?' We find almost nothing in the transcripts concerning the experience levels of lecturers. If anything, what little evidence we did find in the transcripts suggests that it is the older academics, not the new academics that may need the professional development:

Student: *... don't get me wrong because older people can be really happy and really energetic and really passionate. But, you know, if you're sort of new to something – like when you get a new job you work hard to like, you know, impress and keep it. But I don't really think that – like I think they get older so*

they just don't care. They just want to hurry up and teach and get out of there.

<Second Year Group>

8.2 Other Factors in Poor Lecture Attendance

This subsection discusses several factors leading to poor lecture attendance that we found prominent in the transcripts but were not addressed in the recommendations of the CPD.

8.2.1 Timetabling

A prominent reason given for not attending lectures is the timetabling of lectures in such a way that students had too few classes in one day to make the sojourn to university worthwhile. The transcripts also contain student suggestions on how classes could be more attractively timetabled:

Student: *... you would know that someone who's doing, say, an information systems degree would have to do these subjects. Can't you sort of sync it up so that they're all in the same block? ... Instead of waiting three hours for a lecturer to come and then you don't really need to go to it. Do you know what I mean*?

Student: [The student begins by advocating the adoption within computing subjects of a timetabling structure that the student experienced in a non-computing subject]. … *it's like a two-hour block which is like – the first hour is lectures and stuff like that and afterwards if you've got questions and stuff the lecturer will be there to answer questions – or, say for a computing subject, that he could be in the labs or something like that ...*

Student: *That's like the* [computing subject] *we did it last semester was actually good because you'd have lecture and then for ... the prac … The lecturer and – one of her PhD students I think – they would be in the labs the hour after ... like the whole class would walk to the labs and we'd do like practice stuff together.*

…

Interviewer: *So you had access to them after the lecture.*

Student: *And it was useful because like she was there to help the whole class. Like we could be doing our pracs and go 'OK how do I do this' and she'd be able to help us as well as discuss.*

<Third Year Group>

8.2.2 Coordination of Assessment Load

Students identified heavy peak assessment load as a factor in non-attendance at lectures. One student also pithily suggested a solution:

Student: … *the lecturers need to talk between each other because sometimes you get big assignments that are due the same week.*

Many experienced academics will complain about externally mandated alterations to their assessment schedule, with some justification, as the deadlines for assignments in individual subjects are often bound tightly to the sequencing of the lecture material. We concede

that, from the perspective of a single lecturer/subject, coordinating assessment deadlines across subjects might introduce some inefficiency into the teaching of single subject. However, lecturers who are troubled by poor lecture attendance might consider the larger picture; that students attendance at their lectures might improve as a result of coordinating assessment deadlines, and perhaps there is a net gain to be had via the gambit of slightly suboptimal assessment deadlines.

The second author has worked in a faculty (not at his current institution) where assessment deadlines were mandated across subjects, so coordination of assessment deadlines is – not popular, but – possible. If mandated deadlines are too difficult, then at least lecturers could communicate their deadline intentions to each other, and some of them might then adjust their own assessment schedule voluntarily

8.2.3 Coordination of Content Across Years

Students identified the repetition of material in successive subjects as a factor in non-attendance at lectures, and they also discussed the obvious solution:

Student: *... I don't know if lecturers actually talk to each other to let them know what they've done. ...*

Student: *Yeah – well, I'm sure it happens. But it just seems like they've got no idea what I've done in the past ...*

Coordination across several subjects is difficult, as every lecturer knows that their colleague may have talked about something, but the students may not have learnt it. Never-the-less, there is no harm in academics at least talking to each other to find out what their colleagues claim to have taught.

9 Discussion of Findings

We identified two underlying themes in the focus group transcripts that were not captured within the CPD recommendations:

- Lecturer attitude
- Value-adding

With respect to the first of these underlying themes, we can hardly expect our students to be enthusiastic about attending lectures if we lecturers do not convey a positive attitude about lectures. This might appear self-evident, that a lecturer who is disinterested – or worse negative – about taking the class, is giving a signal to students to adopt the same attitude. From the study results presented in this paper it appears that it is worth reminding ourselves and our colleagues of this self-evident truth.

With respect to the second of the underlying themes (i.e. value-adding), students are increasingly asking questions about what the lecturer experience is providing to them. We should at least be thankful that they are asking questions, if not perhaps the ones we would prefer. Scientific enquiry is not meant to ask the easy questions. The results from this focus group study indicate that students want the lecture to contain material and experiences that could not as easily be gained from private reading of the textbook or notes. The lecturer might achieve such an outcome by many alternatives. Some alternatives are: (1) to make the lecture an opportunity to ask questions of the lecturer; (2) have the students work on problems for which the lecturer then presents a worked solution; (3) provide assessment and examination information. Perhaps the message is that if the lecture would have been given in the same way even if no students were actually present, and especially if the lecturer's attitude was disinterested or worse, then we have a lecture that the students are not keen to attend. Lectures that involve the students, which give them positive reasons to attend, will see their own reward.

10 Conclusion

Computing academics often warn of the dangers of outsourcing software development. Analogous problems arise when academics within a discipline outsource the evaluation of teaching quality to an external unit of their own university. Teaching and learning units have their own perspective – (to use an expression common in teaching and learning units) they see the world through a particular lens – and therefore teaching and learning units bring their own biases to any analysis of teaching within a discipline. We are not advocating that teaching and learning units should be ignored – on the contrary, we strongly advocate that academic disciplines work closely with their teaching and learning units. What we warn against is a complete dependence on an outside source of authority for the evaluation of teaching and learning issues.

Teaching and learning units tend to focus on problems that can be fixed by changes to the practises of the individual lecturer. That focus makes teaching and learning units less aware of the sources of other problems in university teaching, and therefore less likely to identify problems that can only be solved by changes to systemic procedures. For example, in this paper, we identified poor timetabling of lectures and associated classes as a factor in low lecture attendance, but the report from the teaching and learning unit made no recommendations in that regard. On the basis of our reading of the transcripts, we conclude that any university seeking to improve attendance at lectures should look as much to improving its timetabling practices as it does to improving its individual lecturers.

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