

## Chronic Absenteeism at Higher Education (Exploring Patterns and Perception at UTAS -Sur)

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism in English Foundation Program classes at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sur Branch in the Sultanate of Oman. High absenteeism rates have been linked to poor academic performance, particularly in continuous assessments, midterms, and final examinations. This research adopted a descriptive research method. It involved a descriptive questionnaire to identify causes of absenteeism through a student questionnaire. A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed online using Microsoft Forms to identify GFP students' perceptions, attendance habits, and suggested interventions regarding English lessons. The findings indicate four primary reasons contributing to chronic absenteeism at UTAS-Sur: feeling tired or unmotivated, physical illness, family responsibilities or emergencies, and mental health-related stress. Students suggested implementing flexible timetables, providing mental health and wellbeing support, offering more engaging and relevant course content, and ensuring additional academic support could promote more consistent attendance habits. A multifaceted approach is recommended, optimizing class timing, enhancing mental health support, improving engagement strategies, fostering positive teacher-student dynamics, and upgrading transportation services. Addressing these areas could significantly reduce absenteeism and promote a more conducive learning environment for students. Future research may further explore the efficacy of implemented changes and continuously assess student needs as they evolve.

**Keywords:** Chronic Absenteeism, UTAS, Higher Education

## 1. Introduction:

Chronic absenteeism is a problem faced by various educational institutions worldwide. Research has been conducted to understand the reasons behind chronic absenteeism, especially in schools, as it correlates with low educational achievement (TeachHub, 2019), increased dropouts rates (EdResearch for Action, 2022), weak classroom engagement, and lack of motivation (Roger & Feller, 2017). The causes of chronic absenteeism have also been investigated and classified into personal, familial, financial, and educational factors. Furthermore, effective intervention strategies to promote regular attendance in schools include strengthening familial relationships (TeachHub, 2019), maintaining instant attendance records (EdResearch for Recovery, 2021), keeping families informed (Rogers & Feller, 2017), providing reinforcement and incentives (CollegeNet, 2025), offering mental health support (TeachHub, 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2021), and implementing flexible learning options. This research aims to examine the problem of chronic absenteeism in the context of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Sur. The issue persists not only in the Foundation Program but also among teachers from post-foundation programs who have been reporting it. The findings of this study will be utilized to develop intervention strategies to reduce absenteeism rates among GFP students in the coming semesters. To ensure effectiveness, the intervention strategies implemented at UTAS-Sur will be based on the findings of this study. Success heavily relies on context—schools and institutions that tailor strategies to local needs achieve more effective outcomes (Xavier & Triadó, 2018).

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem:

There is a high prevalence of absenteeism among Foundation students at UTAS–Sur, correlating with low performance in key assessments. The problem has become extremely alarming after the midterm results. Despite teachers' efforts, meetings to discuss the issue and to provide suggestions and solutions, the root causes and effective solutions remain unclear. This study aims to investigate underlying causes and test intervention strategies. The following is data recorded in the CIMS, which is the UTAS database system, during the Spring 2025 semester:

Data from Spring 2025 shows that absenteeism rates are high. For example:

- **Level 1:** 40% of 48 students had absenteeism rates of 10% or higher.
- **Level 2:** 34% of 100 students were chronically absent, with 10% or higher.

- **Level 3:** 60% of 160 students had absenteeism of 10% or higher.
- **Level 4:** 59% of 71 students were chronically absent, with 10% or higher.

These figures align with standard definitions of chronic absenteeism, missing more than 10% of English lessons, suggesting a pervasive issue requiring institutional attention.

## 1.2. Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attendance habits of students at the General Foundation Programme at UTAS-Sur?
2. What are the primary reasons behind chronic absenteeism among UTAS–Sur students in the English Foundation Program?
3. How do the General Foundation Program students perceive their relationship with peers and English teachers?
4. What kind of interventions do students at the GFP believe would encourage regular attendance in English lessons?

## 1.3. Significance of the Study:

There is a plethora of studies covering chronic absenteeism issues in schools, including root causes, intervention strategies, and the effectiveness of these strategies. However, absenteeism in higher education institutions is not as thoroughly discussed. Originating from UTAS-Sur English Department faculty concerns over frequent student absenteeism and teachers' inability to fulfill their duties because of frequent absenteeism, this research aimed to support not only English instructors in involving measures to support regular attendance among students but also other stakeholders, including academic departments, student affairs, admission and registration, and university administration. By identifying causes and testing solutions, the current study may hopefully inform policies and support services to improve student attendance. Subsequently, improving students' confidence, academic achievement, and sense of belongingness.

Even though this study has been context-specific to UTAS-Sur, its findings could be generalized to other higher education institutions with similar administrative structures, student demographics, and educational challenges. This study also aimed to pave the way for other research, in which the effectiveness of the measures taken and those based on its findings can be further assessed and evaluated.

## 1.4. Definitions of Terms:

**UTAS:** University of Technology and Applied Sciences, A branch-based university in the Sultanate of Oman.

**Chronic Absenteeism:** missing more than 10% of instructional days per academic year (Rogers & Feller, 2017; EdResearch for Action, 2022). In the current study, chronic absenteeism refers to absenteeism rates across the GFP in UTAS-Sur exceeding 10% per semester.

## 2. Literature Review:

Chronic absenteeism is a problem that concerns many educational and higher education institutions around the world. It is defined as missing more than 10% of instructional days per academic year (Rogers & Feller, 2017; EdResearch for Action, 2022). Research regarding chronic absenteeism is more focused on pre-university education. A list of varied, sometimes interconnected reasons is behind chronic absenteeism, which has been discussed in different research papers. According to Xavier & Triadó, the most cited reasons included physical and mental health challenges. (2018). Families' responsibilities and financial hardships, such as needing a job to support oneself and family and care for siblings, are among the primary reasons for chronic absenteeism from school, as Rogers & Feller (2017) mentioned. Transportation challenges due to housing instability and safety concerns also affect school attendance rates, as clearly stated in the EdResearch for Action (2022). Furthermore, School climate, including lack of engagement, poor student-teacher relationships, or uninspiring instructions, also leads to higher absenteeism rates (Kearney & Graczyk, 2021). As for higher education institutes, factors concerning absenteeism rates overlap with factors leading to school absenteeism. In higher education, where students are expected to demonstrate self-regulation, they tend to miss classes because of minimal accountability. They also miss classes due to physical and mental health issues and lack of motivation. Roy, Joshi, and Choudhary (2020) found that poor lecture scheduling, lack of engaging teaching methods, demotivating and monotonous pedagogy, and inexperienced or irregular faculty lead to chronic absenteeism.

### Impact of Chronic Absenteeism on Learning

In schools, frequent absenteeism has been proven to lead to poor academic achievement and examination performance, which in turn leads to lower grades. (TeachHub, 2019).

Also, chronic absenteeism reduces graduation rates as it is considered a strong dropout indicator. (EdResearch for Action, 2022). Roger and Feller indicated that chronic absenteeism is a major factor in weaker classroom engagement and participation, which in turn affects long-term academic confidence and motivation (2017). In universities, students who skip classes are less likely to complete assignments, engage in discussions, or retain key concepts (CollegeNet, 2025).

### **Institutional Approaches to Promote Attendance**

Educational institutions have implemented various strategies to reduce absenteeism and improve student engagement. One key approach involves building strong relationships with students and their families to foster a sense of belonging and accountability (TeachHub, 2019). Additionally, real-time tracking of attendance data allows educators and administrators to identify patterns early and intervene before absenteeism becomes chronic (EdResearch for Recovery, 2021). Moreover, family engagement strategies, like regular text message reminders and check-ins, have shown promising results in improving student attendance by keeping families informed and involved recognition or rewards, to encourage consistent attendance (CollegeNet, 2025). Recognizing the role of mental health in student engagement, many schools and universities have increased support for mental health and well-being through counseling and wellness programs (TeachHub, 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2021). In higher education, flexible learning options—including hybrid models and recorded lectures—have proven effective in accommodating students' diverse needs and schedules (CollegeNet, 2025). Also, in higher education, combining attendance policies with academic support has shown moderate success, especially when paired with instructor engagement (CollegeNet, 2025). Success depends heavily on context—schools and institutions that tailor their strategies to local needs tend to see more effective outcomes (Xavier & Triadó, 2018). Together, these strategies create a comprehensive framework for addressing the complex causes of absenteeism.

## **3. Research Methodology:**

### **3.1. Research Design:**

This study employed a descriptive questionnaire to investigate the causes, patterns, and potential solutions to chronic absenteeism among students in the English Foundation Program at Sur-UTAS during the Spring 2025 semester. A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed online

using Microsoft Forms to gather students' perceptions, attendance habits, and suggested interventions.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first one included demographic information about the participants, while the second tackled the main topic, absenteeism. The latter also consisted of two parts. The first one consisted of 14 structured items divided into five dimensions. These dimensions are attendance habits, reasons for absence, support and learning environment, teacher and peer relationships, and Suggestions to Improve Attendance. The second is an open-ended question to explore students' other reasons for absenteeism, challenges to attend English lessons, and suggestions to promote attendance.

### 3.2. Population and Sample:

This study includes all 563 students enrolled in the English Foundation Program across all four levels (Level 1 to Level 4) at UTAS–Sur. The students of the Sur branch were selected as both the research population and sample because the issue of chronic absenteeism was specifically observed in this branch. No formal communication was made with other UTAS branches to determine whether the same issue exists elsewhere. Additionally, the researcher is based at the Sur branch, which allows for more accessible communication, coordination, and data collection.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined based on initial discussions with English Foundation Program teachers, who first raised concerns regarding frequent absenteeism among their students. As a result, the research was specifically designed to support English language teachers in addressing this challenge within the context of the English Foundation Program.

The inclusion criteria for this study are as follows: participants must be currently enrolled in the General Foundation Program (GFP) at UTAS–Sur and studying English in any of the four foundation levels. They must also have been identified as having chronic absenteeism based on institutional attendance records and be willing to voluntarily participate in the survey or questionnaire.

The exclusion criteria include students who are not part of the English Foundation Program, such as those enrolled in post-foundation programs or other departments. It also excludes students in the Foundation Program who are not studying English. Additionally, any student who declines to participate or submits an incomplete survey response will be excluded from the study.

### 3.3. Data Collection:

Data was collected during the Spring 2025 term from currently enrolled Foundation Program students at Sur-UTAS. The target population included students from Levels 1 to 4 of the English Foundation Program, encompassing all new, passing, and repeating students. A questionnaire was administered in English and Arabic to ensure accessibility for all participants, as Arabic is the students' L1 language.

The questionnaire was administered online via Microsoft Forms, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed of the study's purpose, and all responses were used exclusively for research and program improvement. To ensure data completeness, participation required answering all questions, as each item was marked as “required”. Demographic questions were included to categorize responses by gender, academic status, and program level. Quantitative data on absenteeism frequency and its causes were collected using fixed-choice questions. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through three open-ended questions, which allowed students to express their personal challenges and propose context-specific solutions.

### 3.4. Data Analysis:

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics for closed-ended items (e.g., frequencies and percentages) and thematic analysis for open-ended responses to identify common themes related to absenteeism and potential intervention.

## 4. Research Findings:

Based on the data shown in table 1, a total of 68 students in the English Foundation Program at UTAS-Sur participated in the survey, with almost equal gender representation of 51% female and 49% male. Among the respondents, 50% had successfully passed previous levels of the program, while 35% were new students, and 15% were repeaters of their current level. Notably, 74% of the participants were from Levels 1 and 2, indicating a predominance of students who may still adapt to the academic environment and its demands.

**Table 1** Demographic Information of the Study Sample

N	Gender		Status			level			
	Female	Male	Pass	Repeater	New	1	2	3	4
68	51%	49%	50%	15%	34%	22%	62%	7%	9%



The findings of the study are presented here in an order based on the research questions.

#### 4.1. Habits of Absenteeism:

To answer question 1, “**What are the attendance habits of students at GFP at UTAS-Sur?**”, the questionnaire results in table 2, indicated that 60% of students miss one to two English classes weekly, and 8% were absent for three or more classes each week. This indicates a significant attendance issue, particularly when only 31% of respondents reported consistent attendance. This widens the gap between the intended learning outcomes and the actual knowledge they acquired, taking into consideration that English lessons are structured and cumulative, and that acquiring new knowledge depends heavily on the previously learned materials. Furthermore, the analysis of specific days and times reveals that 25% of students reported no specific patterns for their absences. In contrast, and as predicted, Thursday emerged as the most frequently missed day (24%), likely due to its position as the last day of the week. Morning classes starting at 8:00 AM were notably a common obstacle for 22% of students, indicating a potential challenge with early morning attendance. This indicates the need to survey both students’ and staff’s opinions regarding the potential rescheduling of class start times from 8:00 to 9:00 instead.

**Table 2** *Attendance Habits of the Participant Students in the Study*

1	On average, How Many English classes do you miss per week?				
	0 classes	1-2 classes	3 classes	<3 classes	
	31%	60%	4%	4%	
2	When are you most likely to be absent from English classes?				
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
	6%	0%	3%	3%	24%
3	Which classes you do you usually miss?				
	Morning classes		Afternoon classes		
	22%		8%		

#### 4.2. Reasons of Absenteeism

To answer the second main question, “**What are the primary reasons behind chronic absenteeism among UTAS–Sur students in the English Foundation Program?**”,



the participants were given 10 reasons to order them based on their own reasons. As it is shown in table 3, the data elucidates the complex factors contributing to absenteeism. The leading reasons included fatigue and lack of motivation (20%), which indicates the necessity of enhancing students' engagement and interest. This is followed by physical illness (18%) and family responsibilities (15%) as significant causes of absenteeism. Mental health issues and stress also accounted for 12% of the absences, highlighting a critical need for mental health support within the program. Transportation issues (8%) and work-related challenges (5%) were other barriers to attendance. Qualitative responses indicated that the timing of classes and class duration, often stretching to 1 hour and 40 minutes, could be overly demanding, and long commute times from home to campus and vice versa further compounded these challenges, particularly for those living far from campus.

**Table 3** *Reasons Beyond Missing English Classes*

What are the main reasons beyond missing English classes?				
<i>Feeling tired or unmotivated</i>	20%			
<i>Physical illness</i>	18%			
<i>Family responsibilities or emergencies</i>	15%			
<i>Physical illness</i>	12%			
<i>The teacher does not track attendance daily.</i>	1%			
<i>Transportation issues</i>	6%			
<i>The teacher is inconsiderate</i>	3%			
<i>Work or financial pressures</i>	4%			
<i>Difficulties understanding the lesson</i>	2%			
<i>Lack of interest in the content</i>	2%			
<i>Social or cultural adjustment issues</i>	4%			
<i>Others</i>	16%			
<b>How often do you feel stressed or anxious to attend classes?</b>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Too Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
	35%	49%	12%	3%
<b>Do you find teaching methods and materials engaging?</b>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Always</i>
	4%	10%	47%	38%

### 4.3. Support and Learning Environment:

Regarding the question that tackled the support and comfort levels experienced in English classes, which was stated as, “**How do General Foundation Program students perceive their relationship with peers and English teachers?**”, the answers are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** *Support and Learning Environment*

Do you feel supported and comfortable in your English classes?				
<i>N</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Always</i>
68	6%	13%	51%	29%

  

Do you feel supported by your campus in terms of your academic and personal needs?				
	<i>Never</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Always</i>
	1%	25%	51%	22%

About 29% of the students reported feeling consistently comfortable and supported, with 51% stating they sometimes feel supported. Conversely, 19% of students indicated a lack of support during lessons, which may contribute to their absenteeism. The feelings of stress and anxiety towards attending classes were significant, with 49% of respondents reporting occasional nerves about attendance, and 15% experiencing frequent stress.

The survey revealed a predominantly positive relationship between students and their English teachers, with 85% of students rating this relationship as good to very good. Additionally, 81% of respondents expressed similarly positive relationships with their peers. These strong interpersonal relationships may serve as a stabilizing factor for student engagement and retention.

### 4.4. Suggested Interventions to Encourage Regular Attendance:

Regarding the answer for the question, “**What kind of interventions do students at the GFP believe would encourage regular attendance in English lessons?**” An open-ended question was asked to let participants express their opinions freely.

The students' suggestions reflect a desire for meaningful changes that could enhance their engagement and attendance, as shown in Table 5. Key recommendations include:

1. **Class Scheduling Flexibility:** A substantial 33% of respondents advocated flexible timetables to accommodate diverse student needs. Specifically, many students suggested eliminating Thursday classes due to transportation constraints and advocating for later starting times to improve attendance.
2. **Mental Health Support:** With 22% of students highlighting the need for mental health resources, strengthening psychological support services could alleviate some of the stress and anxiety that impedes attendance. Teachers must be informed about the procedures for accessing mental health support services for students who need them.
3. **Engaging Curriculum:** A desire for more engaging and relevant class content was echoed by 19% of respondents. Suggestions included incorporating diverse teaching methods such as games, digital tools, and group projects to foster a more interactive learning environment.
4. **Teacher Conduct:** Multiple respondents stressed the need for teachers to treat students considerately and fairly. Monitoring teacher behavior could ensure a supportive classroom atmosphere.
5. **Involvement in decision making:** A significant number of students expressed enthusiasm towards making decisions regarding curriculum and class materials. Some students stated, “Teach us correct English.” Even though they did not explain what correct English is, it is a strong motive to ask students what and how they want to learn English.
5. **Transportation Improvements:** Students underscored the need for a better transportation system, particularly for those living in hostel accommodations. This may involve providing alternative transportation solutions for students who miss the UTAS-Sur buses.

**Table 5** *Suggestions might contribute to Regular Attendance*

What could help you attend English classes more regularly?	
<i>More flexible class times</i>	33%
<i>Extra academic support</i>	11%
<i>Better transport options</i>	5%
<i>Mental health and well-being support</i>	22%
<i>More interesting or relevant content</i>	19%
<i>Others</i>	11%

## 5. Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism in English Foundation Program classes at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sur Branch in the Sultanate of Oman. High absenteeism rates have been linked to poor academic performance, particularly in continuous assessments, midterms, and final examinations. This research adopted a descriptive research method. It involved a descriptive questionnaire to identify causes of absenteeism through a student questionnaire. A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed online using Microsoft Forms to identify GFP students' perceptions, attendance habits, and suggested interventions regarding English lessons. The findings indicate four primary reasons contributing to chronic absenteeism at UTAS- Sur: feeling tired or unmotivated, physical illness, family responsibilities or emergencies, and mental health-related stress. Students suggested that implementing flexible timetables, providing mental health and wellbeing support, offering more engaging and relevant course content, and ensuring additional academic support could promote more consistent attendance habits. A multifaceted approach is recommended, optimizing class timing, enhancing mental health support, improving engagement strategies, fostering positive teacher-student dynamics, and upgrading transportation services. Addressing these areas could significantly reduce absenteeism and promote a more conducive learning environment for students. Future research may further explore the efficacy of implemented changes and continuously assess student needs as they evolve.

## 6. Recommendations

The findings from the questionnaire of the English Foundation Program reveal significant insights into student attendance patterns, challenges, and potential solutions. A multifaceted approach is recommended, optimizing class timing, enhancing mental health support, improving engagement strategies, fostering positive teacher-student dynamics, and upgrading transportation services. Addressing these areas could significantly reduce absenteeism and promote a more conducive learning environment for students. Future research may further explore the efficacy of implemented changes and continuously assess student needs as they evolve.

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