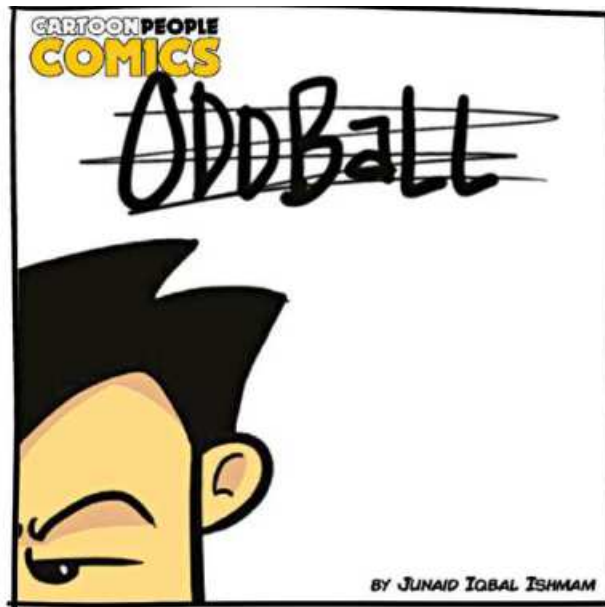


ATTENTION TO ATTENDANCE

MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN & ZAMILUR RAHMAN SHUIVO

Any undergraduate student can relate to the curse of having to drag their body out of bed to attend an 8 AM class. Ironically, the motivating factor isn't their sense of urgency to learn something in class but the harsh consequences of losing attendance marks. High scores, exam performance or enthusiasm — nothing is enough to guarantee a good grade in university if they aren't coupled with attendance. While policies vary from university to university, most institutions penalise students heavily for missing classes by cutting marks, by not allowing them to sit for exams or even by asking them to report to the Registrar's Office, even when students have very good reasons for being absent.



THE PLIGHT OF STUDENTS

Maliha Rahmat took a lab course for Environmental Science at North South University (NSU). She shares, "The course had seven or eight days of classes but there were no exams or tests and no marks for any practical work. The only work we were marked on was a group lab report. All the other marks came simply from attendance. My groupmates who got the same mark in our report ended up with a better grade than I did because I had missed one or two days of class. I missed those classes because of unrest on the roads. When I explained this to the faculty member, she didn't really care."

Maliha's case isn't rare. "A tenth of the marks in our university are allocated for class attendance and activities, so missing out on classes due to unavoidable circumstances means missing out on a considerable proportion of marks that will be added to your grades," states Afrid Hossain, a student of a public engineering university. "You can do everything right yet the system will come back to haunt you."

Afrid continues, "Last semester when I missed out on a couple weeks of class due to dengue fever, I was reassured by my instructor that despite my attendance being below the requirements, I wouldn't have any problem attending my finals and that he would give me an average mark for the class activities I had missed. I was shell shocked when I later saw my name on the list of defaulters. To salt up the wound, I received no marks at all for the class activities!"

Raida Zerín, a student of Economics at NSU, believes this policy is very restrictive towards students. "What if I get sick? One shouldn't be punished for circumstances beyond their control, especially when in some courses, I have to take the initiative to teach myself using the internet because the teacher isn't adequate. I shouldn't be forced to attend such classes if I have nothing to gain."

"In one course this semester, a classmate got the pox but he was severely berated for it and got no makeup midterm. That wasn't fair at all," Raida remembers.

DIFFERENT GOALS, DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Tawhid Mahmud Azan, who studies Marketing at the University of Dhaka (DU), thinks attendance policies rarely accomplish what they are supposed to. "There are a lot of students who would rather do other things that interest them instead of spending that time in class. Sometimes the book-based knowledge offered in classes just doesn't do it for them. Only a handful of students study for an above average CGPA. The rest have different career plans for which they won't need high grades. So setting the bar of mandatory attendance as high as 75 percent hurts those who are more prone to exploring what's outside of the class," he says.

"Most students who study in public universities come from a background that lacks financial solvency," Fahmina Ahmed, a business student at DU, points out. "Many have to work part time or even give five-six tuitions a day to support themselves. The attendance system makes it hard for students to balance academic life and becoming financially independent."

Meanwhile Mohammad Mastak Al Amin, Assistant Professor at the Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences at BRAC University, says of private university students, "Many undergraduate students here are not mature enough to make decisions and are not aware of many things related to their courses and curriculum. Most are dependent on their families. Students abroad tend to be very serious but here many students are not. We can consider the attendance issue a weakness of our education system."

BEYOND BANGLADESH

Mushfik Rahman, however, currently in his second year of undergrad in University of Calgary in Canada, mentions that the system is different over there. He says, "We don't have any official attendance policy. Things are flexible around here and students can be a no-show for the entire semester and still won't have to

face consequences for it. That is reasonable because as undergraduate students, we are mature enough to take our own decisions while fully understanding the consequences that come with it."

A part of the reason why this system works may be how the courses there are designed. "Our faculty members design the program focusing on how to make courses engaging enough so that students attend classes willingly. They take class quizzes every now and then. Mostly, classes are a form of interactive group discussions," Mushfik explains.

Moneesha R Kalamder, University of Waterloo graduate, says, "In my experience, the university doesn't care if the students attended classes or not. If they can teach themselves well enough to pass the course, so be it." Some teachers use different methods of evaluation to encourage participation. Moneesha adds, "A lot of courses are discussion based, and you get marked on the level of your contribution. Even if you don't contribute, you get a basic minimum for just being present in class. If you're absent, you get no marks for participation, and I imagine you might fail a course due to that."

WHAT CAN DRAW STUDENTS TO CLASSES?

When speaking with students from different universities, it became evident that fruitful discourse between students and teachers and real life application of content can all be strong incentives for students to attend classes.

Sumiya Kazi Nipa, a student of Marketing from a reputed public university, thinks improving engagement in class is the key. "One of my instructors this semester tries to make sure that the classes are not dull and boring, but interactive and entertaining. He never calls for attendance yet all of his classes are full, even the ones at 8 AM, because students feel that they can actually learn something by showing up."

Sharing the perspective of a faculty member, Masnoon Khair, lecturer at the Department of Economics and Social Sciences of BRAC University, says, "I think



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TEEEAACHEERRR!

one of the biggest reasons why many people miss classes is not because they are lazy; it's because they feel like they should do something else because there's no incentive for coming to that class. I think good, interactive classes that are positive and helpful can increase participation and productivity — people will look forward to coming to those classes even if the course is easy. However, our system is deeply flawed and operates mostly on grades and CGPA, rather than learning and skills."

Addressing the quality of education, Khair continues, "A lot of universities now have more students and more teachers, and the quality of both has deteriorated overall since everyone only cares about results."

WHAT KIND OF POLICY IS RIGHT?

When asked to speak about the policies from an administrative standpoint, Dr. Engr. A. K. M. Fazlul Hoque, Registrar

of Daffodil International University (DIU), says, "Policies greatly vary from university to university. At DIU, for instance, students are required to attend only seven percent of all classes in a course. There could be some sort of uniform policy for all university students based on what is right."

Masnoon Khair suggests, "I think an entire absence of any policy would make things worse, because then no one would show up. However, these policies definitely need to be slightly flexible. Many have health, familial, or personal reasons for not attending class, and if their overall performance in other areas is satisfactory, they should be given some sort of leeway. If the student is doing well overall, I see no reason to punish them since they have achieved what was required of them."

Another very exciting possibility is the implementation of e-learning into academic curriculum. Md. Rafiuddin, Associate Professor at the Department of Marketing, DU, thinks that we need to shift our medium of learning to the digital platform. "I myself conduct most of my classes on Google Classroom. I invite my students to enrol into the class at the start of each semester. We hold constructive discussions and share content on the digital platform. I try to upload all the materials I cover in class in person. This way, those who want to learn won't be left out just because they couldn't show up. I believe we need more frequent execution of this practice as it helps all of us get over our dependency on the attendance policy."

"Attendance definitely acts a mental pressure for students," adds Fazlul Hoque.

An opinion that may not be popular is that students actually want to learn. They want to learn new and interesting things that will excite them to go out and take on the real world. But the classes need to be practical and relevant. Students don't just want to know what the 4 P's of Marketing mean. They want to know about their practical executions. They want their teachers to meet them halfway, offering fresh new content and prospects relevant to our time. If teachers can manage not to use the attendance policy as a smoking gun, those who are willing to learn may actually in droves.

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