

*Student Views of Attendance at Japanese Universities in the Era of COVID-19:
A Preliminary Look*

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Japanese universities moved their courses online and belatedly began the 2020-2021 academic school year in late spring 2020. While this move supported social distancing measures, it nevertheless brought new difficulties and concerns (both pedagogical and technological) that consequently caused both instructors and students alike to question previously accepted practices, one of which was the taking of attendance. Instructors' opinions on the matter of taking attendance remotely ran the gamut, with their hastily rewritten syllabi reflecting their chosen approaches to the issue. However, as attendance policies needed to be decided well in advance of student registration and the commencement of classes, students' views on the matter were never considered. The current paper presents early-stage research results from a study involving students at three Japanese universities. Questionnaires investigating students' opinions about university attendance both before and during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic were administered at the start of the academic year's second semester (September 2020). Data analyses revealed that instructors were anything but uniform when it came to taking attendance during the first semester of the pandemic and that students overall were used to and thankful for having attendance grades support their academic achievement grades. The results of this stage of the research are meant to be incorporated into a larger study on Japanese university student attendance in the first year of remote learning in the era of COVID-19.

Keywords: Attendance, Japanese University, COVID-19

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak to be a pandemic. This announcement prompted Japanese universities to consider the impact COVID-19 would have on the health and wellbeing of their students, faculty, staff, and others, for their upcoming 2020-2021 academic school year, which was scheduled to begin in April. By the end of March, Japanese universities had en masse began moving classes online for the new school year as a means to mitigate the spread of this contagion. As Japanese university classes typically begin around the second week of April, most universities pushed back their spring semester start date to the second week of May so that all involved – including students, instructors, parents, and even university IT departments – would have time to make the necessary arrangements to have students learn remotely.

For the many instructors teaching at these universities, this decision to move to online instruction presented a host of difficulties and challenges. With only a few weeks of preparation time granted to them, these instructors not only had to quickly learn how to present their course material in an online-only format, which often required that they learn the particulars of university learning management systems (LMSs), but they also had to make decisions regarding some of their most fundamental pedagogical practices. One such practice is the taking of attendance.

Instructors were divided on the issue of taking attendance remotely. Some opted to forgo the customary act of taking student attendance (see Wadden & McGovern, 1993) while classes were online. This was decided partly to counter the unpredictability of class participants' ability to attend online classes at specific times (e.g., due to unstable Internet access), but also partly to reduce the burden that the unexpected online teaching situation presented them as instructors. Other instructors supported the maintaining of attendance policies due to perceived benefits beyond just ascertaining students' physical presence at predetermined times (see below). Novel and creative approaches to taking attendance remotely were consequently devised (see Rubrecht, 2020, for an example).

In the end, the decision of whether or not to take attendance was largely left up to the individual instructors. While all instructors no doubt wished that their students would “attend” all remote lessons, it can be speculated that the question of whether or not attendance should be taken in remote teaching and learning (hereafter, RTL) situations – not to mention how attendance might best be taken – was never asked of the students. In other words, because instructors had so little time to restructure their courses for online learning prior to the start of the new academic school year and because syllabi had to be reworked prior to the commencement of classes, students' views about attendance and attendance-taking methods were never considered.

In an effort to understand what students think about attendance, both in normal times and during the COVID-19 pandemic, an online questionnaire was administered in September 2020 to students enrolled at three Japanese universities. The questionnaire represents an early stage of a larger research project that investigates students views of attendance, remote attendance-taking methods, and student participation in general during RTL situations.

The Literature

As with many other educational and pedagogical issues, there is little consensus regarding the taking of student attendance at the university level. While university instructors value student attendance in principle (see Sperber, 2005, for exceptions), they are nevertheless divided on the subject of whether or not attendance should be taken. Research investigating possible correlations between attendance and other factors such as students' understanding of course content, information retention, motivation, and overall academic achievement have produced mixed results (Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996, as cited in Rocca, 2004; Marburger, 2006).

Possible correlations aside, what is of current concern is the question of *why* attendance may or may not be taken either as a matter of institutional or course policy at the university level. It is of note that different higher education institutions across the globe approach the topic of taking attendance differently, with differences extant even between an institution's own departments and between individual instructors. For instance, at many Western universities (e.g., those in the U.S.), attendance is usually not mandatory (Marburger, 2006), but individual instructors may enact attendance policies that may or may not influence students' final grades. In other countries (e.g., Japan), sufficient attendance is often a prerequisite to passing courses, and it is not unusual for tardiness to be checked and recorded as well (McVeigh, 2002).

The reasons why attendance policies might be established or be considered irrelevant to university classroom participants are wide ranging. Though far from being all-inclusive, the list below presents some of the more common reasons for and against instituting attendance policies at the university level.

Reasons against taking attendance at university

1. University students should be treated as adults.

Students in the West are typically considered to be adults (or very nearly so). Therefore, class attendance is ultimately viewed as a given, as students are expected to display maturity and take responsibility for attending classes whenever possible.

2. University instructors should focus their energies on teaching.

Related to the first reason, if students are considered to be responsible adults, then their instructors should spend their time and energy not on taking attendance but on preparing for lessons and giving feedback and guidance.

3. Attendance does not guarantee that students are learning.

Just because a student attends classes says nothing about whether or not the student is actively learning in them. Students may show up to a lecture but may then sleep, engage in apps on their smartphones, or otherwise generally tune out. Such students may even be seen as distractions in the teaching and learning process (see Sperber, 2005).

4. Attendance assesses one thing while grades assess something else entirely.

Some instructors are cognizant of the fact that good attendance does not necessarily indicate student diligence or effort. For such instructors, to regularly take attendance, let alone to have attendance factor in to students' grades, seems incongruous and is hence essentially meaningless.

5. Taking attendance is a waste of class time.

This is particularly true in large classes with hundreds of students, as it poses a real time and logistics challenge (e.g., some students may respond when their absent classmate's name is called). Seating charts and sign-in papers come with their own downsides (Marshall, 2017). In recent years the use of electronic tracking (i.e., ID card scanners in classrooms) has somewhat mitigated this time aspect, but such technology is expensive (Quinonez, 2014) and not foolproof. Nevertheless, there are creative attendance-taking methods that can reduce this burden significantly, regardless of class size (see Rubrecht, 2006, for an example).

Reasons for taking attendance

1. Taking attendance has been and continues to be a customary practice.

In the eyes of some, universities are not all that different from the lower levels of education, especially if parents are paying tuition. If taking attendance had meaning pre-university matriculation (e.g., attending classes teaches and stresses the importance of discipline, it allows caregivers to ascertain students' whereabouts), it likely retains some merit after.

2. Attendance leads to punctual assignment submission.

Lackadaisical attitudes towards attendance can lead to students coming to class sporadically, if at all. This can be problematic when assignments throughout the semester or school year must be turned in and graded on time before later lectures can advance to more complex themes, for instance, in writing classes (Wachs, 1993). If students do not come to class and submit work in a timely manner, then their progress cannot be accurately assessed, and they will likely fall behind their regularly-attending classmates.

3. The difficulty or general nature of a course is such that mastery requires attendance.

Relatedly, students cannot hope to master the content of some courses, like foreign language courses, with a spotty attendance record. In these cases, what was learned in one lesson will be needed and applied in the next. Having a strict attendance policy encourages students to follow course material as the lessons progress (Robb, 1993).

4. Students mistakenly think university is the time when they can relax.

Japanese universities have been labelled "four-year vacations" (Keaton, Kelly, & Pribyl, 1997) because the act of entering university (by taking exams) is often more

difficult than graduating from them and because students are often seemingly just biding their time until they get a job offer from a company. It is not unheard of for students to consequently view university as the time when they can finally feel liberated from their studies (McVeigh, 2002) and their associated responsibilities.

5. Attendance is part of students' grades in a course.

This is often the case at Japanese universities, where attendance, or at least “class contribution,” which can include criteria such as attendance, participation, and punctuality (in terms of coming to class on time and/or the timely submission of assignments), can be used as part of student assessment. Students tend to like the fact that attendance is figured into their final grades, as it requires relatively little effort compared with actually studying and learning (McVeigh, 2002).

Regardless of one's stance on the matter, the move to RTL required by students and instructors alike at Japanese universities from the 2020 spring semester necessarily caused all stakeholders to revisit the topic of attendance. Decisions about attendance taking had to be made well prior to the commencement of that spring semester so that course syllabi (and their attached grading policies) could be finalized and announced to students so that they would be knowledgeable about the courses being offered. The decisions made were hardly uniform, as evinced by the responses heard by the researcher in early spring 2020 in online forums and practice Zoom sessions with other instructors in Japan and by the subsequently disseminated syllabi.

With few exceptions, instructors and their students were not in contact with each other in early spring 2020 when these decisions were being made. Because students had yet to enroll in any courses, students' opinions about attendance taking during this extraordinary and unsettling time went uncollected and unconsidered, which was a missed opportunity since students' views on attendance are just as varied – if not more so – as those of instructors (see McVeigh, 2002, for examples).

Methodology and Participants

The participants in the current study were 102 students enrolled full time at three Japanese universities located in the Tokyo metropolitan area. They were of varying majors (e.g., commerce, law, management) in different years of study (first year = 50 students, second year = 45, third year = 7). None were majoring in English. The classes they were enrolled in with the researcher focused on various topics (e.g., English communication skills, academic English writing). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all classes for this academic year were conducted online and utilized a mixed teaching approach, that is, both on demand videos constructed by the researcher and Zoom sessions.

At the commencement of the fall semester in September 2020, all students enrolled in the researcher's courses were asked to complete an online Google Forms questionnaire about attendance. Students were informed about this questionnaire and were given its link in through each university's LMS. They were told about the purpose of the questionnaire and the research, that participation was voluntary, and that their answers would remain anonymous. While all fall semester participants were informed of the questionnaire, for the purposes of this research, only the researcher's

spring semester students were eligible for participation (see below).

The questionnaire was written in Japanese and included a range of questions about the participants' classes and their views about the taking of attendance, both before the 2020 academic school year and during the fully online 2020 spring semester. The questions were a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Participants were told that written responses could be written in either Japanese or English. Not all students answered all questions, and some students provided multiple answers.

Research Results

The questionnaire questions and the participants' responses are as follows¹.

[Q1] Indicate your 2020 spring semester class with the researcher (multiple choice, with a "not applicable" option)

This question was meant to ascertain which questionnaire respondents were students of the researcher in the spring semester. Of the 124 respondents, 102 students were the researcher's spring semester students.

[Q2] Indicate the number of courses you were enrolled in during the 2020 spring semester

Responses revealed that the participants were enrolled in between nine and 20 courses in the spring semester, with most taking between 12 and 15 courses weekly.

[Q3] Indicate the number of 2020 spring semester courses where instructors clearly took attendance

For most students, between three and six of their instructors took attendance. Considering [Q2] responses, this shows either that many instructors were not taking attendance (e.g., because they had abandoned the task) or that instructors were able to take attendance unobtrusively (e.g., over Zoom in low teacher-to-student-ratio courses). Students reported that instructors took attendance in 639 of their 1,341 total courses, or in less than half (48%) their courses. The breakdown of the percentage of courses where instructors took students' attendance in their 2020 spring semester courses is as follows, with student response numbers from here and throughout the rest of the paper in parentheses.

- 1% – 10% (7)
- 11% – 20% (8)
- 21% – 30% (17)
- 31% – 40% (11)
- 41% – 50% (22)
- 51% – 60% (4)

¹ Though they provide valuable insight into students' myriad perspectives regarding issues related to attendance, due to space limitations, only the most commonly given responses are listed.

61% – 70% (10)

71% – 80% (9)

81% – 90% (1)

91% – 99% (5)

100% (7)

[Q4] Why do you think instructors would decide not to take attendance in the 2020 spring semester?

In the weeks leading up to the start of the 2020 spring semester, instructors were told by their universities to be lenient when it comes to things like assignments and grading because students would likely be anxious and confused about the move to RTL. Instructors' syllabi were to reflect this leniency, which ostensibly should have included any alterations to course attendance policies (e.g., that attendance would not be taken) and if and how attendance would impact students' grades.

To gauge students' opinions on the subject, this question asked students why they thought their instructors might have decided to refrain from taking attendance during that first semester online. In constructing this and other questionnaire questions, participants were (a) provided with common and reasonable options (e.g., options mentioned by various instructors in the online discussion groups prior to the start of the spring semester), (b) allowed to select multiple options, and (c) given space to include their own options. Results were as follows.

- It would be too onerous to take attendance remotely (61)
- The request to start RTL came suddenly, so instructors decided to devote their time and energy to more important matters (e.g., the recording of on demand videos) (43)
- Instructors sometimes normally downplayed the importance of attendance, so RTL brought about little change (15)
- No one was used to RTL, so instructors purposefully downplayed the importance of attendance (15)
- The request to start RTL came suddenly, so instructors decided to be lenient with students (15)
- Instructors always have and always will take attendance, so this question is not applicable (8)

Six students gave alternate reasons from the ones presented on the questionnaire, that is, that instructors could get attendance from grading assignments because the students were "present" when completing them (3), that tests are the only things needed for instructors to judge students' comprehension of course material (2), and that instructors teach far too many students to make the taking of attendance feasible (1).

[Q5] How did instructors take attendance in the 2020 spring semester?

Five attendance-taking methods were presented on the questionnaire, with an additional open “other” option added. The 334 responses received for this question were tallied as follows.

- Students submitted attendance sheets weekly² (102)
- Instructors counted submitted assignments as proof of attendance (75)
- Instructors checked attendance during Zoom sessions (70)
- Instructors checked attendance via the university’s LMS (67)
- Students sent instructors a notice (e.g., an email or LMS message) of “attendance” weekly (20)
- Other (0)

[Q6] How would you take attendance if you were an instructor teaching remotely in the 2020 spring semester?

This question was presented in a similar style to that of [Q5], with the exception that one additional option was added.

- By the university’s LMS (37)
- By counting submitted assignments as proof of attendance (33)
- By students submitting an attendance sheet weekly (14)
- By checking attendance during Zoom sessions (10)
- By students sending notices (e.g., an email or LMS message) of their “attendance” weekly (6)
- Abandon taking attendance that semester (3)
- Other (1)

For this question, two participants gave multiple methods. Participants were also requested to explain why they selected their method(s) of choice. Presented below are the various methods, the number of open-ended responses provided by students for each method, and students’ top explanations for their reasoning.

- By students submitting an attendance sheet weekly (6)
- An easy, straightforward, and/or reliable method (4)
- By students sending notices (e.g., an email or LMS message) of their “attendance” weekly (3)
- A simple action (1)
- Check student attendance during Zoom sessions (2)
- Zoom is most like face-to-face lessons (1)
- Zoom attendance taking is smooth (1)
- Count submitted assignments as proof of attendance (11)
- Assignments have submission time limits (2)

² This was the researcher’s attendance-taking method for his 2020 spring semester classes. It involved students emailing an Attendance Record Sheet (ARS), discussed elsewhere (Rubrecht, 2020). As such, this tallied number was naturally 102 (the number of study participants). It is possible that a similar method was utilized by other instructors.

- Students must submit assignments anyway (2)
- Abandon taking attendance (1)
- Assignment purpose is for checking comprehension (1)
- Other (1)
- Mimic one teacher's policy of viewing on demand videos to count as attendance (1)

[Q7] Should attendance be taken at university?

This question found that roughly two thirds of the participants (67) were in favor of attendance being taken at university under normal circumstances while one third (35) were not. As with [Q6], participants were requested to give explanations, which most did, with some giving multiple reasons.

Reasons students gave for why universities should take attendance

- Attendance points for grading provide benefits/fair/required (for myriad specific reasons) (26)
- Attendance shows attitude/willingness/motivation for learning/participating/being proactive (14)
- Attendance policies eliminate students who do not attend yet can still get good grades (5)
- Some students won't attend and thus wouldn't participate otherwise (lazy) (3)

Reasons students gave for why universities should not take attendance

- University means learning on your own/taking responsibility (11)
- University is for gaining/testing new knowledge and/or cultivating personal interests (9)
- University is for people who want to learn, so they are the ones will ultimately attend (4)
- Impractical because there are too many students/it is too burdensome (4)

[Q8] Should attendance be taken at university during RTL?

The responses to this question were slightly more balanced than those from [Q7], with 59 students responding positively, 42 negatively.

Reasons students gave for why universities should take attendance during RTL

- Attendance always is (and should be) part of students' grades, as it is proper and fair classroom management (18)
- Instructors cannot monitor students well during RTL/so students won't skip classes (10)
- Student motivation becomes apparent/students are motivated to participate (6)
- It is proof of student participation (5)

Reasons students gave for why universities should not take attendance during RTL

- Students unable to attend/unsatisfactory environment (e.g., due to a poor Internet connection) (10)
- University is about active learning, not attendance (6)
- Students can watch on demand videos whenever (5)
- RTL is too burdensome (for both instructors and students) (4)
- Comprehending course material and completing assignments is sufficient (4)

[Q9] Open-ended section

This last question allowed participants to provide information or opinions not requested elsewhere on the questionnaire. Similar to previous responses, due to their varied nature, it was difficult to succinctly categorize participants' responses (18 responses were grouped into 11 categories).

- An attendance grade is good during RTL (worried about assignments/tests done remotely/now lower level of learning) (3)
- Submitting ARS weekly is too demanding/just check attendance by LMS click (3)
- Assignment submission more effective when taken attendance remotely than in face-to-face situations (2)
- If RTL, on demand videos are more efficient/convenient than setting a Zoom time (2)
- ARS is easy to use/easy to understand (2)

Conclusions

In analyzing the participants' responses, the following conclusions from this preliminary study were drawn.

(1) In this new RTL situation there was a clear lack of standardized attendance taking.

As previously explained, in face-to-face lessons pre-pandemic, most Japanese universities and their instructors typically implement attendance policies, with students' failure to adhere to them grounds for a reduction in grades or even the failing of a course. The participants all attended universities with long-standing clear and relatively strict attendance policies in place (e.g., for foreign language courses, students could miss no more than one third of the lessons). While it may have been reasonable for instructors to make ad hoc decisions about attendance in the weeks prior to the first RTL semester, as explained above, it can be speculated that institutions and instructors not taking a standardized approach in determining what "showing-up culture" (Feriazzo, 2020) would look like in RTL situations potentially negatively impacted students on two fronts.

First, not standardizing attendance taking meant that students had to figure out and keep clear in their minds the various and disparate attendance policies for all of their courses. In normal semesters, attendance is as simple as showing up to a specific location at a specific time. In RTL times, attendance could mean different things,

depending on the course (e.g., logging in to Zoom or just completing homework assignments that needed to be completed anyway). Second, since instructors did not survey students regarding their views about attendance taking (e.g., to assess if students' Wi-Fi equipment or data plans could adequately allow for Zoom attendance), some students might have had to struggle or otherwise worry about whether or not they could sufficiently participate and be considered present during RTL classes. Indeed, the researcher was asked by multiple students to inform them if the attendance sheets they had sent had arrived safely. This confusion from a lack of standardization gets compounded by the fact that roughly half of students' courses were taught by instructors who did not take attendance, which in normal times would have been unheard of.

(2) Students generally viewed attendance – and the grades they contributed – as integral to their university courses.

As could be seen from the students' open-ended responses, particularly to [Q7] and [Q8], some students believed that university is more about learning course content and developing oneself as a person over and above simply showing up to class. While few would argue against one of university's major roles being the opportunity for students to discover and cultivate themselves, it was clear from students' responses that many found receiving attendance points crucial to contributing to their overall course grades, a finding found elsewhere (see McVeigh, 2002). In other words, students typically found attendance grades to be that which could be relied upon to boost their grades or otherwise offset any poor grades received from other grading criteria (e.g., quizzes, final exams). As such, the participants were generally in favor of attendance being taken, both before and during RTL times. Additionally, as evinced from [Q3], only three students in this cohort would have opted to abandon taking attendance altogether in the 2020 spring semester if they were instructors, which indicates how students believe that attendance is an important and almost given part of their educational experience, particularly if they can receive a grade just by showing up to class.

(3) Attendance is indicative of motivation or a willingness to learn.

As was evinced from the open-ended responses in [Q7] and [Q8], several students stated that attending classes shows that they are motivated to be in the classroom and are thus expressing a willingness to learn. In a similar vein, several students expressed clear dissatisfaction with those students who either (a) need something like an attendance policy to force them to make it to class or (b) attend few lectures but are able to pass their courses anyway. In short, it seems as though the more diligent students (i.e., the ones who believe that attending lectures should be considered a given for institutional learning situations) were expressing their dissatisfaction that the less diligent students required coaxing (i.e., making attendance policies necessary in the first place) or that they could slide through without being as clearly motivated to learn and participate as they were. These responses are indicative of the fact that students, to a greater or lesser degree, know their classmates, know what goals they have for learning in general and for their various courses in particular, and that they want to have the learning playing field as level as possible.

Discussion and Final Remarks

As could be seen from the discussion above as well as from the findings garnered from this preliminary stage of research, both students and instructors alike have differing opinions about attendance, including its primary purpose, its ancillary functions, and its overall relevance at the university level. As of this writing (mid-November 2020) it is far too difficult to predict if the 2021 spring semester will see a return of educators and learners to the classroom or if RTL will continue. Based on the conclusions above and the fact that all relevant stakeholders are now experienced in RTL, were RTL to continue into later semesters, then it would behoove institutions and instructors to revisit the topic of attendance together so as to standardize any approach taken on the subject. This should provide the dual benefit of reducing confusion among stakeholders regarding matters of attendance and should make the reasons behind RTL attendance taking clearer for all concerned.

There remain several points of consequence that require addressing, many of which are in response to how the students answered the study's open-ended questions. First, because students are students, they are neither familiar with nor fully cognizant of the difficulties and complexities that instructors encounter as they fulfill their teaching duties, even those regarding the relatively straightforward task of taking attendance. While this fact lends some support for why instructors need not have asked students' opinions about taking attendance prior to the 2020 spring semester, it also puts perspective on students' responses to the questionnaire that showed – even as late as September 2020 – that students were not concerned about the same matters as instructors, and if they were, they were concerned for different reasons.

For instance, when asked in [Q6] how they would take attendance remotely if they were instructors, many apparently failed to grasp what instructors realized early on: there would be some students not sufficiently prepared to engage in RTL from the first week of classes (and possibly throughout the semester) for whatever reason, for instance, poor Wi-Fi, restrictive data plans, inadequate access to technological equipment at specific times, or embarrassing living situations (e.g., noisy siblings, sparse furnishings) broadcast to all through Zoom. Thus, as some students voiced support for taking attendance via their university's LMS or Zoom, which were seen to make the task "efficient," "easy," and "smooth," they made it clear that they did not fully realize the obstacles extant with such attendance-taking methods.

To give a more concrete example, taking attendance via Zoom would only be feasible for (a) relatively small classes (b) where all students were guaranteed to have access to suitable technological equipment (c) with strong and stable Internet capabilities (d) reliably (e) at a particular time of day each week. This example illustrates precisely what some instructors were worried about in the weeks prior to the 2020 spring semester: there were numerous unknowns (some of which had yet to be identified) instructors had to recognize and surmount consistently for their dozens if not hundreds of students in all of their courses. It is therefore little wonder why some instructors abandoned taking attendance remotely, at least during that first semester.

Additional evidence for the students not being cognizant of instructors' concerns regarding attendance also came from their responses to [Q4], as students only selected the options presented to them. No students ventured any additional options, such as

those technological concerns mentioned above. Furthermore, when students voiced support for assignment submission equaling attendance, they failed to take into account the fact that not all courses necessarily have assignments due each and every week of the semester. There would still need to be a way to ascertain that students are “present” even when some weeks only required students to watch an on demand video or engage in a Zoom session.

The present preliminary study was conducted as the first step of a larger study exploring Japanese university student attendance in the first year of RTL in the era of COVID-19. Further investigations will explore in greater depth the efficacy of the researcher’s attendance sheet, with specific attention paid to the degree to which students engaged with it as a remote communication and feedback tool.

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