Prepare or Go: An analysis of enforcing tutorial preparation requirements in an accounting course

Abstract

The tutorial is often seen as the primarily vehicle that provides students with the opportunity to actively engage with the subject materials, their teacher and their peers. Although preparation for class is an expectation, students’ lack of preparation for tutorial work is widespread. This results in a reality where not only the unprepared student’s engagement is problematic but the experiences of their peers and the ability of teaching academics to facilitate learning is also compromised. Within an action research approach, this paper discusses the rationale, implementation and results of requiring students to provide evidence of adequate class preparation in order to attend tutorials for a financial accounting course. This requirement transformed the nature of tutorials although it had no impact on student evaluations or results.

Introduction

Education is not a spectator sport: it is a transforming encounter. It demands active engagement; not passive submission; personal participation, not listless attendance (Rhodes, 2001, 65 cited in Gump, 2005).

Whilst agreement with this statement would be unanimous, the corridors of academia abound with faculty lamenting the lack of work by many students. A common complaint is that, due to fact that often the majority of attending students have failed to prepare the work required, tutorials regularly degrade into ‘mini’ lectures. How can we address this and does it matter? There are numerous reasons why students may fail to complete the requisite preparation prior to tutorial attendance: lack of time; lack of commitment or motivation; competing commitments such as paid employment or social activities; misunderstanding of the purpose of tutorials; prior tutorial experiences and expectations, and poorly structured tutorials that provide little incentive to do the work. Given these compounding reasons a multi-faceted approach is clearly required. This paper focuses on one strategy within such an approach: enforcing tutorial preparation as a necessary precondition for tutorial attendance: in other words, allowing only students who have prepared to attend tutorials.

In the first section of the paper, I discuss the literature which considers the purpose of tutorials, student engagement, attendance, participation in and preparation for tutorials. The second section overviews the action research methodology utilised in this study. In the third section, I outline the context, motivation and rationale behind introducing the tutorial preparation requirement, describing its implementation and how concerns were addressed to minimise potential problems and issues. The next section, includes my reflections on the success of this requirement, tutors evaluations, and also considers student performance and evaluations and comments (both positive and negative). In the final sections I conclude with a discussion of the usefulness and appropriateness of this requirement.

Literature Review

The higher education literature emphasises the importance of students’ engagement with and involvement in the learning process; that active learning is important. As Weaver & Qi (2005) observe ‘students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not’ (p. 570). Undergraduate accounting subjects often employ a lecture plus tutorial class
arrangement. Whilst active learning is not restricted to ‘in class’ time, tutorials are normally considered to provide the opportunity for students to actively engage with the subject materials, their teacher and their peers. The definition of a tutorial at my own university is:

A tutorial is a class of between 5-30 students in which students discuss key topics, concepts and ideas with their tutors. Tutorials are closely linked to assessment and often involve small group discussions and group work. All students are expected to prepare for tutorials and participate actively in class discussions. Tutorials often complement lectures and generally run for 1-2 hours (Unisa, 2012).

Although there are variations in how tutorials are conducted, typically tutorials

Serve as platforms for students to test their understanding of issues covered during large-group lectures through discussions in more depth, answering questions, and analysing ... cases (Baderin, 2005, p. 100).

Thus, tutorials are a place for students to discuss, learn from their mistakes and learn from their peers. However the literature is replete with the apparent failure of the tutorial to achieve its objectives. Numerous sources lament the lack of student engagement in tutorial classes; be this non-attendance, failure to participate in class discussions or lack of preparation. This is underpinned by concerns about the lack of study time, and poor study habits of many students.

The literature suggests that time spent studying has declined significantly. Babcock and Marks’s review (2010) found students out of class study time had decreased by over 40% from 1961 to 2003 to 14 hours per week, less than half of university prescriptions. This decline has remained stable since the mid 1980’s and is not associated with the type of college or employment commitments of students. Babcock and Marks (2010) posit two reasons for this decline. First, this decline may be due to falling standards. Over this time they argue student empowerment via student evaluations has increased, rewarding ‘easier’ instructors and creating ‘perverse incentives’ (p. 5). This is linked to grade inflation (a phenomenon widely cited in the literature; see for example Hassel and Lourey, 2005; Wallace and Wallace, 1998) and a shift in faculty incentives towards research. Second, students’ recognition that employers value grades less than other factors (such as college reputation). McCormick (2011) supports the view that the decline in study time may be associated with the increased emphasis on research, consistent with Sperber’s ‘non – aggression pact’ between faculty and students when ‘we began asking less of our students during this period and their performance fell to meet our expectations’ (p. 39). In accounting education the lack of time on study has also been noted. Fogarty (2008) argues that students have individual and unconscious study time budgets that are relatively inflexible meaning that time demands for one course with reduce time spent in others. All these researchers note that the quality of study time is important; in other words it is not just the amount of time students spend studying but how they spend this time.

Given the evidence that study time is reducing and is limited, it is not surprising that attendance at and preparation for class is problematic. The issue of falling attendance in class has been widely investigated with various research considering incidence and reasons for non-attendance (e.g. Rogers, 2002), association with performance (e.g. Gump, 2005; Self, 2012) and the efficacy of various suggestions to improve class attendance (e.g. Rogers, 2002). The literature suggests that absentee rates of one third are not uncommon (see for example, Rogers, 2002; Self, 2012) with this rate increasing in the latter half of the semester. Self (2012) notes that prior research suggests that the majority of factors influencing attendance are ‘outside of the control of faculty members’ (p. 225). There is evidence of a positive association with class attendance and performance; i.e. that
students who regularly attend classes have better grades (e.g. Crede et al, 2010). However this
correlation is a complex one. A number of studies have found that student characteristics (such as
GPA prior to course, motivation, and study habits) are associated with attendance (e.g. Self, 2012;
Gump, 2005). In other words, ‘better’ students in terms of these characteristics have superior
performance/outcomes and such students are also more likely to attend class. Rodgers (2002)
found that increasing the attendance rate had no significant impact on performance. In the
accounting context Schumulian and Coetzee (2011) found only a low correlation between
attendance and academic performance. These findings support the premise that it is not attendance
per se that is important. This links back to the importance of the quality of study time and endorses
Nonis and Hudson’s (2010) findings that ‘study time has no impact on performance if a student is not
actively concentrating or paying attention’ (p. 236).

The failure of students to meaningfully participate in class, and suggested actions to address this, is
also considered extensively in the literature (see for example, Rocca, 2010). There is debate about
whether attendance and/or participation should contribute to student grades. Support for this is
found from studies that find attendance and participation increase if grades are awarded (Self,
2012). Others suggest that attendance or participation of themselves do not necessarily reflect
achievement or mastery of subject content, are impacted on by other factors such as culture and
language and thus should not be contributors to grades (Gump, 2005).

Rocca’s (2010) review noted that commonly only a third of students participated at all with half
never participating, citing a number of reasons why students did not participate, including larger
classes, confidence, language ability, instructor attitude, critical versus supportive environment.
Research into class participation confirms that preparation for class is a necessarily precondition for
maximising participation and learning outcomes. Rocco (2010) also concluded that learning
improves and motivation increases when students ‘prepare for class and participate in discussions’
and that advanced preparation was a key means to foster the confidence required for effective
participation and to counteract classroom apprehension (p. 192).

Dallimore et al’s (2010) study of management accounting students found a positive association with
learning outcomes and increased participation and that ‘increased preparation for class not only
increases a student’s comfort participating, it also encourages the student to participate more
frequently’ (p. 626). Yet in the accounting context Fogarty (2008) notes that preparation is
problematic:

> accounting educators are regularly stunned by the low absolute level of preparedness demonstrated by
> students...The time-honoured habits of successful study (e.g. careful reading, summarizing chapters, and problem
> practice) are more honoured in the breach than in the observation (p. 229).

These factors, low participation and associated lack of preparation, both have a potential impact on
not only students learning in tutorials, but on their perceptions of the benefits and role of tutorials.
Baderin (2005) found that in contrast to faculty perceptions, only 15% of law students considered
tutorials a more important learning method than lectures. In Hassel and Lourey’s study (2005) only
17% of students believed that ‘learning was contingent on [class] attendance’ (p.5). Baderin (2005)
posited that the lack of perceived importance of tutorials could be due to lack of engagement by
students in tutorials, or by students’ prior tutorial experience. There was nothing located in the
literature specifically about the impact of non-participating tutorial attendees on other students. The
influence of peers and peer behaviour has been examined explicitly in other areas. For example, in the context of academic integrity peer behaviour has been identified as an influencing factor in students own behaviours (see for example, Christensen et al, 2010; McCabe and Trevino, 2001). The lack of participation in tutorial classes is not only a problem for students. Pop-Vasileva et al (2011) found a key factor associated with higher levels of job stress for Australian accounting academics was ‘minimal participation in classes’ by students (p. 430).

The literature therefore reinforces the view that both absence from class and lack of participation in class is problematic throughout the higher education sector. A key conclusion is that failure of students to effectively engage in tutorials is underpinned by a failure to adequately prepare for class.

Methodology

As noted previously this study utilised an action research approach. Action research has been advocated both in the accounting education literature and in the broader education literature as a systematic means of implementing and evaluating change in educational practices (Baker & Logan, 2006; Paisey & Paisey, 2005; Kember, 2002; Swann & Ecclestone, 1999). A useful definition of action research is provided by Stringer, 2007:

> Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike traditional experimental/scientific research that looks for generalizable explanations that might be applied to all contexts, action research focuses on specific situations and localised solutions (p. 1).

The various models suggested for action research all emphasise a step approach, taking action, the role of critical reflection, and the participant role of the researcher. Further iterations/repetitions of the steps are often involved in such research. The approach based on Grundy and Kemmis as outlined and used by Baker & Logan (2006, p. 4-5) was adapted in this study. This involved four steps. The first was the planning stage which involved reflection by the lecturer to define the problem and decide what could be changed. As action research in this context is driven by the beliefs of the individual lecturer and the specific context it is essential that the beliefs and context that inspired the change are outlined (Paisey & Paisey, 2005, p. 2). These are described in the next parts: context and motivation. The second step involved taking action; implementing change by introducing the tutorial preparation requirement. Third, observations that form the basis of critical reflection on the success (or otherwise) of the action taken were made: in this case via student and tutors surveys, student evaluations and analysis of student performance. The final step involved reviewing and reflecting on the changes and repeating the steps. In this instance, although there have been two subsequent iterations following initial implementation (in Year 1) as reflections did not result in the perception of the need for substantive changes in the tutorial preparation requirements these iterations are not discussed separately.

Context of the tutorial preparation requirement

The course is a first semester financial accounting course in the second year of a three year accounting program with on average 450 students attending on campus and 80 studying off campus; 40% of these are international students. It is a highly technical course focusing on the application of accounting standards. Students are expected to attend a 1 ½ hour lecture and a 1 ½ hour tutorial each week, although attendance is not compulsory.
The format for tutorials required tutors to work through with students a sub-set of questions (usually two questions) relating to a particular topic. Although on average eight topic questions were set each week students were provided with answers to the majority of these and only the specified sub set of questions were scheduled for discussion in tutorials. The rationale for this was that it seemed counterproductive for students to prepare answers to a sequence of increasingly complex technical questions if students could not determine if they were on track. By providing answers to most questions this allowed students to attempt these questions, then check their understanding before attempting more complex questions. The remainder of the tutorial involved students, in groups, undertaking a range of activities (including preparing answers to unseen questions, usually based on past examination questions). These group activities allowed students to discuss problems and procedures with other students, make and share mistakes (a key activity for learning) in an environment where the tutor could assist, encourage and correct. All tutorial answers and activities were provided online to students at the end of the week for revision purposes.

Motivation: The ‘trigger’

Lack of preparation by students is not a new phenomenon. What then made me introduce this requirement, with the associated additional work, aggravation and potential downsides? For a number of years my tutors (primarily casual staff) complained about students’ lack of preparation and the difficulty in balancing the needs of the few students who had in fact prepared with the majority who had not. I have noticed this as well. This was particularly problematic for the casual staff whose continued employment is directly dependent on student evaluations of their teaching. If such staff preferred those few students who had prepared (that is conducted the tutorial as intended) this would likely alienate the unprepared students and result in negative evaluations. Over the previous few years I noticed tutors increasingly angry and more frustrated as the number of students adequately preparing fell to one or two in many tutorials across many courses. As one tutor noted:

> It is a sad fact from my experience teaching over nearly 9 years that students are doing less and less. This places more pressure on teachers to teach as more students are preparing less, they don’t understand basic concepts and this often requires unnecessary time to get across to students. While it would be easy to just put [answers] on a board and let the students fend for themselves, I feel that I need to give students the best possible opportunity to understand the topics we cover, hence, if they haven’t prepared, it is then harder for teachers to do the best possible job they can.

Some four years earlier, in response to tutors concerns about lack of preparation and participation by students a number of changes were made. Students had been surveyed in the previous year about their extent of preparation and what factors impacted on this. Of those who responded only 11% indicated that they always prepared the tutorial work and almost one quarter indicated they never (or almost never) prepared the tutorial work. Comments by students did note that some students perceived too many tutorial questions, although tutors noted that most students attempted NO questions (i.e. did not do a few questions and then run out of time). Key factors students indicated impacted on their preparation included that answers would be made available, assignments or other work due, tutors explained answer thoroughly anyway, no time due to other

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1 It should be noted as these surveys were undertaken by students attending the lecture if could be assumed that those not attending the lectures were more likely not to have done tutorial work and so in fact preparation of tutorial work was even lower than these responses suggest.
(non-study) commitments and the fact that no marks were awarded for tutorial preparation/participation. The changes made to the course in response to this included the introduction of a series of multiple choice tests to replace a minor assignment; the aim to keep students on task during the semester, encourage tutorial preparation as the tests followed the tutorials and to provide feedback on technical topics. Also changes were made to the tutorial format (as outlined above questions to be discussed were limited and group activities introduced) in an attempt to make tutorials more active and student centred, driven by problems identified by students, but this format was less successful than anticipated. Whilst feedback from students about these changes were positive the problem of lack of preparation by students persisted. In fact the attempt to make the tutorials more active was frustrated and compromised by the continuing lack of student preparation. Group activities could not be effectively undertaken by students who had not prepared; they simply did not have the knowledge to ‘have a go’.

The defining catalyst for introducing an explicit preparation requirement for tutorial attendance however was when I conducted a tutorial for a tutor who was ill. At the start of the tutorial I asked who had prepared; I do this to get a ‘sense’ of how to conduct the tutorial. Only one student (1) indicated they had prepared. However during the tutorial it was clear from their responses that a further student (2) had prepared. At the conclusion of the tutorial student 1 approached me, frustrated and angry, saying he was getting little use from the tutorials as often he was the only one who had prepared, was fed up being with students who didn’t know anything and didn’t care and asked if instead of attending tutorials could he simply come and see me during consultation times to review his work. I approached student 2 and asked why she had not indicated that she had prepared when clearly she had. The student claimed that she was embarrassed to admit she had prepared as ‘no one prepares for tutorials’. It was this response that shocked me. I could understand students not preparing for various reasons but this response suggested a culture had evolved where lack of preparation was not only acceptable but indeed the norm; i.e. the default position.

Hence the problem my action research aimed to address was:

How could I ensure that students adequately prepared for tutorials so that the efficacy of tutorials could be realised?

The decision: What to do?

I first reflected on the tutorial format and content. Was there something in this that deterred preparation or that I could change to encourage it? Informal discussions with both tutors and better (prepared) students indicated that the tutorial format and content was not problematic if students had prepared. One option was to encourage student preparation by awarding marks for this. The literature suggests that assessment (or marks) matters and is a key driver of student activity (Ramsden, 1992; Papagiannidis, 2007). I rejected this on two grounds: pedagogical and pragmatic. In the first year accounting courses, in the initial semester weekly preparation was marked for effort, and then in the second semester marked randomly for correctness. These approaches in first year were seen as a way to transition students from the regulated and monitored environment of secondary education towards more self-directed learning. The accounting discipline had agreed that beyond first year these transitional arrangements should not continue. I also believed marking students’ tutorial work would undermine the formative emphasis (mission) of tutorials.
marks are awarded there is a tendency for students to associate these with certain minimum presentation standards and correctness. This was not my view of what tutorial preparation should be. Preparation can be muddled, messy and wrong. A tutorial is a place for students to learn from their (and others) mistakes and clarify any misunderstandings; not to be worried about how it will affect final grades. This formative role of tutorials was paramount in my mind.

The option of awarding marks for preparation was also rejected on pragmatic reasons. The cost involved in paying for such marking would not be insignificant. University policy restricted both the number of assessment items and marking loads in courses. Further I believed that other assessment items (specifically a series of online tests that allowed students an actual checking of their knowledge after having completed the work) was more beneficial for student learning outcomes, as this allowed student to check understandings and competencies after tutorials but prior to the final examination.

Given these reasons I decided that I would impose a course requirement that tutorial attendance in this course was only allowed if students provided evidence of preparation for the sub-set of questions (usually two) scheduled for discussion in tutorials. Each student’s preparation would be checked at the beginning of the tutorial and if not adequate, then the student would be required to leave.

Implementation: Overall strategies and principles

My initial enthusiasm for this decision turned to anxiety. Most colleagues were supportive and indeed believed something needed to be done about the lack of tutorial preparation by students but were sceptical. When advised of my intentions a number of colleagues responded with comments such as: ‘you’re brave’; ‘you won’t be allowed to do that’; ‘tutors won’t enforce this’; ‘be prepared for poor student evaluations’. In light of such comments I sought approval from more senior managers in the faculty prior to implementation. Approval was granted on the basis that the decision was consistent with policy (the student code of conduct required students to adequately prepare for all classes) and the aim was improve the efficacy of tutorials. However approval was granted with some provisos. These were that students who did not attend tutorials were provided with adequate access to assistance when they had completed the work, and that guidelines were provided to tutors to ensure any issues with students (such as students refusing to leave a tutorial if they had not prepared) were appropriately managed.

Hence a requirement coupling preparation with tutorial attendance was introduced in line with the following strategies and principles:

- This was to be applied on a no exception, no blame and no excuse basis. This requirement was not to be seen as a punishment or accusing students of being lazy or the like. The emphasis was that if a key purpose of tutorials was to check understandings there was no utility in unprepared students attending. Further unprepared students would not be able to contribute to activities. This stance was consistent with the underlying rationale and also addressed pragmatic concerns. It was accepted that at times students would have legitimate reasons for not being able to prepare (due to illness, work and family commitments). However allowing exceptions to the preparation requirement in such circumstances would continue to undermine the effectiveness of tutorials and leave tutors open to negotiation
and arguments with students. Students could apply to the course coordinator for an alternative tutorial if unable to attend their scheduled tutorial for legitimate reasons but the preparation requirement still applied.

- The requirement for preparation was assessed on students adequately attempting the tutorial work, not on correctness. Tutors would check (via a brief perusal) every student's work at the beginning of every tutorial to determine if an adequate attempt at the work had been made.
- Certain safety nets were provided to ensure that students not attending tutorials, for whatever reason, could still receive any assistance required. Students who failed to attend any of the first few tutorials were contacted by their individual tutors to determine if there were any problems causing the student's absences and to offer assistance. Consultation times with a number of teaching staff were advertised and students could attend any of these consultation times, even if the staff member was not their allocated tutor.
- Expectations and requirements were articulated explicitly and clearly to students and teaching staff, reinforcing the rationale and ensuring consistency in implementation.

**Evaluation Sources**

The preparation requirement has been imposed for three years. No substantive changes have been made to this requirement over this period. In each of these years students were invited to complete an online survey (which included both closed and open questions) specifically about this preparation requirement on a voluntary basis. The results of student responses in year 1 and year 2 are included in the following analysis. However due to a very poor response rate in Year 3 these have been excluded, although these are largely consistent with the previous years' responses.

Information was also derived from informal discussions with tutors. However, recognising that tutors are dependent on me for continued employment, and that this could bias responses made to me personally, tutors were also surveyed each year. This survey was conducted online, with anonymous responses and on a voluntary basis.

**Implementation: Tutors**

The tutors (primarily casual staff) would be at the front line of implementing the preparation requirement. Without their support and commitment it would not work. In the first year of implementation, tutors initial reactions differed. A number were elated; ‘it’s about time’, ‘fantastic’. One simply withdrew their services: this tutor normally undertook one evening class with mature age students and felt it was unfair to exclude students who had family or work commitments that impacted on their study time. The remaining tutors supported the requirement in principle but were apprehensive about how or whether they could apply it. In particular, actually asking student to leave and also responding if a student refused to leave was of concern. All however were concerned to varying degrees, about the possible impact on student evaluations.

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2 In year 1 the response rate was 29%. In year 2 the response rate was 16%. In year 3 the response rate was 4%. Compliant with ethics requirements at this university the survey advises students (and tutors) of anonymity and that the results may be used in research and publications.

3 The lowest response rate from tutors over 3 years was 75%.
Detailed advice, both in written form and in tutors meetings, was provided about how to apply the requirement and how to manage any recalcitrant students. I also decided to attend all initial tutorials (24 in all). In each tutorial I clarified the preparation requirement, explaining this was a course requirement and not a decision made by individual tutors. In these first tutorials I assisted in the checking of preparation and I (not the tutor) ejected any students who had not prepared adequately. In hindsight my decision to attend these initial tutorials was a defining action and I continue to do this each semester. It confirmed expectations, modelled to tutors how to manage students, and deflected any antagonism of students about the requirement from tutors. I was the ogre; not the tutors. In effect this set the scene. As is explained later, after their first tutorial, as students understood the requirement and that this would be enforced, unprepared students simply did not attend. Hence there were few instances in subsequent tutorials where teaching staff needed to request that students leave.

In subsequent years tutors have indeed championed this preparation requirement. However, there remains some anxiety by tutors in enforcing this requirement. Despite a low turnover of tutors (less than 20%) in each year around one third of tutors were apprehensive about enforcing this requirement:

It is always difficult asking a student to leave when they have made the effort to turn up.

It’s not a good feeling kicking them out but students were pretty good about it.

Initially, I was apprehensive as I thought that some students may not accept leaving and be aggressive or reluctant to do so in class.

Half of all tutors indicated that problems did occur, but that these were isolated, predominately in early tutorials and that tutors were able to manage these.

There were situations when the student would argue to be allowed to stay rather than leave quietly

After the first few weeks, almost all came with enough preparation

One student was asked to leave and simply didn’t do so.

Over the three years of this requirement only two students have been referred to me (as course coordinator) for refusing a tutors request to leave the tutorial.

Implementation: Students

As this was a unique requirement, and particularly in Year 1, unexpected by students, it was essential to inform students explicitly. This was done by a series of emails to students, both before the start of the semester and before the first tutorial (which followed the week after the first lecture), announcements in online forums, and initial lectures. These explanations were framed within the context of the dual responsibilities of teaching staff and students (both what students should expect from teaching staff and what is expected of students), why it was important for students to prepare, the need to actively engage in the learning process and the purpose of tutorials. Further, extensive guidance was provided in the form of a set of FAQ’s which covered questions from ‘why is this required in this course’, ‘what is adequate preparation’, ‘what do I do if the dog ate my homework’, ‘do I have to leave if the tutor asks me’ to ‘where can I get help for this course’.
Acceptance or non-acceptance of requirement.

The majority of students indicated that they believed the requirement was reasonable (77% in the first year the requirement was introduced, Year 1, and 81% in the subsequent year, Year 2).

It is good to have this requirement because it means that when you have done all of the work that you can contribute to class.

Attending tutorials where part of the class hasn’t prepared is very frustrating for those who have. Time is lost by redoing the work some have already done meaning further understandings cannot be gained by attending the tute.

As a uni student when we opt to study we have to do subsequent practice and preparation to achieve intended outcome; otherwise it would not make any sense to come.

The positive comments here, focused on acceptance of responsibility, the detrimental impact of ‘non-preparers’ on tutorials and improved learning outcomes (be this due to more useful tutorials or forcing completion of course work during the semester).

A number of students were vehemently opposed to and resented this requirement in principle.

It’s illogical based on the fact that students PAY for tutorials, except can’t attend them?

It is a student’s choice to prepare for a tutorial or not. University is meant to be all about individual learning and therefore it should be just that. We choose to prepare for tutorials and pass the course, or, we choose not to and fail the course. We’re adults now and don’t need rules put in place to ensure we do our homework, they do that at primary school.

I think we are old enough to do work and should not be forced to do it

We are fee paying students and part of that fee is the tutorial, I don’t believe the uni has the right to deny access in the first place but we are paying for it, it should be up to us to be prepared or not to be.

These centred on questioning the university’s right to exclude students from class as they are paying ‘customers’ and also resentment at the perceived paternalistic approach. Their view was that the decision as to whether to do the work or not should be the students and attendance should not be dependent on this. None of the comments made by students opposed to this requirement considered the impact of non-preparers on tutorials or on other students. These comments appeared to preference the rights and needs of the individual student.

It should also be noted that despite supporting the preparation requirement in principle, comments made by many students indicated they viewed the specific rules applied in enforcing this too harsh or inflexible. Adverse comments can be classified into three main streams. The first was that leniency should be made for special circumstances or to allow students to attend a few times without preparing:

There are always instances out of people’s control where they may not have been able to attend to their tutorial work diligently, for example, being ill or having sick children to care for.

I feel as though the requirement is too strict and that there should be some flexibility to the requirement. I believe there should be a 2 or 3 week ‘chance’ which you can use throughout the semester to go and not have work completed.

In my personal opinion if the student has a valid reason (eg: medical certificate) the student should be allowed.
Second, that this requirement disadvantaged students as they benefit from attending tutorials even if they have not completed the work:

No one should have to miss out on valuable information provided in a tutorial simply because (for whatever reason) they have not prepared for it.

As a mature age student, there are times when I simply cannot complete all of the tutorial work prior to a tutorial. However, I usually find it extremely worthwhile to 'sit in' on a tutorial... To hear the tutor run through the questions and give explanations to specific examples can be really useful for learning.

We can still learn things from listening to others in the tutes.

Third, that the assessment of what was adequate preparation was unfair. The decision as to whether or not preparation was adequate necessarily involved some discretion by the individual tutors. However there was comprehensive guidance provided both to tutors and students about this. Further students who had attempted the questions but where preparation was deemed not sufficient were provided with advice about what was deficient in their preparation but were allowed to stay in the first such instance. Although a very few students indicated that their particular tutor was stricter than others, the main complaints here concerned having to attempt all of the specified questions or apprehension about whether their attempts would be judged as adequate.

As long as students have completed part of the tutorial work, they should be allowed into the tutorials.

I’ve always 75% prepared but too intimidated to attempt to go in case of being asked to leave.

As outlined previously, for most weeks students only had to show preparation for two questions, and in fact a number of students supporting this requirement indicated that due to the limited number of questions, the preparation requirement was not onerous.

**Preparation & Attendance**

The majority of students indicated that they normally prepared for tutorials even if the preparation requirement was not imposed (71% in Year 1; 75% in Year 2). This contradicts the earlier survey of students (where only 11% indicated always prepare) my own experience in previous years and that of tutors; indeed this requirement was introduced because very few students were preparing and this was confirmed by the student survey some years earlier. Indeed, even if 50% of students had been preparing it is unlikely I would have even considered introducing this requirement. Students own evaluations suggested some inconsistency as the majority (66% in Year 1; 70% in Year 2) indicated that they were more likely to prepare for tutorials due to this requirement.

As would be expected this requirement resulted in students missing some tutorials, although for a significant percentage of respondents (46% in year 1 and 40% in year 2) this requirement did not affect their attendance. This does not imply necessarily that such students attended all tutorials; reasons (other than these requirements) could be the case of non-attendance. For the majority (88% in Year 1 and 97% in Year 2) the preparation requirement resulted in not attending on average 1.3 (between 1 and 2) tutorials (refer Table 1) out of a total of 11 in the semester.
Table 1  Impact of requirement on attendance at tutorials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of tutorials missed due to this requirement</th>
<th>Year 1 (%)</th>
<th>Year 2 (%)</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>1 or 2</td>
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<td>3 or 4</td>
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<td>12</td>
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Of note is that when asked to compare tutorial attendance in this course to other courses in the same study period, the majority of students (61% in year 1 and 56% in year 2) indicated that tutorial attendance was not less than in other courses in the same semester. This is in line with tutors’ responses where the majority (67% in year 1 and 62% in year 2) did not indicate tutorial attendance was less in this course compared to their tutorials in other courses. In fact some students commented that the lack of preparation by students in other courses contributed to their non-attendance in other courses:

I've stopped attending tutorials for another course.. because I'm frustrated with the lack of preparation and I fail to get any further conceptual questions answered because the tutor has to go through answers that other students have not done!

I stopped attending the tutes for one of my classes this semester simply because I was gaining nothing from it - no discussion, no nothing - and everyone would just listen to me answer the tutor.

Learning Outcomes & Tutorial Effectiveness

Evaluations for both tutors and students asked about tutorial participation, the overall usefulness of tutorials and learning outcomes. These are summarised in Table 2. The majority of both students and tutors in both years found differences between tutorials in this course and tutorials in other courses. There were mixed results in relation to discussion/participation. Whilst the majority of tutors and a significant proportion of students noted increased participation/discussion in these tutorials, compared to tutorials in other courses, this was not uniform. Many students commented on increased participation/discussion:

The tutorials run better and there is more class discussion and student input

In some other tutes, I have gone a whole [semester] with some people not even speaking.

It may just be the tutorials I am in, but the students don’t want to volunteer answers, they have to be asked specifically. In [this course’s] tutorial students seem more willing to participate.

I teach (another course). The majority of students [in that course] don’t come prepared and just sit there and stare at you as you present the material (Tutor)

However, others noted that participation by students was not homogenous, and that some groups (in particular international students) regardless of preparation were still reluctant to participate:

I have found that although some students prepare their work they still do not participate in group or class discussions.

Get the international students to actually participate during tutorials, as a majority of them just sit there.
Table 2: Student and Tutor Evaluations of Tutorial Participation and Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have found that there is more discussion than in my tutorials for other courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>More students seem to participate in FA2 tutorials than in my tutorials for other courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The tutorials in FA2 are more useful because students are required to prepare before attending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The requirement to prepare and the resulting tutorial discussion has enhanced my learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The activities in tutorials are more effective because students are required to prepare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Did you find any differences between attending these tutorials and tutorials that you have attended in other courses/study periods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do you think this requirement should be introduced in other courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Year 2</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 1</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutors Year 2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I found that the students who I perceive to be poorer benefit more provided that they are willing to speak up and try to deal with their problems. Students who are determined to be passive learners will unfortunately remain so (Tutor)

It is apparent that factors other than preparation also impact on participation and discussion in tutorials. As one student observed:

it is very dependent on the tutor and the personalities of the students in the tutorials.

There was strong support for the preparation requirement in terms of usefulness of tutorials and enhancing learning outcomes, particularly in Year 2 with over 70% of student agreement. Positive comments can be classified into 3 main streams. First, the tutorials assisted students understandings as focusing on problems identified by students:

for me I was able to go into the tutorial knowing my strengths and weaknesses on that topic so I could get the help needed

you learn so much more which makes it easier to understand in the long run

The most important benefit of doing this is that students must present a good attempt with their preparation, and as they don't want to be asked to leave, they inevitably spend more time on their work, they don't give up because they can't and often they work out the correct answer, whereas if this wasn't a requirement, they would just give up and say it was too hard. I feel that this has certainly contributed to their learning, because of the requirement, they have had to persevere (Tutor).

Second, that tutorial time was not wasted on repeating lecture information or bringing unprepared students 'up to speed':

Time is spent on queries students didn't understand an aspect of the homework ..instead of time wasted on students who go just for the answers.

It makes it fairer for the people that do prepare and want to get lots out of lesson. Being able to get through all the questions because people aren’t wasting time copying down answers is important. The more people that have looked at the work and ask questions the greater the discussions and learning opportunities

Third, that the need to prepare to attend tutorials motivated students to do the work and learn throughout the semester which assisted their learning and performance. In regards to this a number of students noted that at the time of the examination they were revising what they had already learned, rather than learning the material for the first time:

This is very beneficial to students, as DOING helps to LEARN - no need to cram in the lead up to exams!

This semester for the first time I have to do my homework every single week, in a way its sometimes so hard .. but now it’s close to the exams and I am quite prepared already because I have done most of my reading requirement already...

My own experience of tutorials confirmed the improved learning outcomes and environment. As all students had prepared a variety of answers were offered, highlighting common problems. Students seemed to quickly realise the value of their own, and other mistakes, in answers to questions in facilitating learning, and hence became more willing to share their problems with other students. This contrasted with tutorials previously where only a handful of students had prepared, usually
restricted to ‘good’ students, and where identification of problems or concerns by students was limited.

**Impact on student evaluations and results**

This university conducts student evaluations on this course at course level and class (both lecture and tutorial) level. A review of the course evaluations over six years (three years before and after implementation of the requirement) revealed no significant differences. These had neither improved nor declined overall. Likewise the evaluations of the lectures (I had conducted these for the entire six year period) revealed no significant differences.

Student evaluations of individual tutors are confidential. However a number of tutors advised that there was no negative impact on their evaluations by students. My own tutorial evaluations by students actually improved slightly (although these were already above average when compared to overall student evaluation data, prior to this requirement being introduced). However it should be considered that tutorial evaluations are undertaken in class and thus may be skewed as responses are limited to students in attendance (and therefore those who have prepared).

Student performance in terms of final grades and pass rates were compared for the three years prior to implementation of this preparation requirement and three years following. No differences in the overall pass rate or in grading distribution were found. The pass rate (and associated grade distributions) for off campus students, who would not be impacted by this requirement, also shows no change over this period.

**Findings & Reflections**

I admit that I was initially extremely anxious about students’ possible response to this requirement. Would there be a revolt? Would formal complaints be laid? Would student evaluations plummet and I be asked to explain? What would I do if students simply ignored this requirement and continuously turned up at tutorials unprepared and refused tutors requests to leave? These concerns did not evaluate. However in Year 1 the requirement was a surprise to students and there was a certain about of ‘noise’ and scepticism about whether it would be enforced. I recall at the end of the first lecture a student saying:

> I can’t believe that you are really going to kick us out if we don’t do the work

My response:

> I can’t believe that you really think it’s OK to come to tutorials if you haven’t done the work

seemed to make students reflect. Given the information provided about the rationale for the requirement in the context of a set of dual and reciprocal rights and responsibilities, of academics and students, students accepted that the requirement was a reasonable one, even if they did not like it. In subsequent years students were well aware of and seemingly resigned to the fact that tutorial preparation was a requirement for this course, due to prior knowledge via academics in preceding courses and the student grapevine.

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4 These evaluations are administered by non-academic staff independently of tutors.
Nor did the concerns about student evaluations eventuate as these were not adversely affected by this requirement. Indeed, student’s review of this requirement indicated overall support and a desire by many that it be required in other courses. It should be noted that this support comes with a proviso. I am certain that if I had asked students their views on this requirement early in the semester there would not have been such support. My discussions with students indicated that many initially hated this requirement (in the words of one student ‘I thought it sucked at first’). It was only after being ‘forced’ to prepare and recognising both the positive impact of preparation itself and on the nature of tutorials that students endorsed the preparation requirement. This delayed endorsement is consistent with the motivational literature’s claim that it is a fallacy that motivation necessarily precedes action; in fact, it is argued that ‘in most cases action precedes motivation: that is, once action has been initiated motivation tends to gather momentum and it becomes increasingly easy to continue what has been started’ (Lazarus, 2010). It was apparent here that once students started preparing this increased their motivation to prepare.

Another concern was whether tutors would be willing and able to support this requirement on a sustained basis throughout the semester? I appreciated that it was one thing to agree with the requirement in principle, but another to actually put into practice at the coalface. My attendance at initial tutorials eased the transition and implementation. Further, as noted previously, after initial tutorials students largely self-regulated and simply did not attend if not prepared. Hence many of the anticipated problems did not eventuate. In subsequent years tutors recognising the benefits of this requirement not only willingly enforced this but also promoted the requirement.

Given that the preparation requirement would result in some students being excluded from tutorials I had anticipated that the pass rate would decline slightly. I accepted that those students who did not do sufficient work would still fail but I assumed that simply attending tutorials would be of some benefit to students, even if unprepared. In hindsight this assumption was incorrect. As the literature suggests mere attendance per se does not necessarily facilitate improved performance. This is also reinforced by off campus students in the course who pass without even having the opportunity to attend class. Thus excluding unprepared students who were unable to authentically engage in tutorials did not impact on overall course results. This also needs to be considered in the context of student attendance patterns. There is no doubt that attendance was lower than it would be without this requirement. However the majority of students indicated that the preparation requirement itself did not have a significant impact on their attendance. This is also supported by student and tutors comparisons of attendance in tutorials in other courses. As one student noted:

In other tutorials, I have found lately only about 30% of students prepare for the tutorial. Attendance is at about the same level - 30%. This is very disappointing.

This suggests that for many students failure to attend particular tutorials was more likely for other reasons and supports the literature which suggests that reasons for non-attendance are largely outside of the control of academics and primarily not course related (Self, 2012; Longhurst, 1999).

The benefits of this requirement could be questioned given the negative impact on attendance and the lack of any positive effect on overall course results. However this is to ignore the remarkable transformation in tutorials. These changes were qualitative, and almost cathartic. The very nature of tutorials changed being increasingly student centred and driven. Students had put the effort in to do the preparation, and so wanted and were able to contribute (even if some still needed more coxing
than others), identify problems and share these with their peers. Given the technical nature of the course tutors could ask various students for their answers and often this would result in a range of divergent answers being presented. It was not simply the few ‘good’ students offering correct answers. This allowed students to learn from others mistakes and to value, and not be embarrassed, to share their own mistakes and problems. The act of checking students’ preparation, albeit somewhat cursory and quick, also provided tutors with an insight into problems that students experienced, thus allowing tutors to target these. The in class activities met their objectives as students had the necessary knowledge to attempt these. Tutorials were more a dialogue, a conversion, between tutorial members rather than a ‘mini-lecture’ by the tutor. As one student commented:

*everyone has input and the group discussions provide for arguing of points where listening to a tutor may not get the same result; it may highlight an issue that you would never have thought of just listening to the tutor; also the tutor is not spending all of their time explaining simple ideas to students that have not prepared.*

Tutorials were less a chore, and were enjoyable, more energetic. In previous years I often acted as a sounding board for tutors complaining about students’ lack of engagement and how boring tutorials were. Instead now, tutors talked excitedly about the tutorials and students. Tutors displayed a renewed enthusiasm and seemed less stressed. Indeed the suggestion that we review the preparation requirement (as part of a regular review of the course I questioned if it should be continued) was overwhelmingly condemned. Tutors also observed that in the course in the semester following that a number (albeit a minority) of students maintained the study habits promoted by this requirement, despite preparation not being explicitly enforced in this subsequent course. I cannot over emphasise the difference between the dynamics of tutorials in previous years and in tutorials following the introduction of this requirement. Tutors also noted this difference between tutorials in this course compared to other courses and indeed indicated that the requirement should be extended to all courses.

Overall if success is measured in terms of improvement in course results or student evaluations then it could be concluded that the preparation requirement was not successful; although neither was it detrimental. However if success is assessed on the quality of the experiences of students and teaching staff then the requirement was a remarkable success.

**Conclusion**

Almost all universities have student charters or similar documents that espouse a universal expectation that students have a responsibility to adequately prepare for class. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that lack of preparation by students is widespread and systemic. We recognise (and the literature confirms) that preparation is required for effective class engagement yet this lack of preparation seems to be viewed as a *fait accompli*; something that must be tolerated and simply lived with. Surely the question to ask is, knowing the impact this has not only on students but on staff, why do we accept this? Our passive, if reluctant, resignation implicitly condones such behaviour and in turn may foster the normalisation of non-preparation for class. From a student perspective how can the requirement to prepare for classes be seen as important, or even legitimate, if few academics in reality require or enforce it?
There are numerous ways to encourage student preparation (for example, explicit learning contracts, penalties or marks for preparation, ensuring tutorials are well constructed). The value of such motivating strategies and their place as legitimate initiatives to enhance and encourage student engagement should not be discounted or ignored. None of the literature reviewed considered enforcing preparation requirements or excluding students from class. There is no doubt that there are some academics who do this but it is apparent from the review of the literature this is not widespread.

I can understand the reluctance of many academics to exclude students from classes for non-preparation whether from genuine concern for students or fear of consequences. Should we not care about students who do not prepare? Of course we should! The question however is should we allow these students to compromise the learning experience of those students who are willing and able to engage? Do we not have a duty of care to all students? Isn’t it likely (as the literature suggests) that widespread lack of preparation undermines the value of tutorials and so contributes to non-attendance even by diligent students? The increasingly managerial focus of universities, with the associated emphasis on student evaluations, may promote a ‘customer is always right’ ethos but we need to consider the nature of students as customers. As students’ comments attest unprepared students who behave as mere bystanders have an adverse impact on the efficacy of tutorials as a forum for learning and the learning experiences of all students.

Learning (and teaching) entails both rights and responsibilities on students, academics and institutions. Setting and enforcing class preparation expectations results in increased preparation and resulting participation, thus allowing the purpose of tutorials to be realised as well as assisting students to develop consistent and appropriate study habits. Students are not lazy. But like everyone else, they need to balance and prioritise the myriad of demands on their time. Insisting on adequate class preparation can ‘kick start’ motivation as well as causing a reprioritisation and a shift from a culture where class preparation is viewed as an optional activity. Indeed, as the opening quote states ‘education is not a spectator sport’ and we should not allow it to become one; we need to assist students to move from the sidelines if classes are to provide the opportunity for meaningly student engagement.

As this is a case study the findings and results are situated in a specific context and hence cannot be generalized to other settings; to other cohorts of students or even other courses. Further, this paper illustrated just one strategy to improve the effectiveness of tutorials. Future research could consider other strategies and also target those students who fail to prepare.

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