

Increasing Uptake of TP-HPB Medical Assessment

Department/Organisation: Temasek Polytechnic (TP) and Health Promotion Board (HPB)

In a Nutshell

A TP-HPB Medical Assessment was offered to 1,559 full-time TP students with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of more than 27.5. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), these students fall in the severely overweight category for Asians. The previous Medical Assessment held in 2016 was offered to severely overweight year 1 and 2 students, and saw an uptake of only 81 attendees (9.7%). This study, conducted in 2018, aimed to find out whether making minor cost-free changes to the invitation letters and the timing of a Medical Assessment in Temasek Polytechnic (TP) would result in a change in uptake rates. In 2018, the uptake was more than double with 164 attendees (15.4%) for the same group of students or 199 (12.8%) including severely overweight students in other years of study. Furthermore, the attrition rates of those who registered but did not attend was fell to 11% in 2018 from 23% in 2016. The study found that reducing barriers to attendance such as timing of the MA and a default option in registration forms could have explained the higher uptake in 2018. Additionally, enhanced invitation letters which: i) dispelled commonly used excuses; ii) included a reminder slip; and iii) used direct language, did not increase attendance at a Medical Assessment.

Understand

The National Population Health Survey 2016/17 showed rising overall trends of overweight and obesity among Singaporeans since 1992. In 2017, the proportion of obese and overweight adults aged 18 to 69 years was 8.7% and 36.2% respectively, which was an increase from 8.6% and 34.3% in 2013. To tackle obesity, the Health Promotion Board extended the Lifestyle Coach (LSC) Programme (formerly known as the Student Health Advisor Programme) to Polytechnics in 2015. Under the LSC Programme, on-campus Lifestyle Coaches would conduct medical assessments, health checks and weight management counselling sessions for students who were overweight or obese.

This study focused on the uptake of the Medical Assessment (MA) targeted at severely overweight (BMI>27.5) full-time TP students. Following the 2016 MA, more than one third of students who attended found out that they had a pre-existing medical condition which they would not have known about otherwise. In 2018, this figure increased to 57%, which underlies the importance of achieving higher participation rates.

Solve – Ideate

The interventions used in this study were informed by earlier studies which showed the effectiveness in increasing uptake rates through the following: opportunistic health checks, indicating a default, use of direct language, implementation intentions to bridge the gap between intention and behaviour, and dispelling common misconceptions. The participants in these earlier studies were mainly Caucasian adults from 40-74 years of age. This study aimed to add to the existing research by looking at the effectiveness of these interventions in the context of an educational institution where participants comprised of mainly Asian youths. The following

paragraph details the interventions that were employed. In 2018, the MA was timed for students to be able to take the MA opportunistically when they are on campus and also reduces the barriers to attendance by avoiding busy periods such as during project submission, test or exam periods. In contrast, in 2016, the MA was held during the study week during which students are not required to be on campus for lessons and is the week before the start of exams. Furthermore, in 2018, the registration form was redesigned to make the default choice of attending the MA more salient by using a larger and bold font, which could result in higher attendance rates. Students were also randomised into three groups, receiving one of the three different invitation letters: i) standard letter (no change); ii) enhanced letter with reminder slip and addresses commonly used excuses; iii) enhanced letter with reminder slip only.

Solve – Implement

This study employed a pre-post design, which compared the attendance rates and key differences between the uptake of the MA in 2016, and 2018 which was when the various interventions were put in place.

Evaluate

199 students attended the MA in 2018, an increase from 81 in 2016 (*Figure 1*). Although the MA in 2016 only included Year 1 and 2 students, a similar comparison of uptake by Year 1 and 2 students in 2018 still registered a significant increase of 102% to 164 students. This higher attendance rate could be explained through the timing of the MA in 2018, which allowed students to take the MA opportunistically when they were already on campus and before the start of lessons. In addition, it could be a result of the default choice on the registration forms. However, contrary to other studies, the results here suggested that students were not more likely to attend the MA if they received an enhanced letter that included a reminder slip and dispelled commonly-used excuses. *Figure 2* shows the attendance rates by different letters.

Figure 1. Number of students attending the MA.

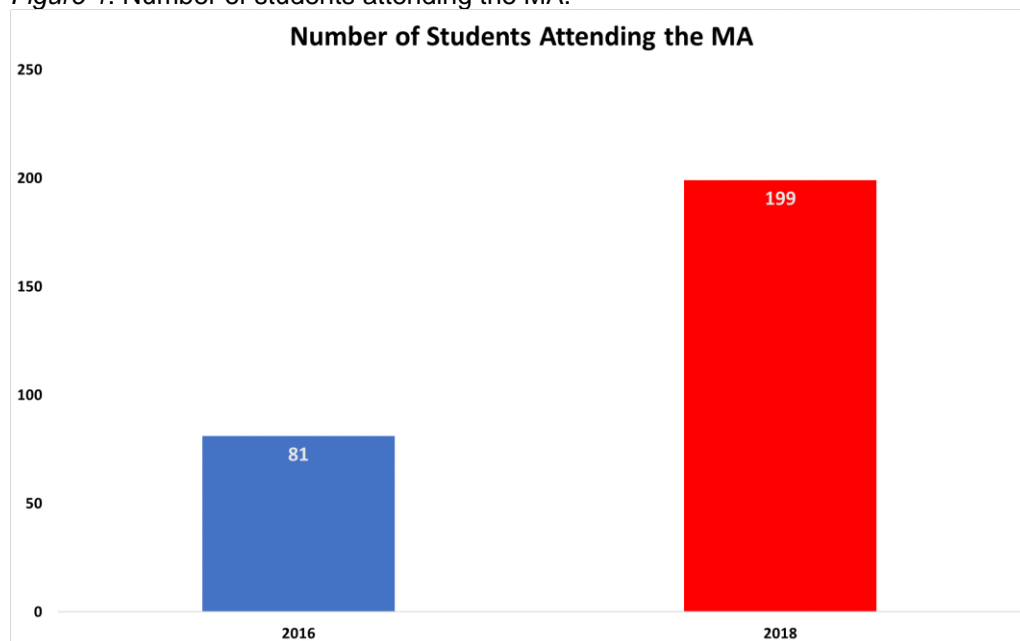
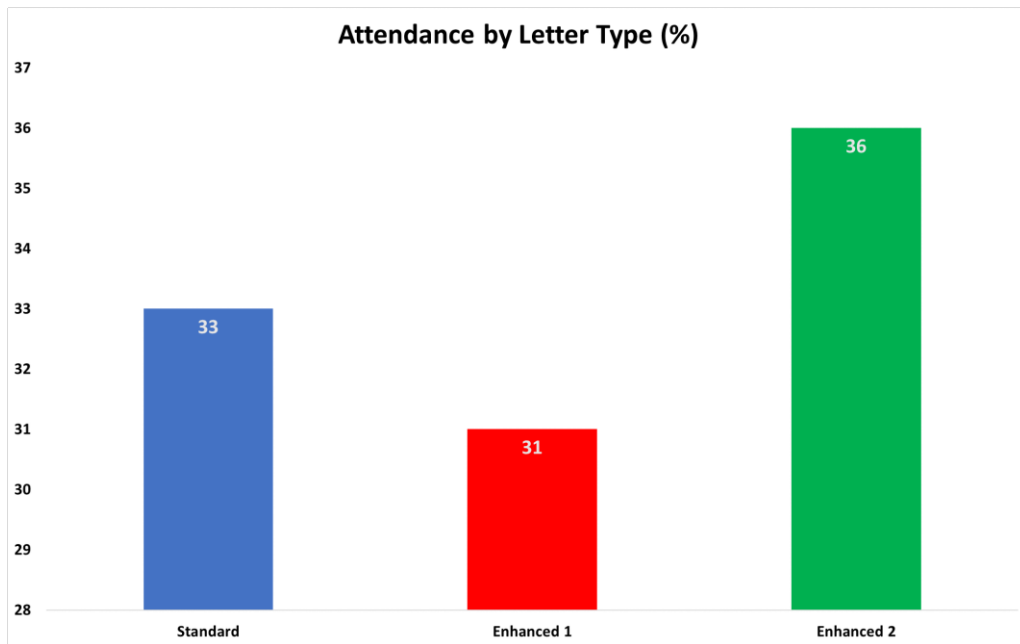


Figure 2. Attendance by letter type.



Lessons Learnt

Enhanced invitation letters which included a reminder slip and dispelled commonly-used excuses (“I don’t want to skip lessons” and “I’m still so young, I don’t think I have any health problems”) were not effective at increasing attendance at the MA. Year of study was a statistically significant factor affecting attendance. Future studies in an educational institution setting should ensure that this characteristic is block randomised and balanced across the groups.

Next Steps

Future studies may look into additional invitation methods and letter content. The impact of variables on uptake rates such as school of study and gender may also be analysed.