



THE ATTENTION CRISIS HAS ARRIVED

What New Research Says About Focus, Distraction and Student Learning

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WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

A growing body of evidence suggests that higher education is facing a significant attention crisis. Researchers studying Swiss university students found that the rapid expansion of digital technologies, social media platforms, and the modern attention economy is making it increasingly difficult for learners to sustain focus during academic work. The study notes that average attention spans have declined dramatically over the past two decades; while multitasking and constant digital interruptions have become normal features of student life. The consequences extend far beyond occasional distraction. Students report difficulty reading lengthy texts, maintaining concentration during classes, and engaging in deep learning. Previous research cited in the study links fragmented attention to increased stress, reduced well-being, lower productivity, and even declines in academic performance. Frequent switching between tasks creates "switching costs" that consume cognitive resources and make learning less efficient.

To address this challenge, researchers developed a semester-long intervention combining instructional materials, reflection activities, media-literacy discussions, mindfulness exercises, and practical focus-building strategies such as the Pomodoro Technique. Students who participated reported improvements in concentration, reduced fear of missing out (FOMO), decreased dependence on smartphones, and greater awareness of their own attention habits. The findings suggest that attention is not merely a personal trait but a skill that can be strengthened through intentional practice and guided reflection.

Importantly, the study argues that educational institutions should not assume students naturally possess strong attention skills. In a world designed to compete for attention, focus increasingly requires deliberate cultivation.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Teachers frequently observe students who appear present but are mentally elsewhere. When attention becomes fragmented, comprehension declines, reading stamina weakens, and



learning becomes shallower. Supporting attention may therefore be as important as delivering content.

CLASSROOM REALITY

Teachers Want	Students Often Experience
Sustained concentration	Constant digital interruptions
Deep learning	Rapid task switching
Reflection	Continuous information flow
Academic persistence	Fear of missing out
Independent focus	Smartphone dependence

TRY TOMORROW

1. Begin a lesson with a two-minute focus routine.
2. Encourage students to silence notifications during learning tasks.
3. Introduce a simple attention journal for one week.
4. Discuss how multitasking affects learning.
5. Build short reflection pauses into longer lessons.

CAUTION

Technology itself is not the problem. Digital tools can support learning when used purposefully. The challenge arises when constant connectivity prevents sustained attention and deep engagement.

ONE KEY TAKEAWAY

Attention is becoming a foundational academic skill, and schools must teach students how to manage it just as intentionally as they teach literacy or numeracy.

Keywords: attention, focus, digital distraction, media literacy, self-regulation, higher education

Reference:

Sitte, M., Hunn, E., Krebs, M., & Kuhn, C. (2025). *Facing the Growing Attention Crisis in Higher Education – Learnings from an Action Research-Based Study on Swiss Business Students*. HEAd'25 Conference Proceedings.